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Film Finance Corporation and the Australian Film Commission), underpinned by a system of guaranteed distribution through network pre-sales, flowing from the content requirements. The new policy statement gives a commitment to preserving direct production support, but creates an additional mechanism for injecting \$20m a year over three years into program production.

Capturing National Identity

Commercial TV stations must meet quotas for programs made by Australians for Australians with an Australian theme and perspective. The idea of capturing national cultural identity in policy has attracted legal and academic criticism, and to business interests it remains a suspect and untenable activity for government.

In the television industry, regulation (as opposed to assistance) is regarded as unnecessary. Australian programs are clearly in demand and the market will deliver, the networks say. Players in the production industry may see it differently, but even so they do not fully support rules which constrain their use of foreign personnel and complicate their overseas pre-sale deals.

So why impose quotas and targets for Australian programs on commercial television? Community research indicates a strong public interest in an assured level of Australian programs. But if Australian television programs are so popular why regulate for them?

The reason lies in the economics of program distribution. High quality Australian television drama can cost around \$400,000 per hour to produce with the networks contributing as little as \$150,000 per hour, depending on what sort of bargain can be struck. Producers will attempt to make up the rest through overseas distribution. But even in paying \$150,000 per hour for quality drama, television stations may still be paying tens of thousands of

dollars more per hour than they can recoup through advertising. Compare this with the broadcast rights for American drama which can be secured for as little as \$20,000 an hour.

Despite the cost relativities and the quota requirements, commercial television weathered the ownership shakedowns of the late eighties and emerged as a very profitable industry. Although they would probably like the Australian content standard to simply evaporate, the networks are only calling on the ABA to increase its 'flexibility', meaning a departure from the standard's emphasis on Australian drama to allow for substitution of cheaper 'infotainment' programs. This is of grave concern to the independent (that is independent from the television networks) film and television production industry.

New Landscape

Also in the statement, in a separate measure, SBS will get an extra \$13m over four years as a commissioning fund for high quality Australian programs. For independent producers all this is certainly better than the proverbial poke in the eye.

By early next year the ABA will have revised the Australian content requirements, and will dovetail the new requirements in with the production fund which - in a sop to complaints from the south that government film assistance is centred in, and biased towards, Sydney - is likely to be administered by the Film Finance Corporation in Melbourne.

Whatever the form of the new requirements, they will be tolerated by the networks in the medium term, but as competition from pay television increases there will be further calls for relaxation. If the networks continue to flex the kind of muscle they have recently demonstrated in Canberra, all those concerned for the future of Australian production and its role in sustaining our culture will need to be particularly vigilant. □

Barry Melville

OZ Films: Where are the Women?

Discrimination on the basis of gender is well and truly alive if the allocation of roles in Australian film production is any guide.

Recently released research commissioned by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and updating an earlier survey (1992) by Women in Film and Television, showed:

- less than 16 per cent of the films were primarily driven by a female character;
- of 32 films released since January 1993, only five had a female protagonist, while women had co-leading roles in a further five films;
- male 'rites of passage' films were a regular feature of the period - films like *The Nostradamus Kid*, *Love in Limbo*, *Map of the Human Heart*;
- eight of the leading roles available to women went to foreign actors.

In view of these findings, it is ironical that two films about the lives of women - *Muriel's Wedding* and *The Piano* - have been both critically acclaimed and top box office draws.

Sue Maslin, who conducted the earlier survey, commented: 'Australian feature films continue to be overwhelmingly about men's stories. This does not reflect the society in which we live nor the cinematic fantasies of the majority of audiences'.

MEAA's Anne Britton went further, saying that it was no surprise that actors like Judy Davis, Greta Scacchi and Nicole Kidman work primarily overseas when there are such limited roles for women in Australia. □