

TIME FOR THE AUSSIE OSCARS?

Article by Leon Burgher

As an Australian Film Institute member of some ten year's standing, it has been a sad lament of mine that the institute's annual screenings of features, docos and shorts rarely attract more than 10% capacity of the cinemas in which they are shown. Seeing Australian productions on the big screen was, after all, my selfish reason for joining the AFI, and later, becoming a professional member. We all know the Australian general public believes our films are 'poison' but why do so few of our screen practitioners take an active interest in the very films they make?

A new initiative by the avuncular CEO of the AFI, Damian Trehwella, may go some way to redressing this apparent lack of engagement.* A diverse group of around thirty from our industry assembled at Carlton's Nova cinema on a cold Tuesday night in late June (Sydney members were to attend the same meeting the following evening) to hear more about his proposal. Whilst I am sure Damian would say otherwise, I attribute the concept of an Australian Film Academy to him as he has been making noises about the idea for some time. The seminars were ostensibly in response to an online survey conducted by the AFI through their website since the beginning of June. Personally, I felt the lead time was a little short, acknowledged to a degree by Damian on the night, when he announced the survey would be kept open longer than anticipated.

*<http://www.afi.org.au/Content/NavigationMenu/News/Consultation/default.htm>

The seminars were also an opportunity for screen practitioners to give the AFI feedback on the concept. As a consequence some details were still rather sketchy but the AFI appears to be well down the road to formulating a cohesive plan to initiate the idea. Following brief but entertaining introductions from Sandy George and AFI Chair Alan Finney, Damian went into Powerpoint mode to explain the principles of the 'Honorary Council' that would be at the heart of the yet to be named academy. The supporting documentation for the night was awash with mandatory bureaucrat-speak of 'rewards, successes and celebrations' but the make up of the proposed academy could best be summed up as having two central planks. The first, to develop wider recognition in Australia and overseas of the many and varied achievements of the industry. The second, and one which should appeal to the variety of the craft guilds involved, the establishment of a 'centre for excellence' under the auspices of the AFI.

An eight-four percent favourable response to the survey from more than 500 AFI members indicates substantial support for the concept. Damian also pointed out that more than 1,645 had viewed Finney and Sigrid Thornton's You Tube presentation on the topic.

However, he and Alan's observations of how the AFI is perceived overseas were less encouraging. Apparently 'institutes' do not hand out awards in places such as the UK and the USA. Damian said many of his counterparts looked at him askance when he told them who he represented and what the AFI did. That is, until he used the term, "Like the Australian Oscars".

Hence the paradigm shift that the AFI is embarking upon. Although it was not made completely clear on the night, it seems the new 'shopfront' of the AFI will be an Australian Academy. It will be this body, not the AFI as such, that hands out the gongs to each year's successful award contenders. Whether the AFI continues in name, or if it will still have general public membership is a question not answered on the night. In any case, the two major changes mooted for the Australian Film Industry awards are:

1. Nominations and awards will be determined by the afore-mentioned Honorary Council, made up of chapters representing each of the major crafts (eg. writing, cinematography, directing, design and, of course, editing to name just a few of the fifteen or so categories). Using overseas organisations such as BAFTA and the US academy (AMPAS) as templates, selection and judging of nominees would take place in two distinct stages.

2. Shifting the awards ceremony to a time more in-sync with the annual awards 'cycle', hence maximising publicity and marketing opportunities. Damian is proposing a late January ceremony, with nominees announced around the new year.

In practice, adopting this style of system will require 'three to four' craft representatives for each chapter of the honorary council, drawn from their respective craft guilds. They will determine a short list of (feature) nominees based on the best examples of their craft exhibited in the films. Once the (short listed) nominees are determined, and announced, the council would then reconvene to vote as a block for the best film.

Naturally, a number of issues were put to the AFI regarding this model. Among them:

1. Exactly which crafts should be represented?

Critics, for example, were one group about which a lively debate ensued.

2. What should the title of the academy be?

I was at pains to point out that the ASE had this debate back in the mid-nineties, hence the use of the word 'screen' in the title of our guild.

3. Should the burgeoning video game industry have a seat at the table?

It is now common knowledge that Australia, like the rest of the world, consumes more video games than any other screen-based format.

In addition, some guilds would have little trouble fielding council candidates whilst others would struggle to forward one representative on a regular basis, let alone three to four. What about industrial power? Unlike Australia, many of the supposed 'guilds' in the US are really unions in disguise (they are canny enough not to call themselves that, though). Will there be a membership quota, as in the US and recently, the UK? A criticism of the US Academy, under Jack Vallenti, was that it had effectively become a 'closed shop'. Will the academy have a physical

presence? Damian lauded AMPAS for its level of involvement and intimated the current screenings would become the domain of the professional membership only, rather than being open to all.

Personally, I would love to see regular 'Academy' screenings, and other events, attended by a broad sample of the industry. Imagine that, showing up to a cinema and having the opportunity to discuss the film with members of the crew over drinks afterwards? Nah, it couldn't happen ... could it?

L. Burgher
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