

31 March 2014

SPADA RESPONSE: NZFC INDUSTRY CONSULTATION PAPER

Pathways to Features: Fresh Ideas on NZFC Short Film Funding

SPADA would like to thank the NZFC for the opportunity to respond to its Consultation Paper on its current short film funding.

SPADA's response focuses on identifying and building on the over-arching goals and objectives of the NZFC short film investment, to ensure it continues to deliver the desired outcomes for both the industry and the NZFC with a minimum of unintended consequences.

To that end, in summary:

SPADA agrees that:

- Higher level short film funding should be available to producers as part of an overall feature development strategy
- The higher risk fresh shorts should serve to transition teams to professional filmmaking
- Short films are integral to building the screen industry's infrastructure as well as individual skill sets through the natural mentoring structure of short films
- Many filmmakers have used a strong short film to instigate a successful and lucrative career in TVCs and television (e.g. Steve Ayson, Robin Walters, Chris Dudman, Tammy Davis, Jane Shearer), which are critical planks in the overall development and sustainability of the New Zealand screen industry.
- In the same way that many feature film directors have never made a high profile short film e.g. Peter Jackson, James Cameron, Andrew Adamson - there are, and should continue to be, many pathways to feature filmmaking.

SPADA is concerned that:

- In tying premiere level short film funding to feature film script development there is a danger of trying to be too prescriptive and predictive about how this might work; which in turn will mean creative opportunities for development - unforeseen by officials - will be missed.
- The "FRESH SHORTS PLUS" approach (given short films identify and primarily serve directors) incentivizes directors to both write and produce their own work: when they are not necessarily skilled to do either.
- The paper pre-supposes a clear pathway to feature filmmaking via shorts, thus limiting other more innovative and creative routes to feature films. Shorts have traditionally been one opportunity for directors to shine.
- The paper does not take into consideration the ever-changing market; particularly with regard to the traditional methods of distribution are being challenged especially in the independent sector.

- A total investment of \$600,000 for the PREMIERE PATHWAYS production of “various visual material” is high risk (\$70k – equates to 70% of the total feature development spend for a single project).

SPADA recommends:

- Retaining PREMIERE SHORTS, but reduce production to four per annum; in line with international agencies e.g. the Irish Film Board funds four short at EURO 65,000 each
- Reducing the total number of FRESH SHORTS (total budget of not more than \$30,000 (cash) grant to six per annum. This must be budgeted with discounts included.
- Replace existing \$10,000 Fresh Shorts with alternative new talent [\$10k] prizes (administered through existing Festivals (Wairoa, NZIFF etc) which will profile new talent and provide them with money to go towards funding their next project
- Increase budget for POST PRODUCTION fund
- All applicants have an experienced producer attached. Building relationships is key at this juncture – which also includes relationships at markets/festivals
- Attendance at Festivals by filmmakers. Believe attendance at festivals by short film “team” feeds into filmmaker’s total awareness of international/global industry and market realities as well as connecting and creating vital relationships. It is also a low-cost opportunity for filmmakers to assess what travels/what doesn’t by watching film with an international audience.
- A consistent approach to how the short film funding is treated. At the moment there are grants/loans and equity. SPADA believes all funding should be grants (similar to Early Seed Development funding).
- Involving active industry professionals currently making films in all facets of decision making as this will greatly increase the current knowledge available to NZFC and develop a greater sense of ownership of new talent initiatives within the industry

BACKGROUND

Short films have, over nearly 30 years been a partnership between the professional industry and the NZFC for mutual benefit as an opportunity to identify new talented directors with distinctive cinematic voices and transition self taught or pre-entry trained new filmmakers into the professional industry with all the disciplines and benefits of working at this level.

The short film initiative has traditionally been generously supported by highly experienced crew and suppliers of professional equipment and technical support for the shoot and post production because it is an opportunity not merely to induct new entrants to the potential of professional level filmmaking, but also an opportunity for the wider industry – producers, writers, crew and suppliers - to assess who has feature film potential.

Short films have served as a relatively low risk opportunity for all involved to test out new jobs, new alliances, and new technologies. This industry and funding body partnership reflects the generous understanding of the benefits of seasoned professionals mentoring new talent at all levels and in all facets of the filmmaking process. It astounds many from other industries where short films are the collaborative work of peer group new entrants.

Statutory context

The NZFC is charged statutorily in Section 17.1.b of its Act

to encourage and promote cohesion within the New Zealand film industry, and in particular—

- *(i) to encourage and promote the exchange of information among persons engaged in the film industry; and*
- *(ii) to encourage and promote the efficient use of available resources within the New Zealand film industry; and*
- *(iii) to co-operate with other interested or affected bodies and organisations in order to encourage and promote employment in the New Zealand film industry, and the productivity of that industry:*

In this respect, the short film funds, subsidized heavily by the industry itself has provided a chance to test out the potential of talent in a relatively low risk manner, which, even when it may not result in a great new director talent, may identify a promising producer, cinematographer, designer, editor, composer or at another level – a potential grip assist.

At the same time they have allowed some of those key talents, including writers, to appreciate better the role of and demands on the director, by experiencing the job first hand. Even if those people do not transition to directing at a higher level, their work within the industry is improved.

Short films are not necessarily the best place to spot great feature film writers but that said, there are other strategies for developing feature writing talent. Some beautifully directed, thoroughly entertaining and commanding short films rest on a single very simple idea, which will not sustain more than the duration of a short film.

They also serve as satisfying works in their own right. Paradoxically, some films made without a career objective in mind have succeeded in profiling their makers more than those that have been much more strategically planned.

It is true that many of the most successful director/ writers began their careers with a short film; it is a false assumption that a successful short film will necessarily predict a feature filmmaking talent. Many have used a good short film to instigate a successful and lucrative career in TVCs which have also been a critical plank in the overall development of the industry. Equally many, many feature film directors have never made a high profile short film (e.g. Peter Jackson, James Cameron, Andrew Adamson). There are, and should continue to be, many pathways to feature filmmaking.

Short films therefore have been serving a more complex role than may at first appear. We acknowledge however, that they have become the focus of many who see a short film as key stepping stone in a straightforward pathway to a first feature.

SPADA looks forward to discussing these ideas further with the NZFC at the Focus Group meetings taking place in late April.

PREMIERE PATHWAYS + FRESH SHORTS PLUS

Aims and Objectives:

- Showcase directors by offering a “calling card” and fast tracking them to a feature
- Opportunity to test if writers can direct
- Good chance for short form directors (TVCs, music videos) to try a more narrative, longer form screen story
- Transition directors/teams from amateur to professional disciplines and potential
- Build teams
- Provide opportunity for new talent to shine

Tying premiere level short film funding to feature film script development

Feature film development is more than developing a script, and SPADA applauds that this is recognized. However, there is a danger that trying to be too prescriptive and predictive about how this might work will mean creative opportunities for development unforeseen by officials will be missed. Equally such prescriptions risks of incentivizing unproductive pathways.

SPADA believes the best person positioned to strategize the development of an idea to the screen is the producer. The NZFC does not need to serve as a de facto film school; as it is not sufficiently resourced to do so; and it should allow and require the producers to lead their teams. Therefore the producer should free to devise a proposal for whatever best serves the particular needs of a project.

For this reason, such proposals should be able to be submitted to any EDF or ADF meeting and be assessed on a case by case basis within an overall strategy. Teasers and shooting scenes can limit, rather than enhance, a sense of what a film can be given the full power of the team behind it.

Fresh Shorts Plus (additional \$10k)

SPADA believes this approach risks:

- incentivizing director/writers
- disadvantages talented Directors who do not want to be writers (e.g. Sima Urale, Peter Burger, Lee Tamahori)
- encourages peer group teams and lessens the opportunity for enthusiastic amateurs to engage with a more professional and more experienced talent
- creating teams for a feature without the benefit from the participation of more established producers who can neither afford or want to make shorts; however, established producers see them as talent identification opportunities

FRESH SHORTS

SPADA believes there should be funding for six shorts of not more than \$30,000 (cash) grant. This must be budgeted with discounts included.

SPADA does not support \$10k vs \$30k approach, as we believe it slows progress for new talent and \$10k budget attracts film school grads wanting to “meet” the NZFC and meet the NZFC’s “needs”. It would be preferable to incentivise these applicants to “meet” producers (esp those with BDS).

The \$10K budget level incentivizes the enthusiastic amateur. The cost of good quality equipment today means that the NZFC does not need to be financing the hobbyist. The truly innovative and experimental filmmaker may also be excluded in this structured and arbitrary approach to funding.

An alternative approach is offering new talent prizes of \$10k prizes via Film School, short comps @ Festivals, NZIFF, SMS, Wairoa. These prizewinners will almost without exception use the money to make films if that is the career path they are seeking, and such films are more likely to be unalloyed voices.

SPADA RECOMMENDS reducing the production of FRESH SHORTS to six per annum.

FESTIVAL ATTENDANCE

SPADA believes it is key for emerging filmmakers to attend Festivals. In most producers’ experience it is rare to meet those who immediately wish to fund a feature at an A list festival. Sales agents and distributors rarely attend shorts screenings: BUT filmmakers and teams get to see the “real” world and experience early in their careers.

Therefore, Festival attendance provides an:

- International framework for filmmaking – meet colleagues at the same level who will continue to serve as a creative community
- Introduction to media and screening obligations as a guest
- Opportunity to get noticed by talent spotters (offered films – from elsewhere and offered chances to take an idea further e.g. Ellory Elkayem’s *Larger than Life* or Taika Waititi’s *Two Cars, One Night*) producers, writers, etc
- Opportunity for filmmakers to develop a direct relationship with Festival Directors and become part of alumni – festivals are very loyal to the talent they launch
- Awareness of international/global industry and market realities
- Chance to assess what travels/what doesn’t by watching your film with an international audience.

Value of Festivals and markets is greatest with regular attendance. It is the producers who will be able to lever the opportunities that festival offer directors but short film producers are not always seeking feature film careers.

POST PRODUCTION FUND

The selection at the NZFC determined “A” list festival and delivery to it requires quick response, it requires that when funding is needed to exploit an extraordinary opportunity, a decision should be actioned expediently. Only some Festivals have value – so called “A list” on your CV. The value of attending is not always easy to predict, but there will be unexpected opportunities. The tyranny of distance from markets is an ongoing problem for New Zealanders and any chance to target exposure internationally at the few truly valuable festivals should be exploited.

TREATMENT OF SHORT FILM FUNDING

Throughout the proposal short film funding is treated in a number of ways: grants, loans and equity. SPADA believes the NZFC should adopt a consistent approach to how the funding for the short films is treated.

SPADA RECOMMENDS all short film funding should be treated as grants (similar to Early Seed Development funding).

SHORT FILM FUNDING ASSESSMENT PROCESS

SPADA recommends the involvement of active industry professionals in all facets of the decision making process. SPADA believes this will not only increase the current knowledge available to NZFC, but will also go towards developing a greater sense of ownership of new talent initiatives within the New Zealand screen industry.

GENERAL COMMENTS

While the objective of creating career pathways is admirable, it risks establishing what that pathway looks like, to the exclusion of other potential options. The highway is not always the most effective route to a destination. It may be better to approach short film making with a philosophy of assisting by removing or avoiding obstacles which crop up unexpectedly adopting a flexible, responsive and accessible funding approach.

It is less useful to create pathways that go nowhere, than being alert to smoothing pathways going somewhere. The industry is the resource to help with this.

Once again, SPADA looks forward to the opportunity to discuss these ideas further with the NZFC at the Focus Group meetings taking place in late April.

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www.spada.co.nz