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April 2017

SUBMISSION BY: **Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF)**

TO: House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts Inquiry into the factors contributing to the growth and sustainability of the Australian film and television industry

About MIFF

Hailed by the *International Film Guide* as “unequivocally the most significant film event in Australia” and “the longest-running film festival in the Southern Hemisphere” with “the largest and most diverse program of screenings and special events in the country, in addition to the largest audience,” at 66, MIFF is one of the oldest film festivals in the world and amongst Australia’s longest standing arts events.

Throughout its history, MIFF has consistently delivered a showcase of exemplary international and, importantly, local cinema. It showcases these films to its large, dedicated and growing audience. With a well-established profile as a major film event on the Australian calendar, MIFF brings international attention to Australia and generates significant local, national and international media exposure for the local film industry.

MIFF and the Australian film industry

Chaired by Claire Dobbin AM, MIFF has a strong commitment to Australian film. Indeed, MIFF has been developing and nurturing Australian cinema audiences since its first edition in 1952 and the festival is the largest showcase of Australian cinema. New Australian films are exhibited, alongside the best of international cinema, and celebrated with screenings, Q&As, special events and celebratory functions. In the end, audiences come to MIFF with the expectation of seeing both the masters of and the new voices emerging in Australian cinema.

The Australian showcase benefits funding agencies that support local film production by ensuring that films are screened to influential audiences during MIFF. MIFF’s elevated international profile benefits Australian filmmakers whose work is promoted during the festival as it is also monitored closely by the international sales agents in attendance who are at MIFF to do screen business at the festival’s MIFF 37°South Market.

Also, since 2008, the MIFF Premiere Fund (backed by successive Victorian State Governments) has provided strategic minority co-financing to more than 55 new Australian feature films that helped them into production and they then world premiered at MIFF as part of the largest annual showcase of Australian cinema in the world. The Premiere Fund’s films have travelled to such prestigious international festivals like Cannes, Berlin, Rotterdam and Toronto and the Fund is very proud of its track record in diversity - especially in supporting first-time directors, female filmmakers and indigenous content.

So, not only does MIFF deliver an exceptional audience experience through the program and festival atmosphere, it also provides essential opportunities for Australian filmmakers through an internationally recognised suite of industry programs which, in addition to the Premiere Fund, includes:

- 37°South Market, which brings together Australian producers and international film financiers to help advance the financing of new scripts. Across its 10 years of operation, 37°South has scheduled more than 16,000 meetings for local producers and resulted in more than 280 film deal offers. 37°South has proven to be a vital part of the Australian film financing landscape and positions local producers and projects in the international market place. For further information on 37°South Market, including testimonials from local producers and international financiers, see:
http://miffindustry.com/assets/2016/37s_Brochure_2016_WEB_v1.pdf
- Accelerator Lab, which is a unique program that supports the development of the craft and business acumen of emerging Australian directors in the transition to making their first feature film. Its alumni includes the directors of *Snowtown*, *Animal Kingdom*, *What We Do In The Shadows*, *Thor*, *52 Tuesdays* and many more, and this shows the importance of nurturing emerging talent for the future of the screen industry. For further information on Accelerator Lab, including details of previous speakers and the workshop's alumni, see
<http://miffindustry.com/assets/Accelerator/ACCELERATORfactsheet2017.pdf>

MIFF also seeks to develop future generations of film critics through the Critics Campus talent campus.

It is this special combination of a vibrant and burgeoning audience together with the suite of industry programs that makes MIFF a uniquely important part of the Australian film ecosystem while also reinforcing Melbourne as a centre for screen business and culture.

Festivals and Agencies

Great national film industries also have great film festivals. This submission seeks to demonstrate the essential role that film festivals play within the Australian film industry, a role that the Australian Academy of Cinema & TV Arts (AACTA) has now recognised by broadening the definition of theatrical release (for the purposes of AACTA award nomination eligibility) to include film festival screenings, and a role worthy of continued support from the national screen agencies.

Key film festivals play a crucial role in shaping the cultural landscape and the film economy. Major film festivals like MIFF generate social, cultural and economic capital, and, with their low price point, are accessible, large-scale events that enhance the social cohesion and liveability of the broader community, and contribute to the creation of a vibrant screen culture. Film festivals can be less constrained by the commercial considerations of Australian distributors and exhibitors and can thus support diversity, including challenging work, in a way that mainstream cinemas can find more difficult. Selection at a major film festival like MIFF can bestow great status on a film and bring it to the attention of the international industry. Film festivals like MIFF complement the work of the Australian screen agencies by ensuring that the work funded by these agencies have a promotional platform and find an audience.

One of the key functions of Screen Australia, as set out in the *Screen Australia Act 2008*, is to support and promote the development of screen culture in Australia. MIFF submits that there are few greater progenitors of screen culture than film festivals with their environment of curation, entertainment, debate, storytelling and discovery. The experience of being an audience member at a sold-out session at MIFF, participating in the shared moment of anticipation and discovery, is rarely replicated in the commercial exhibition environment. No film is complete until it finds its audience. Continued support for film festivals completes the circle Screen Australia creates through supporting the development, production, promotion and distribution of Australian film. There are few greater launch-pads for an Australian film than a high-profile premiere at a film festival such as MIFF.

Challenges:

Funding cuts to Screen Australia appear to be behind a number of difficult decisions the agency has made that have the potential to impact negatively on festivals and their important role in the screen industry ecosystem as outlined above.

First, Screen Australia has been conducting a long-running review of the agency's festival and markets funding and, citing that review, the agency has only been able to offer one-year funding contracts to festivals for each of 2017 and 2018. It is also noted that the levels of funding have been static for five years. The combination of the review, the short-term nature of the commitments and the static funding has created great uncertainty within the film festival sector as well as presenting ongoing risk around the long-term future of festivals such as MIFF. The global film festival landscape is ultra-competitive, and uncertainty over continued support and support at realistic levels from key agencies such as Screen Australia means festivals such as MIFF struggle to execute their vital role in developing screen culture and providing a supportive platform for the world premieres of Australian film.

Of great concern is the recent notification by Screen Australia that, owing to funding issues, the agency will in 2018 remove 25% of the present funding from 37th South Market & Accelerator Lab. The cut will be made specifically to the following sub-programs of 37th South Market & Accelerator Lab:

- Books at MIFF: the first event of its kind in Australia, Books at MIFF brings together producers and publishers who pitch manuscripts that are ripe for screen adaptation. Fostering adaptations is a stated priority of Screen Australia, and there is substantial evidence that films derived from adaptations of literary works perform much better at the box office, so the decision to defund this program element must be illustrative of the severity of the funding cuts to Screen Australia.
- Talent of Tomorrow: a part of Accelerator Lab, this event introduced the emerging directors to the wider film industry. Part of the national film agency's role is to aid the discovery of the next generation of cinema masters, so the removal of support for a program designed to support emerging talent is most concerning as to what it might say about Screen Australia's present funding situation.

Indeed, from the perspective of both the MIFF Premiere Fund and Accelerator Lab, funding issues appear to be nibbling away at Screen Australia's ability to maintain a diverse feature film slate. It appears that there are fewer opportunities for first and second time filmmakers to secure funding for feature films than in previous decades as the agency spreads its decreased dollars across an expanding suite of activities. However, contracting opportunities for emerging feature filmmakers reduces diversity, which, in turn, can inhibit innovation, excellence and the range of outcomes. It is worth noting that the Oscar-winning *Moonlight* was a challenging low-budget film that will return its budget and then go into profit.

Finally, MIFF notes that the national agency might have a role to play in audience development in regional areas, to assist regional tax-payers in seeing the films their taxes partly pay for. MIFF's own MIFF Travelling Showcase brings a selection of new Australian films, and their filmmakers, to regional areas. MIFF's experience with the Travelling Showcase indicates great potential for audience development and growth across regional areas that do not get to access the same breadth of Australian films, or the unique film festival experience with filmmakers and guests that metropolitan audiences enjoy through festivals such as MIFF. Therefore, perhaps consideration should be given to Screen Australia providing specific funding for audience development in regional areas.

In conclusion, MIFF contends that major film festivals play a vital role in helping Australian films find both profile and audiences and in building the national screen culture and that a healthy national screen culture, in turn, generates more appetite for viewing Australian films. Festivals like MIFF also offer significant opportunities for filmmakers through programs like 37th South Market & Accelerator Lab. However, the funding issues faced by Screen Australia appear to have forced difficult decisions at the federal agency that will – and are – having impacts on the festival sector and its work in supporting the

promotion and exhibition of Australian films, providing opportunities for filmmakers to connect with the international industry and enabling the development of emerging filmmakers.

Summary - recommendations:

- 1]. Consideration should be given for Screen Australia's funding to return to a level where it is able to fully and effectively discharge all the functions required of it under the Act. Where funding falls to a level that the agency finds itself having to cherry pick parts of its functions, therein lies problems such as films being supported into production but then finding themselves confronted with an enfeebled festival and distributor sector.
- 2]. Consideration should be given for Screen Australia's funding to be at a level where it can once more provide the certainty of multi-year funding support to festivals – and to be able to provide CPI increases as well as hopefully being in a position to seriously consider new initiatives from festivals aimed at developing and nurturing Australian cinema audiences.
- 3]. Consideration should be given for Screen Australia's funding to be at a level where it can reverse its impending 25% funding cut to 37th South Market & Accelerator Lab, which directly impacts on the books-to-film (a Screen Australia priority area) pitching market and also the emerging director's networking event Talent of Tomorrow.
- 4]. Consideration should be given for Screen Australia's funding to be at a level where it can set aside specific funding for emerging lower budget filmmakers (as per initiatives at legacy agencies the Film Finance Corporation and the Australian Film Commission that led to such memorable films at *Romper Stomper* which underlines the importance of nurturing new talents and supporting a range of film types).
- 5]. Consideration should be given for Screen Australia's funding to be at a level where it can set aside specific funding for regional initiatives including supporting regional showcases of Australian film from the major festivals.

MIFF thanks the Committee for its consideration of this submission.