

## **5 - The NZFC - Film Commissionitis**

### **Film Development and the Missing Projects**

#### **Film Commissionitis**

The policies, politics and personnel of the NZFC are the object of endless speculation. This can be poisonous – so poisonous that I have invented a term for it:

***Film Commissionitis:*** *An obsessive interest in the personnel and policies of the New Zealand Film Commission, prone to escalate into outbreaks of shrill hysteria at the slightest provocation.*

Film Commissionitis is sometimes met by its counterpart. This one originates within the offices of the Film Commission itself and is liable to break out when someone who is not a commissioner has the audacity to make a public statement regarding the state of the industry. I don't have a name for this phenomenon yet but it's likely to feature the word "paranoia".

In fairness to both the industry and the commission both of these conditions have been largely absent from the debate surrounding the current NZFC Review. Nevertheless the extent to which talk about THE COMMISSION tends to dominate all discussion of New Zealand film is entirely unhealthy. A part of it is no doubt inevitable given that we live in a country where only one organization dispenses film funding. But it has a terrible effect when discussion of the Film Commission takes over all other discussions.

THE COMMISSION is too often the default topic for all the other more important discussions when they get too difficult. It speaks to the notion that film development and film funding are some type of mechanical, turn the knobs and dials the right way affair – that somehow if the various policy instruments are aligned the right way great films will spontaneously spring forth. When the debate goes public it risks making us look like Lilliputians squabbling over a very small thimble.

Let's move on.

#### **A View From the Inside**

As a development executive at the NZFC for three years I observed that when it came to actual feature film production funding decisions the really good projects did actually get funded. True, it was often the case that this could not occur until the film makers had been subjected to the Chinese water torture that is the development process for some years – sometimes for a lot of years actually. True also, the machinations that occurred in the weeks leading up to a board meeting sometimes resembled that of a medieval court. Sometimes a type of ritualistic trial of humiliation was required at the boardroom table. And sometimes the decisions made by the board were unclear – even to the point where staff members, who had been present in the room, had to meet over the following days to discuss what they had witnessed and attempt to edit it, not always successfully, into an intelligible form. But the good projects did get funded.

I may be biased of course - forever tainted some might think – in making this assessment. However this view was endorsed at Stephen Cleary's "Business of Development" workshop in Auckland late last year.

An informal poll of the room, which included a fair representation of New Zealand's film makers, old and new, found unanimous agreement that no one had had an unambiguously brilliant project that had been refused NZFC production funding.

It is an attribute of the really good projects that they tended to reveal themselves as really good projects to staff, independent assessors, distributors and board members alike. Sure there were some god-almighty rows – you'd hope so – if the discussions had all been dispassionate that would be much more of a worry than the most vitriolic of stand up arguments. However, it wasn't over the really great projects that the really difficult debates took place – it was over the ones which weren't unambiguously brilliant and yet weren't without merit.

Working for the NZFC was a highly pressured job, and a very interesting one. Being in the engine room of the organization that decided what projects got developed and why, and more importantly which got production funded and why, was never dull. It was my good fortune to work at the NZFC during one of the most exciting times in terms of local film making that New Zealand's had. When I joined the NZFC *Whale Rider* was just being released and *In My Father's Den* was in early pre-production. In the time that I was there the films funded by the NZFC and the Film Fund included *River Queen*, *The World's Fastest Indian*, *Black Sheep*, *Number 2*, *Sione's Wedding*, *Eagle v Shark*, *Out of the Blue* and the two Headstrong Films *Song of Good* and *The Devil Dared Me To*. It was a very exciting time and the number of films coming through placed great pressure on staff in every department.

However, in one of the most exciting times that New Zealand film has experienced, the biggest pressure that we faced, particularly in the development department, was never one of having to make hard calls between too many films that were coming up for production funding. The pressure that we faced was always that of how to spend the production funding budget allocation we had for each financial year – without funding a dog. In this I have to admit we were not completely successful. In my time at the NZFC I never saw films vie with each other for scarce funds. I saw development staff, me being one of them, aggressively seeking out projects on the slate that could be funded and pushing them forward for financing. That was the pressure we faced.

This pressure began to increase markedly in my final six months at the NZFC. In the first half of 2006 it started to become apparent that the development slate was thinning out. When we looked for projects that were coming into advanced development we started to find that the cupboard was bare. This was in spite of an unprecedented development spend in the previous years and an impressive series of industry and training initiatives to find new projects and new ways to address skills gaps that were perceived to exist in the industry. We were funding project development and training initiatives like never before, but we were not seeing the results we would have liked for this in terms of projects coming through demanding to be made. This trend continued into the drought between August 2006 and August 2008 when the NZFC didn't advance production funds to a single feature film drama.

Happily the drought is now over. The NZFC has again been funding projects at a reasonable clip this year and staff report that we are now heading into a situation where aren't going to be enough funds to fund all the good projects. If that is the case, than that's a high quality problem to be dealing with.

## **Development Funding**

I am a skeptic regarding just how good all those projects coming up for funding really are. If they really are all good then the overall quality of our film projects has changed radically in the last six months, so radically as to represent a transformational shift in quality unprecedented to what it's ever been before in the history of New Zealand film – without anyone in the industry noticing. Maybe they have.

I think we could be doing better – in terms of box office impact, cultural impact and international impact. Furthermore, considering the amounts of money the NZFC spends on Development, on Development Staff, on Industry Support, and on Creative Development (Training) I think we actually *should* be doing better. That's quite a big call to make, but it's one that's I've attempted to justify in a previous section – “New Zealand Film Now”.

For up to date figures I am hamstrung by my own timing here in that the Annual Report for the 2008-2009 financial year hasn't been published yet. However in the 2007-2008 financial year \$2,924,107 was spent on Development, of which \$314,758 went on Staff costs. A further \$1million was allocated to Devolved Development and Producer Overhead funds. \$775,000 was spent providing baseline funding for the industry organizations that support Writers, Directors, Producers, Women and Maori who work in film and \$562,535 was spent on Creative Development. Each of the figures quoted above was up significantly on the year before that so it's a reasonable assumption that the figures for 2008-2009 will also have increased.

\$5million being spent on film development and development related activities in this country each year is not a lot of money considering the cultural and economic importance of the film industry. It's not lot of money compared to the stationary bills of some government departments or the catering budget on a Hollywood studio picture. The NZFC development funding that goes directly to writers, directors and producers is vital. In fact it's the life line between film makers and future projects. Money spent in any form of research and development by any institution, whether it be a Hollywood studio or a scientific research foundation, is always highly speculative. At a rough guess I'd say the NZFC would have invested a total of less than \$10million on Peter Jackson's first four films – delivering an overall return on investment to New Zealand that surely justifies the government's support for the NZFC in perpetuity.

But \$5million is quite a lot of money when one considers that this is an organization that only expects to production fund around half a dozen films in a good year.

## **In the NZFC's Defense**

This is the organization through which the New Zealand taxpayer funds us to realize our dreams. Let's not forget that.

The reality is that good film projects are hard to find because good film projects are hard to generate. The fact that a film funding body is finding it hard to find projects that are ready and deserving to be financed, may not necessarily be an indictment of that organization.

The NZFC has not been alone with this problem of developing fundable projects. The Headstrong Digital Film Scheme was set up to produce at least four feature films. However the producers on the scheme, very capable people all of them, struggled to find and develop material suitable for production. After

three years in operation only two films were made. There was a similar situation with the Signature Television Initiative. This collaboration between the NZFC, TVNZ and NZ On Air, was intended to produce at least four feature films – it only made two. Producers are often quick to assert that they could do better than the NZFC but in fact of the holders of Devolved Development Funds only South Pacific Pictures have proved to be a reliable source of fundable projects.

### **But Asking Some Serious Questions**

The NZFC is a public organization and people should not be afraid to say serious things about the organization and to ask serious questions.

The committee system, culminating with production funding decisions being made by a board made up of eight or nine people is just diabolical – for everyone involved. Even if every one of those people was an internationally respected expert on film development, production, finance or distribution it would still be diabolical because there's just too many people involved in the decision and the decision making process itself is, by necessity given the number of people involved, too inflexible. This is a problem that exists regardless of the particular board and staff involved.

Staff are promising streamlining to the development funding process in the coming months. I think it needs something more radical than that, like getting rid of it for example. How about giving individual staff more power not less, but making them responsible for it, and appointing them to fixed terms during which they have a chance to have a real impact? And while we're at it, how about unshackling writers from the need to have a producer when they first approach the commission? As it stands, staff themselves are victims of the committee process, except that unlike film makers their own income is not dependent on committee applications and decisions.

Aside from the mismatch between how much is being spent on things other than feature film financing, and the amount that is, there are other indicators that the way the NZFC operates could do with some changes.

Of the two most successful New Zealand films released in the last 18 months one, *Second Hand Wedding*, was developed and shot without NZFC assistance. The other big success, *The Top Twins*, was documentary developed at time when the NZFC did not officially fund feature documentary development. Good to see that that has now changed.

Of the most successful films funded whilst I was at the commission, three of them - "Out of the Blue", "Eagle v Shark" and "The World's Fastest Indian" – were developed almost entirely independently of the commission. To the credit of staff all three of these were recognized for their strengths the moment they came in the door and were aggressively supported for production funding.

The current development process has a way of killing projects off, not so much by intention, but through the slow attrition of committee decisions. The committee system is just too cumbersome. It involves long waits for decisions involving too many people at each stage which are too often unclear when they do arrive, and for which there is no accountability. Given that it is a public organization the committee system also plays strongly to the imperative to spread the money wide and thin to keep everyone quiet. With more and more people involved at each funding level from Staff Committee, through Development

Committee to the Board, decision making only becomes more and more opaque as the amounts of funding being considered get bigger.

There are other – hard to measure but vital – indicators that all is not well with the current system. One is the fact that for the vast majority of film makers, and not just the new ones, getting a feature film up appears to be a task so daunting that the very difficulty of the endeavor can itself stifle creativity.

Another related problem is the perception amongst film makers that there is a particular set of boxes in terms of story and content that must be ticked in order for a film to be funded. Whether or not this is true the committee system fosters this perception. My experience of having been on the other side is that it isn't. However a view that I do think is true is that under the current committee system, with its reliance on script reports and market assessments, the idiosyncrasies that define originality have every chance of being squashed well before financing let alone production. The films that established our film culture and our film industry were defined more by the ideas and energy of their creators than by any adherence to conventional forms. Would films like "Sleeping Dogs", "Good Bye Pork Pie", "The Quiet Earth", "Vigil", "The Navigator" or "Illustrious Energy", been funded under the current system? I'm not sure any of them would have been.

Members of the founding generation of our industry have said that the films we are making now are over developed. I think they are right. Better any day for a project to be rough, ready, high energy and made whilst its energy is contemporary, and the team behind it too, than see it developed into oblivion.

This should be particularly the case with newer feature film makers. We should be making more films in the \$1-\$3million range – lots of them. We can make these sized-films without international financing and all that that entails – particularly given that right now there isn't really much international finance around anyway – and without bumping budgets up to qualify for the Producer Offset.

These films should be a realistic goal for a film maker who's proved themselves with a short or a television program or some TVC's, without years, decades even, of development hell to be endured in their brewing. They can be contemporary, and idiosyncratic, specific to the culture and the times. Not all of them will work but at the very least the ones that don't will have been bold experiments, the good ones will find a New Zealand audience, and the ones that are brilliant can travel internationally. Absolutely none of them should be dull.

Together these films should be the engine room of our film culture. At the moment they barely exist.

An indication from the NZFC that it was back in the business of funding genuinely risky films would send a jolt through the industry – a good one that is – and it would in turn demand a response from us film makers as to what those films might be.