Looking Back, Looking Forward: Sydney Film Festival at 60

By Tina Kaufman

When the Sydney Film Festival's first Chairman, Professor Alan Stout, wrote in the program of the very first festival in 1954 that it was hoped to not only make the festival an annual event, "but to make it better every year," would he, even in his wildest dreams, have envisioned SFF celebrating its 60th anniversary?

In its 60 years, the festival has grown and changed enormously, as has the whole film-festival circuit. There's barely a day in the year when at least one film festival isn't happening somewhere in the world, and Australia alone has four major film festivals. But back in 1950s Australia, non-mainstream films were for the most part only seen thanks to film societies and screening groups which were growing in both number and size, particularly in NSW and Victoria; films were mainly borrowed from the libraries of the recently set-up State Film Councils. It was at a meeting in 1950 of the Australian Council of Film Societies, in the Sydney beachside suburb of Newport, that serious talk of an Australian film festival first occurred; and in 1952, in January, about 800 people (many more than had been expected) attended the very first Australian Film Festival, at Olinda in the Dandenongs outside Melbourne. Screenings were held in church halls, the Town Hall and the Mechanics Institute, and films included Robert J Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1948) and Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930). This exhilarating event sent many home seriously thinking of starting a regular festival in their home city.

The world's very first competitive film festival, in Venice, had commenced before the war but had been suspended for the duration, while its French competitor, the Cannes Film Festival, originally planned for 1940, finally began in 1947. Another major competitive festival began in Berlin in 1951. In 1947, however, the Edinburgh Film Festival came up with a different concept: a non-competitive festival, set up purely for audiences to enjoy a selection of films they would otherwise never get to see.

But Australia was a long way from the rest of the world in 1950; those enthusiastic filmgoers coming back from Olinda determined to start a film festival in Sydney were more interested in creating a local event which would allow them to show otherwise inaccessible films in an environment where they could talk about them and exchange ideas. A committee was formed, made up of many who'd been to Olinda and others who'd joined in the enthusiasm, with Alan Stout, Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University, as chair. Active members included filmmakers John Heyer and John Kingsford Smith, along with Sydney University Film Group President David Donaldson. The first formal meeting was held at the offices of the National Film Board of Canada (an important hub of the local film scene), and was attended by an interesting mix of individuals and representatives of widely varied organisations, including the NSW Federation of Film Societies, the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations, the Independent Film Group, the Australian Amateur Cine Society, the Film Users' Association, and the Sydney Scientific Film Society. They had no budget or base of operations, so John Kingsford-Smith's company, Kingcroft Productions, donated 25 pounds, as did the Rural Bank; while the NSW Film Council offered their facilities for film viewing and storage. It was decided to hold the first festival at Sydney University, and David Donaldson agreed to take on the role of director.

The first Sydney Film Festival opened on June 11, 1954, on a cold winter's night. It screened in four halls over four days on borrowed projectors, offering 1200 tickets at one guinea each, and sold out. (There was a note in the program that said: "Trams to Abbotsford, Haberfield, Fivedock and Leichhardt pass the Parramatta Rd gates of the University.") The films included Jacques Tati's *Jour de fête* (1948), Rene Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930), Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1947), Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926), and of course, John Heyer's *The Back of Beyond* (1954).

As it grew over those early years, in both number of films screened and days of operation, the festival remained at Sydney University, but added different outside venues to the mix in different years, trying to get the format right. In 1968 it was decided to move the entire festival to the lovely old Wintergarden in Rose Bay. Then in 1974 it moved again, to its current home, the iconic State Theatre in the centre of Sydney. Subscribers who had been used to picnicking between films in the University grounds or on the Rose Bay foreshore soon found a different type of picnic spot in the old and unused State Ballroom, down beneath the cinema, or around the corner on the steps of the Hilton.

The State, of course, has become SFF's greatest asset; it has over 2000 seats, wonderfully overblown décor, and foyers where so much conversation can happen. Rarely does a year go by without a visiting filmmaker on stage giving gasps of enthusiasm about seeing their film screened in such a venue. But it's

also inflexible, making it difficult to screen smaller films; and in recent years the need to clear the cinema after many screenings has led to more queues anddifficult exits. (Recently, one subscriber was so incensed by his treatment that he printed his grievances in leaflets and handed them out for days.) Finding supporting venues in cinema-starved Sydney has been an ongoing problem; the Pitt Centre, just around the corner in Pitt Street, was an excellent second site for some years, but then the Greater Union company shut it down. The Dendy in Market Place was within reasonable walking distance, but that too was eventually closed. The Dendy Opera Quays has been satisfactory in all ways as a replacement, except for the time spent getting there and back from the State. The State, of course, has been unavailable for weekday daytime screenings during the last two festivals, while building works to convert the Gowings Building and the State Office block into a boutique hotel were carried out, but a greater threat has been averted. Amalgamated Holdings, owners of the State, had wanted to extend the cinema's stage and backstage facilities so that it could be used for live theatre, which could have seen long-running shows shutting the festival out. Thankfully, the City of Sydney only approved a very modified version of the proposal, which will improve functionality but not allow for large-scale productions. The State has always been a cinema, and is heritage-listed as such – and it must remain so.

The festival added screenings at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and at the Greater Union Cinemas (now Event Cinemas) in George Street for the first time in 2005. While many festivalgoers found seeing foreign and independent films in the depths of a multiplex a little strange and alienating at first, the relationship with Event Cinemas has become more accepted in recent years, perhaps out of necessity, with the building work next to the State precluding any daytime weekday screenings for the last two years. Moving subscribers en masse to George Street certainly helped.

A festival that started with borrowed projectors has been through enormous technological change, and with few 35mm projectors left in Sydney, most of the films screened in the future (apart from retrospectives and silents) will be projected via DCPs, or Digital Cinema Packages. The same changes have been seen at film festivals everywhere. Of course SFF has had occasional problems, but considering the complexities of screening so many films in such a short time, and doing it for 60 years, it's all been remarkably smooth. There are those memorable moments, of course. Who could forget the screening of Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, which turned up without subtitles, featuring dialogue dubbed by a hastily organised cast that seemed strangely out of keeping with the spirit of the film?

And what is a festival for? The films, of course, and with over 8000 films screened in its 60 years, the festival has provided everyone who has attended with their own selection of delights and discoveries.

Nearly every film screened will probably find the audience a little divided, while another will cause much more division, some loving it, some finding it tedious or difficult; there'll be much to discuss afterwards. There have been many screenings that meet with rapturous applause, and for filmmakers in attendance a standing ovation; but there have also been those less-frequent occasions that brought mass disapproval, even walkouts. In the heyday of feminism, there was much booing and whistling at perceived instances of sexism and constant complaints about the shortage of films by women filmmakers. Looking back over years of festival reviews, it's interesting how many refer to foyer conversations, or remarks heard in passing; festivalgoers will happily talk, even to to strangers, about the films they've just seen. That element of a shared experience is one of the ongoing pleasures of SFF. In fact, that's what festivals are about.

For many Australians it was probably Sydney Film Festival where they first got to see Japanese – or any Asian – films; these films have been one of the strongest threads in the history of the festival. The Japanese classic *Gate of Hell* (Teinosuke Kinugasa) screened almost unknown and by accident at the second SFF in 1955. But as festival directors found out more about filmmaking in Asia, they introduced audiences to the wonders of different Asian cinemas – from work by Hong Kong's King Hu to China's Fifth Generation directors; from the Taiwanese directors Edward Yang, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang; to, more recently, Japan's Hirokazu Koreeda and Thailand's Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Pen-ek Ratanaruang.

It was SFF that would introduce its audiences to films from Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, and made sure they kept up with the work of Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer, Andrej Wajda, Aki and Mika Kaurismaki, Sally Potter and many others. SFF introduced audiences to Sergei Paradjanov and Alexander Sokurov, to Bill Douglas and Terence Davies, and even found just a few films from Portugal's prolific now-centenarian, Manoel de Oliveira. Every festivalgoer would have a list of the films and filmmakers they have discovered at SFF, and every list would be different, but just as rich and rewarding – and many are included in this publication.

And in a city with a patchy and erratic history of specialist and alternative screenings, especially after the demise of the NFTA in the early eighties, the festival has probably had the added responsibility of bringing to audiences films that in other cities would be screened at year-round cinematheques. Where else but at SFF could Sydneysiders see the films of Raúl Ruiz, Alexander Kluge, Jon Jost, James Benning, Chantal Akerman, Guy Maddin, and many other important but challenging filmmakers? After some criticism about the lack of really new and provocative work in the festival, in 1981 David Stratton invited

film producer and distributor Glenys Rowe to select a more adventurous program in which Bette Gordon's *Empty Suitcases* and Peter Greenaway's *The Falls* were highlights, a programming tradition that's seen much new and exciting work in the following years.

And where else would audiences regularly see feature documentaries on challenging issues on the big screen? Where else would they keep up with the work of Frederick Wiseman, Errol Morris, Nick Broomfield, Chris Marker and other great documentarians? Where else would they discover the great New Zealand documentary filmmakers Gaylene Preston and Annie Goldson; or experience essential Australian documentaries, including, for instance, the extraordinary screening of and discussions around Dennis O'Rourke's very confronting *The Good Woman of Bangkok*? And where else could they possibly have seen, on the big screen, the amazing Chinese documentary *West of the Tracks* in its nine-hour entirety?

Retrospectives are part of the picture, too: those blissful programs of films by Antonioni, Ophüls and Ozu, of Lubitsch, Preston Sturges, Howard Hawks, Melville, Jean Eustache, and many others – even one devoted to films in Cinemascope. These special programs appear as if by magic, concealing the months and sometimes years spent tracking down and locating the usable prints of rare films, somewhere in the world, and actually getting them here. On one memorable occasion in 1976, Italian-film historian Gideon Bachman presented a special session on Pier Pasolini's *Salo* (then only banned for the first time), using stills and his commentary to give the audience some understanding of the controversy over the film.

A vital part of the festival over many years has been the opportunity it provides for discussion, debate and even furious argument – not only about the films and their makers, but about screen culture itself, about the aesthetics of film and the business of filmmaking. Whenever a filmmaker is in attendance, Q&As are held after screenings; more in-depth discussions are often held between screenings. Forums on a range of topical issues have been part of the festival for many years, a practice that goes back to the second SFF in 1955, when a talk on Children's Films was held. In 1965 the first of many forums on film criticism was held – an ongoing debate that regularly changed its emphasis and conclusions. Finding locations for the forums and filmmaker events has often been a challenge; they've been held in the State, in the old State II, in the Dendy cinemas in Martin Place and at the Opera Quays, in the Pitt Centre, in several different areas in the Sydney Town Hall (who could forget the wonderful session with Googie Withers in the foyer of the main hall?), up George Street to UTS, out to COFA, and finally back to the Statement Bar. Locations have been closed, pulled down, made unavailable, or just not worked, but there's always somewhere else to try. 2011 saw the welcome introduction of the Apple Store talks

series; last year the Festival Hub at Lower Town Hall became a new meeting place for all manner of forums, events, parties and engagement between filmmakers and filmgoers. Working with many different industry organisations and in a variety of different formats, trying out different approaches, the forums have tackled perennial topics and broached new issues, always finding interesting people to talk to audiences that blended festivalgoers and industry people.

In 2008 the festival commenced the Official Competition, which was arrived at after several years of intense discussion and local and international consultation to establish just what the Sydney Film Prize would be awarded for, and what films would be invited to compete. Originally proposed by then-festival director Gayle Lake, it became very much the baby of her successor, Clare Stewart, who strongly believed that the prize would raise the festival's international standing, with a high profile competition and a jury attracting exciting films and filmmakers. It has certainly succeeded in achieving this.

Interestingly, when the introduction of the Competition was being discussed, there was much debate about also moving the festival to later in the year, perhaps to September or October. The Melbourne film festival had already moved to late July and early August, and had been followed by the Brisbane event (which has since moved to November). While many reasons were offered as to why this change of date would be a success for Sydney, it was ultimately rejected due to the availablility of the State Theatre and collaboration with Vivid Sydney. But way back in 1957 SFF had moved to the Labor Day long weekend, in October, "to take advantage of warmer weather" (as if you need warmer weather to watch films!) – it had not worked then either. By 1959, the festival had gone back to June, to the Queen's Birthday weekend, skyrocketing from four to seventeen days. Working around that long weekend ever since, SFF has changed the size of the festival a number of times over the years, both growing and contracting; in 2010, however, it was decided to bring the festival back to a manageable 12 days, a contraction which has pleased audiences, filmmakers, and even the media.

In its early years, the festival office was a rather temporary affair, moving every few years to a new location in the city, from Castlereagh Street to Liverpool Street and then to Erskine Street in its rather nomadic existence. But in 1974, after several very successful festivals, the board decided to invest in a permanent home, buying a large terrace house in Glebe which then housed the festival staff for 30 years, seeing innumerable board meetings, preview screenings, and even the occasional get together with members. It was renovated sometime in the '90s, but as the festival and its staff grew, a new home had to be found. The sale of the house coincided with the board reorganising its financial arrangements.

In 2004, the festival moved into Elizabeth Street, and a few years later into its larger and present premises in Marlborough Street in Surry Hills.

60 years of bringing films to festivalgoers, but that's not all. SFF is also home to the longest-running, most consistent and most well-respected short film awards, which started in 1970 as the Benson & Hedges Awards. (That moniker didn't last long, thank goodness; imagine how that would go over with later festivalgoers!). The competition became the Greater Union Awards in 1974. Established to draw attention to the work of independent filmmakers who were just beginning their careers, the awards have seen many great shorts, but have also created much debate. Over the years the festival's rules, guidelines, categories and choice of judges have been discussed and argued over, together with the relative merits of the winning films, the placement of the films within the program, and even whether there should be awards at all. For a number of years SFF held a forum to debate these and other issues, and one of the recurring topics was that Greater Union, while providing prize money for the awards, showed no inclination to actually screen the winners at their cinemas. In fact, in 1984, when it was learnt that Hoyts and Village Roadshow had announced new screening plans that included the message "no more boring shorts," a lobby group of filmmakers, film workers and film students sprang into action, making a short film to promote the positive aspects of Australian shorts just in time to have it screened on that year's SFF Opening Night. Of course, it didn't do much good. While the occasional short would be exhibited, usually with an Australian feature and almost always at an independent or arthouse cinema, this little film was only ever a short-lived response to the problem.

In 1974 the great Hollywood director Rouben Mamoulian was a special guest of the festival, which opened with his 1932 classic *Love Me Tonight*. A new award had been created, with a panel of visiting filmmakers selecting one film from all the shorts finalists; and as he presented the award on Opening Night, it has been called the Rouben Mamoulian Award ever since, and is greatly prized. Yoram Gross began sponsoring an award for animation in 1987, and whether Greater Union got sick of the continuing criticism, or whether they just decided they'd sponsored the event long enough, they relinquished the awards in 1989, with the Dendy Cinemas stepping in at short notice to take over. Dendy, of course, already had a much stronger relationship with Australian filmmakers, not only because they exhibited local features (and the occasional short), but because they were involved in their financing as well, so the criticism did seem to die down from then on. With the rise of short-film festivals like the St Kilda Festival and Flickerfest, the increasing support from the Australian Film Commission for filmmakers to take their short films to overseas festivals, and even the beginnings of film screenings on the internet,

criticism over the lack of opportunities for short films diminished considerably. And while SFF has occasionally changed both the structure of the awards and their place in the festival, the awards themselves are still as respected, and entries just as strong; in fact, apart from the first few years, the number of films entered has continually provided evidence that short filmmaking in Australia is a thriving activity, and that much of the filmmaking talent in Australia still believes in this art form.

Censorship seemed to arrive at the festival along with David Stratton, for whom of course its opposition has been a vital and defining issue. With a number of films cut by the censor, and two films banned outright, 1966 saw the festival begin its long and continuing struggle against censorship, which David Marr investigates in much detail elsewhere in this e-book.

For most of its history, the festival was membership-based – the members being a mixture of film-industry figures and general festival supporters – with a board elected by members and a president selected by the board. Significant supporters have been rewarded for their contribution with Honorary Life Membership. Tony Buckley remembers that when he and fellow longtime board member and Vice-President Dorothy Holt were made Honorary Life Members in 1977, she thought it was nice, "…but I said, 'Don't be bloody silly, we have lost our voting rights – but it doesn't stop us writing letters to David (Stratton) and the Board.' She beamed and said, 'No it won't,' and it didn't !!" For many years the festival thrived and prospered; but more recently, as many longtime devotees know, SFF has been through a pretty tumultuous time. In the '90s and early 2000s there have been some years in deficit, many changes in personnel (observers lost count of the number of general managers the festival had had in a relatively short period) and the ongoing problems of finding the right mix of venues. Continually adverse media stories ("Sydney Drags Festival Chain") made comparisons with the festival's old rival, which by now had changed its title to the Melbourne International Film Festival, and to the relative newcomer, the Brisbane International Film Festival; such stories usually skated over the fact that both of these festivals had a much more secure financial relationship with their state governments. But after years of lobbying and long negotiations by the SFF Board, the New South Wales Government very enthusiastically decided to substantially increase its support of SFF, to establish the festival at last on a more secure basis to enter a new era of expansion. After an extensive review and consultation process, and much spirited and even fiery discussions at several membership meetings, the festival's structure itself was changed in 2010; the festival board is now appointed by a committee of four (which includes a nominee from the government, members, board directors and an external), and is more in line with other not-for-profit companies.

The festival once survived and even prospered on the income from its ticket sales; now, like festivals the world over, it needs additional income streams in which sponsorship and government support play an equal part. The competition for material to screen is particularly intense overseas, where most of the programming for the SFF comes from; international distributors are becoming more commercial in their approach to festivals, often demanding a fee for higher-profile films such as Cannes competition entries. It's a challenge for directors to provide their audiences with satisfying programs in such a crowded and competitive landscape.

Changes in what audiences want from festivals have brought about changes in ticketing. Where once the festival could sell out all its subscriptions weeks and even months before the program was finalised, and exist only on subscriptions, it now finds that many festivalgoers are busier and more time-poor, with many less willing or able to commit themselves to two weeks of dedication. Most now wait for the program to be published to select a more limited schedule of films to watch. What have been seen by some as long overdue changes has resulted in a much more flexible and user-friendly ticketing system which is encouraging new audiences to try out the festival with just a few screenings. Subscribers, however, are still offered their tried and true entrée to what most of them still see as *their* festival.

SFF's role in the the growth of a local film industry is probably not fully appreciated. It has influenced the careers of many Australian filmmakers: George Miller and Phillip Noyce, for example, have both talked about having their eyes opened to world cinema at SFF; many filmmakers over the years, starting with Peter Weir and Bruce Petty in 1971, have entered films in the short film awards, and of course many have won awards and their first recognition. George Miller's first film, the short *Violence in the Cinema Part 1*, was screened at the festival in 1972; Tim Burstall's first feature *Two Thousand Weeks* screened in 1969; and Peter Weir's *The Cars that Ate Paris* in 1974. In 1975, traffic was stopped in Market Street outside the State while shearers sheared sheep to celebrate the launch of Ken Hannam's *Sunday Too Far Away*. In 1979 SFF screened Albie Thoms' *Palm Beach* and Chris Noonan's *Cass*, followed by a wide-ranging discussion on working in film and TV in Australia – a topic that has been revisited in forums many times since. The premiere of Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* was electric – the response to the film was phenomenal, and Jane Campion still says it's one of the most moving nights of her life. And of course the wonderful screening and rapturous reception of Rachel Perkins' *Mabo* last year must still be fresh in everyone's memories.

From the very beginning the festival has worked to create a recognition of and an audience for Australian films by helping to locate and screen films from Australian film history – important silent films forgotten gems, and especially documentaries, many of which would not otherwise have been seen on a big screen and by a large audience. Raymond Longford's *A Sentimental Bloke* has screened at the festival three times: in 1955, in the Salute to Australian Film in 1975, and in a newly restored print of this silent gem in 2004. In 1960 there was a special memorial program for Charles Chauvel, who had died the year before; *In the Wake of the Bounty* (1933), *Heritage* (1935), *Uncivilised* (1936), and *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940) were screened, and Elsa Chauvel was there. Former festival director David Donaldson had been to see Mrs Chauvel after Charles Chauvel died. He said, "Under the house at Castlecrag, there was everything (made) before *Rats of Tobruk*, including the priceless and ageless *Forty Thousand Horsemen.* A number of films, probably all, were transferred to National Library, who made 16mm prints for this special show in the Festival. The session was given a highlight page in the program book. I believe that this was the first time that such a tribute had been screened in Australia." In 1958 the first new Australian feature was screened at the festival: Lee Robinson's *Dust in the Sun*, starring Chips Rafferty; and in 1979 there was a special screening of Ken G Hall's *Dad and Dave Come to Town* (1938). Working with the National Film and Sound Archive, the festival has brought many of the seminal films, often restored and presented as they were intended to an enthusiastic audience; Norman Dawn's *For the Term of His Natural Life* was screened in 1981, and who could forget the presentation in 2009 of the beautifully restored print of the lost and then found *Wake in Fright* (1971), with director Ted Kotcheff coming from Canada and the intrepid Tony Buckley, who had found the film after nine years searching for it, in attendance. The film and all those involved got an overwhelming reception. Appetites had in fact been whetted for such rediscovered films early on, by the screenings of of Tony Buckley's own *Forgotten Cinema*, in 1967, followed by Alan Anderson's *The Pictures That Moved* in 1969, and Joan Long's *The Passionate Industry* in 1973, all of which documented the early days of Australian filmmaking and all of which were received with great enthusiasm.

A few years ago there was a lot of concern, both locally and overseas, about whether film festivals even had a future – a concern that generated articles, forums and discussions at various festivals, even at some conferences devoted to the topic. The multiplicity of ways that films could now be accessed was seen as a major issue, one that threatened the very existence of festivals. But the immediacy of that concern seems to have dissipated, and while it's been replaced by an understanding that festivals still have to consider what their future will be, and what they need to do to address a number of issues relevant to that future, there is much more confidence in festivals surviving. Because what festivals do is

create something substantial and accessible out of that mass of films, by selecting and curating a program that has much in it to excite and entice. And audiences can still get together and see those films, in a darkened cinema, and talk about them afterwards.

For a festival that started 60 years ago through a combination of enthusiasm, luck, and much love of film, SFF has come a long way. It has had to become more professional and more competitive in order to survive and prosper, but it has achieved that while maintaining its own identity and cementing its position within its city and its community. It has somehow discovered how to make audiences come back, and that must have something to do with being able to share the love of film, that essential that lies at the heart of a film festival.