

From the very beginning

Keith Gallasch

What follows is a quickly written, not terribly well informed and doubtless naive look at marketing and promotion issues pertaining to The Stage 2 Review Terms of Reference. But I hope it makes clear some matters of concern. I'd be only too happy to be disabused of them.

The Stage 1 vision for Australian film and for screen media innovation embodied in the Program Guidelines for Screen Australia's Development, Production Financing and Indigenous Programs is ambitious and welcome and under way. Now The Stage 2 Review Terms of Reference with regard to Marketing Support, Promotion, Research and Statistics detail existing funding categories and seek comment on them or overall directions within the limits of what's "feasible for a Commonwealth Government agency with a finite budget."

It's interesting that in the Stage 2 Review Terms of Reference there is no suggestion of how these programs and activities are meant to mesh with the big changes taking place in film development and industry sustainability coming out of Stage 1. The marketing and promotion of Australian films would seem to be pivotal to the success of the development and production financing programs. But will they be?

Screen Australia CEO Ruth Harley wrote in December 2008, on the Screen Australia website, "At a broad level, the new programs took shape around several principles: to simplify and better target our approach to project development, to encourage more focus on audiences from the very beginning, to support innovation, to introduce a qualitative assessment for all feature film production investment, and to assist in the development of viable businesses." The aim entails "ensuring that Australian projects have the best chance possible of reaching receptive audiences, both locally and internationally.'

It is this desire "to encourage more focus on audiences from the very beginning", particularly local audiences, that interests me.

The Stage 1 Review was preceded by a directive from the Minister for the Arts, Peter Garrett, and a response from Screen Australia. These informed the Stage 1 Review Terms of Reference. The Stage 2 Review Terms of Reference do not come with such big picture imprimaturs or immediately suggest that the changes in Development and Production Financing Programs should shape the funding of Marketing, Promotion, Research and Statistics programs. Meanwhile widespread concern continues to be expressed in print and online about the lack of critical and public support for Australian films (while Australian television series enjoy new-found approval), and the financial consequences.

It's hoped that the new development and financing programs, with their commitment to sustainability and innovation, will yield a greater number of films and a denser, more fecund screen culture from which will consistently emerge popular and niche successes. But to hope that the new programs and producers alone will achieve this is problematic.

I am particularly curious about the phrase "from the very beginning" with regard to audience engagement. How does that work? Perhaps it will be in the hands of producers to decide. A quick survey of the development and financing programs reveals the following.

The Enterprise Program includes funds for "encouraging development, production and marketing strategies which employ digital media such as websites, mobile phone content and digital distribution." Feature Film Project funding includes support for "marketing strategy and pitch materials" while documentary funding includes support for "marketing and pitch materials including plans or elements for multi-platform delivery." The Escalator program guidelines state, "The aim is to provide new practitioners with mentoring, market knowledge, and development and production expertise, as well as to expose experienced professionals to the energy and innovation of new talent." The Innovation Program states emphatically, "This program does not support projects conceived primarily as ancillary marketing or promotional additions to existing non-interactive films or programs; i.e. companion websites."

These address the well being of individual films in the market place but what about Australian film collectively in respect of Australian audiences?

I was expecting the Stage 2 Review Terms of Reference to have a touch of vision about them, explicitly seeking suggestions about how to "focus on audiences from the very beginning." I was hoping too that responses to the terms of reference would trigger a flood of ideas about long-term ways of building new audiences through a variety of means, including the new media.

As Australian films grow in number and strength, what kind of large scale, pervasive public programs might support them, in live events, in print, online, on TV (currently comprising affable banter)? How can screen studies with an Australian focus be bolstered in schools? How can Australian films be more widely accessed? Touring programs often address regional areas, but many Australian films never make it the suburbs, let alone the countryside. Are there alternative spaces for screenings? I've visited cinemas which are part of cultural and media arts centres in UK and Europe that run popular and cinematheque programs side by side, and what kind of networking would be needed? What will the impact of online downloading be for Australian film - are there projections? Doubtless there are programs under way that I'm unaware of that might be achieving some of the above. And, sure, there's nothing new about these ideas, but has there been any thought given to conceiving a sustained, long-term campaign to market and promote Australian film within Australia as the films born of the new initiatives emerge.

In the Terms of Reference for the Stage 2 Review, Market Support and Promotion continue to be largely centred on international festivals and sales. These are, of course, vital and ongoing support is utterly necessary. But what about strategies for substantial audience development within Australia? There are numerous local festivals, myriad workshops, the touring film programs (formerly with the AFC) of the National Film and Sound Archive. There's the Regional Digital Screen Network (Stage One of the trialling of digital cinemas in regional Australia); the comprehensive Australian Screen website (NFSA); and there's a handful of widely distributed magazines, in print and online, that range effectively from industry coverage to media arts convergence and multiplatforming. These all do vital work, but seriously expanding Australian audiences, that would seem to require more work at another level. You would have thought, for example, that the exponential growth in short film making competitions and the growth in the number of film schools across the country over the last decade would have had a positive impact on audience numbers for Australian film. Apparently not.

The central assumption in the current debate about Australian film is that if the films were better, then so would be the audiences. There's a necessary truth in that, but it underrates the calibre of at least a handful of very good films every year that deserve more attention. It's also about a debate governed by concerns about feature films, when the work of Australian short film, animation and documentary makers is largely unacknowledged: one DVD collection of Australian animation; no DVD of over a decade of fine Indigenous short-film making. Yes there are events for fans and aficionados in short film and animation, but to think beyond niches towards the relationship between Australians and Australian film of all kinds might take a very big leap.

On the other hand, the multi-million dollar success of the occasional feature film from time to time might need to be balanced against a million niche markets and the desires of an increasingly promiscuous audience. Either way, at a time when the Government and the people of Australia are addressing the big pictures of health, education, infrastructure and more, it would be sad if the reforms and initiatives introduced by Screen Australia only went half way to fruition because the audience weren't there "from the very beginning."

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