

**Submission to House of Representatives inquiry into future opportunities for Australia's film, animation, special effects and electronic games industries.**

### **Introduction**

Although the Australian film industry has traditionally been based in the country's largest cities, an increasing number of productions are choosing to film in regional areas. In turn, these regional areas are beginning to recognise the economic and cultural benefits that film and TV production can bring. These two factors have, in recent years, brought about the existence of a number of local film offices in regional NSW. Of these, one of the most significant is Film Illawarra.

### **Film Illawarra**

Film Illawarra is the regional film office for the Wollongong, Shoalhaven, Kiama, Shellharbour, Eurobodalla and Wingecarribee council areas. It is one of five similar economic development agencies, representing different regions of NSW. These agencies, like Film Illawarra, seek to facilitate and attract production of films, TV programs, commercials and other forms of film/video production to their areas.

Film Illawarra was established by Prof. Sharon Bell (then Dean of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong) in August 1999 to promote this region as a potential film location. Today we are one of the country's foremost regional film commissions. Among the projects we have attracted to the area are:

- Mullet (2000) – director David Caesar, starring Ben Mendelsohn
- The Man Who Sued God (2001) – director Mark Joffe, starring Billy Connolly and Judy Davis
- Turn Around (2002) – a short film indigenous film by Samantha Saunders and produced by Jenny Day, recently screened at the Message Sticks '03 festival.
- A Fine Body of Gentlemen (2002) – a ABC TV documentary about the first touring indigenous cricket team, director Geoff Burton
- Floodhouse (forthcoming)– a short feature for SBS independent, director Milo Bilbrough
- A Man's Gotta Do (forthcoming) –an Australian feature, director Chris Kennedy, starring John Howard
- The Fall of the House (forthcoming) – a documentary on composer Edward Goosens, director Geoff Burton
- Axefall (forthcoming) – an Australian feature, producer Sally Regan

To date, these productions have contributed an estimated \$600,000 to the local economy – with still more revenue being generated from the steady stream of TV commercials that the area hosts.

Other key achievements include:

- Illawarra Region Of Councils film policy: a Film Illawarra initiative to standardise the process for application to film on council land and produce a consistent approach within all six council areas to encourage filmmaking.
- Australian Screen Directors Association conference: Film Illawarra's hosting of this event was the first time this major industry event had been held in the area.
- Filmmakers' Forums: A series of community forums, where local filmmakers have been able to hear from industry professionals free of charge on topics as diverse as the Australian Film Television and Radio School, Tropfest and the NSW Young Filmmakers' Fund.
- Editing traineeship: Film Illawarra arranged a unique opportunity for a young filmmaker through an editing traineeship on an ABC documentary.
- A professional set of marketing materials, including a 24-page full-colour location guide and promotional video/CD-ROM.
- On-line searchable database for film locations, facilities and expertise – the most extensive of its kind in Australia.

### **How Film Illawarra works**

As the Illawarra region's interface with film industry, we send out a variety of marketing materials to film professionals and maintain a profile within the industry, through media coverage and advertising. This helps us gain the attention we need in order to develop leads on film or video projects that could be filmed in the Illawarra area. We read scripts, find key locations that could serve as filming sites, photographs these, and send these photos along with other information to the producers. We also maintain a comprehensive web resource, complete with an on-line council application process.

Once a producer has narrowed his or her options to our area and a few other cities, principals from the film usually arrive for a pre-scout. We escort them to suggested locations, liaise with local council representatives to secure clearances for filming, provide information on local accommodation, and generally do everything possible to land and facilitate the project.

Our work does not stop when a film begins shooting. We must often assist the actual filming on a daily basis, cutting red tape, providing resources and solving problems unanticipated by the producers. With some films working to tight time-frames and budgets, they cannot afford to work in a location without a film office to help quickly address their needs.

There are many reasons why film and TV producers are attracted to the Illawarra area. Among these are our proximity to Sydney, the availability of skilled talent, crew and production equipment, acceptable hotel rates, municipal cooperation, and a variety of other factors, including the presence of Film Illawarra in the area. Without Film Illawarra existence, there would be no organisation dedicated to attracting film work ( and its subsequent local investment) to the area.

## **The importance of regional film offices**

Importation of business, jobs and revenue is a primary reason for Film Illawarra's existence. Film and video production is a million-dollar industry. Even a medium-sized Australian feature can end up spending between \$200,000 - \$300,000 in the local community.

In addition to local film professionals, a range of non-film businesses are routinely employed. Local businesses ranging from caterers to office supply stores to tradespeople are often employed during a film shoot. Film and TV shoots can contribute directly to room occupancy of hotels of all sizes, including those that may lack the facilities to benefit from traditional convention business. A film crew of 50 staying two months is the equivalent of a 1,500 person convention in town for the weekend.

Another area that benefits from an active regional film commission is tourism and the national exposure provided when these films are seen internationally in theatres and on TV. Attracting films involves no infrastructure costs of building roads, sewers or schools, often associated with other types of business. All you need is a film office, such as Film Illawarra.

## **Funding**

Film Illawarra is a non-profit organisation and all our services to film makers are free of charge. Given the many different options available to film producers for filming in regional areas, the ability to offer our services for free is an essential aspect of our work. Given that our ability to generate income is limited, we are reliant on the support of a number of key organisations.

Primary amongst them is the University of Wollongong, which has provided in-kind support and top-up funding since 1999. Film Illawarra has also received funding from the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services (DoTaRS) and the NSW Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD) for specific projects. Finally, we receive a small amount of financial contributions from three of our six council areas (all of whom benefit from location fees paid by production companies filming in the region).

## **Our Future**

Over the next two years, Film Illawarra is seeking to consolidate its position by developing a sustainable business model for the Illawarra's regional film commission. Our Business and Strategic Plan 2003-2005 (included) sets out the key objectives essential to meeting this goal. With active support from all levels of government, Film Illawarra should evolve into one of the region's crucial regional development agencies.

Our submission seeks to remind the committee that regional film commissions, such as Film Illawarra are now a key part of the local film industry and that they play an essential role in drawing film and TV production out of the major urban centres and into regional communities.