

New Zealand Film Now

In light of such a roll call of talents and achievements as we encounter in the previous article, one might fairly ask why there is any need to question what is, apparently, such a strong position. There are two answers to that. The first is that when you roll the highlights of 30-odd years of film making into several pages of course it looks good. The second answer is that I think the industry has a natural in-built tendency to overestimate its own impact, both internationally and domestically, in ways that do not correspond to reality.

New Zealand Films in the World:

The international film market is facing a particularly difficult time at the moment. Nevertheless it is not uncommon for a good New Zealand film to sell to every significant international territory.

However whilst our good films are in demand in the international market place the fact is that in the last 10 years there has only been one big success in terms of the actual international box office and that was “Whale Rider” (2002) which was a significant hit in countries all over the world. According to BoxOfficeMojo it grossed \$60,121,722 (at today’s exchange rate¹) world-wide. The next biggest success after “Whale Rider” was “The World’s Fastest Indian” (2005) which grossed \$26,541,700 world-wide, of which half came from its highly successful New Zealand and Australian releases which each delivered around \$7million each. In the same year “In My Father’s Den” also enjoyed a successful Australian release grossing over \$1million dollars at the Aussie box office. The two most recent films to do any significant international theatrical business were “Black Sheep” which delivered \$7.3million world-wide, and “Eagle vs Shark” which was just shy of \$2million. That’s no small achievement for first time feature directors, both of whom went on to get their second features up in short order after their first.

Just how hard it is to get a cinema release in America can be seen from the figures from this year’s Sundance Festival. 3,661 films were submitted to the festival, of which around 200 were selected, of which around 12 are getting theatrical distribution². Of these it may be guessed that the majority were from America.

Nevertheless the box office figures quoted above do rather contradict a general perception both within the industry, and the wider community, that in recent years New Zealand films have been something of a sensation in the world. The fact is that there has been one sensation so vast in its magnitude with “The Lord of the Rings” series, that its bright light has thrown a glow of achievement over an industry which is otherwise unremarkable. The Peter Jackson phenomenon, combined with the publicity associated with the various other big international films that have been shot here, “Narnia” in particular, tend to give the impression of a place for New Zealand film in the world that is bigger than it actually is.

Box office returns are not the only measure of success. Festival selections are also important and we manage to have a few features being selected for international A-list festivals each year. For a country with our population base that’s not bad.

However I’d like to apply a test here that’s tougher, and more relevant in my view, than any analysis of selections and prizes in international festivals. Let’s call it the *International Airport Test*. Imagine you are sitting in a transit lounge in an international airport – where ever in the world you like – and find yourself

¹ NZ\$1 = US69c

² p.346 The Reel Truth by Reed Martin, Faber & Faber 2009

in conversation with a random stranger who wants you to tell them what New Zealand is like. You might think that a good place to start would be to mention a few famous New Zealand films. Have you had this experience? It's humbling.

In my own informal polling I find that a slim majority of people who have seen "The Lord of the Rings" know that it was filmed in New Zealand (typically in the countries where Tourism New Zealand ran its campaign to alert people to the fact). In the non-film industry population I occasionally find someone who has seen "Whale Rider". Amongst people who work in the industry or who are cinephiles one will strike a good many people who have seen, and appreciated "Heavenly Creatures", "Once Were Warriors" or "The Piano" – great films all of them and all of them made more than 10 years ago.

The experience of mentioning New Zealand film in a foreign location and finding oneself discussing "The Last Samurai" and the "Vertical Limit" is a humbling one. The fact is that if it weren't for Peter Jackson and the big films that are being shot in his studios, New Zealand films would occupy a place in the international consciousness much more in keeping with our overall geo-political importance – small.

In this regard one might quite fairly compare our international impact with some countries of a comparable wealth and size - say Norway, to take a completely random example. Personally I'd have trouble naming one Norwegian film off the top of my head, as I would naming a film from Finland or Portugal. However these notes are frankly not just about making fair comparisons – they are about looking at the actual impact we are having in the world with a view to the impact that we might have.

Kiwi Films at home:

Despite the success each year of at least a couple of New Zealand films at the box office, the statistics for the total number New Zealanders viewing New Zealand films at the cinema remain pretty dreadful. In the last reported financial year (2007-2008) it was 416,000³.

I would like to apply some other measures of our impact. How important are our films to our audiences, really?

When was the last time that you found yourself in a serious argument with a family member or a friend regarding a New Zealand film?

You might ask the same question regarding a New Zealand novel, as you might for this question:

When is the last time that you can recall that the way in which you viewed a fundamental aspect of the world was challenged or changed by a New Zealand film?

And some others:

How many characters can you name from New Zealand films from the last 10 years whose names have entered the culture as universally recognized character types?

Can you name a line from a recent New Zealand film which you could quote and which any other New Zealander would immediately recognize when you did?

What was the last New Zealand film that made a hit of a new song, or was made a hit by a new song?

³ NZFC Annual Report 2007-2008 p3 under "Highlights"

Has there been a film recently that has launched a new type of fashion trend?

What was the last New Zealand film to come out that you simply cannot imagine your life without having seen?

Has there been a film recently that has inspired you to actually want to change an aspect of your life?

How about one that has caused a national debate on a particular issue of relevance to our society?

Is there a film that has for sheer power of drama, comedy, intellect or imagination simply **BLOWN YOUR MIND?**

These may be tough questions to ask of our films but there have been times when films have commanded strong answers in the affirmative to a lot of these questions. I think our own films did this in the late 70's and early 80's and again in the early 90's. Particular films have done so since then but they have done it sporadically.

We are not alone in facing this problem. A recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald suggests that the Australian film industry is in an extremely similar situation:

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2009/08/21/1250362203695.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1>.

And one from the Guardian suggests the Brits are too:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/aug/30/jason-solomons-british-film-industry> .

The challenge of competing for audiences against the might of Hollywood is not a new one and nor is it likely to go away.

Each of the questions posed above are meant to cause their own type of reality check, but there's an aspirational element to each of them as well. There hasn't been a film in recent years that really has ignited a national debate on the scale that say "Once Were Warriors" did – but wouldn't it be great if there was one next year? And wouldn't it just be great to see a series of films come out that for sheer power of drama, comedy, intellect or imagination really did blow everyone's minds? Isn't that what we should be aiming at?

Collectively I think the answers to these questions raise the suggestion that even if there is not a whole lot wrong with our films just now, there is also a potential that they could be something else all together.

For this sort of thinking to be anything more than pie-in-the-sky we need to think big, really big, and I am going to get to exactly what I mean by that. But first there's a bit more scrub clearing to be done in terms of the way we think about films, because we tend to think in ways that are very unlikely to yield useful results.