

NORTHERN RIVERS SCREENWORKS INC

Submission to 2017 Inquiry into the Australian film & television industry

March 2017

Submission summary:

Northern Rivers Screenworks Inc. ("Screenworks") welcomes the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts inquiry into factors contributing to the growth and sustainability of the Australian film and television industry and appreciates the opportunity to make a submission.

Screenworks represents a diverse range of members interested in seeing more jobs and growth in the screen industry in regional Australia. Screenworks' members are predominantly screen practitioners who work and reside in regional Australia (mainly in the Northern Rivers region); however some are based in metropolitan centres.

Consequently, Screenworks decided that it was essential that it prepares a submission to this inquiry that addresses the terms of reference from our unique perspective.

Within this submission, we have focused specifically on what we believe would contribute to the growth and sustainability of the film and television industry in regional Australia. With 30% of the Australian population living and working in regional, rural or remote areas, it is imperative that a regional voice is able to contribute not only to this inquiry, but also to the future direction of the industry in Australia.

Screenworks' submission is presented under three sub-headings:

1. Support for production companies and/or screen businesses in regional Australia.
2. Producer offset reform.
3. Funding certainties for Screen Australia, ABC and SBS.

Our recommendations are focussed on the future of the film and television industry in regional Australia, including:

1. The need to create funding programs that assist regional production companies and/or screen business to make them ripe for international investment;
2. The importance of reform to the producer offset, particularly for television to increase economic activity in regional, rural and remote Australia; and
3. The requirement for Government to provide funding certainty for Screen Australia, ABC and SBS.

Screenworks also invited contributions from its members who wished to have their individual voices heard. A total of eleven contributions were received and have been attached to this submission. Please note the views expressed in the individual contributions are those of the individual members and not necessarily endorsed by Screenworks.

Submission from Screenworks:

Screenworks was established in 2000 and has built a strong national reputation as one of the very few screen organisations that provide support, leadership and vision for the regional screen industries in Australia. Screenworks is regionally-based (Bangalow, NSW) and runs international-quality programs and events in regional areas. Screenworks is known for delivering multi-faceted, effective programs and events whilst ensuring excellent return on investment for all of our government-funded projects.

Each year, Screenworks presents an annual program of approximately 40 professional and industry development events/programs, which are attended by over 2,000 people each year. Supplementary information is provided at the end of this submission detailing Screenworks' purpose and what we do.

There are many reasons why supporting the development and sustainability of the film and television industry in regional Australia. It's not only because filmmakers, audiences and taxpayers who live in regional, rural and remote areas deserve this support, but because local regional economies and our Australian culture will be immeasurably richer as a result of stronger film and television industries in regional areas. As Peter Wood, Executive Director of Arts Northern Rivers says:

"Work produced by and for and about people in regional places has got to be part of the picture of who we are as a country. It's like First Nations' work; we can't have a national cultural conversation unless that's included."

When you consider the Top 100 Australian Feature Films of All Time¹ (February 2017), the majority of the most successful films at the box office have been made in regional areas or area stories set in a regional landscape. In the top 20 films on that list are: *Crocodile Dundee* (ranked #1), *Australia* (ranked #2), *Babe* (ranked #3), *Crocodile Dundee II* (ranked #7), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (ranked #10), *Red Dog* (ranked #11), *The Dressmaker* (ranked #12), *The Dish* (ranked #13), *The Man From Snowy River* (ranked #14), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (ranked #15), *The Water Diviner* (ranked #16), *The Sapphires* (ranked #19) and *Tomorrow When The War Begun* (ranked #20). The combined box office for the above-mentioned films add up to over \$300 million.

For the purposes of this Inquiry, we would like to raise the following factors that we believe would contribute to the growth and sustainability of the Australian film and television industry:

1. Support for projects, production companies and businesses in regional Australia.

Over the past few years, there have been several funding programs offered by Federal and State funding bodies aimed at supporting ambitious and innovative screen projects, production companies or screen businesses. One example of these programs is Screen Australia's *Enterprise Industry* program.

Many businesses supported by these programs have received unique support to implement growth in their businesses mainly thanks to financial support. As a result, nearly all of these businesses are now more competitive and most have gone on to secure international investment in local productions as well as international investment in the businesses themselves.

It has been mainly metropolitan companies who have been the main beneficiaries of these programs, with our members commenting that this is probably due in part to the businesses' geographical location. One of the most common barriers faced by regional filmmakers and screen practitioners is geographical –

¹ <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/cinema/australian-films/top-films-at-the-box-office>

meaning that they must travel to metropolitan centres to build/maintain relationships and establish investment avenues. Another barrier is the (incorrect) notion that to be original, ambitious and/or bold, you need to be located in the cities.

Many respondents have suggested the creation of similar funding opportunities that support the growth of production companies and/or screen businesses in regional Australia. Ideally, such a funding program would support the growth of production/screen businesses in regional Australia up to a point so that it is ready for international investment in productions, projects or in the businesses themselves. At the very least, setting a minimum percentage of funding available in existing programs (such as Enterprise Industry) to regional, rural and remotes areas is highly recommended.

2. Producer offset reform

In 2015 Screen Producers Australia commissioned a joint report with Australian Subscription Television & Radio Association (ASTRA) provided by PwC, which illustrates that increasing the TV tax offset to 40% (the same value as film) would boost our economy and give Australia a competitive edge internationally. Doubling the Producer Offset would reportedly cost the Commonwealth a maximum of \$15.5 million in foregone tax revenue, but would generate an additional \$119.4 million in economic activity, making the overall economy better off by more than \$103 million.

Screenworks adds its support to the Australian screen industry's call for Producer Offset Reforms as we believe that the economic activity would benefit regional Australia and provide jobs and opportunities that are much needed in regional, rural and remote Australia.

3. Funding certainties for Screen Australia, ABC and SBS

To support the growth and sustainability of the film and television industry in regional Australia, it is critical that there is certainty of funding to the institutions and agencies that support local regional production: the ABC, SBS and Screen Australia.

Some of Screenworks most outstanding achievements over the past five years have been as a direct result of collaborations and partnerships with Screen Australia, the ABC and SBS. For example – (i) with financial support from Screen Australia's *Gender Matters* Initiative, Screenworks has been able to support the career development of twelve regional female writers/directors from across Australia as part of *The Athena Project*²; and (ii) with financial support from the ABC and Screen NSW, *Createability* has provided opportunities for professional regionally-based filmmakers to profile artists with disability living and creating in regional NSW, with twelve short films produced and screened nationally and internationally³.

Over the past 5 years, the industry has seen the Government reduce funding to these three entities. These organisations are the backbone of the industry in regional Australia and are the primary stakeholders that help develop, finance and deliver Australian screen stories to audiences in many different ways.

For regional screen practitioners, production companies and screen businesses, it has never been more important that the Government commits to funding certainty for Screen Australia, ABC and SBS. By giving this commitment, regional production companies and screen businesses will be able to plan for future growth knowing that, if their projects and productions are innovative, ambitious and attractive, then there will be the opportunities and funding available that will enhance local and regional story telling in Australia.

² The Athena Project – more information at: <http://screenworks.com.au/theathenaproject/>

³ Createability – more information at: <http://screenworks.com.au/createability> <http://iview.abc.net.au/collection/createability>

Supplementary Information

About Screenworks:

Screenworks supports and provides leadership for the development of an innovative, vibrant and sustainable regional screen industry (film, television, online, games and apps), with a particular focus on the Northern Rivers region of NSW.

We do this by providing professional development and networking opportunities and services for screen content creators and workers, which are delivered in the Northern Rivers and beyond. We promote Northern Rivers-based screen projects, events and people and our unique regional cluster to the NSW, national and international industry via our communications and marketing strategies.

We also assist local and non-local productions in the Northern Rivers region through location and crew referral services, and stimulate screen culture by promoting screenings and discussion of local and Australian films for the broader community.

What we do:

Professional and industry development

Each year, we deliver a diverse and relevant range of professional development workshops, seminars and events covering the business and creative sides of all aspects of the Australian screen industry. Demand for and attendance at our professional development programs/events continues to grow annually and remains high, which has been demonstrated by solid attendance and the quality of presenters agreeing to speak at our events.

Industry connections and opportunities

Our industry development activities deliver opportunities, connections and benefits for the local screen industry. Our rigorous market driven approach to concept/ project development supports both established professional and emerging practitioners as they develop projects and we match make them with market partners. Our program includes pitching opportunities, incubators and mentoring opportunities with visiting and local industry professionals and market representatives.

Crew referrals and location support

We assist both local and non-local productions in the Northern Rivers region by providing location and crew referral services. We work closely with Screen NSW's Production Attraction Unit and others to work towards increasing screen-related jobs and opportunities in the Northern Rivers.

Promotion and communications

Screenworks promotes local screen productions, projects, events, people and our unique regional industry cluster to national and international networks via our communications and marketing strategies (refer to one-year operational plan for marketing and engagement plan). We provide regular industry updates, local news and access to national and state industry policy, funding rounds and opportunities via events, e-newsletters and website updates.

Advocacy

Screenworks provides a voice at regional, state, national and international levels on behalf of screen practitioners in Northern NSW and regional Australia. We act as a bridge between the regional screen industry and screen agencies' markets and networks at all levels, and we help shape the future of the industry by keeping regional practitioners informed of trends and opportunities.

Individual responses from Screenworks members:

Lois Randall (Magpie Pictures), Lennox Head NSW 2478

Magpie Pictures is a regional producer of film and television drama based in the NSW Northern Rivers region. Magpie currently has a 13 episode live action children's television series in pre-production in regional SE Queensland. The finance model includes a co-commission by NITV and ABC, a presale from The Disney Channel and an advance on ROW from Canadian distributor 9Story.

Producer Lois Randall also worked with Every Cloud Productions to produce "The Gods of Wheat Street" and "East of Everything" in regional NSW, which combined provided 823 jobs and direct regional investment of \$7.3 million.

To underpin sustainability and growth of regional screen industry clusters where television provides the most viable business model, employment and business opportunities, Magpie Pictures recommends that the Federal Government agencies:

- Provide regional enterprise funding to assist regional production companies build national and international market partners;
- Implement tax reform to increase the producer offset to 40% for television to increase long form drama production;
- Maintain current Australian content quotas for television including children's television; and
- Make a commitment to secure appropriate funding levels for Screen Australia, ABC and SBS/NITV.

In addition Magpie Pictures emphasizes the importance of Screenworks as a screen industry driver with a regional mandate. Screenworks' suite of services and programs is in itself an important factor in industry sustainability and growth in the NSW Northern Rivers, and other regional industry hubs across Australia.

Brett Stephens (six sixty productions), Bangalow NSW 2479

six-sixty productions is a digital media production company developing and producing factual and artistic content for a wide variety of audiences and broadcast platforms based in Bangalow in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales.

Screenworks has been a vital link in the chain contributing to the growth and sustainability of our part in the Australian film and television industry. Screenworks has been instrumental in six sixty productions building a beautiful working relationship with Producer/Director Cate McQuillen and the dirtgirlworld team. We are now about to start filming the next series of 'Get Grubby' for the ABC next month in regional New South Wales.

On a personal level, Screenworks has been extremely proactive in developing my professional growth as a writer with a placement in the writing room of the Nine Network show 'Love Child'. This experience is vital in navigating the ever changing face of the Australian Film and Television industry. Also of great benefit are the Producing and Directing events regularly run by Screenworks featuring extremely talented and inspiring practitioners.

six sixty productions has been in the extraordinary position of being engaged to film and produce a series of high quality websites on these events, partly funded through Screen NSW and Screen Australia and now available to view on Screenworks' YouTube channel.

Darius Devas (Being Films), Suffolk Park NSW 2481

The main factor for me is creating lean production models. As the industry is transitioning away from a different era and into new landscape of digital delivery, the top heavy production companies of yesteryear are no longer sustainable for the vast majority of projects being created. Instead, smaller companies and collectives are coming together on a case by case basis to service the new generation of projects that are expected to be produced on sometimes half the budget of what they were in the past. It is important that this is recognised as legitimate model to make it possible to realise projects on reduced budgets and compete with international projects and currencies.

I also live regionally, in the Byron Shire and it is my belief that investment should be prioritised for certain regional hubs to establish satellite industries outside of the major capitals. This benefits local economies, creates professional services that enable national and international productions to film regionally. This allows specific regions to best exploit their unique landscapes and locations. Regional production companies can also sometimes compete more competitively for international clients, than city based production companies with greater overheads

J'aimee Skippon-Volke (Byron Bay International Film Festival), Bangalow NSW 2479

The Byron Bay International Film Festival ('BBFF') is Australia's most well-known regional film event, recognised by the NSW State Government for our contribution to enhancing NSW's global reputation as a creative state. We are passionate about supporting talented filmmakers and content creators at all levels of their careers, and run an extremely successful Young Australian Filmmaker of the Year competition. This means that we have met with hundreds of emerging Australian filmmakers over the years and learnt about their challenges, as well as connecting with established and connected filmmakers from Australia and overseas.

I believe contributing factors to growing a stronger and more sustainable Australian Screen industry includes - understanding the growth of an internet focused society that more and more creatives (and individuals in general) will be seeking lifestyle balance and leaving the cities. Funding and development opportunities need to lose a city-centric approach and recognise the large pool of talent that is growing all the time regionally. This is particularly true for our region - Byron is a globally recognised town, full of international and culturally active people - who choose to be here. Additionally - most productions scale up and down and a large amount of screen practitioners work from home, as a permanent office space becomes difficult to manage, with crew/staff sizes growing and retracting. I would suggest developing initiatives such as film hubs, funding for home-based practitioners with young children to make their space office ready and stay in their field while parenting to be a positive move for keeping careers and companies moving forward in balance with family.

The internet has also provided a democratisation of content distribution - which means there is more content out there and more ways to access it. This means it's vital to protect national assets like the ABC whose trusted brand has been built since the birth of Australian screen entertainment, but who also seeks to keep Australian content strong. Adhering to strict policies around % of Australian content created and screened will help keep our industries strong and our communities engaged with their home-grown talent.

Encouraging investment in Australian productions and production companies is vital as is developing initiatives that support innovative production companies and screen businesses so that they are better positioned for international investment - though a strong set of off-sets, co-production treaties, travel funds, skills-growth and business mentoring initiatives and perhaps a return to Production Investment Tax

Incentives. Festivals, such as BBFF, and Film Markets also provide an opportunity for Australian filmmakers to meet and collaborate with Australian and International talent and Screenworks continues to get regional screen practitioners ready to take their ideas to market. These are vital ingredients which have helped make our area the strongest regional screen community in Australia. The growth potential for the screen industry in our region is enormous but needs support to continue the charge forward.

Just as the internet has dramatically changed our culture and the entertainment landscape so will new technologies impact the Film and Television industry. With many jobs in Australia set for automatism - the creative industries remains an area which is driven by people who are operating software and machinery (cameras, hardware etc), the nature of production means that for many they already work a part-time or rather short-term contract role - as so developing our industry, and letting creative young people know that working in TV, film or other screen industries is not a pipedream, it's a career path will help Australia stay strong in the years to come, especially as branded content has become part and parcel of marketing.

Many filmmakers work in Marketing, and perhaps working on bringing the industries together could create opportunities as the line between advertising and entertainment is increasingly blurred. Interactive is an area where entertainment is heading and it seems to me that there's just not the understanding or support for those growing their talents in those fields from Australia's screen bodies. I am passionate about Virtual and Augmented Reality and how that technology along with AI will evolve our entertainment and human experience, this is an industry that should be supported but yet the funding strands I have seen work to push filmmakers into that realm instead of supporting the passionate developers already working there who understand the medium but need help learning about production processes and story. I believe stepping outside the comfort zone of funding those who are known or who have credits and instead taking a risk and working with individuals who you can really see and experience their raw talent will net some surprisingly positive results.

Finally Australia's Screen Industries will thrive with connection - connection to each other and to the overseas Industries and Audiences... work to make connection and keep them strong and active.

Byron Studios, Bangalow NSW 2479

'Byron Studio' is dedicated to supporting local content creators bring their creative vision to life through a collection of like minded local professionals. The intention is to grow the local industry in our region and keep the amazing local talent in the Byron region instead of having to travel interstate to where the work currently resides.

We strongly believe that with the right support from existing bodies such as 'Screenworks' and other professional services such as 'Cumulus Visual Effects' and 'Verve Entertainment' we can create a sustainable industry in the (Northern Rivers) region.

Looking to the future we intend to build a production ready sound stage capable of not only supporting the local industry, but also attract interstate and overseas projects to further build the local industry into a world recognised filming destination.

Wendy Champagne (Writer & Filmmaker), Coorabell NSW 2479

As a documentary filmmaker and scriptwriter who has worked in both these capacities in Australia and overseas, I would like to address the Inquiry's Terms of Reference first by stating the obvious: To maintain and grow an Australian TV and film industry it has to be supported, culturally and financially.

I believe Australian TV and Film communities and their film output flourish when they are recognised - think 1970's South Australian Film Corporation and its outsized and enduring cinema production. We can do wonderful things that reverberate for generations when the work we do to contribute to these creative industries is encouraged and financially supported at the grassroots - equitably across cities and regions - by our government and its institutions.

As Australians we always punch above our weight. Despite learning and adapting new technologies and storytelling forms with lightning speed and moving from authors and directors to "content producers" in a few short years, it is just depressing to see how the task of getting a project up is a bare fraction away from impossible for even some of the most experienced TV and Film creatives.

Our State Arts Councils should not have to make funding choices between two equally viable and worthwhile projects in one round; there should be more financial support for them. One million dollars extra in an Arts organisation can literally create a loaves and fishes environment for project development. I believe there should be greater emphasis on early development funding rounds that allow for at least a one in four or five opportunity for writers and content creators.

At the other end of the process, having worked as a filmmaker in Canada and the UK for 10 years, my projects benefitted from strong institutional distribution support. For example, when an arts organisation funds a project through development and production (say through SODEC in Quebec or Telefilm in the rest of Canada) they would then take it on festival rounds and promote it at film and TV industry forums giving the project a chance of a much wider international audience and access to multiple TV licenses. I think we should look at creating stronger connection between development and distribution and provide support for a separate department at Film Australia perhaps or state arts organisations.

With regard to competing with overseas multi-platform production companies, I do not see a problem as long as you protect our ownership of copyright, reaffirm your charter to support Australian production and above all nurture the great talent and innovation we have here – through the creation of a new fund for multi-platform projects instead of asking more and more from less of a pie. Equip Screen Australia and the State Arts Councils with more resources to market our creative, unique multi-platform production expertise overseas.

Lastly please remember when you speak of the Film and TV Industry, we are actually talking about human beings, people with families to support, people who should be applauded for their contribution and dedication to innovation despite withering financial opportunity. I do believe, given the talent in this country, and with just a small shift in structural support and attitude we could be leading the next creative renaissance.

Susie Forster (Byron Bay Multimedia), Byron Bay NSW 2481

As an independent filmmaker in a regional area, Screenworks events enable me to network with key industry players and develop my skills as an emerging director and producer. Through my involvement with Screenworks I have succeeded in launching not only a video production business but also producing many films, including a short documentary for NITV and, through Screenworks funding, directed and produced an award-winning short film about disability. Screenworks have provided an accessible pathway and direct funding for my career aspirations to begin to be realised- creating content for television and online broadcast and festivals in Australia and overseas.

Poppy Walker (H.W Collective), Bangalow NSW 2479

It would be of immense benefit to the growth of the regional screen industry, if more funding and development opportunities were regionally-specific. Moreover, it is vital that ongoing financial support is given to regional bodies such as Screenworks, who are committed to building a sustainable and vibrant local industry.

Rebecca Ingram, Mullumbimby NSW 2482

I am an independent filmmaker and film studies teacher at TAFE located in the Northern Rivers of NSW. Most importantly for our growth and our future filmmakers' growth having organisations such as Screenworks located in our region and supporting us is instrumental in our growth – this includes potential co-production opportunities as well.

As a regional filmmaker I would like to have opportunities to be able to connect with international producers and production companies and discuss potential collaborations; however there aren't many opportunities on small scale intimate level similar to what events Screenworks runs for Australian producers and content creators. More placements overseas such as Europe for emerging Australian filmmakers would be ways to encourage growth and collaborations as well as encouraging more events and incentives to attract overseas interest.

But in the meantime, having support from Screenworks has been instrumental in the development of my career as a Content Creator as well as many others I have witnessed, and I hope to see support for this vital organisation expand.

Graeme Cooney (Caldera Productions), Murwillumbah NSW 2484

I think we can compete by making uniquely Australian content and keeping the cost of production down. The cost associated with producing big production dramas and the like in this country seems astronomical, it's why we can't compete and why our television screens are filled with mostly American or British content. None of which is good for us culturally as Australians. When Australian productions do take place they seem to be filled with the same old familiar faces acting in them and same crews producing them. It's a very insular, guarded scene and difficult in the extreme to break into. For that reason we have young actors and production people going straight overseas and being very successful, of course there are plenty aren't as well.

With the huge leaps in technology increasingly becoming more sophisticated and less and less expensive. There is no logical rational reason for not having a lot more Australian content both on our TV and Cinema screens. The overwhelming main reason for it is Hollywood's tentacles stretch far and wide. It certainly has a strangle hold on Australian Cinema. Village Roadshow has a monopoly on it with cinemas Australia wide screening almost exclusively Hollywood blockbusters. With the proceeds all going overseas and none of it finding its way to Australian filmmakers. Despite having the best actors and production people in the world we do not actually have an Australian film industry. Australian Filmmakers have to go begging to increasingly cash strapped organisations set up by the Government to essentially be funded by the Australian taxpayer. Mainly as a cultural thing not to create an actual industry, sure a few films get made here and some people get some work but it's a long way from an industry.

What really has to happen to create one is the monopolies broken down and the market opened right up. The exclusive little club that is the Australian Film Industry needs to open its doors to new talent instead of

the same people over and over again. The notion that unless it's filmed with equipment worth millions it's not film has to go. There's a lot of technical snobbery going on as well, we won't screen it unless you've used XYZ to film it that has to go. Surely we can produce something more interesting than overweight people slobbering around on lounges talking about the dumbed down mindless crap they're watching on television to look at. Or American supposed comedies full of laughing machines and totally devoid of humour.

Bette Guy, Modanville NSW 2480

All I can suggest is that more money is given over to the development and mentoring in the initial stages, so that scripts are better suited to particular markets and, perhaps, the costs of production.