

Australian film industry "stuffed"

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



When the president of the Screen Producers Association, Stephen Smith, declared recently that the Australian Film Industry was "stuffed", people all over Australia sat up and took notice. However, this was not the first time that such comments had been made about the Australian Film Industry. In 1940, Blah Murray claimed that "For 30 years, Australian film making has been as stuffed as Phar Lap," (Murray, 1981, p. 7).

The Australian Film Industry has always been somewhat of a rollercoaster, moving in waves through the good years and the not so good years. Unfortunately of recent times there seems to have been more of the latter. "The history of Australian films since 1930 has been, to say the least, erratic," (Brand, 1985, p. 1).

Early film set the precedent of waves that is seen in the industry today. In the 1930's, the Australian Film Industry was "in reasonably good shape," (Brand, 1985, p. 1). However, by the 1950's, the majority of Australian films "fared badly... [and] the public generally showed little interest," (Brand, 1985, p. 2).

The late 1970's saw perhaps the best Australian films developed since the establishment of the Australian Film Industry. Over 100 feature films were produced, and Australian filmmakers had received international recognition for films such as Mad Max, My Brilliant Career, and Breaker Morant (Sklar, pp. 500-1). However, "since the heady days of the late 1970s the quality of output from the Australian film industry has declined," (Brand, 1985, p. 3).

Today, there are many problems facing the Australian Film Industry. Some of these which have been highlighted in recent times are listed below:

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* Production of features has dropped from 28 per year to 15 in 2003/04 (Woods in , p. 1 - [www. if. com. au/tools/find. taf? fn= detail&id= 7622](http://www.if.com.au/tools/find.taf?fn=detail&id=7622))

* Private investment in features fell from \$29 million in 2001/02 to \$10 million in 2003/04 (Managan, p. 1 - [www. theage. com. au/articles/2004/08/04/1091557920081. html? oneclick= true](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/08/04/1091557920081.html?oneclick=true))

* Almost two-thirds of the Australian releases in the past five years have taken less than a feeble \$1 million at the box office ([www. smh. com. au/articles/2004/08/13/1092340455401. html? oneclick= true#](http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/13/1092340455401.html?oneclick=true#))

* Local spending on film and television production is in steady decline (Fitzsimmons, p. 1 - [www. abc. net. au/am/content/2004/s1168397. htm](http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2004/s1168397.htm))

* Only 8% of movie going audiences attended an Australian film last year ([www. furiousfilms. com. au/PR-GenreFilms. htm](http://www.furiousfilms.com.au/PR-GenreFilms.htm))

These statistics speak more loudly than supporters or critics ever can.

With the establishment of the Australian Film Commission, a government film funding body in the 1970s, the Australian film industry looked set to take off, and that it did, with films such as *My Brilliant Career* (1979), and *Breaker Morant* (1980). However, as can be see further in this essay, the Australian Film Commission didn't always get it right.

However firstly one must address the arguments for and against the establishment of the Australian Film Commission, and the tax incentives that were introduced by the government in the 1980s. The Australian Film Commission was introduced to stabilize the industry; to help it move forward

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with a reliable income from government funding. Tax incentives were introduced to lure private investors into providing further funds for Australian films, hence allowing filmmakers to produce bigger and better films than had been possible previously. The idea seemed innocent enough. However 30 years along, the government seems to be taking a large portion of the blame for the current state of Australia's film industry.

The common cry of people in the industry is that there is not enough government funding, and that the government does not allow for enough creativity in their choice of films. " The Australian film industry is just too safe and too insular," (www. furiousfilms. com. au/PR-GenreFilms. htm). The argument makes sense, and this is why. If the popularity, production and profitability of Australian films are going backwards, then it would be logical to say that something needs to change. However, if the government is continually funding the 'safe' films; films like *The Nugget*, *Bad Eggs*, *Take Away*, and *The Wannabes*, then one must wonder whether the industry will ever move forward. All of these so-called comedies star Australian comedians. But if the Australian public doesn't find them funny, then is it any wonder that nobody else does? All the films mentioned previously are 'atypical, quirky Australian comedies'. It's just a problem that these comedies don't seem to have anybody in the industry laughing.

As can be seen on the website of the Australian Film Commission, there have been many more failures than successes in the industry. For every *Lantana*; \$8 million production costs, \$11 million in takings at the box office, there are

countless *Strange Bedfellows*; \$8 million production costs, \$4.4 million in takings at the box office (www.afc.gov.au).

Does the government need to take some responsibility for the state of the Australian film industry? The answer is a resounding yes. The government needs to 'think outside the square' and begin to fund slightly more risqu^{1/2} productions, films that break from the traditional, films that make the rest of the world sit up and take notice. The problem with the Australian film industry is not with the writers, the producers, the directors or the talent. As President of the Screen Producers Association, Stephen Smith, clearly states, the problem is with the structure of financing. " Our problem is not our ability to make films, nor, necessarily, the stories we choose to tell, or lack of skill or experience of our crews, directors, actors, or producers. It is the present mindset and structure of our film financing process," (Stephen Smith in *The Courier Mail*, 09/08/2004).

So the current tribulations of the Australian Film Industry can be said to come down to one stand-out feature - money. But does a small budget necessarily mean a poor quality film? In 1979 and 1980, two movies were made in Australia under a budget of \$900,000. Then, as they are today, these films were seen as cinematic masterpieces.

My Brilliant Career (1979) was directed by Gillian Armstrong, produced by Margaret Fink and starred Sam Neill and Judy Davis. The film is set in the Victorian era, and is centred around Sybylla Melvyn, the daughter of a poor farming couple. When Sybylla is sent to live with her middle-class Aunt to learn the refinements of life, Sybylla falls in love with Harry Beacham, and

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soon learns that the relationship seems doomed from its beginnings (Stewart, 1984, p. 105).

My Brilliant Career was produced on a budget of \$890, 000. " Mysteriously, the AFC repeatedly rejected the project: funding came from the NSW Film Corporation, which put in \$450, 000, and from GU, which put in \$200, 000; the balance of \$240, 000 was raised from private investors," (Stratton, 1990, p. 2). My Brilliant Career went on to be one of the finest films in the history of Australian Film. Made on a modest budget, the film dispels arguments that films need big budgets to get the big bucks.

Breaker Morant (1980) was directed by Bruce Beresford, produced by Matt Carroll, and starred Edward Woodward, Jack Thompson and Bryan Brown. The film was set during the Boer War in South Africa, where Harry 'Breaker' Morant and two other Australian officers were charged with the massacre of the Boers. The trial is the central element of the film, and sees the officers defended by a young Australian country lawyer (Stewart, 1984, p. 108).

Breaker Morant was made for around \$800, 000. The principal investor was the South Australian Film Corporation. However, unlike My Brilliant Career, Breaker Morant was backed in part by the AFC (Stratton, 1990, p. 2).

Then there was The Castle, the humble Aussie comedy that was an overnight success. The Castle, starring Michael Caton, sees a 'typical' Australian family struggling against 'the big guys' of Australian bureaucracy when a company tries to take the family's home from them so that the company can extend the airport on the neighbouring property. The success of the film reduced

arguments by many that the Australian film industry needed bigger budgets to compete with those of other nations such as America. The Castle was "written in two weeks and shot in eleven and a half days..." (Craven, 2001, p. 127). The reason The Castle was successful had more to do with the witty script and well-developed characters than with its budget (www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/09/05/1062549007977.html).

Therefore, a small budget does not necessarily mean a poor quality film. Nor does a large budget necessarily mean a good quality film. However, it is undeniable that money is a factor in today's filmmaking environment.

Money is also a factor in Australia's inability to hold onto up-and-coming talents, or 'stars'. " Stars articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it," (Stam, 2000, p. 609). Over the course of Australia's filmmaking history, countless stars have left Australia behind and headed for the bright lights of Hollywood. Audrey Hepburn, Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Geoffrey Rush, Nicole Kidman, Heath Ledger, Eric Bana; all these stars established their film careers in Australia, but none could become true 'stars' or acquire international recognition by continuing to appear in Australian films that were mediocre at best.

With the lure of the bright lights and the increased monetary benefits, time and time again Australia lost their ticket to dragging the Australian film industry out of its slump. The reason so many Australian talents headed for Hollywood? Money. There simply isn't an opportunity to further an acting career in Australia. There aren't the funds, nor the quality of product to hold

onto one of the main things we need to drag the industry from its current ruin - stars. Audiences who forge an attachment with an actor will often times go to see a film knowing nothing more about it than Tom Cruise is in it, or that Jack Nicholson plays the lead role. Australia doesn't have that luxury, because no sooner is there a star in the making than they are lost to America. Australia needs to make a greater effort to encourage Australian actors and actresses to stay in Australia. In order to do that, there must be funds; there must be publicity and there must be recognition, all things which are not currently accessible in the Australian film industry.

It is blaringly apparent that the Australian film industry needs more funds to be competitive in the global market. In order for this to happen, there are two solutions. Either the government needs to pour more funds into the industry, or there needs to be more private investment in films.

So the Australian Film Industry is in trouble. All we need to do is go back to producing films the way they were made in the '70s right? Wrong! In an ideal world, righting the wrongs of the Australian Film Industry would be as simple as returning to ways of old when Australian films were popular and profitable. However, we do not live in an ideal world, and to return to ways of old simply isn't possible. So much has changed in the world since the 1970s. What people want has changed. The way people see the world has changed. What viewers expect has changed. The world is more politically correct than it once was. Multiculturalism means that audiences in Australia and around the world are very different to the white, middle-class audiences of the 1970s. "[films] were intended for audiences now impossible to reconstitute:

white, largely middle class, almost racially homogenous and predominately suburban Australians..." (Molloy, 1990, p. 1). All that is left is for the Australian Film Industry to find a new formula, one that fits in to the world today.

In America, as much as \$143 million Australian dollars are being spent on marketing and advertising of films prior to their release in the box office (www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/07/28/1090694021642). In Australia, average development costs are about 1 to 2 per cent. On a budget of \$5 million, Australian films are lucky to have a meager \$50, 000 spent on its development (Stephen Smith in The Courier Mail, 09/08/2004). One of the few successful Australian films in recent times was Steve Irwin's Crocodile Hunter, which cost \$US 12 million to produce, and took \$US 30 million at the box office in America alone. The key to the film's success? Publicity. Prior to the film's release, Steve Irwin launched a publicity campaign, hence preparing a market before releasing the film.

The problem with too many Australian films is that they come out blind. Australian filmmakers aren't conducting audience analysis or demographic testing. Therefore, producers do not even know who will be watching the film. The success of Crocodile Hunter was largely due to the fact that Steve Irwin already had a prepared market before launching the film. Australian filmmakers are leaving too much to coincidence. In order for Australian films to be more popular with its audiences, market analysis needs to be conducted, and an advertising campaign should be launched targeting those audiences that the film was aimed at. There also needs to be a larger focus

on the production of films for international audiences. Australian filmmakers seem to under-estimate the value of market analysis and advertising; and they are making a very large mistake.

In summary, the Australian film industry needs to reform many aspects of the industry in order to become competitive in the global industry. These reforms need to include the current film financing structure; greater market and audience analysis; more films aimed at international audiences; and more diverse script subjects. Should these changes be put in place then the Australian film industry will go a long way towards creating a positive new wave in Australian film history.