

AUSTRALIA'S FILM INDUSTRY

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Introduction

For almost a century the film industry in Australia has been developing its own distinct identity. It differs greatly from the American or British studio systems, comprising a large number of independent entrepreneurs, production companies and individual producers.

Generally, the industry has depended on government financial support at both Federal and State levels. However, Australian cinema has developed its impressive international reputation because rather than in spite of these differences.

How it started

Australia's film industry is one of the oldest in the world and started with the partnership of Australian Walter Barnett and Frenchman Marius Sestier at the end of the 1800s.

Their earliest surviving Australian 'moving picture', shot in 1896 and now held by the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra, shows the running of the nation's premier horse race, The Melbourne Cup.

Other early filmmakers soon followed their lead, making documentaries of Australian life, creating combination film and slide shows, and using film as backgrounds for plays.

In 1900 the Salvation Army in Melbourne produced the feature-length combination film-slide show, *Soldiers of the Cross*, and six years later the Tait Brothers made what is believed to be the world's first feature film, *The Story of the*

Kelly Gang. In the following years filmmakers ventured into creating longer films producing an incredible 90 full-length features before World War I.

Unfortunately, only about 10 per cent of Australia's silent feature films survive, but this includes gems such as Raymond Longford's delightful classic, *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), based on the writings of CJ Dennis.

Australia's thriving silent film industry made a difficult transition to sound in the 1930s. The strain of this new technology brought to an end many careers including those of the pioneering women filmmakers, the McDonagh sisters.

Pressure was also increasing to conform to Hollywood models of filmmaking, however directors Raymond Longford, Ken G Hall and Charles Chauvel adapted the new technology and made films dealing with Australian subjects. They dominated film production in the 1920s and 1930s.

Along with other Australian producers, they had to struggle against intense competition from importers and distributors of off-shore product. By the late 1920s, British and American films were being imported at the rate of 40 a week.

Distribution was also dominated by overseas interests so that when Australian films were shown, if at all, they were usually supporting features.

Despite these behind-the-scenes problems, Australians still loved cinema so much so that in the 1930s, the price of a cinema ticket was included in calculating the basic wage.

Along with the feature film, they went to the cinema to see their weekly news-reel - a 10-minute reel of news, sport and human interest stories.

From 1945 to 1965 many American and British companies used Australia as a location for films such as *The Overlanders* (1946) and *On the Beach* (1959).

Local production included Australia's first colour feature - Charles Chauvel's visually grand drama, *Jedda* (1955).

Government support

The call for Government support for the Australian film industry started as early as 1927 but it was not until 1969 that Federal Government funds stimulated the resurgence of the nation's filmmaking.

In 1970, the Government gave direct aid through the Australian Film Development Corporation later the Australian Film Commission, which was established to provide grants and investment to the film industry.

Three years later the Federal Government established the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in Sydney to train producers, directors, writers, cinematographers and other production specialists.

This support stimulated a renaissance in Australian filmmaking during the 1970s with 156 feature films being produced using government assistance as their major source of finance.

Distinctly Australian films which drew on the nation's literary traditions as well as the unique Australian landscape included *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *My Brilliant Career* (1979) and *Sunday Too Far Away* (1977).

Towards the end of the decade, the Federal Government introduced the Tax

Incentive Scheme known as Division 10BA to attract more private investment.

Emerging names

Films produced in the scheme's first years brought to the forefront some of Australia's best-known filmmakers: Bruce Beresford (who went on to direct *Driving Miss Daisy*), Gillian Armstrong (*Mrs Soffel*), George Miller (*The Witches of Eastwick*, *Lorenzo's Oil*), Peter Weir (*Dead Poets' Society*, *Witness*, *Green Card*) and Fred Schepisi (*Roxanne*, *The Russia House*).

One of the most outstanding successes of this period was *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) which was the largest grossing foreign film to be released in the US and made an Australian record of \$400 million at the box office world-wide.

Australian cinematographers also gained international reputations for their work including John Seale (*Witness*, *Mosquito Coast*, *Gorillas in the Mist*), Don McAlpine (*Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, *Predator*), Russell Boyd (*Tender Mercies*) and Dean Semler who won an American Academy Award for his work on *Dances with Wolves*.

Australian filmmakers, though still exploring historical subjects, started to tackle contemporary issues such as adolescence (*Puberty Blues*), the new wave music scene (*Starstruck*), international politics (*Far East*), environmental issues (*Heatwave*), socio-ethnic problems (*Moving Out*) and the drug culture (*Monkey Grip*).

Filmmakers also became interested in television mini-series. The national

and international success of *A Town Like Alice* (1980) ushered in years of high levels of television production.

Boosting the boom

Other factors besides government support contributed to the production boom including:

- increased range of production which helped to build a production and services infrastructure;
- the critical and commercial success of films such as *Breaker Morant* (1980), *The Man from Snowy River* (1982), *Mad Max* (1979) and *Crocodile Dundee* (1986);
- the advent of the home video market; and
- growing demand for high quality television drama programs.

In 1988 the Government established the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC) to invest in Australian film and television projects with demonstrated commercial potential and 40 per cent private sector participation.

These have included *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992), *Death in Brunswick* (1991) and the mini-series *Brides of Christ* (1991).

Filmmakers also pursued international co-production ventures which led to the making of features such as *Black Robe* (Canada, 1992), *The Navigator* (New Zealand, 1989), *The Prisoner of St Petersburg* (Germany, 1990) and *Green Card* (France, 1991).

The annual output of Australian features is now between 20 and 30 films and the success rate has increased.

What is emerging is a stylish new generation of energetic and innovative Australian filmmakers including Jocelyn Moorhouse (*Proof*, 1991), Baz Luhrmann (*Strictly Ballroom*, 1992), Geoffrey Wright (*Romper Stomper*, 1992), Paul J Hogan (*Muriel's Wedding*, 1994), Rolf de Heer (*Bad Boy Bubby*, 1994) and Stephan Elliot (*The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, 1994). Their productions have won both domestic and international critical acclaim.

Strengths

From early and enthusiastic beginnings, through difficult and faltering moments, Australia's domestic film industry is steadily growing in strength and vigour.

The excellent calibre of material being produced by Australian filmmakers clearly demonstrates the nation's maturing film culture. For foreign filmmakers Australia is a popular production centre attractive for its under-used and diverse locations, low costs and world-class post-production facilities.

This combination of an established reputation in film production, a rich supply of talent and a sensible framework for financing, points to a future of fresh, high quality film entertainment from Australia.

Source: DFAT