



samag
Seminars for Arts Professionals

JUNE 2010 SEMINAR SUMMARY

THE SECOND CUT IS THE DEEPEST

Monday 28 June 2010

Australia Council: 372 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills

Chair

Bethwyn Serow: Policy Manager, Screen Producers Association of Australia (SPAA).

Panel Members

Steve Jacobs: film and theatre director whose work includes *La Spagnola* and most recently *Disgrace*, based on the book by JM Coetzee and starring John Malkovich.

Melina Marchetta: Australian novelist whose work includes *Looking For Alibrandi* (1992); *Saving Francesca* (2003); *On the Jellicoe Road* (2006); *Finnikin of the Rock* (2008); and *The Piper's Son* (March 2010). Melina also wrote the screenplay for the film version of *Looking For Alibrandi*.

Jess Scully: Artistic Director of Creative Sydney 2010 and the developer and creator of a range of magazines and other creative projects.

So, you've had your first book published, film produced, exhibition mounted or festival presented. What happens next?

The Panel convened for SAMAG's June seminar explored these questions and importantly considered how you sustain a career as an artist, director or arts manager in Australia and the role played by funding bodies.

Bethwyn opened the seminar with some interesting statistics from the film industry: 66% of producers, 67% of directors and 71% of writers had only one work 'produced' in the past 5 years. She then posed the question: "What are the obstacles to producing a second or third work?", "What needs to happen to produce a second or third work?", and "How do you deal with the pressure to do something 'new'?"

The panel presented diverse responses to these questions.

Melina's experience has largely been positive and built around her personal relationships with her publisher and agent. She spoke firstly of the challenges of writing her first novel and then of building a team (her publisher/s and agent) that has nurtured her career.

When Melina finished the first draft of *Looking For Alibrandi* she went through the Yellow Pages to find a publisher. During this process she received some 'useful' advice, such as "make sure you use double spacing" and "don't forget to write a synopsis". After many phone calls and a number of rejection letters, Melina sent her work to Penguin and thus began a three-year journey reworking *Looking For Alibrandi* until it was published in 1992, six years after she started work on it. Melina's second novel, *Saving Francesca*, was released eleven years later in 2003. She said that it took

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this time for the character of Francesca to arrive and, after the success of *Looking For Alibrandi*, it was hard to ignore the questions “Can she do it again?” Speaking further about audience expectations, Melina commented that when it came to her third book *Jellicoe Road*, because it was not a straight forward narrative like her first two books, it took a long time for her readers in Australia to embrace it. On the other hand, it gave her a whole new audience in the USA.

For Melina the factors that allow her to keep writing are her belief in her writing and the stories she wants to tell, willingness to rework her writing and learn from her publisher, and, crucially, finding a good agent who reads her work and actively supports her career. She also advises other writers to keep their drafts (“there may be a good idea that you want to return to later”) and, if it’s not working, put the work away for a while.

For Steve, success in the film industry has been more difficult to achieve, particularly, he says, because of the conservatism of funding bodies. As significant funds are required to produce a film, funding bodies play a very important role. By way of example, Steve told us that after studying at Mitchell College (now Sturt University) he tried several times to get funding for an experimental film about domestic violence. Firstly, the Film Finance Corporation was unwilling to fund the work. They recommended he apply to a women’s film fund who said it was too experimental and recommended he present a test scene to the Film Finance Corporation. He did this and was told “we like it but it’s too experimental”. Summing up this experience, Steve commented “they never say “no”, but by exhausting the artist they get rid of you”.

Even when a film gets through the assessment process once it is presented to the Board of the funding body they will ask “Do I want to take my kids to this on a Sunday?” and it doesn’t get funded. As the ‘gatekeepers’ of funding, Boards have become more conservative and less prepared to take a risk. They are wedded to genres they feel comfortable with and lack the professional background to conduct proper informed assessments.

Steve said that this is of particular concern from young film-makers who face the dilemma of writing something that is acceptable or write something experimental that is unlikely to get funded. He recommended that, based on their submitted work, funding bodies should trust people and award \$1 million for a first film, then \$3 million for the next one. They should trust the director to make a good film and reward excellence rather than mediocrity. He also noted that in other countries Independent cinema is strongly subsidised or supported through tax incentives. For example, the French Government funds its film industry by charging a tax every time someone goes to the cinema.

Jess presented another perspective. Based on her training as a journalist and lawyer, Jess’s approach is built around business skills and self sufficiency, rather than relying on grants. She added that it’s better to fund your own projects so that you can remain independent. The majority of her projects, such as the magazines *Hot Press* and *Summer/Winter* receive no funding. On the positive side this means not having to obey rules, “you can write about whoever and whatever you want”. But, she noted that they do take a lot of energy to produce and make very little money.

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For Jess, it's a matter of building from small beginnings, finding supporters both in terms of sponsorship and endorsement, and being adaptable. This was well illustrated by her experience with Creative Sydney, now in its second year. In its first year, while it received some corporate funding and support from the City of Sydney, it was not well recognised and considered to be outside the "system". This year Creative Sydney came under the umbrella of the Vivid Festival which gave it authority and led to much larger audiences and recognition. This year, organisers were also able to build on last year's event, adding photos from last year's event to the website. They also developed the 10X10 project through which 10 well-known designers, such as Liane Rossler from Dinosaur Designs, chose 10 people who have inspired them. Next year those ten will get to choose their 'top ten'. This is an effective way to introduce new people to the program and to have other people involved in the recruitment of new 'talent'.

An audience member asked how he could market a mobile film festival to a wider audience. Jess commented that you have to have realistic expectations and think about how you can build an audience over time. In her experience, it may not be until year three that you have a large enough audience to attract funding. This has its advantages as there aren't the expectations associated with an established event and you have more freedom to do what you want. During this phase it is important to make sure your early audiences become your "evangelists".

Jess has also spoken of the importance of adaptability using the example of the Qantas Spirit of Youth Awards (SOYA) which she has been working on for the past three and a half years. She started raising awareness of the awards by making them more aspirational and edgy: engaging an expensive design agency, recruiting high profile "hipster mentors", and showing the work of previous winners, such as Romance was Born, on the website. When they found that some people were intimidated to enter, they had to adapt the program by removing the high profile success stories of previous winners and introducing more funding rounds.

In terms of other obstacles, Steve raised the issue of internet piracy. He commented that it's so easy to make a copy of a film and distribute it via the internet. Cinema audiences are declining and in turn cinemas are showing more conservative films. This is a major issue which is destroying the film industry.

Bethwyn commented that the Australian Government is yet to find a way to deal effectively with piracy, and the protection of intellectual property more generally. She referred to Justice Cowdroy's finding that internet service provider, iiNet, had not authorised the copyright infringements carried out by its customers. Industry representatives had alleged that iiNet infringed copyright by failing to take reasonable steps — including enforcing its own terms and conditions — to prevent customers copying films and TV shows over its network.

Bethwyn also commented that creative commons has perhaps gone too far and not enough consideration is being given to protecting the rights of the original creator of the work. Jess commented that while there can be copyright issues the internet can give artists a whole new

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audience, giving the example of a song that featured in a YouTube wedding video which, while breaching the artist's copyright, resulted in the featured song going into the charts.

For Jess the Internet provides opportunities to do things in different ways and reach new audiences. She cited the example of the music industry where artists may no longer make money from their 'albums', but they can get income from concerts, licensing, and merchandise. Steve commented that there still has to be a way to get revenue to the people who spend time and money to make a work, otherwise "the chain gets broken".

For the individual artist, director or arts manager, it seems that producing the second or third work requires self-belief, energy, and perseverance. Jess challenged us to think of different ways to get our work produced and reach new audiences. More broadly, for the industry, particularly the funding bodies, the challenge is whether they are prepared to take the risks required to build a sustainable and vibrant creative culture in Australia.

Websites

<http://www.emptymag.com/>

<http://www.summerwinter.com/>

<http://www.soya.com.au/>

<http://www.creativesydney.com.au/category/10x10>

by Sarah Evans

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