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Signature Television: Questionnaire on key issues

REPLY FROM THE SCREEN PRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION (SPADA)

SPADA sought the views of its 325 members before the preparation of this response and members were given a second opportunity to provide input in this draft.

Our response is in italics below.

This paper has been approved by the SPADA Executive.

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This paper seeks comments from stakeholder groups on issues relating to the establishment of a scheme for Signature Television. These issues need to be resolved so that the principles and criteria for allocating funds can be finalized. The scheme is proposed for introduction from July 2003, subject to available government funding.

The proposed Signature Television scheme

'Signature Television' refers to self-contained, one-off programmes bearing the distinctive creative stamp of individual film makers particularly directors and screen-writers. The New Zealand Film Commission is seeking additional government funding of \$5.6 million (GST incl.) annually to deliver such programmes for broadcast on New Zealand television.

The proposal is consistent with Labour's commitment, in its 2002 arts and culture manifesto, to: 'Establish a 'Signature Television scheme to provide funding for high quality one-off television drama productions, targeted at the section of the market between short films and television series, and full feature films.'

Key Issues for consideration and comments

What is the main purpose of the expenditure?

The Film Commission's interest in signature television centres on:

- i) developing the story-telling skills of directors and writers (beyond entry level) who have already demonstrated significant potential by making short films, advertisements, music clips etc; and
- ii) providing opportunities for experienced feature filmmakers to work in the medium of television on one-off projects.

Questions

1. Do you agree that the two objectives identified above provide the appropriate basis for funding support?

Most respondents agreed that these objectives were adequate. Many pointed out that developing the skills of producers in this medium must not be overlooked. We agree with that point. The reference in both objectives should just be to 'film makers'.

The second objective is less clear. There is nothing actually preventing film personnel working in television. Many in fact do. It is also unclear why those currently working in television (some may become film makers) should be automatically excluded.

Assessment criteria should include:

- *how the particular scheme will achieve these goals*
- *what factors will contribute to, or mitigate against, the success of the scheme, and how those risks might be managed*
- *how meeting these objectives will be measured*

Understanding what skills will be developed or showcased (whether by experienced or new film makers) by one off television projects is crucial. Such projects will undoubtedly allow the film maker to demonstrate they can sustain and build story and performance in a way that will hold an audience over an unbroken period irrespective of duration. A programme structured around commercial breaks however, demands a different approach to structure, plotting and character development and may dilute the personal voice.

There have been a number of one-off drama projects, miniseries and packages on New Zealand television over the years, some of which have palpably advanced feature film talent. It is worth looking at what elements proved crucial in this and why on occasions, the needs of commercial broadcasting have necessarily taken precedence and limited the direct influence on feature film development.

Such series include Winners And Losers and a series of filmed plays in the 1970s, TVNZ teleplays and the About Face series in the 1980s, An Angel At My Table, E Tipu E Rea, the Another Country and Meridian packages in the 1990s as well as Bread & Roses, True Life Stories, the TVNZ Sunday dramas (2 series), the Nga Puna, Tala Pasifika and TV3 drama series, the TVNZ comedy one-offs, ScreenVisionNZ and most recently, Mataku and Aroha. The NZFC, especially through the Short Film Fund was a contributor to many of these and NZOA was involved in all since 1989. There is much to be learned, then, from previous experience.

There are also significant overseas models, including American Playhouse and Masterpiece Theatre (US PBS), Channel 4, BBC films, SBSi, Canal+, HBO. Notably these are public or subscriber channels, not principally funded by television commercials which can run films without breaks.

There are many examples of small-scale films funded for television which are also intended to do well in cinemas on first release. The examples are numerous but include My Beautiful Laundrette (Ch4), Mrs Brown (BBC) and the about to be released Real Women Have Curves (HBO).

2. What would a scheme based on the two above objectives add to television drama that would be different to what is currently available?

It would add variety, individuality and originality. Drama currently available on the screens mostly comprises well-made series and serial drama, which involves ongoing character set-up, teams of writers and directors and the restrictions (and disciplines) of episodic storytelling. The current exception to this is Matakau and the very occasional screening of a NZ feature or miniseries.

3. How would there be quality assurance for projects by film makers of high potential but limited experience?

We assume that 'quality' in this case refers to technical and professional quality, not just a mass ratings measure.

In general, the industry has been very happy with the model used for the two Sunday drama one-off series for TV One (EP'd by Caterina De Nave) and the TV3 one-off initiative (EP'd by Fiona Copland), all funded via NZ On Air. A highly experienced umbrella Executive Producer needs to oversee all projects, providing both quality control for the broadcaster and funder and a buffer for the programme makers so that they are not overly distracted with multi-party issues and can focus on the project. The EP is also involved in putting together the production teams where necessary and needs a degree of latitude (trust) from funder, broadcaster and film makers. If the film maker is talented but inexperienced in the needs of television, a mentor may also be needed.

We do not think this kind of one-off funding initiative should be dealt with by a full board decision-making process, but via a sub-committee of funder(s), broadcaster(s) and the EP. See our comments on Question 19 below.

4. How would the scheme best support the needs and aspirations of Māori filmmakers?

By ensuring that Maori projects are included in the final selection.

What genres should be considered?

Labour's cultural manifesto identifies 'drama' as the genre intended for funding support under the scheme. The assumption is that this category would exclude documentaries.

Questions

5. Will the objectives of the scheme be achieved if documentaries are excluded?

Most respondents supported the exclusion of documentary, feeling that an additional and separate initiative would be better. None felt that including documentary would actively work against achieving the objectives, merely that the need for one-off drama was stronger. We are assuming that docudrama is not excluded.

However several respondents felt that a genre-base was unnecessarily restrictive and that the strongest stories should be commissioned, irrespective of genre. It is hardly unknown for film makers to work across drama and documentary, adding to their storytelling skills with each project (one of the NZFC prime objectives). Examples include Gaylene Preston, Niki Caro, Merata Mita, Owen Hughes, Rachel Jean and even Peter Jackson.

6. What additional benefits, if any, would arise if the scheme included documentary projects?

That longer-form 'authorial' documentaries would have the opportunity to get made. Currently the NZFC declines to fund these projects at all and the broadcasters pick up perhaps one every two or three years in the absence of a push from a funding agency. NZ On Air has concentrated on building up series drama at the expense of this kind of initiative.

7. What are the risks, if any, that the scheme's objectives will be diluted if funding is spread over a range of genres?

This question caused some confusion. If we are just talking about drama and documentary, respondents saw no real risk. If we are talking about sub-genres (eg. types of drama such as short-form, long-form, miniseries etc) then the risk of dilution is also minimal as all self-contained dramas require similar skills.

If we are talking about further genres, the risk is unclear.

Any risk is probably not so much related to the scheme's objectives but to the successful programming of the projects.

What kinds of audience?

Signature television offers opportunities for fresh and original programming in contrast to familiar conventions of television series.

Questions

8. Should all funded projects be targeted at prime time audiences, or should a wider approach be considered?

Most respondents did not feel that the projects should be specifically restricted to prime time. All felt that prime time was desirable but that if compromises to the creative integrity of project were too great then other slots should be considered. Many felt that these projects could provide an opportunity to expand the boundaries of prime time.

In short, the view is that prime time is desirable but not essential and that quality of the story and storytelling should be the paramount selection criteria.

9. Which broadcaster(s) would have access to the scheme? What criteria would that decision be based on?

Respondents felt that TVNZ and/or TV3 and possibly Prime and Sky should have initial access. They were split on whether any of those broadcasters should have sole access, some arguing that TVNZ should because of its Charter obligations (and does this mean One or 2 or both?), others suggesting that a competitive process would be beneficial and that TV3's audience might suit more eclectic projects.

None felt regional channels should be eligible (except for replays) because of their small audiences. A few felt the Maori Television Service should be eligible but even those respondents felt that a broadcast shared with TVNZ or TV3 or perhaps Sky would be more appropriate given production costs and MTS's refusal to pay a licence fee.

There is little harm in approaching a range of broadcasters to ascertain initial interest. The main criterion should be based on broadcaster commitment, manifested as:

- *proposed slot*
- *adequate financial contribution - critical -*

- *marketing support and*
- *the variety of projects and production teams committed to.*

This will instantly determine which broadcasters will have a supportive and engaged approach (which in turn is critical for attractive scheduling and marketing when the project is completed). See our comments on Question 16 below.

10. Would project selection be primarily based on creative merit (best idea wins), rather than any considerations of broadcast schedules or audience profiles?

Respondents strongly felt that creative merit must be the primary selection criterion. Signature television, by definition, is committed to uniqueness, which implies a more lateral approach than usual.

This does not mean that programme makers are oblivious to their intended audience. Funding applicants should be able to articulate who their project is aimed at, and why, and provide a basic understanding of the schedules in terms of where their project might sit, but only as one element of the application.

The objective of this scheme is to encourage unique and innovative projects. If the broadcasters' commercial objectives override rather than align with the scheme objectives, the scheme will not succeed. One would hope the best projects attract audiences, and that the broadcasters and producers work together to market the films with equivalent imagination and originality. The best ideas tend to have the ability to mould schedules and audiences, rather than the other way around.

11. Would there be any funding criteria relating specifically to the needs and interests of Māori audiences?

Most respondents felt that Maori projects would have to be included in the final selection and hoped that they would be projects which would attract a mainstream audience as well as Maori.

Number and duration(s) of programmes

Signature Television provides opportunities for storytelling outside the constraints and conventions of series. The Film Commission estimates that funding of \$5.6 million could provide at least 7 hours of signature television per year, if management and development costs were also met from this source.

Questions

12. Would variable programme durations be considered? If so, would there be a maximum length of programmes?

Respondents felt that genre and scheduling issues were relevant here. Most felt that there was no need to be prescriptive at the outset, but simply require applicants to justify their case (namely if someone was proposing a 37' duration for prime time, there might be issues of expertise to consider unless a creative solution was being proposed).

Respondents felt that half-hour and one-hour projects, telefeatures and miniseries could all be considered within the objectives and that there was little point in this kind of restriction at the RFP stage.

13. Would the number of projects that could be managed annually be a consideration in determining how many would be funded annually?

No one understood the question. There is no evidence to suggest that seven (or more) projects could not be serviced by the industry (which is currently under-worked). Our comments on Question 7 above assume that one (or more) EP's will be used which means quality and process issues are covered. We would find it remarkable if the NZFC or a broadcaster could not cope with the process of this scheme – the total number of projects will presumably be in the single figures.

In any case, the past similar schemes have never had all projects shooting simultaneously (because of the various development processes). So what is the concern? The only constraint should be funding – the logistics will take care of themselves.

14. Would all development costs be met from the proposed \$5.6 million funding?

This question is also unclear. Many thought that more than seven projects could be funded. It depends on the process being used. We assume (and strongly recommend) that the following process is used:

- (i) a contestable call for submissions – concept and outline as a minimum. Scripts written on spec. not encouraged but existing scripts can be submitted.*
- (ii) development decisions made on (say 12) proposals and extended treatment/ first draft script commissioned and funded*
- (iii) second/third draft scripts (say 9) as required and funded*
- (iv) production decisions made on (say 7) projects*

All the stages above depend on the state of the original submission (there will be completed scripts submitted at stage 1 down to basic outlines). Some stages can be skipped; one or two existing scripts might be so good that a production decision can be made immediately.

The main point is that development is adequately funded so writers and producers are paid for their work. The amount of money secured from the Government (plus broadcaster contribution and any other money secured by a producer) determines the number of projects made.

How would the scheme be managed?

The Film Commission would receive funding to deliver this scheme, though may wish to contract out the management role to another party. Other agencies may wish to cooperate in the scheme, including as investors who might also then contribute to the selection process for projects.

Questions

15. Would other funding agencies be involved in the policy and management of the scheme?

In the past NZFC has collaborated with NZOA, TMP, TVNZ, TV3 and Portman Entertainment on various one off drama initiatives. There is no reason why this should not recur. For feature film projects, the NZFC was the lead agency. For television projects, NZOA was the lead agency.

The challenge is ensuring that each agency's objectives can be met without overriding another's.

An excellent outcome would be to extend the scheme by others also agreeing to put money in the pot. The worst outcome would be inter-agency squabbling. While the credit for this initiative goes to the NZFC, if other agencies also contribute funds the NZFC should not then see itself as the driver. If our strong recommendation to contract out the processing and creative work to an EP is uplifted (see Questions 18

and 19) the latter chance is reduced. The agencies should then restrict themselves to agreeing on selection criteria (allowing the industry some input), identifying one rep. for the selection process, and allowing the broadcaster final cut approval as usual.

16. What is the most effective way to involve broadcasters? Should the scheme rely on a single broadcaster or should each project be subject to broadcaster contestability?

See our comments on Question 9 above. All respondents thought a broadcast commitment and proposed financial contribution should be confirmed before significant development money was expended. A minimum licence fee of \$50,000 per hour should be required for prime time projects.

Respondents generally believed that TVNZ, TV3, Prime, Sky and possibly MTS should be invited to participate at the outset. Some might wish to co-venture in any case. Single broadcaster status could be achieved if one proposes an attractive, comprehensive and supportive package. If several are interested, then there is little downside to allowing initial competition for support of particular projects.

17. How might delivery of the scheme through the Film Commission impact on other agencies supporting television production?

See our response to Question 15 above. There is no intrinsic harm in two agencies delivering television drama. The harm is when one agency negatively impacts on market conditions or industry norms (eg. the tradition of strong editorial involvement by the NZFC is not undertaken by NZOA,¹ and is inappropriate with this kind of scheme; NZFC contracting would need to be adapted to the television environment; if this scheme dilutes licence fees paid by broadcasters, the wider industry suffers). If NZFC can act more like NZOA with this scheme, there may be little effect.

But the two agencies (and/or TMP) could work together and increase the scheme by adding funds. In short, it is dangerous to overlook the distinct purposes for which each of the screen funding agencies has been established but collaboration to achieve shared goals is quite possible.

A potentially serious impact is in the wider arena. Each year NZOA has secured additional one-off funding for new initiatives (without the public broadcasting fee, it has lost the capacity to generate extra revenue). It was recently reported that the budget bid this year is for an extra \$9 million (Herald, 7 February). The Government is also directly funding TVNZ for its Charter, the first direct funding for several decades. If the NZFC scheme is money over and above what would normally be secured by NZOA and TVNZ, this scheme is obviously a welcome addition. If NZOA does not receive what it needs, then the funding waters become very muddy indeed. This scheme cannot be created by depriving the main agency.

18. Would there be merit in the Commission managing the scheme by contract?

Absolutely. The unanimous response was that this is critical. There is insufficient television and television drama experience at the NZFC and the latter's heavy creative involvement in development is inappropriate in this kind of initiative.

This scheme has the potential to help build alliances and infrastructure which will flow into feature films and other screen production. It can strengthen the working relationships of producer, director and writer and build mutual understandings which will benefit future projects.

Not only viable but profitable producers and production houses are essential for the growth of the industry and reducing dependence on government funding. It is important then that any scheme builds, rather than undermines, the producers' relationships with their directors and writers and the teams they build to support them.

¹ Because it is the broadcaster who, properly, has final editorial control.

19. If so, who else could manage it and how would this work in practice?

See our response to Question 3 above. One EP contracted jointly by the broadcaster and funder(s). NZFC funds should be delegated to a subcommittee with one or two NZFC board or staff members, one or two broadcast reps and the EP. No more than 5 sub-committee reps, irrespective of number of parties, for clarity and good process.

The EP position(s) should be advertised and contestable. This is a similar model used for the two Sunday drama strands, the TV3 drama series and TV2 comedy series, for the Work Of Art and authorial documentary strands and has similarities to the short film funds. It works.

20. How would the on-selling of broadcast rights (off-shore) be managed?

By the producer, as usual, who contracts with a sales agent in a contestable process.

Summary

For the scheme to work, not get bogged down with politics and to provide film makers with a useful opportunity, it is critical that:

- **Selection processes are transparent**
- **Broadcaster involvement is determined via financial contribution in line with existing licence fees**
- **An independent Executive Producer is contracted by all parties (via a single contract) to manage the scheme**
- **The NZFC takes a hand-off editorial approach after projects are selected (normal accountabilities will of course apply)**
- **The NZFC welcomes and encourages the participation of other funding agencies.**
- **Government funding is over and above what would normally be secured by NZOA including the one-off additional amount**