

***A Complex Gig***

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**Festival Director 2000-2004**

The thermometer was hitting 40 degrees on the day of my job interview, and the festival's Glebe premises was hellishly hot. Despite moving office a few years later, the temperature of my tenure as Festival Director never got any cooler.

My memories of six years at the festival have a rosier tint these days. When I was first appointed to the position of festival director, I received a number of different pieces of advice – develop the hide of a rhinoceros, cover it with medieval armour and watch out for the grenades. I learnt pretty quickly that nearly everyone had an opinion and they were more than likely to tell you what they thought!

That said, I was touched by an exchange with a festivalgoer in a Surry Hills supermarket the day after my first festival had wound up. I was sporting tracksuit pants and bed hair, and staring blankly at the freezers, when a very kind soul approached and gently asked if I was the festival director, offering his congratulations and saying that he had enjoyed the program immensely.

It was always going to be a complex gig. There was, and still is, a profound love and sense of ownership of the festival by its stakeholders, as demonstrated by animated and sometimes volatile annual general meetings in the early years. The tone of these AGMs was completely understandable but nevertheless challenging to endure. It was this passion from the members, most of whom were there from the beginning, that had provided the blood and oxygen of the event over the previous decades. SFF was staunchly independent and financially successful, to the point that the festival was able to purchase the Glebe office.

However, internationally the subscription-based festival model was being replaced by one that incorporated more flexible ticketing packages, taking into account that new audiences were not of the mindset to attend for a complete two weeks. When a change in New South Wales government

legislation allowed the festival to sell single-session tickets a world of possibilities and challenges opened up. Whilst the festival had effectively been selling tickets to less than 10 programs, a new operational activity now had to be devised to sell the 150 events that now comprised the same program.

The approach to audience demographics needed to change, along with that the ability to satisfy expectations of new audiences. The event, which grew out of Sydney University, was supported by a hugely dedicated but small staff, the board and a trusty band of volunteers. Cinema venues were closing, the cost of staging the event was outstripping generated income, business development strategies needed to be defined or in some cases invented. Alas, the dreaded six letter word c-h-a-n-g-e (not love) was in the air. A review of business was enacted and relevant industry, government and other stakeholders were consulted.

Plainly if the festival didn't adapt to the changing environment the event was on a very slow and undoubtedly painful road to ruin. Amongst the very basic needs of increasing income (box-office and non box-office), audience numbers, more flexible ticketing options, developing new partnership relationships, the requirement of greater marketing budgets and strategies to encourage public uptake of the event was the infrastructural upgrade required to deliver a new event.

Intertwined with the complexity of the business model of the festival was of course the program. In the end the festivalgoer wasn't really concerned with the engine room but what was on the screen. The question of how they and the films got to the screen was and is not of great interest.

On my first trip to the Berlin International Film Festival, Paul Byrnes offered me an important piece of advice: not all films that inspire five-minute ovations and great trade reviews at international festivals will deliver the same effect at home. Paul's advice also works in the reverse.

In the beginning my decision not to sit through the opening night film caused some consternation. Basically it was because I was terrified I would nod off if I sat down. What was left of the adrenalin that had fuelled the previous hectic 12 months would slip out of my body into a puddle below my mezzanine seat and soak into the carpet. It conjured a terrifying image of tragic headlines the next day.

In selecting the program, the opening and closing night films were always the last confirmations. They are the most difficult selections as the audience is quite different from that of the rest of the event, particularly for the opening night selection. It is the same issue for every festival the world over. Sometimes a film screamed at you, occasionally there was not a really an appropriate film, but still a selection had to be made nevertheless. To name the best opening night experience during my

tenure is too hard and possibly too political given I still work in the industry. Each of the six opening night films selected from 1999-2004 exhibited different merits; some were more successful than others in terms of audience response. One thing is sure: no film is going to achieve carte-blanche approval.

Over the years, in the minds of some, the SFF opening night audience has developed a reputation for being tough and therefore having the power to potentially shape the future box-office performance and release coverage for the film. That could be said of any film festival in the world. Once the film is made and put out to its public then it is in the lap of that public.

Getting the right balance for the program was a chess game, one that demanded assessment of all available domestic and international contemporary works, considering which retrospectives, shorts, documentaries, domestically distributed and imported titles would provide the most enjoyment, debate and education for the audience. Contrary to popular belief not all films that I wanted to include in the program were available. The festival, after all, not only exists in a domestic calendar, it also exists in a global festival calendar. And the competition for content is highly competitive on both fronts. A festival's international credibility is directly linked its ability to attract high-calibre work and talent.

A good barometer of how things were going at the festival in general were my long-suffering housemates and friends. Upon returning home I was always greeted by a chorus of questions, judgements and general discussion. The question of why I didn't advise the taking of more tissues to the screening of *A Time for Drunken Horses* is still raised with me to this day. Recounting the debate around *Werckmeister Harmonies* and *Goodbye Dragon Inn* is for another time.

I had the privilege of meeting many people over the years whom I would have not had the opportunity to meet in any other line of work. Apart from hosting international filmmakers such as Bertrand Tavernier, Paul Schrader and Jan Hrebjek to name but a very few, I also had the distinct pleasure of presenting the great diversity of talent which makes up the Australian film Industry to the Sydney public.

Whether it was presenting Bryan Brown a birthday cake at the introduction of *Two Hands* on opening night; worrying that Hebe, the greyhound from the film *Silent Partner*, was about to collapse with stage fright; getting a call at Sydney town hall during the Googie Withers presentation alerting me that the State Theatre had been evacuated due to acrid smoke from a malfunctioning air-conditioning duct; donning a hard hat to enter an adjacent building site to complain that the eastern wall of the mezzanine was vibrating with jackhammer noise; installing a video projector the

size of a small Rushcutters Bay bedsit into the state theatre; the ridiculous banning of *Ken Park* (which need not have happened if the DVD distributor had followed advice); and endless business development pitches to both government and private sector supporters – my time as festival director was exceedingly rich. For all the challenges there were just as many rewards.

Everybody who has ever worked for the festival has given their all. Head projectionists Bob Gamlen and Alan Butterfield were magicians. Their toolkits comprised everything from the most appropriate and expected items but also included paddle-pop sticks, elastic bands and toothpicks. They and their team were always calm and professional in the face of crises and there were more than a few. I count myself lucky for having had freight guru Neil Angwin in the mix as well as an extremely talented and steadfast group of people throughout my time at the festival – none more so than Jenny Neighbour. It is also appropriate that I acknowledge past Presidents, the late Russell Stendell and Cathy Robinson and General Managers Fiona Allan and Patrick McIntyre, who brought their extensive events and managerial experience.

It was indeed a good time.