

## **Inquiry into the Australian film and television industry**

Leo Baker

### **1a. Continuity of industry**

*The single biggest problem with the Australian film industry is that there is a struggle for continuity of industry. The level of ongoing production and investment is largely due to the relative smaller population of Australia where investment is dependent on the support from Screen Australia and demand can struggle for Australian content due to lack of awareness and support of the material. We are also always competing with international production that have higher production values, popular appeal and particularly huge marketing budgets. So we need to work with what we have, and be smart about it.*

### **1b. Service work vs the cultural importance of original Australian content..**

Offering tax rebates for international production to come to Australia does employ Australian film crew personnel, and stimulate certain sectors of the economy, but I feel *we must be careful not to let this be supporting backbone of the industry.*

- Firstly, this situation is largely due to the strength of other currencies, particularly the U.S, against the Australian dollar. History has shown us that this does not maintain forever, nor would economists like it to.
- Secondly, this creates an industry where smaller operators invest in equipment and skills that are dependent on this incoming, “service work” from overseas productions. As economic cycles have shown us, as soon as this well dries up, these smaller businesses are left with large overheads to meet without the work to support it.
- Thirdly, and in my opinion most importantly, this is because culturally we will suffer from the lack of Australian created film content. *Iconic, culturally significant Indigenous and non indigenous Australian stories must be maintained as a matter of national significance from generation to generation, and this is done being mindful of supporting the current generations of filmmakers as well as nurturing the next generation of emerging filmmakers.*

The National Film Board of Canada is a good example of how government financial support is given to Canadian films and international co-productions with Canada, providing the films adhere to the guidelines of Canadian cultural significance.

*Investing in Australian film work will foster a continuity of our own industry.*

## **2. Investing in the next generation of Australian filmmakers.**

- **Emerging filmmakers.** As mentioned above, *we must think ahead to foster the next generation of emerging filmmakers*, being mindful of not only supporting programs but access to film funding –even for first time feature film makers. Emerging filmmakers of today, if supported, will be contributing to a continuity of industry tomorrow.
- **Nurturing writers, then directors and producers.** All good projects begin with good writing. Like nurturing seedlings, Australian writers need to be supported so they grow strong roots and bare fruit back into the industry. A strong industry has strong writers, talented directors and savvy producers, but these skills come with being challenged in a active, vibrant industry. It is a cycle, but the cycle begins with good writing. Nurturing writers, directors and hence producers will help to:
- **Reduce the brain drain.** If opportunity, interest and support is greater overseas than in Australia, we will continually see Australian filmmakers leave Australia to work in other countries. In the past, filmmaker talents would look further afield to elevate themselves higher in an established career. Now many young people are seeking opportunities much earlier in their career, even straight out of film school because, devastatingly, they are realising they wont find them here. I think this is an awful shame, and a sign of an industry in desperate need of rethink, repair and reboot.

## **3. Funding awarded on the merits of the script, development material or rough cut, rather than just filmmaker credits criteria.**

It has been a daunting and debilitating fact, that as an award winning filmmaker of 5 years (with 20 years industry experience), I have not been able to access funding from most of Screen Australia's funding programs because the stock standard criteria is that the producer or director has had to have at least one feature film credit. There are some programs where this required number is even higher. Making a feature film is a huge task and is out of reach to almost all emerging film makers in Australia without the support of Screen Australia. Whilst I understand that this is designed to coax emerging filmmakers to learn from working with more experienced filmmakers, I think it simply just creates an unfair, black-and-white criteria of qualification that is unnecessary. Getting philosophical; filmmakers are all qualified and unqualified. Just because someone has a feature film credit does not necessarily make them a better filmmaker over an emerging filmmaker with a ground breaking idea, tonnes of

talent and a fresh approach. Whilst experience is always important, I strongly believe that funding allocation needs to be assessed by the merits of the applicant's script, development material, rough cut or previous demonstrations through short form works. *I think it is important to look at the whole team, their approach and track record, and with that quantitative and qualitative criteria in mind, I think that emerging, first-time feature film makers should be allowed to be considered for funding support.*

#### **4. Assistance for independents filmmakers with a release schedule.**

- **VPF fees.**

For a limited theatrical release, one of the difficult costs that can add up and affect a release schedule are the 'virtual print fees' imposed by digital cinemas. An area that could greatly assist the ability of independent film being shown throughout cinemas would be if *Screen Australia could assist the independents by subsidising VPF fees on an approved theatrical schedule.*

- **Marketing support.**

Financial support for marketing is one of the most important tools for generating the public awareness of Australian content. Too often Australian films are released without the financial ability for mass marketing, or even basic, minimal marketing. This is generally because budgets have been exhausted. Needless to say, marketing is what aids the financial return of films, feeding into the next cycle of filmmaking. *What if Screen Australia could provide financial assistance, or at least matched funding, for independent filmmakers, for the various types of release strategies.* This funding and approaches might be slightly different for theatrical releases vs online releases. But support could be included for items such as: money for street posters, TV spots and paid online advertising through websites and social media –all of these items are typical movie marketing avenues.

#### **5. Further ideas.**

- **Private investment incentives.**

Private investment is a significant component to film financing, but investing in film is generally not regarded as a 'wise' or 'safe' investment due to the many factors that contribute to the financial success of a production.

*What if private investment in film production was incentivised through an attractive tax rebates?* This could also attract more investors to the space.

- **Percentage quotas of Australian content on SVOD platforms.**

'Subscription Video on Demand' platforms such as Netflix and Amazon are rapidly instating themselves as new power players in the film space, redefining the way millions of people consume content. Consumers are able to easily curate desired content in their own home. This popular convenience is what has made these SVOD platform a 'disruptive'

technology, affecting cinema going participation and challenging the might of the American studio models of filmmaking. Now that they have accumulated huge wealth, they are investing heavily in 'original content'. Not only does this indicate it is a time to be adaptive, but a time to be careful and capitalise on the success of this system, and embrace it as an opportunity to support Australian content.

The advent of these platforms has brought in a torrent of content from all over the world, but largely from the U.S, the worlds biggest producer.

*What if these platforms were required to support a minimum quota of Australian content, both in direct financing of original Australian content, as well as acquiring other Australian content for the platform.*

If you think about the millions of Australian households subscribing to these services, generating billions of dollars --as an allocation of wealth -- does it not make sense to enforce a ruling that these platforms must provide a minimum support for the local industry? Or if they do not meet these quotas, they could pay a tariff that can in turn be used to support the same cause.