

Time For Some Changes

If you're not involved in New Zealand feature film development it's a great time to be involved in the New Zealand film and television industry.

There are many areas of the industry that are dynamic.

Television documentaries are dynamic. Each year millions of New Zealand viewers tune in to watch hundreds of docos made by New Zealanders for New Zealanders.

Television drama is entering a new era of self-confidence. "Outrageous Fortune" led the way and is still leading the way. The networks have demonstrated a new appetite for drama and some of it's pretty good. The two drama series currently in production – Great Southern's "The Cult" and Desert Road's "This Is Not My Life" – are both audacious enterprises and they both, going on the enthusiasm of the people working on them, promise to be ground-breaking.

Television comedy is exciting. My two favorites: "Eating Media Lunch" – satire at its best – and "Jackie Brown" – smart, sassy, surprising and funny. Internationally the superstar following that "The Flight of the Conchords" have acquired befits one of the most original comedy shows on the planet.

Feature documentary making is exciting. Feature docos have delivered both the most innovative film made here in recent years – Florian Habichts's "Rubbings From a Live Man" – and our most recent box office hit with Leanne Pooley's "Untouchable Girls". Barbara and Tom Burstyn's "This Way of Life" was a real hit at this year's New Zealand Film Festival and will no doubt be a bigger one when it's released into cinemas nationwide.

Short film making is dynamic. New Zealand remains a world leader in shorts, as it has been for several decades now, and each year throws up several new gems and the new talents that they herald. The kiwi shorts on offer at this year's NZIFF surely make up as strong a selection as there's ever been in any year before.

Television commercials are dynamic. Kiwi commercials makers have been slammed by the international economic downturn this year but obviously that's no fault of their own. New Zealand retains its well deserved rep for great local TVC's, and as a great place to shoot international ones.

The 48 Hour Film Festival is a phenomenon. There's no country in the world where such a competition draws more competitors from more walks of life and more ranges of experience than our own, and the standard of films that get made is amazing.

Foreign film production in New Zealand is more than dynamic, it's explosive. When productions in Auckland are not only thieving each other's crews but being forced to recruit from Australia you know this sector is busy. In the absence of up to the minute figures on the amount of hard currency that foreign line productions are currently bringing into the country I have observed one pretty direct measure of the health of this sector up close – the amount of champagne and other recreational enhancements that are being consumed by crews in Auckland on a Friday night, and not just a Friday night – it's staggering.

The size and calibre of international productions that Peter Jackson and Richard Taylor are bringing to New Zealand is awe inspiring. When James Cameron has "Avatar" and Peter Jackson has "Lovely Bones" in post-production in Wellington, when Guillermo del Toro has "The Hobbit" – two of them - in pre-

production, when Peter Jackson and Steven Spielberg are teaming up to make “Tintin”, when Martin Scorsese is rumored to have a film to be shot in New Zealand and at least half a dozen other projects from people of a similar calibre are floating around, one has to conclude that these are indeed amazing times.

In fact, as you can see, I am running short of superlatives. But when considering NZ’s film and television industry right now words like exciting, amazing, awe-inspiring and so on are not meaningless adjectives, but accurate descriptors of the state of play.

Except that is, for one rather vital sector of our industry – local films by locals film makers. In particular local dramas made by new film makers.

Whilst the short history of New Zealand film offers plenty of reasons to be proud, and recent successes have given plenty of reasons for optimism about the future, the fact is that right now we are facing a challenge. It’s not one that’s completely new, and it’s not completely unique to us, but it is nevertheless serious. The challenge that we are currently facing is that, in spite of unprecedented support from both audiences and public funds, we have a problem not of having too many well developed proposals for films to make, but a much more challenging one of not having enough.

Just how surprising you find this statement, or in fact whether you believe it at all, will have a lot to do with what part of our industry you are working in. For example if you are someone who’s lucky enough to have recently received NZFC funding you are likely to think the overall health of the local industry is not that bad, as evidenced by the success of its most talented members, one of them being yourself. I know from my own experience having worked for the NZFC, that the view from within the NZFC looking out is usually one of robust activity. It’s a view borne from the fact that you are in many regards at the epicenter of what’s going on – or believe yourself to be at least.

If you are not directly involved in local production but read the press, or in particular if you read the NZFC’s Film News, you may have an impression of great activity. That is of course what NZFC publicity is designed to make you think, but it’s not just propaganda. At any given time there will be a number of films at various stages of production, being selected for international film festivals, or in release. There will also be any number of industry consultations, initiatives, or workshops coming up which are in themselves a type of film activity. In fact between them the NZFC and the New Zealand film making community have in recent years proved themselves to be highly adept at generating all sorts of activities with all sorts of outcomes – it’s just that feature films by new film makers isn’t one of them.

For the past three years – and not only the past three years - the New Zealand Film Commission has been struggling to fund films that are ready for production.

In particular the NZFC has been struggling to fund films by new film makers. How badly? Here’s how badly: over the course of the past 3 years¹ only four NZFC funded feature film drama’s by new films makers have gone into production. i.e. just over one a year. They were: “The Strength of Water” – directed by Armagan Ballantyne, “We’re Here to Help” by Jonathan Cullinane, “Matariki” by Michael Bennett and “After the Waterfall” by Simone Horrocks. If we include “Eagle v Shark” by Taika Waititi, which was in production in early 2006, that brings the total up to five.

The situation looks a lot better when projects financed by the New Zealand Film Fund – which funds bigger budget films by experienced film makers – are brought into the equation. Over the past three

¹ To match the NZFC’s financial year, which runs from July to June, I have counted the films made between July 1, 2006 and June 30, 2009.

years (to June 2009) five Film Fund films have been produced - "The Vintner's Luck" (Director – Niki Caro), "My Talks With Dean Spanley" (Toa Fraser), "Under the Mountain" (Jonathan King), "Separation City" (Paul Middleditch), and "The Volcano" (Taika Waititi) - indicating that our more experienced film makers are doing OK.

The situation looks better still when two highly successful documentaries are considered – "Rubbings from a Live Man" and "The Top Twins" – films that were advanced post-production funding like "Second Hand Wedding" and "Trouble is My Business" – and the two Signature Television films - "Apron Strings" and "Show of Hands".

However these funding decisions, combined with the release of the two films funded through the Headstrong initiative, and the recent completion of a number of TVNZ/NZ On Air funded television-features, have masked the fact that for long periods NZFC feature film production – the engine room of new films by new talent – has been disconcertingly silent. In fact between August 2006 (when it funded "The Strength of Water" and "We're Here to Help") and August 2008 (when it funded "Matariki") i.e. a period of two years, the NZFC didn't advance production funds to any feature films – dramas that is – at all.

This is a troubling situation for a number of reasons.

It's our own local feature films that kicked off this whole extravaganza that is the current New Zealand film and television industry in the first place. It was our own feature films that established the importance of our own stories on screen. It was our feature films that played the key role as a forger of national identity, and it was our feature films that really announced us as a creative film culture to the world. And its feature film making that has always, and still does, attract our finest talents. Making a great New Zealand feature film that amazes the world, or making a serious contribution to such a film, remains the goal to which our finest talents aspire.

Considering the number of talented people aspiring to make feature films, and the resources that are being poured into feature film development, an average of one and a half feature film dramas (1.66 to be precise) by a new film maker being funded every year is a devastating statistic.

Clearly there has been a problem within the Commission.

With a new government in place, government support for the film industry in general and for the NZFC in particular, is currently under review. That Peter Jackson is leading the review can only be great news. Having worked for the NZFC for three years as a Development Executive, and having worked for the past three years as an independent producer, I have plenty of views on how the NZFC should be run. I think the organization needs a serious shake up. But the chief focus of these notes isn't the NZFC. In my view the NZFC is not the key issue because...

Although the policy debate is important, it's not the most important debate.

The key challenge we are facing at the moment was not primarily caused by government policy, and nor can it be fixed just through government policy. In fact discussions of policy, tend in themselves to be a distraction from more important issues – issues, for example, to do with the types of films we should be trying to make. By its very nature analysis of film policy tends to dramatically overstate the importance of policy to the overall health of the film industry. That's not to say it isn't important, good film policy will encourage an industry and bad policy can stifle it. But the key determinant of the creativity and vigor of a

film culture is the creativity and vigor of the people who are actively engaged in the business of actually making films.

Clearly there is problem within the creative community too.

There are important measures of the health of film culture in New Zealand which are not statistically quantifiable.

How to measure for example the despondency that's evident so many aspiring feature film makers at the moment? How to measure the fact that so many aspiring film makers have over the past year or so become what they have never been before which is to say extremely bad social company – at least when they are talking about film that is? Gallows humor is part of our industry. In recent times it's become something darker than that – there is a mood of despair at large. And it's not just me. Run your own poll at a Script-to-Screen gathering, or at one of our industry watering holes and tell me it isn't true. These are troubling questions, and policy and statistics are not going to help diagnose the problem or provide the answers.

How also to measure the impact of recent films on our culture? I'd venture that it's not as big as we'd like to think – more on that later.

The key cause of the situation in which new film makers are not making new films is that in the absence of a clear set of ideas about the types of films we want to make we “new” – though not necessarily particularly young – aspiring feature film-makers, have for some years now been proving spectacularly unable to generate a healthy supply of film projects that are demanding to be made because we are having real problems finding and developing cinematic stories that just have to be told on film.

If we were finding and developing these stories and they really did just have to be made then a lot of them would be being made digitally without any NZFC support whatsoever. But this isn't happening.

The challenge is cultural. It has arisen because a number of the various streams of ideas to do with identity – national, masculine, feminine, gay and Maori - that have nourished the development of our film culture thus far have to a certain extent run their first course. That they are not being replenished is in turn reflective of the type of crisis of values, meaning and identity that grips a culture, and a person, that is struggling to make a difficult transition from one era of development into another.

In terms of dramatic scale this is not of course a crisis of the type that we encounter on the international TV news. It does not involve planes flying into buildings, armed conflicts, or starvation. It is not a crisis that is encapsulated in one world-changing event that demands an immediate and decisive response. It is nevertheless an important crisis, for us at least, because it goes to the heart of our purpose for existence, not just as film makers, but as people living in this part of the world in the early 21st century.

We see this situation reflected in the lack of dramatic, or comedic, story-telling that is appearing all too often in our scripts. New Zealand is at present producing the odd good film. For a nation of four million people that's OK. But it's not great either. It's certainly no better than how we were doing when our industry as we know it first got going 30 odd years ago with a great deal less experience and resources. In fact I think that in terms of the importance of our films to our audiences the impact we're having is not actually as strong as it was back in those days.

There have been some very good and very popular films in recent years. But has there been a film recently which has reimagined contemporary issues as dramatically as “Sleeping Dogs” (1977- that’s 32 years ago), or confronted them as directly as “Patu” (1983 – that’s 26 years ago) or “Once Were Warriors” (1993 – 16 years ago)? Our last unambiguous international hit was “Whale Rider” (2002 – seven years ago), before that it was “Heavenly Creatures” (1994 – 15 years ago) and “The Piano” (1993 - 16). Our last Cannes selected feature was “Rain” in 2001 – eight years ago. The last art-house film to have a big impact was “In My Father’s Den” – five years ago.

This is a shame given that the front page of the newspaper on any given day shows that we live in a time when our society is not actually short of things going on that are worthy of dramatic - and comic - attention.

It’s also a shame in light of the fact that other fields of artistic endeavor in New Zealand are particularly dynamic. There is a new exuberance in our culture that is expressing itself through music, television, the visual arts and the numerous different types of festivals that take place all over the country. There are a lot of exciting developments going on in New Zealand culture at the moment – they’re just not occurring through new films by new film makers.

These notes are intended to spark debate between those of us who view film making as a great deal more than a profession – not only producers, writers and directors, but actors, technicians, critics, commentators and bureaucrats – professional distinctions are not important in this context.

For those who regard film making as more than a profession then the issue of what type of films we are making is paramount and will inevitably be intimately tied up with issues of how we see ourselves and our own lives. That’s what makes film making and those who make films interesting. It also points to the stakes involved in film making because for those of us who have a passionate interest in making them, films encapsulate everything that we find to be important, ridiculous, dramatic, comical, dreadful and fantastic in our existence. And if the films that we are making aren’t as good as we’d like them to be, or in fact we are not even successfully developing the sort of films that we feel we’d like to make, then that is an important issue for us to face.

A Devil’s Advocate could have a lot of fun with the question of why film making in this country should be supported at all.

No group of people believes more firmly that the New Zealand film industry is important to New Zealand than the community of film makers and aspiring film makers themselves. But let me play the devil’s advocate for a moment when I pose this little thought experiment:

Imagine an activity that is perceived to be not only worthy but glamorous – so worthy and glamorous that it draws a substantial number of the most creative, practical, ambitious and energetic people from a community into its clutches. Having done so it exerts a power so addictive that it consumes not only a substantial portion, if not all, of their own, and not only their own, financial resources, not only their time and energy, but in fact their very dreams. However imagine that what makes this activity even more extraordinary is the fact that for all the resources that it sucks in it results in what is more often than not the most mediocre of products, and that in more than 99% of cases it results in no product at all. What is more it does this not in a short space of time but over a course of many years, decades in fact – releasing its grip only when its victim is completely spent. A devil’s advocate might argue that such an activity, far from being one that should be promoted with the help of tax payer’s funds, should on the contrary be treated as a menace to public health. Rather than directing public funds towards promoting such an

activity, a devil's advocate might convincingly argue that the same funds might be better spent on prevention programs, educating people on the dangers of such an addiction, and offering rehabilitation to those who have succumbed to it.

Right now, the job of such a devil's advocate doesn't seem that hard. What's harder is to have a look at some of the ideas and values that shape our outlook.

This is not easy. In fact even the suggestion of a discussion of ideas or values causes a feeling of profound unease in many of us – often with good reason. However, whilst the dangers of abstract intellectualisms cannot be over stated, nor can the danger of denying the role of ideas, and of values, in our lives and in our art. Ideas for films and ideas about film are in fact the most fundamental building blocks of our craft, in their own way far more vital than any of our physical tools of trade.

I think that the films we are developing and trying to make are in many ways the best that we are going to be able to make – given the quality of the ideas and the strength of the values that they are based upon. I think that behind the self-congratulatory slogan of “Great New Zealand Stories” that almost every film industry publicity campaign refers to, lies a vacuum of ideas as to what type of films we should be trying to make, that's reflective of a film culture that sometimes seems almost defiantly adolescent.

There are some things that I think we need to do.

For a start I think we need to acknowledge the importance of the debate as to why it is that we want to make films and what films we want to make.

Amidst the adrenalin and anxiety, the hopes and disappointments, the often desperate struggle for survival that is the daily existence of anyone who works in independent film, it is perilously easy to lose sight of the reasons why we embarked upon this venture in the first place. Given the technical aspects of the medium, all the issues of *how* we make films – and not only all issues technical, but the financial and political ones too – have a strong tendency to dominate all film-related discussions.

Secondly I think we need to blast the way that we think and talk about films far out beyond the self-referentiality that occurs so often when we discuss films only in relation to other films.

Let's discuss films in relation to the true source of all film material – life.

Thirdly, let's not be afraid to open up a wider debate on our destiny as individuals and as a culture.

And having re-imagined that destiny, and the role of films in it, to return to the question of what the films are that we wish to make. Film remains one of the most potent mediums of communication available. It will remain so, so long as we continue to have the courage to treat it with that level of importance.

None of what follows is a criticism of what has been before. In fact none of the aspirations I want to set out would be even conceivable if it had not been for the extraordinary achievements of talented people that have worked, are still working, and are just starting to work, in this industry. To review their work is both humbling and inspiring and it is a tribute to them that their achievements point forward to even greater ones that may be possible. In fact it's with a review of the achievement thus far that I would like to start.

These notes fall into three sections. To use an analogy from the natural landscape, I would describe the first section as a vigorous (and not always elegant) act of scrub clearing the better to take a fresh view of the overall contours of our creative landscape. It looks briefly at what films in this country, and the

people who made them, have achieved – and what they haven't. It attempts to identify some of the pitfalls that we are liable to fall into when we think and talk about *what* films we want to make and *why*. It then raises some questions with regard to where our films are now and therefore where we as people are now. In doing so they will I hope, suggest why our current predicament is one that we should look to move beyond. The second section is my attempt to frame the big drama that I think films should be addressing. The third returns to much more practical territory with some ideas on what sort of films we should be trying to make.

The Big Picture

My argument, in brief, is that having earned a modest place for our art within our society and within the wider world, in moving beyond the current challenges we face we hold the potential to develop a cinema that is a more vital part of our culture than it already is, and to make our small corner of the globe here in the South Pacific one of the key centres of world cinema. There is much in what has already been achieved, and is being achieved, to suggest that this is much more than a pipe-dream.

We might in turn hope that as we become more international our culture in turn will become more interesting to the outside world, that we ourselves might become a subject for international interpretation, capable of drawing talent to our shores to interpret our stories for an international audience.

New times call not only for new aspirations, but for new ideas and new values. The search for these would form the basis of the forging of a new and stronger New Zealand voice – one of independence, intelligence, optimism, and wit – surely a worthy objective for a generation, so imbued with potential and yet trapped thus far, like the culture, in what sometimes feels like an eternal adolescence.

If this sounds like the start of an outline for a grand theory of everything let me be upfront – it is. Grand theories of everything are important. They help to provide us with context and potential direction. They cannot, by definition, be anything but faulty, and if they seek to establish any sort of enforceable orthodoxy they become dangerous. But it's an inability to think big or to think deep – in terms of our place in the world, in terms of our projections into the future – that is currently hindering us.

A devastating equation

If all this is sounding a little abstract please be reassured that I do hope to make it less so, and for now consider something which might be impossible to measure but which certainly isn't abstract: It's the number of hours, days, weeks, months and years of the time of talented people in this country which is currently being poured down the drain pipes of film projects which will never be made. Consider the intensity of aspirations that have been poured into these projects, and the creative and psychological, not to mention financial, toll that arises when film projects fail to become films, and when the films that do get made fail to deliver on their aspirations. Of course not all films projects can and should be made, and not all that do get made can be good – but one and a half feature dramas by a new film maker being funded for production each year? – that's ridiculous.

What got me typing

My own experiences and frustrations as an independent producer of course. But in particular the experience in recent years of being in India, and Russia, and Europe and meeting and talking with film makers from countries where film makers actually make films – regularly, before they are 30, lots of them, having developed them for a year or two rather than decades.

Let me reassure you that I do not seek your agreement on all of what I say, but I do seek your engagement, for everyone who has an interest in these things has a contribution to make.

- Matt Horrocks August 2009