HISTORY

OF THE

SYDNEY FILM

FESTIVAL

1954 - 1983

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MASTER of ARTS
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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a higher degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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For John and David

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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACOFS	Australian Council of Film Societies
AFC	Australian Film Commission
AFI	Australian Film Institute
AFTRS	Australian Film Television and radio School
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
CFU	Commonwealth Film Unit
DOI	Department of Information, later Department of the Interior
EFF	Edinburgh Film Festival
FIAPF	Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films. Regulatory body governing the operations of international film festivals in their business dealings with film producers
FUA	Film Users' Association of New South Wales
GU	Greater Union Organisation
IWFF	International Women's Film Festival
LFF	London Film Festival
MFF	Melbourne Film Festival
NFTA	National Film Theatre of Australia
SAFC	South Australian Film Corporation
SFF	Sydney Film Festival
SFIFF	San Francisco International Film Festival
SFS	Sydney Film Society
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald
SSFS	Sydney Scientific Film Society
SUFG	Sydney University Film Group
SUFS	Sydney University Film Society
SWFG	Sydney Women's Film Group
TFF	Travelling Film Festival
WEA	Workers' Education Association
WWFFU	Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit

CHRONOLOGY

1 1954, June 11-14, University of Sydney
Chairman A.K. Stout, Director David Donaldson
Premier screening of *The Back of Beyond* (John Heyer)

2 1955, June 10-13
Chairman A.K. Stout, Director David Donaldson
Japanese feature *Gate of Hell* (Teinosuke Kinugasa) makes huge impact
The Hungry Miles (WWFFU) and *The Sentimental Bloke* (Raymond Longford) amongst Australian films screened. SFF neglects to invite Longford to screening

3 1956, June 1- 6
President Frank Bellingham, Director David Donaldson
Television comes to Australia
Three In One (Cecil Holmes) rejected by Film Selection Sub-Committee
*The Seven Samura*i (Akira Kurosawa) screens

4 1957, October 4-7
President Frank Bellingham, Director David Donaldson
Erwin Rado becomes Director of MFF

5 1958, October 3- 6
President Frank Bellingham, Director Valwyn Wishart
1350 subscribers
Valwyn Wishart takes over Directorship. Donaldson continues as a programming consultant
Festival registered as a company limited by guarantee
First overseas guest Paul Rotha, sponsored by UNESCO
Introduction of advertising in Festival catalogue
Dust in the Sun (Lee Robinson) screens with star Chips Rafferty in attendance

6 1959, June 12-28
President Frank Bellingham, Directors Sylvia Lawson and Robert Connell
Festival reverts to June and expands to 17 days

7 1960, June 10-26
President Frank Bellingham, Director Lois Hunter
2095 subscribers. 97 films
Many sell out events
Receives accreditation from FIAPF
Charles Chauvel Retrospective
Introduction of Opening Night feature film and party. Inaugural opener is *Black Orpheus* (Marcel Camus)
Short films by Tim Burstall and Bruce Beresford

8 1961, June 9- 25
President Frank Bellingham, Director Patricia Moore
Tribute to Frank Hurley which he attends

9 1962, June 1-14
President Frank Bellingham, Director Ian Klava
Ian Klava appointed first full-time director
Tribute to cinematographer Arthur Higgins, which he attends

10 1963, June 7- 20
President Frank Bellingham, Director Ian Klava
Vincent Report tabled
International guest Madame Kawakita of the Japanese Film Foundation

11 1964, June 5-15
President Frank Bellingham, Director Ian Klava
SFF acquires first full-time office space at 53 Liverpool Street
Dr Strangelove (Stanley Kubrick) big success
Tribute to Damien Parer

12 1965, June 4-14
President Frank Bellingham, Director Ian Klava
24 feature films and 59 shorts including amateur program
Modesta Gentile becomes first full-time Assistant to the Director
Tribute to Ken G. Hall
Screening of innovative CFU documentary *From the Tropics to the Snow*
David Stratton joins SFF committee. Ignites debate about censorship
SFF administration relocates to 40 King Street

13 1966, June 1-13
President Frank Bellingham, Director David Stratton
David Stratton becomes Director and makes first overseas visit to select films
Amateur Film program dropped
Censorship difficulties over *A Blonde in Love* (Milos Forman)
Formation of Film Censorship Sub-Committee

14 1967, May 31 – June 12, Wintergarden, Cremorne Orpheum
President Dugmore Merry, Director David Stratton
Cremorne Orpheum and Wintergarden added to University theatres and Elizabethan Theatre in Newtown as screening venues
Forgotten Cinema (Tony Buckley), a documentary about Australia's cinema past, screens three times to rapturous reception

15 1968, May 29-June 6, Wintergarden

President Ian McPherson, Director David Stratton

Political events in Europe have fall-out effect. Strikes and riots at Cannes Film Festival which is abandoned. FIAPF boycotts Venice FF. Festivals in Montreal and Vancouver both cancelled.
Rado stranded in Warsaw by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia
SFF moves to Wintergarden Theatre, Rose Bay and office premises at 52 Erskine St
Director given autonomy over film selection. Film Selection Sub-Committee becomes Advisory Panel only
Satyajit Ray is a Festival guest

16 1969, June 6-16

President Ian McPherson, Director David Stratton

2,300 subscribers
I Love You Love (Stig Borkman) is banned by the Chief Censor while its director is in Australia as a guest of the SFF
First major SFF sponsor Fiat Motors
2000 Weeks (Tim Burstall) screens and is booed by audience
Stratton visits the San Francisco Film Festival and decides it is the model he will use to develop SFF
Petition signed by 64 film culture and industry figures raising concerns about Stratton's direction is presented to SFF

17 1970, June 3-15

President Ian McPherson, Director David Stratton

Introduction of Benson & Hedges Award for Australian Short Films
Features *A Married Couple* and *Like Night and Day* banned by censor

18 1971, June 1-14

President Ian McPherson, Director David Stratton

Jorn Donner, Jerzy Skolimowski and Akira Kurosawa invited as Festival delegates. Kurosawa drops out at last moment because of illness
R-Certificate is introduced. Film festivals are granted exemption from censorship

19 1972, May 30- June 12

President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton

Purchase of Festival premises at 405 Glebe Point Road
Albie Thoms arranges experimental program (The Films of Bruce Baillie)
Four Australian features programmed under "New Developments in Australian Cinema" banner
Violence in the Cinema Part 1 (George Miller, Byron Kennedy) screens in main Festival after missing out on selection for Short Film Awards

20 1973, May 29- June 11

President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton

Introduction of first Green Series
Two Australian - produced ethnographic films about New Guinea given prominence; *Towards Baruya Manhood* (Ian Dunlop), *Tidikawa and Friends* (Jef & Su Doring)
WD&HO Wills withdraw sponsorship of Short Film Awards

21 1974, June 2-17, State Theatre

President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF David Stratton

Entire Festival relocates to State Theatre. Prime Minister Gough Whitlam opens the event
Greater Union takes over sponsorship of Short Film Awards
Introduction of Rouben Mamoulian Award for Best Film (selected from finalists in Short Film Awards) First winner Phillip Noyce for *Castor and Pollux*
Australian features screened include *The Cars that Ate Paris* (Peter Weir) and *27a* (Esben Storm).
Guest of honour Rouben Mamoulian, around whom a retrospective has been programmed
Launch of Travelling Film Festival funded by Australia Council for the Arts

22 1975, June 1-16

President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Carol Hughes

David Stratton's tenth Festival
For the first time, the SFF opens with an Australian feature film, *Sunday Too Far Away* (Ken Hannam)
Retrospective of almost seventy selected excerpts and full feature film screenings programmed under title *Salute to Australian Film*. Twenty-page booklet produced to accompany it.
Warren Beatty, Dusan Makavejev, Basil Wright, and King Hu amongst international delegates
Introduction of National Nights. Germany and France
The Sydney Women's Film Group (SWFG) organises the International Women's Film Festival (IWFF) in part in protest at poor representation of women filmmakers in SFF

23 1976, May 30-June 14

President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Carol Hughes

Program of contemporary Italian cinema, *Salute to Italian Cinema*, arranged by Gideon Bachmann. *Seven Beauties* (Lina Wertmuller) is extremely well received as Opening Night film.
International guests include Michelangelo Antonioni, Giancarlo Giannini
The Devil's Playground (Fred Schepisi) arrives as a late entry and is voted most popular feature*The Singer and the Dancer* (Gillian Armstrong) is a Short Film Award finalist

24 1977, May 29- June 13

President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Antonia Barnard

Introduction of Film Forums
Festival hosts sixteen international delegates from seven countries, including Peter Watkins.
Backroads (Phillip Noyce) screens
In the Realm of the Senses (Nagisa Oshima) refreshes concerns about censorship
Departure of Modesta Gentile

25 1978, June 2-17

President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Ian McPherson

Opening Night film *The Night the Prowler* with screenwriter Patrick White in attendance
Twenty-fifth anniversary celebrated with publication of commemorative booklet
International guests include Shyam Benegal, David Mercer, Keith Carradine

26 1979, June 15-30

President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Louisa Wright

Pressure from FIAPF forces end of sharing arrangement with MFF
International guests include Lino Brocka, Jiri Menzel, Albert Johnson, Derek Malcolm

27 1980, June 13- 28
President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Julie Stone
Launch of Network 0/28 (later the Special Broadcasting Service). Stratton becomes feature film consultant for the television network and hosts Movie of the Week and Cinema Classics
Death of Ian McPherson

28 1981, June 5-21
President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Kathy Turbott
Inaugural Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture delivered by John Gillett. The lecture series sponsored by Ron Adair
Guests include Tony Rayns, Peter Wollen, Connie Field, Feliks Falk, Veronica Soul, Michael Raeburn and John Lowenthal
Alternative Cinema program introduced. Curated by Glenys Rowe and others from Sydney Filmmakers' Co-op

29 1982, June 11- 27
President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Kathy Turbott
Friends of the Festival inaugurated.
Re-introduction of Green Series
Chief Censor bans *Pixote*. Decision overturned by Review Board
Lindsay Anderson delivers Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture

30 1983, June 10- 26
President Ross Tzannes, Director David Stratton, TFF Victoria Brien
David Stratton's eighteenth and final Festival
Festival has six staff members, an Honorary Auditor and an Honorary Solicitor. The Board of Directors comprises eleven people, five of whom are women.
The Draughtsman's Contract (Peter Greenaway) is Opening Night film
Jane Campion wins Rouben Mamoulian Award for *A Girl's Own Story*.
Joseph Skrzynski, CEO of AFC, delivers Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture

ABSTRACT

This study is intended to provide a record of the founding and development of one of Australia's oldest and longest surviving film festivals and to determine the nature and impact of the Festival in its engagement with other cultural, social, and political institutions over the thirty years from 1954 to 1983.

I have taken my research from a variety of sources, primarily the archive of Sydney Film Festival papers and ephemera lodged at Mitchell Library, Sydney. I have utilized a number of publications from the period, including daily newspapers, trade papers and specialist film and art journals. These give some indication of the Festival's influence and impact within the wider community and help position it in terms of predominant cultural and social values.

I conclude that the Sydney Film Festival has played a significant, and so far somewhat underestimated, role in the development of Australian film culture and industry, and has influenced the nature and reception of films in commercial distribution within the country. In a pedagogical sense, it has influenced contemporary understanding of film and film history, in part by privileging particular movements and filmmakers over others and in part by creating a communal and interactive environment in which films, filmmaking and other aspects of film culture can be discussed, analysed and celebrated.

This is a history of an organisation whose membership included some of the major figures in Australian film and related media and I have been committed to bringing a human element to the events and issues explored. To this end, I have utilized the extensive Oral History archive created in 1992 by the Sydney Film Festival in order to commemorate its fortieth anniversary. As is often the case with historical research, some of these personal memories are in conflict with one another and with the documentary record. By a process of referencing and cross referencing, I hope I have arrived at an approximation of a truth about a moment in the life of an Australian cultural icon.

“Next to excellence is the appreciation of it.”
William Makepeace Thackeray

“A film is not complete until it’s had its first spectator.”
Manoel de Oliveira

INTRODUCTION

Month in, month out, from the Flickerfest International Outdoor Short Film Festival starting in early January in the Bondi Beach area of Sydney, Australia, through the Autrans Festival of Mountain and Adventure Films ending in mid-December in the high, thin air of south-east France, there is barely a day on the calendar where some film festival is not being celebrated in some exotic city somewhere in the world.
Kenneth Turan [1]

In 1998 the well-known American film critic Roger Ebert established the "Overlooked Film Festival" expressly to recover all those films which he considered never received their due at the time of release. In 2003, "The World's Smallest Film Festival" was launched in London. It showcased short films, between 30 seconds and five minutes in length, produced especially for screening on mobile phones. Such extraordinary specialisation is a feature of the film festival landscape of the twenty-first century. Not only are festivals diverse in subject and range but they are ubiquitous. It is no longer possible to estimate with any accuracy the number currently operating around the world. Most published guides list between four and six hundred but, as Kenneth Turan notes, such lists do not always overlap and none of them is comprehensive. For example, Chris Gore's popular *The Ultimate Film Festival Guide* has 622 entries but does not include the Utrecht, Edinburgh or Pusan film festivals.[2] If you consider all the small, specialist festivals operating around the world, numbers of one thousand or more become quite feasible.

Film festivals have different agendas and can serve very different purposes within a film community. It is perhaps worth exploring just what film festivals are and what they do. In one way or another, all of them are forums for the screening and watching of films. They can cater to a variety of tastes - a degustation of cinema excellence, or they can

[1] Turan, 2002, p1
[2] Turan, ibid, p2: Gore, 2001.

specialize in one field. They can be competitions where filmmakers vie for the prestige and dollars which follow a win. A big prize from Sundance can launch a low budget independent film into the international spotlight while winners of the Palme d'Or at Cannes are guaranteed global distribution for their films. Some festivals are primarily a marketplace in which film as commodity is bought and sold. Others can be exhibition spaces, venues for testing new and experimental forms and ideas or museums presenting particular constructions of film history.

Festivals are also institutions reflecting national interests; representing and celebrating national identity. They are usually forums for discussion and debate about film culture, film aesthetics, the politics and the business of filmmaking – elaborate international conferences in which specialists share knowledge and explore ideas. They have been platforms launching new aesthetic movements or sites where differing political and cultural values emerge in violent confrontation. They are businesses, sometimes turning over hundreds of thousands of dollars every year, sometimes surviving on small change and goodwill. They are almost always, to a greater or lesser extent, celebrity "events" - highlights in the cultural calendar of a city or country. They are a media circus, the place to be seen. They are events made possible by a beavering body of staff and volunteers who support the Director's vision and are committed to realising it. In this, festivals are not unlike the films they screen.

The concept of authorship, or more accurately in this case, directorship, is problematic when applied to processes such as filmmaking, which are essentially collaborative in nature. Yet, like films, film festivals, at least the successful ones, the survivors, seem always to be the creative end product of one person's vision – Gilles Jacob in Cannes, Piers Handling in Toronto, Kim Dong-ho in Pusan, Robert Redford at Sundance, Erwin Rado and later Tait Brady in Melbourne, David Stratton in Sydney.

An International Context

The idea of creating a special forum for screening films gained currency in the 1930s. The first documented international festival and the oldest still operating began as the "Esposizione d'Arte Cinematografica", an off-shoot of the Eighteenth Venice Biennale held in 1932. For twenty nights, patrons could see films from the comfort of Chez Vous Terrace at the Excelsior Hotel on the Lido. Like Hitler, Mussolini knew the power of visual propaganda and he quickly injected government funds into the event so that by the end of the decade it bore little resemblance to its "consumption, tourism and leisure"[3] origins. As World War II loomed, festival juries began sacrificing artistic merit to the promotion of countries in the fascist alliance. Britain, America and France all withdrew their support of the politically compromised festival and in 1939 the French government established an alternative competition in Cannes. Festival activity was suspended during the war years but the movement really took off again in the late 1940s. Through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, film festivals sprang up all over the world, first in Europe, then in Asia and elsewhere. They provided the means by which truly international, non-mainstream, alternative films could reach receptive and enthusiastic audiences.

Some cultural historians have noted the close alignment between the establishment of major international film festivals and the nationalist agendas of the governments which underpin them. The 1932 Venice event has been positioned as "an explicit act of propaganda aimed at legitimizing and promoting Mussolini's fascist state on the world stage"[4] while the Berlin Film Festival, founded in 1951, has been seen as an ally-sanctioned tool in the post-war reconstruction and democratization of Germany.[5] The London Film Festival, which began in 1957, was then and is still today, an extension of

[3] Stone, 1998, p102
[4] Stringer, 2001, p135
[5] Gore op cit; Stone op cit; Fehrenbach, 1995

the British National Film Theatre which is in turn part of the British Film Institute. Cannes began as a reaction against the politically compromised Venice Festival but the decision to locate France's largest and most prestigious festival in the southern coastal town had more to do with the city council's offer to underwrite it than with any cultural or geographical attributes. Some acclaimed festivals are fully state run, as was the case with Moscow, Karlovy Vary and other Eastern Bloc festivals until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The 1970s saw a new wave of film festivals around the world. Hong Kong, Toronto, Montreal, and Rotterdam were all founded in that decade which also saw the expansion of film festivals within Australia. Through the late 1980s and 1990s, other festivals such as Pusan and Sundance emerged and claimed a place alongside the veteran events. There are now so many film festivals that they have become, in the words of Piers Handling, "an alternative distribution network"[6] for films unlikely to obtain commercial theatrical distribution. Many films can travel from festival to festival across the whole year, developing word of mouth and achieving exposure to the specialist audience most sympathetic to them. To some extent this has always been the case but in the period covered by this study, most festivals were engaged, to varying degrees, in providing a showplace for films seeking commercial distribution. Festivals like Cannes, Utrecht and Fajr in Tehran have markets attached to them where industry buyers come in search of potential box office winners. At others, the connections between culture and commerce are less overt but they are present. Few film festivals can survive long term without providing the carrot of possible sales to the world's film producers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, large international competitive festivals such as Cannes, Berlin and Venice were balanced by a number smaller in scale and focussed on screen culture. One such, the Edinburgh Film Festival (EFF), began in 1947 as an adjunct to the city's

[6] Turan, op cit, p8

already established arts festival. In its formative years it adopted a programming policy inspired by the cinematic social realist philosophy of the Griersonian school concentrating on documentaries and realist, narrative cinema. Edinburgh became the primary role model for the Sydney Film Festival.

Despite their structural similarities, film festivals tend to develop individual personalities closely connected to the culture and politics of the societies of which they are part; to reflect, in some degree, the values and preoccupations of that society. The Thessaloniki Film Festival for example, reflects this geopolitical framework through its structuring as a showcase for Balkan cinema and culture. Films of the region are promoted along with local culture so visitors are provided every opportunity to steep themselves in Greek tradition and society. At the same time, this nationalistic drive is both offset and complemented by the Festival's respected "New Horizons" section which programs new and unusual works from around the world and has long sustained an international reputation for innovation and diversity. So while it is true to say film festivals around the world tend to privilege the same films it is also equally true that local engagement with and response to these films varies enormously and that most film festivals, particularly the smaller, specialist ones, program some films unique to themselves.

Australia's film festivals differ from most of the major international events in that they were founded by community rather than government or other institutional support. Whatever national characteristics they have developed have come from the bottom up – the individual participants, rather than from the top down – government cultural or social policy. They are not competitive, nor are they industry marketplaces though they have elements of these about them. They are relatively financially independent, relying on ticket sales for the bulk of their income. The Sydney and Melbourne events are among the oldest and longest-running film festivals in the world and both have international reputations for excellence.

Film festivals have become a giant, self-sustaining, global industry and many of those attending are there in that capacity but festivals remain distinct from purely business events through the participation of the general public. Even the huge and powerful Toronto Film Festival with its vast programs and prestige guests remains at heart a festival for the people of Toronto who flock to it each year. It is impossible to say exactly why film festivals have this attraction, this special appeal. Amongst the festivals profiled in Turan's book is the Sarajevo Film Festival which was founded in 1995 in the midst of the Yugoslav civil war. What could motivate people to go and see films in such circumstances? Turan quotes Festival organiser Haris Pasovic:

> You don't have to have everything fine to want to see movies … You see them because you want to connect, to communicate from your position on the other side of the moon, to check whether you still belong to the same reality as the rest of the world. The favourite question of journalists during my festival was "Why a film festival during the war?" My answer was "Why the war during a film festival?" It was the siege that was unusual, not the festival. [7]

Film festivals are clearly about something beyond appreciation of the cinema. They are possibly unique in their blending of community, commerce, consumption, celebration, discussion, and exchange all in the pursuit of artistic excellence.

A Local Context

> Like democracies, film festivals are far from perfect, but they are still the best system we have for giving movies an opportunity to be seen when commercial concerns are not the first priority. [8]

The first Sydney Film Festival (SFF) was held over the Queen's Birthday long weekend of 1954. It was a modest affair – a handful of feature films, some local and international documentaries, a program of amateur short films. Few connected with it imagined it

[7] Turan, ibid, pp104-5
[8] Pickard, 1998, p11

would survive for long. But survive it has. In 2003, the Festival celebrated 50 years of continuous operation as Sydney's major screen culture event. Current indications suggest it will be around for many years more.

Today Australians have access to a range of film product unimaginable in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet, despite the ready availability of videos, DVDs, pay television, and two national, publicly-funded television broadcasters ostensibly dedicated to representing culturally diverse, high quality programming, film festivals seem not only to be surviving but constantly growing, becoming more diversified, representing more and more areas of the arts and culture. Why are there so many festivals? What need do they fulfil in the cultural community? What do they provide the cinema-goer that a visit to the local multiplex does not? What do they provide that the film society movement which preceded them did not?

Interest in these questions prompted me to make a study of one festival in order to historically explain the phenomenon. This study is also motivated by a desire to find out where film festivals, and the Sydney Film Festival specifically, fit into the Australian "film culture infrastructure", to borrow a phrase from Barrett Hodsdon.[9] I wanted to explore the network of connections and obligations which bind the Sydney Film Festival as an institution to the social, cultural and professional community of which it is part. In that sense, this is a cultural history but it is also an institutional one in that I have set out to record a detailed chronology of events - the who, what, and when which shaped the Sydney Film Festival as we know it today.

In Sydney alone there are more than fifteen festivals held annually.[10] The most significant of these, in terms of size and prestige, is the Sydney Film Festival. Along with

[9] Hodsdon, 2001, p105

[10] This is a conservative estimate. Consider just a few of the established Festivals – SFF; Queerscreen; Asia-Pacific FF; Tropfest; Flickerfest; WIFT FF; National Student Film & Video

Melbourne, Edinburgh, San Sebastian, and London, Sydney constitutes part of the second wave of international film festivals which began and flourished in the decade immediately after WWII - festivals primarily interested in promoting the aesthetics of international cinema. It has remained a people's festival, part of the artistic and cultural life of the Sydney community.

To date there has been very little research into the impact film festivals have had on the development of the film industry and community in Australia. There are as yet no in-depth studies of either the Sydney or Melbourne Film Festivals though both organisations have published commemorative histories which are largely celebratory. In 2001, film writer Paul Kalina edited a slim volume of reminiscences by some key participants in the Melbourne Film Festival over its more than 50 year history.[11] The SFF, with Edward Gillan, produced a similar but more extensive oral history to commemorate its fortieth anniversary in 1993.[12] Like Kalina's booklet, the Gillan volume is made up of a highly selective compilation of quotes from various individuals associated with the SFF. It gives an excellent general overview of the Festival's history, includes many lively and appealing anecdotes, but gives no analysis and is frustratingly silent on some key areas of development. The Gillan booklet, along with another published on the occasion of the SFF's twenty-fifth anniversary which gives a year-by-year account of the films, guests, and major events up to 1978, proved useful stepping stones on which to built this study; a study which I hope addresses some of the gaps left in the earlier works.

The role played by film festivals in the writing of film history is seldom acknowledged in either popular culture or academic discourse and they tend to be referenced only

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Festival; Sci-fi Film Festival; Greek FF; Spanish FF; Italian FF; French FF; German FF; Sour Grapes FF; Australian Effects & Animation FF; Bondi Short Film Festival.

[11] Kalina, 2001

[12] Gillan, 1993

peripherally in works on film history. Film festivals have not been *sexy* subjects for historians. While there are a number of edited collections exploring aspects of Australia's cinematic history, few, if any, feature essays which are directly concerned with film festivals as protagonists in the development of a local film culture and industry.[13] Yet the number of documents about SFF and MFF matters included in *Cinema in Australia: A Documentary History*[14] would suggest that these festivals have been more significant than is generally thought.

Individual studies tend to reflect a similar situation. In their history of Australian cinema, Shirley and Adams consider developments in the Australian film industry during the late 1960s to have been "motivated by the community's deeper regard for film"[15] but they do not consider the importance of film festivals as a source of this increased community regard. In discussing the making of a distinctive national cinema, Tom O'Regan opens up opportunities to reconsider the place of film festivals, particularly in relation to what he describes as "formations of value". He suggests that "Value is an inescapable feature of all cultural objects", and that "disputes over value are likewise inescapable".[16] Film festivals must surely play a pivotal role in determining the "value" of cinematic product most especially in regard to the demarcation line between Hollywood and "other" cinemas which O'Regan articulates.[17]

Dermody and Jacka, in their seminal study of the Australian film industry, acknowledge film festivals, along with film societies, as forceful lobbyists for the revival of domestic film production in the late 1960s.[18] Unfortunately, the scale and scope of their project precluded the authors from examining the intricacies of film festivals in relation to film

[13] For example, Blonski, Creed & Freiberg, 1987; Moran & O'Regan, 1985; Moran & O'Regan 1989; Murray 1980; Murray, 1994
[14] Bertrand (Ed), 1989
[15] Shirley & Adams, 1989, p217
[16] O'Regan, 1996, p111
[17] ibid, Chapter 5
[18] Dermody & Jacka, 1987, Volume 1, p49

production, distribution and exhibition in any depth. While there have been many studies of cinema distribution and exhibition in Australia I have been unable to find one devoted to film festivals though these are part of the extended theatrical landscape.[19]

If the study of film festivals has been neglected, this is, in part, because they occupy a kind of no man's land just outside the usual areas of research. Though they are loosely connected to virtually every post-war movement in Australian film culture they are seen as intrinsic to none. The failure to fully explore the film festival contribution is also due to its singular nature; an event lasting just two weeks each year is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as unlikely to carry too much influence or impact. Yet both Sydney and Melbourne have punched greater than their weight in a number of key areas of cultural development. The SFF's contribution to the renewal of a domestic film industry has been underestimated by film historians and analysts. From 1954 on, the SFF campaigned for the re-establishment of a vigorous national film industry. It played a crucial role in identifying and locating seminal films from the silent and early talkies era, bringing them to a public hungry to see itself represented on the screen. Films we now recognise as important documents of our national, cultural heritage are known to us in part because of the persistent effort made by the Festival to ensure their survival and recognition. In 1970, the SFF initiated a competition to promote Australian short films. Despite early difficulties with organisation, categorisation and judging, the Benson & Hedges Short Film Awards soon became established as an important part of the newly developing local industry. In the absence of alternative distribution and exhibition networks, the Festival provided a forum through which emerging filmmakers could gain recognition and encouragement.

Both the Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals made significant contributions to pushing the boundaries of what kind of films Australians could see. From the post-war period

[19] Moran (1995) touches on their importance.

through to the 1980s, they strongly influenced the type and range of films in commercial distribution and exhibition within the country. The SFF helped develop a discerning, knowledgeable, film-literate cinema audience for international and domestic films. When the Festival began, commercial theatrical release for European and Asian films was limited to a handful of committed independent operators. Within a decade that situation had greatly changed and soon after, the Festival found itself unable to screen some films of choice because of competition from local distributors. Many factors contributed to these developments but the SFF has played a significant part. Throughout its history, the Festival maintained a policy of encouraging and assisting local distributors to pick up non-mainstream films for theatrical release in Australia. It helped create an audience for these films and stimulated in the Australian public an awareness of cinema as an art form as well as an entertainment medium.

Browsing old SFF catalogues is rather like glimpsing cinema not in its adolescence but in the first astonishing flowering of its adulthood. From its inception, the SFF has featured films which have since become classics. Often there are clusters of them together in one year. The 1960 festival showed Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus*, Ray's *World of Apu*, Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds*, and Karoly Makk's *The Home under the Rocks*. Lionel Rogosin's documentary about New York's social outcasts *On the Bowery* and his South African docu-drama *Come Back Africa* are there, as well as a retrospective screening of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and his then new film *Living*. If you attended the festival between, say 1968 and 1972 you could have seen Visconti's *The Stranger*, Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains*, De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, Anderson's *If* and Gosta-Gavras's *Z*. You would have been introduced to Bertolucci via *The Conformist* and *The Spider's Stratagem*. You may have developed a social conscience watching Ken Loach's *Family Life*, or a political one watching Glauber Rocha's *Antonio Das Mortes*. You might have tested your humanist ideals by watching

Solas's *Lucia* or Kurosawa's *Dodes'ka-Den*. You could have been baffled and challenged by Makavejev's *W.R. Mysteries of the Organism* or Pasolini's *Theorem*. If your tastes ran to something more relaxing you could see Rohmer's *My Night with Maud* or Widerberg's *Elvira Madigan*. Film enthusiasts began to see what it was possible to do on film and it made them hungry for a cinema which could reflect their own lives in their own world.

In making that selection, I am acknowledging the existence of a canon of film classics and by extension, the role which festivals have played in determining that canon. This opens up an area of analysis which might investigate the role festivals play in the social construction of "good taste". In their capacity as the major conduits through which world cinema reached Western audiences before the current era of multiple delivery options, film festivals played a most significant role in shaping what Western societies came to see as the essential productions making up the modern film canon. Julian Stringer, adapting the arguments made by art historians Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach in their seminal 1980 essay, "The Universal Survey Museum", posits the idea that film festivals attract international media and academic and economic attention by creating a brand image of themselves as global surveyors of cinema excellence.[20] Like objects in museums, films in festivals are automatically assumed to have intrinsic value because they have been selected by a body which claims aesthetic authority. Like most other film festivals, the SFF structured its programming policies and marketed itself along these lines.

The SFF's constituency has always been predominantly well educated, moderately affluent and middle class. It is essentially a conservative organisation, in the classical sense of conservatism as committed to existing forms of social, political and cultural organisation and resistant to radical change. Yet at various points in its history it has

[20] Stringer, op cit, pp135-144

been perceived quite differently. During the Menzies era, in the height of the Cold War, the Festival was regarded by many as subversive and left-leaning. In reality, it followed a loosely liberal-humanist policy, attempting always to program according to aesthetic principles. But while the SFF Committee members consciously avoided adopting any kind of ideological position in relation to Australian society, they nevertheless did so, in a sense, subconsciously.

Many historians have noted that, in the 1950s and early 1960s particularly, an interest in "continental" culture was often synonymous with dissatisfaction about the political and cultural values then dominating Australian society. While they are primarily concerned with presenting new and previously unseen work to an interested public, film festivals also use retrospectives and other exhibition events to built a particular version of cinema history and to connect that history to the national discourse of their own countries of origin.

The most frequent observation about the SFF from those who took part in its first twenty years of operation is that it gave a privileged entrée to a range of cultures and societies beyond the boundaries of personal experience. The term "window on the world" is a cliché now but it emerges over and over in conversations with Festival-goers of the 1950s and 1960s. In Sydney in 1954 it was a completely new way of looking and seeing. The city was isolated - geographically, culturally, socially - from most of the world. Festival films showed people relating, behaving, being and doing things differently to the way they were done within Australia. There was an element of voyeuristic pleasure and excitement about this, a sense of having special access to "forbidden fruit" as Phillip Adams has described it.[21] Festival subscribers felt themselves bound together by this need for knowledge of the outside world and by a desire to engage with cinema as a medium of artistic expression. With the advent of television, the internet, improved

[21] Murray, 1994, p61

communications and easier, cheaper international travel, this ideological aspect of the Festival diminished though it remains a part of the experience for many subscribers even today.

Conscious of its fragile status and wary of disintegrating into factional warfare as happened to many film related organisations during the 1950s, the SFF tried to be as apolitical as possible but in the late 1960s it did take a radical stand on a very contentious issue - censorship. The SFF was one of the catalysts for change in the area of film censorship, first by highlighting the severe and outmoded limitations on artistic expression which existed in Australia throughout the period, then by actively lobbying for legislative reform.

With its high-profile win in the battle for freedom of artistic expression, the festival appeared to be keeping pace with social change in Australia. But after the global political upheavals of 1968, it was heavily criticised by many for its failure to reflect the great changes taking place across Europe and America. Increasingly it seemed, the Festival failed to address the issues and concerns of the contemporary generation. It struggled to find a way to incorporate the expansion in experimental film forms which burgeoned in Australia and around the world in the 1970s and 1980s. Film aesthetics were changing and the SFF was lagging behind. Feminist filmmakers in particular noted the Festival's shortcomings – its seeming blindness to the revolutionary changes taking place in women's lives and its poor record in screening feature films made by or about women. This was in sharp contrast with the 1950s and early 1960s when the Festival had been one of the few public spheres in which, off the screen at least, men and women could operate on equal terms in a spirit of companionship. But it is one of the features of the Festival's history that it tends to bounce back from adversity with renewed energy. My study ends in 1984 at just such a point of rejuvenation.

I am normally cautious about anthropomorphism but such a metaphor rather nicely describes the historical trajectory of the Sydney Film Festival. The mid-1950s is the infant stage – a most vulnerable time in life when survival is by no means assured. By the late 1950s the Festival is a toddler on a fast learning curve. There's some reliance on its slightly older sibling, the Melbourne Film Festival (MFF), but it's boldly experimenting in its own right resulting in a few close scrapes, the odd tantrum and one near-fatal accident. Next comes a fairly secure if unadventurous childhood until the mid 1960s when adolescence hits and the Festival becomes embroiled with all those issues which so rivet our attention at that turbulent time – personal identity, independence, resistance to authority, an awareness of the future, new responsibilities and expanding engagement with the wider world. By the mid 1970s the Festival is showing signs of comfortable, maybe even complacent middle age though it can be roused to a youthful vigour from time to time when circumstances need. It still likes a good party and it's still open to experimentation and new experiences but it sometimes casts a mystified glance at the younger generation coming up behind - a generation with a subtly different world view.

My study takes in this part of its life history from the first Festival held at the University of Sydney over the Queen's Birthday long-weekend of 1954 - an event which Sandra Hall, reviewing the twenty-fifth Festival for *The Bulletin* in 1978, called "a four-day orgy of good intentions" - to 1983, when Festival Director David Stratton handed over the reins to Rod Webb after eighteen long years in the saddle. Over that thirty year period, the SFF metamorphosed from a small scale amateur event to an established corporate entity with firm links to local film industry and cultural organisations and to a complex international network of film festivals and other film-related institutions which reaches far across the world. Internationally, the SFF is regarded as one of the best non-competitive festivals with a reputation for integrity and excellence. I have attempted to track the

crucial elements in this metamorphosis, to identify the series of events, influences, accidents and decisions which shaped the Festival.

The study is presented as a chronological and thematic narrative over four chapters. In *Art Form of a Generation: The Early Years 1954-1961*, I outline the developments in post-war Australian society out of which the film society and festival movements were born, then track in some detail, the first few years of operation during which the SFF made tentative steps toward an individual identity and purpose. *Expansion and Consolidation: 1962-1975* sees the Festival establish itself on a firm footing only to enter a dangerous period during which it comes close to collapse, rallies and is recreated under the Directorship of David Stratton. This is followed by a study entitled *Beguiling Times: The SFF and Australian Cinema 1954-1983*, which looks specifically at the engagement between the Festival and local filmmaking from the 1950s on. *Change and New Directions: 1976-1983* takes the Festival from the mid-1970s through to the early 1980s and the end of Stratton's term. These were challenging years which found the Festival losing ground in terms of its place as one of the major cultural events in Sydney, not quite able to meet the demands of a new and different kind of audience in a rapidly changing world.

The booklet which the SFF published in 1993 utilized some seventy hours of interviews with key Festival participants compiled, in the main, by film historian Graham Shirley. These interviews, now lodged with Mitchell Library along with the collection of SFF historical documents, form the basis of research for this study. I was also privileged to have access to some private papers and printed memorabilia of Ian McPherson, one of the founders and major contributors to the development of the SFF.

The 1993 archive is a rich resource as it includes contributions from a number of those responsible for founding the SFF[22] and from many others associated with it over the years, ranging from staff, SFF directors, presidents and Committee members to audience to filmmakers and to other industry professionals. It has not, however, been my intention to make another oral history. It is essential to be critical of the autobiographical voice and I have been careful to ensure that the participant's recollections I use are corroborated by SFF documentation including Committee Minutes, letters, reports, and program catalogues. I have also utilized material from a range of newspapers, film journals and magazines of the period.

It was not my original intention to conduct interviews myself but in some cases I found it necessary to do so. David Donaldson, Valwyn Wishart, and Dorothy Shoemark gave me the kind of first-hand detail needed to contextualise the 1950s and 1960s while Tony Buckley and John Baxter provided me with their personal perspectives on issues of conflict around programming and policy which occurred during the 1960s. I was able to conduct one brief interview with David Stratton mainly to clarify or elaborate on issues not clearly defined in the archive interview. As this study ends at 1983 I did not attempt to contact those SFF directors who followed Stratton though I found the archive interviews with both Rod Webb and Paul Byrnes extremely useful in forming a framework for the decades preceding their involvement.

Any study of the SFF must contextualize the Festival in relation to its Melbourne counterpart, acknowledging the very complex and at times interdependent relationship between the two. However, it has not been my intention to do a comparative history. The SFF has not achieved the same cultural recognition as the MFF, nor anything close to its

[22] Of all the major players, only Ian McPherson, A.K. Stout, John Kingsford Smith, and Lois Hunter are absent.

audience figures. I have not attempted to answer the question of just why this should be but it would make an interesting topic to explore in a different study.

Finally, I would like to clarify my usage of certain terms. Dennis Altman's definition of 1960s Australian counter culture as "large scale radical social movements not based on economic interests" which emerged first out of student politics and spread into other areas of the arts and social organisation is the one I have adopted.[23] Where I am referring specifically to filmmakers within the counter culture who adopted an anti-establishment mode of production and exhibition I have used the terms "experimental" and/or "avant garde". Those filmmakers and other industry operators who work outside the mainstream commercial film trade in Australia but do not follow a particular organisation or philosophy I have termed "independent".

[23] Altman, 1988, p309

CHAPTER ONE

ART FORM OF A GENERATION
THE EARLY YEARS 1954-1961

Films have been the distinctive art form of our generation
Tom Weir [24]

The SFF is one of those institutions … that was founded in a period when Australia's cultural isolation was most acutely felt.
John Clare [25]

Reinventing Australia: 1946-1954

Stuart Macintyre opens his 1994 study *A History for a Nation* with these lines:

War in the Pacific dispels the last illusions of Pax Britannica: the balance of global power tilts irreversibly away from the British Empire: the last viceroys depart. New trading patterns and strategic needs realign the settler society in the South-West Pacific: changed patterns of material life draw in waves of New Australians. New Australians create a new Australia, one consciously formulated to accommodate and contain diversity within a vigorous national culture.[26]

Macintyre goes on to question this prevailing view of Australian national identity as a post-war construct but for me, these beautifully written phrases seem instead to reinforce that view. Certainly it is true that the quest for our sense of self goes much further back than the late 1940s but the development of a diverse indigenous Australian culture came into being only after the crucial shifts described above had taken place. An annual film festival for Sydney emerged from the collective imaginings of organisations and institutions almost all of which were initiated or became productive only after 1945. The decade after World War II was a period which found Australians with a heightened awareness of the world and their place in it amid an atmosphere that encouraged

[24] Weir, 1985, p144
[25] Clare, 1981, p91
[26] Macintyre, 1994, p1

individuality, self development, and the pursuit of knowledge. For some, the desire for knowledge manifested itself as an enthusiasm for alternative cinema. In its early years, the SFF was managed by a committee of volunteers drawn from a surprisingly broad cross-section of the Sydney film community. This eclectic mix would determine the shape and direction of the Festival for many years and it is worth taking some time to examine its origins.

Many scholars discussing the development of mass popular culture have identified the way social order became more fluid in the post-war years. An interest in knowledge and in education was indicative of a change in the way one determined one's social status; a shift away from what one *did* and toward what one *thought*. In other words, intellectual pursuits became a means by which members of the working class could "elevate" themselves to the middle class. The Australia of the 1950s is traditionally depicted as devoid of intellectual creativity but in fact, this seems to have been a time of great activity.

Tom O'Regan has observed that developments in film culture and art cinema during this period undermine dominant perceptions of the 1950s as "a moment of cultural philistinism".[27] The SFF bears this out in its social organisation – an informal mix of men and women – and in its undefined but nevertheless discernible role as a site for the expression of political dissent. Film was the art form which spoke most directly to many who came of age after WWII, and also the medium through which they connected with a new and as yet rather hazy concept – the global community. Peter Hamilton's introduction to the 1949 Sydney University Film Group (SUFG) Film Festival reads in part:

[27] O'Regan, 1987

The purpose of this Festival is to stimulate active thinking about film not only as an art form or as a means to entertainment but also as a means to educate and the promotion of international understanding … Cinema going pervades all social spheres it knows no differentiation of creed or nation. The same film, directed by the same director, played by the same cast, can be seen all over the world exactly as it was first produced. Because of this universality, the film can be a powerful instrument in promoting international understanding. [28]

This encapsulates the ideology which motivated film societies and which filtered through to the Sydney Film Festival.

The NSW film society movement, while never as strong or cohesive as its Victorian counterpart, did provide forums through which people could engage with a range of films. The Workers Education Association (WEA) had a vibrant film study group, formed in 1944, which screened documentary films and non-mainstream features and even the Federation of Parents and Citizens Association had its own film group. The largest of the film societies was Sydney Film Society (SFS). Many of its members had been politicized by firsthand experience of the war and they tended to favour a liberal social reform agenda. The SFS published its own journal, *Film*, and many of its members were employed by the Department of Interior (DOI) Film Unit, including Producer-in-Chief Stanley Hawes. Professor A.K. Stout was its inaugural president. He was succeeded by John Heyer, who directed a number of films for the DOI Film Unit during the mid 1940s before becoming Head of Production at the Shell Oil Company Film Unit. Heyer's involvement with the SFS, and with a number of other film groups, was motivated by a strong desire to establish an alternative distribution and exhibition network for screening Australian films as the companies dominating the industry had little interest in local material. Hawes, Heyer and Stout would all play significant roles in the development of the Sydney Film Festival.

[28] SUFG Film Festival Program Catalogue, 1949, p21

In 1949, John Heyer, at this point still with the DOI Film Unit, Peter Hamilton, a field officer for the NSW Film Council, and a few others had the idea of forming an organisation to represent all the film societies in NSW. It was hoped that this body, the Film Users Association of NSW (FUA), would provide the mechanism by which the diverse societies could become a single unit levering more power in negotiations with film suppliers. It never happened, but the Association did research and publish a catalogue containing a complete listing of all the films available in Australia and the sources from which they could be secured. This work was carried out by FUA Secretary and SFS Committee member Neil Gunther.

Independent filmmakers were also drawn to the idea of a Festival for Sydney, partly because, like Heyer, they saw it as a forum for getting their own films screened and partly because of the opportunity it provided to see how films were being made around the world and so influence their own creativity. John Kingsford Smith, who ran his own commercial filmmaking company, Kingcroft Productions, would become a Committee member and later a Vice-President of the SFF. A few film critics and film writers were attracted to the Festival idea by a similar desire to extend their knowledge of film history and aesthetics as were a handful of individuals, unaffiliated with the societies but frequenting the same circuits.

Connections and Divisions

Peter Hamilton's vision of film as transcendent of social and ethnic considerations, and his intention to use it in the "promotion of international understanding" are indicative of a left-leaning liberal humanism which favoured Soviet cinema and the documentaries of filmmakers like Ivens and Lorentz. As Cunningham and Routt have pointed out, "an

intellectual interest in film is, even today, often associated with left politics."[29] Many believed that film societies, by their very nature, were subversive while some felt anyone interested in alternative cinema was likely to have Communist sympathies. During the years following the election of the Menzies government in 1949, film societies, like many other cultural institutions in Australia, found themselves increasingly affected by a polarising of political beliefs. Up until the turn of the decade, few people saw any problem with employees of a government film unit being seen to be connected with a politically left-leaning film society but the SFS was soon to become a victim of the climate of reactionary conservatism which came to dominate Australia during the Cold War. In 1951 Gunther wrote an article for the magazine *Film Guide*, provocatively entitled "Goodbye Mr Red"[30], in which he rails against the insidious influence of the "film society Communist" and exhorts all film societies to seek out and expel him as soon as possible.[31] Heyer and Stout, uncomfortable with such overt politicisation, resigned from the society which eventually fragmented when Gunther left to form the breakaway Independent Film Group. Oddly enough, Gunther remained part of the initial group involved in setting up the SFF but he soon disappeared from its story as a new generation of film enthusiasts became the crucial movers in the SFF venture. These young men and women had a very different take on cinematic culture.

In 1947, the Sydney University Film Group (SUFG) was formed as an offshoot of the Sydney University Visual Arts Society, extending the notion of "art appreciation" to the moving image. Its members were university students or graduates, many of whom had studied law or philosophy when that department was headed by the controversial

[29] Cunningham & Routt, in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p208
[30] Gunther in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p208
[31] Shortly after this, Gunther set out to purge the FUA of those he thought were using the organisation for political purposes. Judith Adamson recalls her husband, Rod, coming home from an FUA meeting in disgust after a member had stood up and screamed that the Reds were coming and would soon be under Australia's beds! (Adamson, CY MLOH 275/36-38). Under such pressure the FUA eventually disintegrated, another victim of the political climate.

philosopher John Anderson, and when A. K. Stout was Professor of Moral and Political Philosophy there.[32] By the early 1950s, the SUFG was dominated by men and women who had been teenagers at school during the war and who tended to define themselves politically in more abstract terms than the wartime generation had done. Too young to serve in the armed forces, this group had nevertheless indirectly experienced many of war's effects and had reached adulthood just as the Cold War came to dominate global politics. They were interested in the aesthetics of non-Hollywood cinema and in its potential to open up ways of discovering and interpreting the outside world. Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* was their bible and anyone with a subscription to *Sight and Sound* or *Variety* magazines was welcomed with open arms. With overseas travel beyond the means of all but a few, this generation looked to the arts, specifically the youthful and still developing art of film, for inspiration and enlightenment.[33]

All these groups, as well as many from other film societies, community groups and individuals with a strong interest in cinema, felt they had a stake in the development and successful operation of a film Festival for Sydney. Some were motivated by self interest, some by an apolitical curiosity which can be loosely aligned with a philosophy of liberal humanism. While the Sydney University Film Group concentrated on exploring the artistic and cultural aspects of cinema, its near namesake the Sydney University Film Society was interested solely in the technicalities of film presentation. This group had a film exhibition licence and showed commercial features in the university's Union Hall at lunchtime. So incidental was their interest in film itself that projectionists frequently played around with the projection, dropped reels or changed screening order just for the

[32] See, for example, Anderson, Cullum and Lycos (eds), 1982

[33] It would be interesting to trace connections between the Andersonian *Freethought* movement and the interest in cinema at Sydney University, especially the model of engagement practised by the SUFG

fun of it.[34] In 1954, one of these cowboy projectionists, Anton Crouch, was an eighteen year old student of science and engineering. That year Crouch would be persuaded to help out at the first Sydney Film Festival. As it happened, he was the projectionist for the first screening of the first Festival film, *Kingdom of the Waters*. It took a few years but eventually Crouch fell in love with the alternative cinema he saw at the Festival. He is still a member of the SFF today.

In 1949, Peter Hamilton organised a film Festival at the University of Sydney as part of activities of SUFG.[35] An article in *Film Monthly* reports this event was received with great enthusiasm.[36] It describes people sitting on the floor in the aisles and standing up at the back of the hall. Here was another indication that enthusiasm for film and film culture was spreading. These SUFG Festivals are possibly the earliest film festivals held in Australia. In January 1950 the Federation of NSW Film Societies organised a national convention at "the seaside resort of Newport" during which it formed an Australian Council of Film Societies (ACOFS) to represent film groups in all States.

The national body was intended to provide greater levels of professional support for its members as well as increasing community awareness of film societies and their function but it could also act as an independent importer increasing the range of films available to enthusiasts across the country. The film business was highly regulated and societies could only show films with local distribution rights if they could meet a stringent set of conditions applying to "closed situations".[37] If societies got too close to a film with a commercial licence the distributor immediately responded, in some cases calling in the police to break up gatherings.[38] Individual groups rarely had sufficient funds or resources to secure screening rights or to import films themselves. Council members realised that

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[34] Crouch, CY MLOH 275/20-21
[35] *Film Monthly*, in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p193: Adamson CY MLOH 275/36-38
[36] *Film Monthly,* in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, pp193-4. Article probably written by Judith Adamson
[37] Donaldson, CY MLOH 275/27-31
[38] Donaldson, ibid

an annual film festival would also provide the means for bringing non-commercial films to Australia. When the Council met again at Newport the following January, the Federation of Victorian Film Societies offered to host the 1952 convention and to stage a film festival at the same time.

Olinda 1952

The Film Festival and Convention of Australian Council of Film Societies (ACOFS) were held on Australia Day weekend in 1952 at Olinda, a small town in the Dandenong Ranges near Melbourne. The driving force behind Olinda was the Federation of Victorian Film Societies, especially its President, Frank Nicholls, and Secretary Alfred Heintz. The Federation was an extremely well organised and well respected force within the Victorian film community, including the commercial industry. Also on the organising Committee were Ed Schefferle, Secretary of the Geelong Film Society, and Neil Edwards, CEO of the Victorian Film Centre which was also committed to promoting film culture. Such strong institutional support gave the State of Victoria the edge. Initially the Council planned to hold a festival each year in a different state/territory.[39] Canberra was slated as the next venue but the Victorians had seen an opportunity to create a film festival specifically for Melbourne and to keep it there. As it turned out, Olinda became, in Judith Adamson's words, "the only genuine Australian film festival there has ever been"[40] but the idea of a truly national film festival lingered on for several years and came to have a detrimental effect on the establishment of the Sydney Film Festival.

ACOFS expected around eighty people to attend the event. More than 600 turned up. Response was so great that the little town soon filled up, its guesthouses, restaurants and screening venues jammed to capacity and beyond. To help alleviate the crush, an

[39] Manzie in Bertrand (Ed), op cit, p196
[40] Adamson, CY MLOH 275/36-38

outdoor theatre was erected among the gum trees to take advantage of the "warm" summer nights. Ian McPherson, then President of the SUFG, wrote a note in pencil on his program: "blankets necessary, very cold night air even in January"[41] No-one had imagined this level of interest.

Who went to Olinda and what did they see there? Frank Doherty, writing in *The Argus*, noted that the audience was of two kinds - the film society enthusiast who could recite cast crew and history of every film, and the casual visitor who came to relax and be entertained. The former spent the weekend in a state of excited elation, "racing from one hall to another, devouring as many films as possible and heatedly discussing them with anyone who cared to listen" while the latter viewed selectively and spent the time between films drinking beer - somewhat bemused but still pleased with the occasion.[42] The program offered something for both types.

There were programs of scientific, religious and experimental films; a number of DOI documentaries, including the newly completed *Mike and Stefani* (R. Maslyn Williams); Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* was scheduled but didn't get there in time and was replaced by Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* and Eisenstein's *Earth*. Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* was one of the shorts on offer. Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* was a highlight while *The Lavender Hill Mob* was the crowd pleaser.

The outstanding success of Olinda both astonished and inspired film enthusiasts to believe a regular festival was more than possible. Almost everyone who would be part of the organising Committee for the first Sydney Film Festival was there. Alan Stout and Malcolm Otton contributed, as did Sydney independent filmmaker John Kingsford Smith. Stanley Hawes and John Heyer joined cinematographer Geoffrey Thompson to discuss the craft of filmmaking itself. Judith Adamson, by this stage involved with both the

[41] McPherson, Personal Papers
[42] Doherty, 1952, p2

Sydney Film Society and the Sydney University Film Group, organised an exhibition of film stills. Ian McPherson was there with his good friend David Donaldson, both representing the SUFG. The success of the SUFG Festivals and of Olinda encouraged them to believe it was possible in Sydney too. They were once again motivated after seeing Melbourne take the lead in 1953.

It is worth noting the aims and organisation of the Olinda Festival because it is quite clearly the model the SFF Committee aspired to follow. The Festival program features a quote from John Grierson: "It is a high moment for a few brave spirits…" and there is no doubt that these people saw themselves as pioneers of cultural change. As an ACOFS event, Olinda reflected the range and variety of film societies operating nationally – sponsoring organisations included the Australian Religious Film Society, the Victorian Amateur Cine Society and the Olinda Film Society itself, as well as the larger film bodies. Sydney too would adopt this diversity of interest groups. According to its program notes, the Festival aspired:

> To bring together Australian film enthusiasts so that they may see films which would not otherwise be available and to encourage these film enthusiasts to talk films, think films, and exchange views to their mutual advantage

and

> To enable people to hear words of wisdom from the acknowledged experts and leaders of the film movement. [43]

A number of forums were held to discuss aspects of film culture. One was concerned with the role of censorship which indicates that freedom of expression was already an

[43] Olinda Film Festival Program Catalogue, pp2-3

issue amongst film societies. Another, entitled “Film and Society” was led by Alan Stout and his introduction gives some insight into the nature of his interest in cinema. He asks:

> … how far does the cinema determine our sense of values, the kind of life we think worth living, the sort of person we want to be, the conception we have of right and wrong? [44]

He observes that cinema is both big business and one of the most powerful influences on character and outlook the world has ever known and he laments the failure of the film industry to see cinema as anything other than box office takings. Stout brought these intellectual concerns to his presidency of the SFF, shaping its direction and emphasis in the early years.

From Concept to Reality

David Donaldson has described Olinda as a “brilliant coruscation”.[45] It is an ideal description - Olinda provided the spark that would get Melbourne and Sydney firing. John Kingsford Smith kept talking up the idea – an “Olinda” for Sydney - at FUA meetings, as did Terry Boylan. Boylan was a camera technician who owned a shop in Oxford Street. He was a member of the Independent Film Group, the right-wing breakaway from SFS formed by Neil Gunther, a Vice-President of FUA and an amateur film enthusiast. Alan Stout, wearing his Chairman of the NSW Film Council hat, was busy garnering support, as were Hawes and Heyer. Gunther, as FUA secretary, was also actively promoting the idea.[46] Another central figure was Ron O’Brien, Vice-

[44] ibid, p9
[45] Donaldson, 2002
[46] Barr, MLOH 275/61-63, p7; Donaldson CY MLOH 275/27-31

President of the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations which ran educational film evenings at school halls.[47] In September 1953, O'Brien wrote to Keven Barr:

> It has been decided to hold a film Festival in 1954, tentatively in the month of June. This decision was reached at a preliminary and informal meeting at which representatives of the following bodies were present. The FUA, AACS, *Film Weekly*, IFG, Kingcroft Productions, SSFS, and SUFG. [48]

On 13 October 1953 the FUA held an inaugural meeting at the offices of the Canadian Film Board in Elizabeth Street to form a Sydney Film Festival Committee.[49] From the FUA Committee came Boylan, Kingsford Smith, Keven Barr, Tommy Tomlinson and Gunther. Stout was elected Chairman with Joseph Lonsdale Secretary. George Wheen, Treasurer for FUA, took up the same role on the new Committee. Frank Bellingham, President of the Australian Federation of Amateur Cine Societies came on board as did David Donaldson. Bob Connell, who ran the Sydney Cinema Group, volunteered too. Connell worked as a graphic artist in advertising and his design skills can be seen in early Festival programs. Anthony Michaelis and independent film producer Mervyn Scales, from Sydney Scientific Film Society joined along with Heyer, Otton and DOI chief Hawes.[50] So did a young Allan Ashbolt, then librarian at the NSW Film Council, and Hans Bandler, a Viennese immigrant who had arrived in Australia in 1939. Bandler took to Australia straight away. As an outsider, he was aware of the unique nature of Australian society and culture and wanted very much to see his newly adopted country maintain and develop its own voice. If cinema could be expanded to include locally made features as well as European films, there may be a chance, he believed, to counter what

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[47] Donaldson, email to author, 20/01/04
[48] Barr CY MLOH 275/61-63
[49] Gillan, 1993, p3
[50] Lonsdale, MLOH 275/14-17, p16

he saw as the invasive nature of Hollywood and American cultural dominance.[51] Another extremely important and influential member was Josephine O'Neill, film critic for *The Telegraph,* who had an extensive knowledge of film and was a great supporter. Through her professional contacts she was able to promote the SFF beyond the film society circuit. Her presence, along with Peter Morrison, from *Film Weekly*, ensured the Committee had a connection to mainstream media and trade publications.

A surprising thing about this Committee is its inclusiveness. These people represent an extraordinary range in terms of political affiliation, age, background and relationship to cinema. Stout was the mediating agent keeping this broad church of strange bedfellows together. A "small man, filled with energy and sharp as a tack",[52] Stout is a perfect example of what Moran calls "Australia's first film intellectuals".[53] As Cunningham and Routt observe, Stout was:

> … perhaps the first intellectual in a tertiary institution in Australia to espouse the cause of film art, and the effect of the cachet of respectability his advocacy bestowed simply cannot be imagined today. [54]

Stout's endorsement of the SFF meant many in official positions, such as NSW Film Council Secretary Joseph Lonsdale, felt confident about lending support to the venture.[55] Stout's influence dominated the fledgling Festival and was possibly crucial to its survival. Stout was a "disciple of Grierson"[56] and his attempts to uphold Griersonian principles of film production had led to his forced removal from the Australian National Film Board in

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[51] Bandler, CY MLOH 275/18-19
[52] Wishart, Interview with author, 25/02/04
[53] Quoted in Cunningham & Routt in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p183
[54] Cunningham & Routt, ibid
[55] Lonsdale, CY MLOH 275/14-17
[56] Lonsdale, MLOH 275/14-17, p16

1947.[57] David Donaldson describes him as a "public intellectual" who disliked political excess of any kind.[58] Stout had kept away from involvement with the FUA because of political struggles taking place within that organisation. Yet here is Alan Stout, in 1953, chairing a Committee which is as representative of the political spectrum as it is possible to get.

The SFF Committee met at John Heyer's office in the Shell building. Each Committee member put in _1 to cover postage for a mail-out to interested parties. Kingsford Smith's company Kingcroft Productions, donated _25 and the Rural Bank, one of Kingcroft's clients, agreed to buy _25 worth of seats in advance through their PR officer Noel Griffiths, who was a great supporter of the idea.[59] With _50 in the kitty, the Committee began looking for an operational base. Lonsdale offered space at the Film Council which was ideal. The staff was enthusiastic and the Council already had film storage and viewing facilities with technicians to operate the equipment on a volunteer basis. It was also a film library and major source of material.

The next big question was where and how would the Festival be staged. With Olinda in mind, the Committee opted for a venue with a number of screening rooms in as compact a location as possible. With commercial theatres out of the equation because of cost, the Committee "kicked around the idea of using either the buildings at the Showground or at the university".[60] At this point Alan Stout made a move that would determine the shape of the Festival for the next decade. He approached the university Vice-Chancellor, Professor Stephen Roberts, who agreed to support the event and give it a home. The June holiday weekend was chosen because it was traditionally a quiet time of year with

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[57] Cunningham & Routt suggest that Stout's removal from the Australian National Film Board "signalled the end of whatever federal government commitment there had been to a "hands off" Grierson policy toward government film production." (in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p183)
[58] Donaldson, Email to author, 9/12/03
[59] Lonsdale, CY MLOH 275/14-17
[60] Gillan, op cit, p3

few other events to distract and because a holiday weekend meant volunteers would be available to help out.[61] The SFF now had a base, a little working capital and a screening venue. It needed to decide on a director.

By 1953, Peter Hamilton's SUFG Film Festival initiative had settled into an annual event. Donaldson and McPherson had gained experience in film selection and event organisation and they were steadily building up a network of film industry contacts around town. Donaldson describes himself as one who caught the "organiser bug" and found the SUFG a good place to practise his skills.[62] Donaldson seemed a natural choice to direct the first Sydney Film Festival and he was invited to take up the position by Alan Stout. The hours would be long and the pay ridiculously inadequate but he accepted. Allan Ashbolt remembers him as:

> … the activating spirit of the Festival. He seemed to me to be the central figure in the concept and then later in the organisation … I just accepted him as he was, knowledgeable, effective as an organiser, unpretentious, very thorough in his administration, his control of affairs. He was a likeable man.[63]

Donaldson was respected and well-liked, certainly the most effective of the directors before Klava and his influence cannot be underestimated but the Committee did not always back him as it should have and he was hampered by lack of time, resources and money.

The First Festival

It is the purpose of a film Festival to bring together in common experience those whose interest in the cinema goes beyond mere entertainment (not that entertainment is forgotten!). Such an

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[61] Lonsdale, CY MLOH 275/14-17
[62] Donaldson, CY MLOH 275/27-31
[63] Ashbolt, MLOH 275/11-13, p25

occasion is a reminder and a witness that both in content and form, the film can be an art worthy of serious study and criticism. With this in mind, we have collected for you films which we believe to have some special distinction, to be out of the common run.
Professor A. K. Stout [64]

Organisation for the first Festival involved everyone hands on; Keven Barr, for example, recalls that he wrote some program notes, set up screens with Alan Stout, looked after the ushers, arranged for torches (Eveready came through with these as a sponsorship deal), and served on the Film Selection Sub-Committee. Once the Festival got underway he handled a bit of projection and spent hours driving around town in his own car collecting and delivering films. Barr was a school teacher and he occasionally commandeered the services of some young pupil to come with him and help load films.[65] As many as a dozen people at a time were on call to transport films here and there using their own cars.[66] When he wasn't looking for features, Donaldson was busy keeping up contact with ticket sales venues, writing program notes, arranging the screening timetable, liaising with theatre staff, assisting the publicity Committee and helping to promote the Festival wherever and whenever opportunity arose.

It was expected the bulk of ticket buyers would come from the existing film society circuit and the Committee utilized the mailing lists which connections to the film societies made possible. The FUA had between 300 and 350 member organisations all of which received a mail-out leaflet about the Festival. The registered membership of the NSW Film Council provided another 2000 names and addresses. But to survive long term the Festival would have to attract strong support from the wider community. Energy and resources focussed on maximizing publicity – with success. All 1200 tickets printed sold out.

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[64] Stout, Chairman, SFF, Program Catalogue Introduction, 1954
[65] Barr, CY MLOH 275/61-63
[66] Gillan, op cit, p5

From the beginning, publicity was given importance. In the 1950s, the Festival had news value; it was something different and special. Lynn Brown at the *Sydney Morning Herald* supported it as did O'Neill, who presented it as a unique opportunity for film buffs to see classics and new international films.[67] The involvement of these publications helped give SFF a public profile and some sort of cultural legitimacy. Interestingly, many popular women's magazines also wrote about the Festival, reflecting the notion of the Festival as a middle class interest.[68]

The first Sydney Film Festival was a small but somewhat chaotic affair. There were a number of shorts, documentaries and experimental works but only nine feature films in all. The British Film Institute loaned three great classics: Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* which had failed to materialise at Olinda and now put in an appearance, along with Buster Keaton's *The General* and Rene Clair's *Sous les Toits de Paris*. New features included Jacques Tati's *Jour de Fête* lent by Woodrow Distribution in Melbourne, and Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero*, lent to the Festival by local company Independent Film Distributors.[69]

Among the experimental works was Len Lye's *Colour Box*. The animated films *On Closer Inspection* and *Animated Genesis,* by British artists Joan and Peter Foldes were introduced by Peter Foldes who was in Sydney at the time. Documentaries included *World Without End* by Paul Rotha and Basil Wright, and *Grass*, a Schoedsack and Cooper film inspired by Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, Pare Lorentz's 1936 classic *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, and the documentary *Kingdom of the Waters*. Other documentary material which helped fill in the gaps was supplied by the United Nations which produced worthy but sometimes rather dull films usually accompanied by a very

[67] Lonsdale CY MLOH 275/14-17
[68] SFF Minutes, 3/4/1962, SFF Records 1952-1991, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 5596
[69] Donaldson, CY MLOH 275/27-31

slick press kit.[70] The cover shot for the Festival program is from the UN film *Portrait of Maria*, selected because the features arrived without any publicity material at all.[71] As at Olinda, there were supporting exhibitions of stills. “Sixty Years of the Best Motion Pictures” and “Secrets of the Dream Factories” both came from the Taussig Stills Collection held at the National Library in Canberra. The SFF engaged with other arts only in a very limited way. The early Festivals held exhibitions of posters or other film-related ephemera at public venues from time to time, often quite successfully. But there was no interchange with live theatre or music other than a pianist to accompany silent films.

The Sydney University venue gave the event an informal, undergraduate feel and an air of excitement. Film enthusiasts rushed from screening to screening, program notes in hand. A few hardy individuals sat on rugs scattered about the pristine university lawns eating picnic lunches. Young married couples shared childminding – while one parent attended a screening the other kept the children amused, then they swapped over for the next screening. This way they could both get to see and discuss the films.

Again, the idea of breaking new frontiers is evident. In his introduction, Stout presents the Festival as an intellectual and cultural event. He describes the occasion as pioneering, warning that while mistakes and upsets would be inevitable a spirit of goodwill should prevail. For some, the first Festival is remembered as no more than an extended film society gathering but others, including Barr, Heyer and Bandler, knew something more was happening. Allan Ashbolt captures it:

> There had always been amongst the intellectuals this slight distaste for films. There was a snobbery that surrounded them, that film was an ephemeral medium, an entertainment medium, it was not as worthy as theatre, and not as important as reading a book. This was the attitude that

[70] Donaldson, Email to author, 18/7/04
[71] Donaldson, ibid

the film festivals here and in Melbourne simply had to try and change. Which they did eventually, simply by being there, by bringing films in, by showing films, the masterpieces of films, the best of the new films. People were given the opportunity to understand how film had developed in its own way, and how it made, as it were, its own rules and standards. [72]

This is a lengthy quote but it encapsulates one of the crucial forces which drove enthusiasts to keep the festivals alive – their belief in film as a form of artistic expression. They wanted the commercial film industry to recognise cinema of this kind, to make venues available for screening non-Hollywood films, and they wanted to encourage people to come along with them on the journey of discovery they were making.

The Festival Takes Shape: 1955-1958

As in all ventures, there have been teething troubles but I think that we may confidently state now that the Festival has become accepted as an annual event in the cultural life of Sydney.
Frank Bellingham, SFF President, 1958 [73]

By the time the fifth Sydney Film Festival was held in October 1958, the event had evolved from a tentative experiment to an established fact.[74] It developed an administrative structure, established a programming format, greatly increased the range and number of films on offer, and took its first halting steps toward creating a cohesive identity and philosophy for itself. Certainly there were problems but, on the whole, the future looked bright.

A selection of amateur, experimental, and scientific films was again offered in 1955. Screening venues expanded to include the university's Great Hall. Too cavernous for

[72] Gillan, op cit, p4
[73] Bellingham, SFF President, SFF Program Catalogue, 1958
[74] In 1957 the Festival moved to October long weekend in the hope that warmer weather and an association with the Waratah Arts Festival might increase audience numbers. They didn't and the Committee opted to return to the mid-winter dates from 1959 on

sound films, it became a useful venue for showing classics from the silent era. Concert pianist Dorothy (Dot) Mendoza was courageous enough to provide a completely improvised accompaniment to Buster Keaton's *The Navigator*. The print had not arrived in time for her to have even one preliminary run through![75] Other features included Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*, De Sica's *Miracle in Milan*, and Jean Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite* but the absolute showstopper for 1955 was to be a film which no-one knew a thing about.

In the post-war years, Japan had begun exporting films to the West. Cinema was to be "Japan's cultural emissary" helping to restore the defeated nation to a place on the world stage. One of its early exports, Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, made a big impact in Europe, winning the Golden Lion at Venice in 1951.[76] Sydney independent distributor Natan Scheinwald had one of these Japanese productions come his way and he offered it to the Festival. The film was Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell*. Donaldson had never heard of Kurosawa, let alone Kinugasa but he was in desperate need of feature films and this one fulfilled the essential criteria of being in the country and being playable.[77] *Gate of Hell* screened in the Teachers' College Theatre. For many there, including Anton Crouch, it became an unforgettable experience:

> People were quite unprepared for Japanese movies, and the fact that it challenged Hollywood standards of excellence really impressed people enormously. People talked about *Gate of Hell* for years afterwards. [78]

Gate of Hell won the Grand Prize at Cannes in 1954 and an Oscar the following year.[79] The impact of this film resonates still. It was one of a small number chosen for a "Best of the Festival" retrospective screened at the fiftieth Sydney Film Festival in 2003.

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[75] Donaldson, CY MLOH 275/27-31
[76] Anderson & Richie, 1982, p227
[77] Donaldson, CY MLOH 275/27-31
[78] Gillan, op cit, p9

In 1956, Asian cinema was represented by a special program of short films from the region and by Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*. If the latter failed to raise the same levels of enthusiasm as *Gate of Hell* it probably had more to do with projection problems than with the film itself. The cans arrived unnumbered and labelled in Japanese. Keven Troy recalls that, "Judging from the conversations afterwards I don't think the film reels were shown in the same order at any two screenings." [80]

Projection was one of the Festival's biggest problems in these early years but there's a general sense of enthusiastic blundering which makes anecdotes of the time oddly endearing. At one evening screening of *Seven Samurai*, Keven Barr made the decision to drop a couple of reels out altogether so they could finish before public transport stopped at midnight and stranded the audience in the city centre. His sleight of hand did not go unnoticed.

Kurosawa's film adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood*, screened in 1959. The exotic nature of Japanese period films had great audience appeal and from this point on, the Festival screened a steady stream of Japanese features. At about the same time, the films of Satyajit Ray began appearing and were very positively received, perhaps in part because of the colonial connection but more likely because they slotted very comfortably into a liberal humanist philosophy. In recent years, one of the most successful national cinemas on the festival circuit has been that of Iran. Iranian films chosen for festivals are aesthetically innovative and lyrical in style with a strong humanist ideology evident in them, their political messages softened by overt artistry and avoidance of violence. Yet, because they originate from a nation demonised in the political rhetoric of the West, their selection and the serious regard given them constitutes, in a small and very safe way, an act of resistance to the political status quo. Russian, Japanese, Indian, and other

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[79] Anderson & Richie, 1982, p233
[80] Gillan, op cit, p5

humanist flavoured art films of the 1950s and 1960s served much the same purpose. At the SFF as elsewhere, such films appealed to both selectors and audiences. Films which demonstrated ideological or aesthetic extremes tended to alienate so that a natural watermark developed with filmmakers like Eisenstein and Lorentz just above but Cecil Holmes, for example, just below. Such an argument is much more easily applied to festivals of a more recent period which have a far, far greater cinematic pool in which to fish. Until the 1970s at the earliest, the SFF had access to too small a range of material for any really meaningful assessment of selection policies to apply other than that of expediency.

While the Festival was able to access Asian films screened at the major European Festivals, actually establishing the connections necessary to secure them directly was hugely difficult. A sub-committee was formed to find more films and establish direct sources where possible. Its convenor, Mervyn Scales, through an involvement with UNESCO, was able to travel in Asia and keep an eye out for films of interest. He also connected the Festival with Asian organisations in Sydney such as the Asian Australian Society.[81] Any opportunity to discover more films from the region was followed up. [82]

Feature films from India and Japan appear regularly in Festival programs from 1955 on and there is a small but steady trickle of documentaries and shorts from South East Asia and the Pacific.

All of this was done in a spirit of good will but with a certain degree of cultural blindness. Those involved with the SFF had little knowledge of, for example, Japanese film production and history; could not have been aware that Kinugasa had made over a hundred films before *Gate of Hell* and had a reputation as a master of Expressionism

[81] SFF Minutes 22/1/59: 7/4/59: 1/12/59
[82] SFF Minutes 14/2/61: 4/4/61: 20/11/61:6/2/62:15/5/62 for example

and the avant garde.[83] Nor was anyone likely to rationalize how a nation which gave the world *The Harp of Burma* could also produce *Godzilla*. The SFF did attract a number of immigrants but these were predominantly British and European. To my knowledge, not one Australian of Asian origin served on any SFF Committee during the period of this study.

While Donaldson and many others embraced exploration of our northern near neighbours, for some on the Festival's organising Committee, the countries of Asia beyond Japan remained outside and apart, accessible only via the still dominant colonial paradigm. There is a subtle but distinct difference in the Festival's approach to Asia when compared to Europe - Asian films should involve less cost, Asian guests should come to the Festival at their own expense and similar attitudes prevailed.[84] Lack of familiarity with Asian cultures dictated the limitations of communication and understanding. In 1963, Sydney and Melbourne shared in bringing out an international guest from the Japan Film Council but the SFF seems to have benefited little from her visit. Similarly, attempts to negotiate for films and guests through Asian government channels usually came to nothing.[85]

One interesting aspect of the Festival's engagement with Asia is the fudging and blurring, over time, of what is Asian and what is not. In these early years material could originate from the Malay Film Unit, the BBC or an American commercial production company and still be gathered under a collective Asian category as long as the region featured in the content.[86] Slowly, over a period of decades, colonial productions faded away and individual Asian countries were recognised as legitimate originators of their own cinematic arts and culture.

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[83] Richie, 2001, p86
[84] SFF Minutes 5/1/60
[85] SFF Director's Report 1963: SFF Minutes 7/4/59
[86] For example SFF Program Catalogue 1956

The SFF's engagement with the cinema of Asia has waxed and waned over time but in essence, it has remained much at the levels established in the 1950s, despite our geographical proximity to the region, increased cultural exchange in the arts and high levels of Asian migration.

Is it Here? Does it Look like Arriving?

One would read in *Sight and Sound* or whatever, reports from Festivals, and one would think that a certain film might be the kind of film for our Festival. One would go to whomever in Australia seemed likely to be the agent for that sort of film. We didn't get to see the film – we had only read something about it, and we were working in the dark … As to how [films] were selected, the primary criterion really was, were they here, or did they look like arriving?
David Donaldson [87]

Expediency was the dominant criterion for SFF programming during the Festival's first few years of operation. With few international contacts of its own, the fledgling organisation was able to secure only a handful of suitable features. The gaps were filled with items from film libraries, borrowings from consulates, the UN and cultural institutions, contributions from Australian producers, and the odd offering from a sympathetic local distributor. In matters of acquisition, Stout deferred to the expertise of people like Heyer, Hawes and Kingsford Smith who had extensive contacts within the film production industry. Hawes' presence ensured the inclusion of CFU productions but the National Film Board and the federal government in general never saw the potential of film festivals as vehicles for promoting their nationalist agendas. The SFF film

[87] Gillan, op cit, p8

selectors bowed to Hawes not through any intervention by government agencies but simply through polite deference. In practical terms, the Festival program was made up of a range of items which reflected the dominant individual interests of the people on the Committee.

The Festival operated through a set of sub-committees – Film Selection; Halls and Grounds; Publicity; Transport; and so on. Everyone was operating on a volunteer basis and levels of knowledge and enthusiasm varied from person to person. The selection of features was entrusted in the main to the Festival Director. He was assisted by Mervyn Scales who had, many years earlier, shared an apartment in New York with the poet and documentary filmmaker Pare Lorentz[88] and had a good knowledge of European and art cinema, and by Bandler, Otton and Hawes, who all had first hand experience of European and British cinema. The Film Selection Sub-Committee assisted with preparing the program and screening schedule and with finding material to support the feature program. Once Donaldson located the features he wanted, he then had to find the right people to negotiate with. Expediency, he recalls, was the key; is a print here? Will one be likely to arrive in time? If it does get here, will it be in any condition to screen? As so often in Australian history, time and distance became major considerations. Here was a small scale festival, held thousands of miles away from Europe in a city few outsiders knew anything much about. Even when contact was made, the difficulties of communication meant negotiations often just petered out before any firm commitments could be made. Until well into the 1960s, both the Sydney and Melbourne Festivals were dominated by the tyranny of distance.

In our collective imagining of the historical period we call “the fifties” we tend to forget the immense difficulties which still hampered travel and communications. In 1954, a flight from Sydney to London took nine days by flying boat and a ticket cost the equivalent of

[88] Donaldson, Email to author, 11/09/03

the average annual salary.[89] Adelaide did not have an airport until 1955. International telephone calls needed to be booked well ahead of time. It was common for a call to take more than an hour to come through and sometimes no connection could be established at all. The situation was exacerbated by the need to operate in different time zones and different languages. Importing films was hampered by bureaucratic red tape. The SFF attempted to minimise these problems in two ways, both of which ultimately presented a new set of difficulties. First it entered into a supply arrangement with the Melbourne Film Festival (MFF) and second, it actively pursued membership of FIAPF.

The Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films (FIAPF) is the regulatory body governing the operations of international film Festivals in their business dealings with the film production industry. Accreditation with FIAPF would greatly broaden the range and number of producers, distributors and film institutions willing to provide material to the Festivals. Both SFF and MFF believed that recognition from FIAPF would solve their film supply problems but the Paris-based organisation was unwilling to sanction either of Australia's fledgling festivals until they had proven themselves as stayers. Even then, it was their policy to endorse only one per country. FIAPF rules were another problem. Festivals were required to abide by such rigid regulations as maximum length of event to be no more than fourteen days; subscription not to exceed 2000 in number; FIAPF films to be screened only once and to be exempt from censorship. To make things more difficult, endorsement was granted on an annual basis only so even if one or other festival did receive it, the whole application process needed to be repeated for the next year with no guarantee of success. Melbourne was the first to gain FIAPF accreditation in 1958.

The relationship with FIAPF would come to dominate policy decisions in both Sydney and Melbourne for the next twenty years. For their first few years of operation, both

[89] QANTAS Airways Archive, www.naa.gov.au/the_collection/transport/air.html

shared resources and titles. John Sumner, the inaugural Director of MFF, was happy with this state of affairs but when Erwin Rado took over in 1957 relations between the two events became more complicated and less balanced. Both festivals shared prints and international guests. SFF still made separate approaches to producers with MFF providing the credentials to help this along. Each director made a few individual choices but the bulk of titles were shared.

MFF was a going concern from the very first, firmly underpinned by film societies, the State Film Centre and other social and cultural institutions in Victoria. This support was matched by the business skills and connections of Erwin Rado. Stout was a down to earth character with no formality about him[90] but he was first and foremost an academic who made the intellectualising of film his priority. The SFF was clear about its objectives and did have a philosophy – to promote good film, to help people in Australia have access to the best films – but it was hampered by lack of a clear *modus operandi*. Somehow the goodwill, energy and enthusiasm could not be harnessed to an efficient or effective management structure.

Both Rado and Stout were knowledgeable and passionate about cinema, hardworking and committed to the advancement of film culture in Australia but where Stout was an "enthusiastic amateur", Rado was "the consummate professional".[91] After arriving in 1955 as an immigrant from Hungary, Rado managed a successful photographic business in Melbourne, developing a network of professional and social contacts around the city which helped him later at MFF. He was charming and attractive, with "a great facility for getting along with people but he could also be arrogant, overbearing, and territorial.[92] Philosophical differences between Rado and Stout about the role of festivals

[90] Lonsdale CY MLOH 275/14-17
[91] Lawson, CY MLOH 275/10
[92] Long & Wishart, CY MLOH 275/54-56: Donaldson CY MLOH 275/27-31: Wishart, Interview with author, 25/02/04

and the manner in which they should be run proved incompatible but because these differences were never really spelled out, there was a degree of tension and ambiguity about the relationship. Because Rado had FIAPF recognition first and because he had the European contacts to bring in the really significant films, he was always in a position of strength relative to Sydney which remained to some extent dependent on his goodwill.

The range of films selected during these years shows the Festival was so far maintaining a broadly inclusive policy despite the view held by some Committee members that it should err on the side of caution and avoid being tainted by association with left-wing films. John Murphy has suggested that the public at the time of the Petrov affair was less concerned about the threat of Communism than is usually supposed[93] but there is little doubt that the political climate deeply affected people. The SFF and film societies were always highly aware of what John Heyer called "our own McCarthyism".[94] The SFF's concerns in this regard were not unfounded. David McKnight has identified the manner in which Cold War cultural battles were fought out "on the terrain of literature, mass media and the arts, including film" with much of the conflict generated from within arts institutions themselves.[95]

The collapse of the FUA indicates how easy it was for organisations to implode in the face of insurmountable ideological differences. The SFF, first under Stout and later Bellingham, was governed by group consensus. Individual beliefs tended to be subjugated in order to achieve some kind of outcome but the membership reflected every political colour in the spectrum. It is, to some degree, astonishing that these differences did not become destructive more often.

There is, I think, a somewhat prosaic reason for this. The logistics of survival – raising revenue, securing films, grappling with projection equipment – tended to push

[93] Murphy, 2000, p131
[94] Gillan, op cit, p9
[95] McKnight, Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture, SFF, 2003

ideological concerns into the background. Sub-Committees could fairly easily avoid the political with the exception of the Film Selection Sub-Committee which, as we've seen, was on the frontline as far as accusations of political bias went. The full Committee met every two months, more frequently in the period leading up to the Festival and the event itself lasted just two weeks. Passions might run hot about particular issues but would more often than not cool again by the next meeting. Sometimes the path of least resistance won the day but there were exceptions. The Festival screened the WWFFU productions *The Hungry Miles* and *Hewers of Coal* after the filmmakers lobbied hard for their inclusion[96] but the Film Selection Sub-Committee got cold feet over Cecil Holmes's feature film *Three in One*.[97] It did program films from the Eastern Bloc and the People's Republic of China whenever it could get them and of course, liaised with cultural representatives of those countries. It was this interaction which probably brought the SFF under increased security surveillance.[98]

It is difficult to know to what degree the Cold War environment determined the nature of the SFF. Like the film societies, it had a freer hand than film institutions more closely allied with government. For example, no WWFFU films were ever bought by the NSW Film Council and few Soviet films either.[99] But the Festival bears out McKnight's views in that the Committee almost always opted for self-regulation in order to avoid conflict. Hans Bandler recalls:

> There were very powerful forces feeling that any going too far to the left was going into dangerous territory. If we were offered films from three East European countries … and we had only two from the United States and Canada, we'd be very, very concerned that this may be interpreted as political bias. [100]

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[96] Lonsdale CY MLOH 275/14-17
[97] Covered in more detail in Chapter 3
[98] McKnight, op cit
[99] Lonsdale, op cit
[100] Bandler, CY MLOH 275/18-19

Joseph Lonsdale has similar recollections:

The Festival was, I would say, conservative. I recall Committee discussions going on about political content. There was the feeling among some people that whatever was shown would identify the Festival as being a supporter of that kind of activity. I think a lot of people were afraid of being branded. [101]

From 1951 on, ASIO kept dossiers on film societies and Festivals as well as on individuals it thought politically suspect. The CFU, despite its conservatism and positivist nationalism, was also considered a security threat. Many people considered security risks by ASIO through their involvement with film societies, the CFU or other suspect organisations were also active in the SFF. There are ASIO files on Alan Stout, John Heyer, Malcolm Otton, Bern Gandy, Stanley Hawes, Hans Bandler, David Donaldson and Allan Ashbolt.[102] There is also documentary evidence that at least one SFF member supplied information to ASIO on Festival activities and personnel.[103]

Despite its fears and concerns, the SFF did program and screen material which made it vulnerable to unwanted government attention and it is interesting to speculate on why this was. It is possible that the humanist philosophy common to most SFF members provided a basis for consensus. David McKnight and others have speculated that support of Soviet cinema was less about the films themselves than about a desire to oppose "the bigger cultural problem of insularity and smug self satisfaction."[104] This is almost certainly the case but the idea of a culture-led resistance to Australia's isolationist attitudes extends beyond politics into the arena of social relations and national identity.

[101] Lonsdale, ibid: Gillan, op cit, p9
[102] McKnight, op cit
[103] McKnight, ibid
[104] McKnight, ibid

Here to Stay

Each succeeding year, subscribers supported the Festival in numbers sufficient to make the event financially viable. It was always tight but the days of the Director and Committee members subsidizing cash flow from their own pockets, as Donaldson and others had done in 1954 and 1955, were fortunately gone. Preparations got underway for the 1958 Festival with a kitty of _70 at hand in the bank and the sale of 1,350 subscription tickets was sufficient to ensure if not a huge profit, then more than a break-even figure for the year. Those involved on the organising Committee could feel confident they were providing a much needed and appreciated service to the film community of Sydney.

For the moment, appreciation was the only remuneration Committee members were likely to get. In the absence of corporate or government sponsorship, mounting each Festival was heavily dependent on the contribution of unpaid volunteers. By 1957, the SFF Committee had settled into a workable administrative and operational format - a President, three Vice-Presidents, a Secretary and a Treasurer as well as seventeen members making up four sub-committees – Film, Technical, Exhibition, and Halls & Grounds. It's a diverse group with representatives from film production (DOI, commercial sector and amateur enthusiasts), journalism, film societies and government institutions. Frank Bellingham took over as President in 1956 but Alan Stout remained active on the Committee, continuing to lend his influence with the university. These older establishment figures were joined by many young people either still at university or just starting careers, among them Allan Ashbolt, Sylvia Lawson, Ian McPherson and Valwyn Wishart.

Such a wide range of people from a variety of backgrounds – male and female, some young, some older - gave the Committee vibrancy and versatility but there was a

downside. With so many separate interest groups involved, it was not always easy to create a sense of common purpose and identity. There was enthusiasm in spades, but the SFF lacked what its Melbourne counterpart so conspicuously had – a forceful, experienced figure, ably supported with resources and adequate income, behind whom these disparate elements could find cohesion.

Donaldson was overworked, underpaid and under resourced. Up to 1957, the last year of his Directorship, he remained a part-time employee assisted by an office administrator, also part-time, who doubled as publicist in the weeks leading up to the Festival itself. Both operated out of an office at 49 Castlereagh Street made available to them by Watson's Bay Cinema manager Tom Deamer. While this was a big improvement on 1954, when Donaldson had run the Festival from a room in his house, relying on a network of volunteers to deal with typing his letters and addressing mail-outs, it was far short of satisfactory. Preview and film storage facilities had to be begged or borrowed each year. The growing archive of Festival records and documents was stored in cartons and hauled from place to place as needed. The Festival could not afford its own typewriter.

There was expansion in the Festival's schedule of films as well. Each succeeding year, the selection became more considered, the range greater. The 1956 program lists a total of forty-five films in its thirty-two pages. There is a steady increase in the number of contemporary feature films, more diversity in the documentaries and in the short films, more talks. This meant ever-increasing demands on the university's theatres and halls.

Sydney University, with its gothic buildings, rolling lawns, and quiet quadrangles modelled on Oxbridge lines was, in the 1940s and 1950s, an institution of the privileged. As a venue for a film festival it had both advantages and disadvantages but, over time, the latter began to vastly outweigh the former. Association with the university was a double edged sword. The involvement of academia gave the Festival stature, credibility,

kudos, but it also gave it an air of stuffiness, even a little pomposity. Faculty staff would attend opening night parties in full academic regalia – caps and gowns. If not actually a private space, the university was certainly less than a public one. And while it offered an approximation of the facilities needed for a festival (multiple screening venues, canteen, recreational areas) these things were so specific to, and associated with, university life that they came to shape and dominate the event in ways which bound it to a kind of well-meaning but rather amateurish and poorly organised mode of operation. While students didn't mind the draughty halls, seeing it all as part of the undergraduate experience, the paying audience became increasingly less tolerant, particularly once ticket prices began to increase. Subscribers began to want a greater sense of professionalism about the organisation of the event, including a commercial standard of presentation. The burden on, and frustration of, the Technical Sub-Committee is reflected in its annual reports which track the same course year in, year out – a miniscule budget, big capital outlay on much needed projection equipment, regular malfunctions of old equipment and lots of operator error. Lack of adequate heating was a constant complaint.

In an effort to avoid winter weather the Festival moved to the October Labour day weekend for 1957 and 1958 but the change failed to draw audiences and the timing was switched back to June for 1959. Despite these difficulties, the Festival felt some confidence about the future. On 29 May 1958 the Sydney Film Festival was registered as a company limited by guarantee.[105] The same year it was able to invite its first international guest, film writer and theorist Paul Rotha. The Sydney Film Festival was no longer a hopeful experiment: it had arrived: a solid fixture of the Sydney cultural calendar. Within a few months of that confident projection, the Festival would face collapse.

[105] Despite incorporation, the SFF continued to identify its organising body as a Committee with a President and Vice-President's positions. Even after it adopted a Board structure it continued to use the term "President" rather than "Chairman" and does so still today

From Crisis to Cohesion

The years 1958 to 1961 were touch and go for the Festival – marked by change of director each year, complications in relations between Sydney and its counterpart Festival in Melbourne, and a crisis of identity and direction.

Accessing a sufficient number of quality features to fill their Festival programs remained a problem. When MFF received FIAPF accreditation in 1958 Rado put forward a proposal to tour the films imported for Melbourne to Sydney and to the newer festivals in Canberra and Adelaide the following year. In order to facilitate this, the Australian Film Institute was established with Rado appointed its first Director. Representatives from each of the four festivals signed an agreement to operate as autonomous divisions of the "Australian Film Festival 1959". The AFI would negotiate for films on behalf of each division and, in return, each festival would make contributing payments to the AFI. To the SFF the proposal seemed like a godsend. The nationwide event would have FIAPF recognition, the feature films would start flowing, the burden of expenses would be reduced and the budget as per the agreement looked manageable. Inevitably, the SFF committed itself to the project wholeheartedly[106]. There was a catch however. FIAPF endorsement meant a commitment to those onerous FIAPF regulations designed to protect the interests of the commercial film industry as well as the festivals. In the federation's eyes, a film festival travelling to four cities was in effect a commercial film distribution operation. Such a concept could not have FIAPF backing. Rado continued to negotiate in the hope he may gain concessions and, with communications slow and

[106] There are records of SFF Committee meetings from the time of the Festival's incorporation in May 1958 and the "Australian Film Festival" is on the agenda for every one of them until the issue is finally resolved in October of 1959

difficult, several months passed without a resolution.[107] By that stage, Sydney had become aware of several other difficulties in its association with the AFI.

The AFI was structured so that each Festival contributed two representatives to the Board of Governors but, with Rado actually operating as Director of both MFF and of the AFI, it soon became clear that Melbourne had the controlling hand. At the Institute's first meeting Alan Stout and Bern Gandy, representing the SFF, protested against this imbalance, and against the extremely generous terms of Rado's employment contract – a five-year term with option to renew.[108]

In 1959, FIAPF again endorsed the MFF and, with the travelling festival concept looking shaky, Rado concentrated on securing films for his own Festival while still, in his role as AFI Director, putting heavy-handed pressure on Sydney about its own programming.[109] Linked as it was to the MFF/AFI juggernaut, the SFF began to find mud from Rado's many disagreements with the commercial distribution industry, with the Chief Censor's office and with just about everyone else firmly sticking to it too. As if this wasn't enough, Sydney had a number of internal problems to contend with that year.

The SFF Committee was enthusiastic, hardworking and committed but it had some major weaknesses, the biggest of which was its failure to understand the importance of the role of the Director. The job was seen as primarily one of administrator with film selection tacked on. The raison d'etre for the event was discovering the cinema of the world but, oddly, the person charged with actually finding and accessing this cinema was given little status or autonomy of vision. Despite (or perhaps because of) the example of Erwin Rado, Sydney persisted in selecting its directors on the basis of their

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[107] A truly national film festival was never realistically achievable. The time frames and distances involved would make it unwieldy and inordinately expensive. FIAPF's decision probably benefited local festivals in the long run. By 1960, both SFF and MFF had FIAPF endorsement and both found the benefits of membership to be balanced and sometimes outweighed by the disadvantages

[108] SFF Minutes, 9/12/1958

[109] SFF Minutes, 3/2/1959

organisational skills. There is even a sense that, with Rado able to supply the necessary expertise and advice about features, the SFF Director need only liaise with him for the big pictures and be on hand to arrange the DOI, amateur and other short film programs. Donaldson had understood the potential of the director's role but was unable to develop it significantly during his period in the job. After four years of extremely hard work in difficult conditions, he resigned the directorship but remained a member of the Film Sub-Committee.

Valwyn Wishart took over as Director for 1958. Wishart was originally from Melbourne, where she had been a subscriber to MFF. Her background was in journalism and public relations and she was skilled in marketing and event organisation. Wishart and Donaldson formed a productive partnership – he acted as film advisor, she handled administration and publicity.[110] Though audience numbers were down, Wishart returned the biggest ever profit to the Festival coffers.[111] She also introduced a number of initiatives which brought the Festival some way toward a professional, corporate style of operation. At the end of 1958, Wishart returned to Melbourne. Her Director's Report proposed an operational structure which, had it been adopted, would have put the Festival on a firm creative and managerial footing but the SFF Committee continued blind to the need for a strong Director with creative as well as housekeeping skills.

The Festival appointed Garth Hay to replace Wishart but for reasons which remain unclear, he proved "unable to fulfil his duties as Director" and, with less than three months to go before the Festival's 1959 starting dates, Hay was sacked.[112] Bob Connell, convenor of the Film Sub-Committee, and Sylvia Lawson stepped into the breach.

[110] Long & Wishart, CY MLOH 275/54-56
[111] SFF Director's Report, 1958
[112] SFF Minutes 9/12/1958, 7/4/1959

Connell too proved less than effective as a Director[113] and, with only weeks to go, a desperate Lawson flew to Melbourne where Erwin Rado helped her cobble together a program more or less under the AFF umbrella. Lawson believes:

> The 1959 Sydney Film Festival was only possible because of Erwin Rado's help supplying films. If the Melbourne Film Festival hadn't got the films in, there wouldn't have been a Sydney Film Festival. There was no lead time. It was pretty desperate."[114]

The 1959 SFF went ahead but it was a near thing and the Committee had to face the fact that its dreams of a single national festival were never going to materialise. Nor could it continue to rely on Rado's experience and expertise in the international arena. Understanding they must go it alone, Donaldson proposed SFF develop a regional programming policy, concentrating on Asian and South American films which were all outside FIAPF jurisdiction.[115] This was forward thinking and imaginative but didn't appeal to the Committee, possibly because there were already two Asian Festivals for Sydney in the planning pipeline – Asian Students' Association & Asia-Australia Association – both for 1960.[116] The existence of these other events could suggest a greater interest in the region than is usually assumed but whatever the case, the SFF pursued its increasingly desperate courting of FIAPF.

Lawson was offered the Director position for 1960 but she did not see her career developing in that direction. She saw herself as a writer and preferred the individuality and independence that role afforded her. She was never really comfortable with

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[113] SFF Minutes 7/9/1959 say Connell's services were terminated "because of certain unsatisfactory aspects of his work". He was also asked to resign his SFF membership
[114] Lawson, CY MLOH 275/10
[115] SFF Minutes, 3/11/1959
[116] ibid

Committees.[117] In 1960, Lawson began reviewing films for *Nation* a publication she had helped set up in 1957. She believes her most significant contribution to the SFF was as a film reviewer and critic throughout the 1960s. Lawson dropped out of direct involvement with the SFF in 1961. Lois Hunter took on the thankless job for 1960. Malcolm Otton recalls she:

> … worked like a tiger and had a good team as well as having a house which was nice and central for an office and for getting films to and fro. [118]

Hunter was a New Zealander, something of a roaming spirit who made her living as a freelance writer.[119] She had some knowledge of film and a good deal of enthusiasm. She had a good relationship with local independent distributors like Kapferer, Blake and Scheinwald as well as with the trade. The SFF was able to show the 1959 American version of *Crime and Punishment* that year through Hunter's contacts at Paramount Pictures.[120] Despite her lack of experience she learned fast and had natural aptitude but, like Wishart and Lawson before her, she realised the Festival needed to rethink its approach to the Director's position. Many tasks were depressingly mundane – chasing up non-paying advertisers, organising cleaning and heating services – and there was far too much work with too little professional backup, all of which made the job an unattractive proposition.[121] Hunter was appointed Director at a salary of _500 and was able to have an office assistant at _15 per week for the ten weeks leading up to the Festival itself. This was not sufficient a salary to allow her to give up other work so presumably she pursued her writing career at the same time. Inadequate remuneration

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[117] Lawson, op cit
[118] Gillan, op cit, p7
[119] Barr, CY MLOH 275/61-63
[120] Klava, CY MLOH 275/43-47
[121] SFF Director's Report, 1960: SFF Minutes 2/2/1960, 2/5/1961

for services was an ongoing problem for the SFF. Few people were actually paid and those that were – the Director, the projectionists – received amounts which in no way compensated for the hours and effort involved. Sydney lacked the support base which the Victorian film societies provided for Melbourne – there was never quite enough money to go round and never anyone quite skilled enough to engineer significant financial sponsorship from either the private or public sectors. State and federal governments had no interest at all at this stage in supporting film culture while occasional small grants and subsidies through local government were never more than a drop in the bucket. Potential from the private sector was better but without an Erwin Rado to negotiate such deals, the SFF remained reliant on goodwill and volunteers. Hunter stayed on the SFF Committee for 1961 but refused the directorship undoubtedly because no structural reform had taken place.[122] She later relocated to Europe where she briefly acted as an overseas representative for the Festival[123] but then contact with her was lost. So again the SFF lurched into another year without any prospect of a long term Director and with no plan for addressing its financial problems.

In other respects though, 1960 marked an upturn in affairs. Val Wishart was back in Sydney and employed for a few weeks as the Festival's publicist. The concept of an Opening night Film was introduced and, most importantly, for the first time, the SFF's bid to FIAPF for recognition as an international film festival was accepted and the Federation agreed to send out four French features and six short films free of charge.[124] A total of 2095 subscribers signed up to see programs featuring 97 films – among them *Ashes and Diamonds*, *The World of Apu*, *On the Bowery* and *Rashomon*. Albert Camus' *Black Orpheus* opened the Festival. With that kind of line-up, it's no surprise many sessions were sell-out events.

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[122] SFF Director's Report 1960, p4: SFF Minutes, 6/12/1960
[123] SFF Minutes, 2/10/1962
[124] SFF Minutes, 31/5/1960

The next appointee to the Directorship, Patricia Moore, was Secretary of the Art Gallery Society at the Art Gallery of NSW. Her employment terms give some indication of how poorly the SFF was managing its business affairs at this point. Moore received a salary of _800 for her services as Director between December 1960 and September 1961 – roughly a third of the average salary at the time[125] – so she was obliged to keep on her job at the gallery as well. The independent film distributor Natan Scheinwald offered the SFF a work space at his offices if Moore would "answer the phone and do some typing" for him in return.[126] Desperate for affordable accommodation, the Festival accepted his offer. A first-time Director with no experience of the industry and little film knowledge with one hugely demanding full-time job and two part-time ones was unlikely to be a great success and so it proved. Even so, Moore was obviously capable. Like Wishart and Hunter before her, she made a number of recommendations which would have served the Festival well, not least the appointment of an agent in Europe to scout independently for films, an idea not taken up until David Stratton forced the issue six years later.[127] Some on the Committee felt Moore was treated rather poorly but despite their support she was not offered the job again.[128] Patricia Moore died of cancer in December, 1964. She had served on the SFF Committee since 1959, directed the Festival in 1961 and continued involvement on the Publicity and Public Relations Sub-Committees until her illness took hold in 1964.

While the SFF struggled internally it was also faced with pressure externally. Its complicated relations with Erwin Rado remained unsatisfactorily resolved. Both Hunter and Moore were heavily reliant on his help with programming and with film supply but

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[125] Reserve Bank of Australia, Australian Economic Statistics 1949-50 to 1996-97. Occasional Paper No.8. www.rba.gov.au/Statistics/op8_index.html
[126] Klava, MLOH 275/43-47, p20: SFF Minutes, 14/2/1961
[127] SFF Director's Report 1961
[128] SFF Minutes 5/9/1961 and 3/10/1961

the Committee was often at odds with the antics of its Melbourne colleague.[129] The Festival was at loggerheads with the trade and getting the run-around from the Censor's Office. The private company responsible for film handling was unreliable and the problems at Sydney University were becoming harder and harder to ignore. Something needed to be done to get the show back on the road – at which point, enter Ian Klava, from the wings.

[129] SFF Minutes 2/2/1960, 4/10/60, 6/12/1960

CHAPTER TWO

EXPANSION AND CONSOLIDATION: 1962 - 1975

The social and cultural movements of the early 1960s were often liberal, middle class and Christian in character … The new middle class, most members of which were still in training during the 1960s, represented a new cultural constituency as much as the teenage and student generations … They challenged traditionally middle class values, and ruling anti-intellectual and anti-cultural values in general.
Stephen Alomes[130]

Coming of Age

In Chapter One I outlined in some detail the people, events and circumstances which shaped the SFF in its "infancy" and "childhood" phases. Its "adolescence" coincided with a period of great political, social and cultural change which swept Australia in the next decade. By the 1970s, an archetypal "film festival goer" had entered Australian popular culture. He turns up as the safari-suited, North Shore dwelling, Liberal voting, pipe-smoker Simon in the film version of *Don's Party*. Yet only a few years earlier, an interest in film outside the Hollywood mainstream had automatically labelled the festival goer left-wing in his politics, and possibly a Communist sympathiser. Whether membership of the SFF was seen as radical and dangerous or staid and conservative depended very much on who was doing the looking, when, and from what point of view. Adrian Martin pinpoints the difficulty when he writes:

…recent historiographical attempts to pigeon-hole the 1960s film society cinephile in a cultural genealogy are superficial and contradictory. In one account he features as an embryonic nationalist fighting for the Australian Film Renaissance: in another he is an underground avant gardist aligned with the Filmmakers' Co-operatives: and in a third he is a European art house Film Festival devotee. [131]

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[130] Alomes, 1983, pp29-32
[131] Martin, 1988, p124

What Martin says of the film society stalwart applies equally to the SFF subscriber who could be, at any given moment, any of the above. The study of Australian film festivals is complicated by their failure to fit comfortably into historical pigeon-holes. Stereotypical classification first as radicals and then as stuffy and elitist conservatives firmly embedded in consumer society – the view held by many in the counter culture movement of the 1970s - in no way reflects the reality.

It is beyond the scope of this study to make any detailed analysis of the SFF audience but some conclusions can be made about those involved in running the Festival and in supporting it externally at the beginning of the 1960s. The majority were tertiary-educated, usually but not exclusively middle-class in origin and aspiration, in a profession and fairly affluent.[132] Almost all were Australians of British origin and the small number of migrants, with the exception of the Viennese Hans Bandler, came from that source too. There was a reasonably wide representation of left and right political leanings but the middle-class, small-l liberal values which most of the membership shared tended to dominate. Probably only Allan Ashbolt and Hans Bandler could be described as overtly left wing.[133] For some the SFF was primarily a professional connection; a means to advance the interests of the business organisations they represented. For others it provided an opportunity to engage with their craft, develop as filmmakers. Some were drawn to the Festival for social reasons or for the chance to develop administrative skills. A few were motivated by the films alone, by the pursuit of cinematic artistry. A great many were involved in media and the arts – writers, radio broadcasters, television producers, journalists, filmmakers. A few dabbled at the edges of more culturally radical movements like the Sydney Push. In the post-war years, there was a fashion for cosmopolitanism which manifested in a sometimes affected desire for

[132] Complete Membership List, SFF Minutes 5/3/1963
[133] See Inglis & Brazier, 1983 for details of Ashbolt's turbulent career in broadcasting.

all things “continental.” Phillip Adams, Clive James and others have written affectionately about this but Barry Humphries captures it perfectly:

> The epithet which carried with it the very highest promise of artistic excellence was ‘continental’. No more improving evening could be spent than in a continental restaurant eating a continental meal before a continental film followed by a continental supper in a continental coffee lounge preferably inhaling a continental cigarette. [134]

But there was a deeper resonance to this fascination. What most in the SFF shared, to a greater or lesser degree, was a broadly humanist philosophy. They recognised, in the cinema of the wider world, an opportunity to extend their awareness and understanding of their fellow human beings.

An example of this inclusive ideology is found in the well-documented response to Japanese films at the SFF during the 1950s and 1960s. Over this period, Australia gradually increased its engagement with Asia. Commonwealth initiatives like the Colombo Plan helped create a climate of awareness of and interest in the nations close to us. But memories of the Pacific war also lingered. The horrors and humiliations of Changi, Sandakan and the Burma Railway remained firmly in the collective Australian consciousness.[135] Japanese war brides were not admitted to Sydney until 1952 and could not gain citizenship till 1957.[136] The technical and artistic excellence of Japanese cinema helped mitigate these memories. Valwyn Wishart and others have observed that Asian films became “part of the healing process” between Australia and Japan. These films helped to make the Japanese “less than monsters and more human beings”.[137] Kon Ichikawa’s *The Harp of Burma* resonated particularly when it screened in 1959. With so much Cold War rhetoric centred around the notion of Asian hordes collapsing in the face

[134] Humphries, 1992, p140
[135] Clarke, 1992, p273
[136] Broinowski, 1992, p66
[137] Wishart, Interview with author, 25/2/04.

of advancing Communism the SFF response, with its liberal humanist sensibility, presented a kind of "third way" by which to overcome historically entrenched prejudices. Film festivals, like film societies, drew autodidacts who saw cinema as an integral part of their pedagogical progress; a cultural tour phenomenon which favoured exposure to different cultures over artistic excellence and there is some validity in that analysis. Perhaps it explains why narrative cinema was so popular and why, so often, festival audiences were left perplexed or even angered by work of an experimental nature. The social, political and cultural expansion which occurred through the later 1960s and into the 1970s meant a diminution of this kind of engagement but for a brief few years it was the guiding philosophy for film societies and film festivals alike.

The Times They Are A-Changin': 1962 - 1967

Ian Klava, Director of the SFF from 1962 to 1965, was typical of the film society generation – a member of the SUFG, the SFS, the All Nations Club Film Group, WEA Film Study Group, the Sydney Cinema Society and the Catholic Film Society! He had been attending the SFF since 1954, on the Film Selection Committee since 1959 and had some first-hand experience of the industry through the DOI Film Unit.[138] He was well liked, "beautifully mannered and considerate, punctilious about everything he did".[139] His film knowledge was greatly respected and his appointment as Director introduced a period of stability to the Festival. Klava brought a steadying hand just as it was most needed but he lacked the entrepreneurial skills to take the Festival into new territories. His Directorship is marked by a tendency toward caution and appeasement at a time when boldness and a spirit of adventure might have served better but in terms of film selection, he was a little more adventurous than his predecessors, in part because more

[138] Klava worked at the DOI Film Unit from 1957 to 1960
[139] Wishart, Interview with author, 25/02/2004

sources were opening up worldwide.[140] He was the first to be appointed full-time to the position and the first of the directors to have a public profile in the media. Klava concentrated his efforts where they could be most effective – extending film selection and improving administrative organisation. There were rich pickings in the 1960s world of cinema and the SFF was always sold out well before commencement dates but many difficulties remained unresolved including inadequate pay and lack of clarity about the Director's role.[141]

The SFF Committee comprised 36 individuals most of whom held strong opinions about the Festival and its direction. What began to emerge around this time was a generational conflict not unlike that occurring simultaneously within the CFU with many of the same people involved. In both organisations, many of the old guard were reaching retirement age and authority was passing to a "new old guard", to take Moran's phrase[142], while an even younger group with a radically different ideology and aesthetic sensibility waited impatiently in the wings. At the SFF, Hawes, Stout, Kingsford-Smith and Bellingham were amongst the old guard while Otton, Donaldson, Lawson, Wishart, McPherson, Bandler, Klava and Ashbolt formed the new old guard – younger, more willing to experiment, less concerned about social conventions but not as young or as socially radical as the baby boomers who would soon come of age. It's interesting that this should be the case for the SFF was never subject to the government's top-down policies which dictated production at the CFU. The conflict never became a schism but it did force the SFF into a kind of creative holding pattern with both groups unable to fully

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[140] Klava had come to the attention of the SFF through a letter he wrote in 1959 presenting criticisms of the 1958 Festival and making recommendations for future improvements. In the same way it would with Stratton a few years later, the Committee invited him to join the SFF which he did in April of that year. A willingness to engage with its critics was one of the SFF's most positive qualities during this period.

[141] His salary of _1,250 (about half the average male annual income for the period, required he keep on another job to make ends meet.

[142] Moran, 1991, p101

implement their preferred options for future development. Yet right through Klava's period as Director, the SFF retained something of the "wow" factor which had made the early Festivals so much fun. On the whole, people were still thrilled just to be able to see these films. And what films they were.

The policy of bringing a selection of the best on offer from across the world was becoming firmly established though no-one yet expressed it in quite those terms. Under Klava, the Festival cast its net wider, seeking out films from Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Finland, Rumania, Switzerland, Mexico and Cuba as well as increasing its efforts to source material directly from Asia.[143] Among the features screened during these years were Rademaker's *The Knife*, Ray's *Mahanager*, and *Two Daughters*, Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel,* Malle's *Le Feu Follet*, Antonioni's *Il Grido,* Anselmo Duarte's *The Given Word*, Wajda's *Innocent Sorcerers* and Godard's *Bande à Part.*[144] Among the retrospectives were Renoir's recently restored *La Régle du Jeu* and Lang's *M.* Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, Teshigahara's *Woman of the Dunes*, Ozu's *An Autumn Afternoon* and Shindo's documentary style, dialogue free study *The Island* give an indication of the variety of films on offer from Japan alone. Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* was a massive hit in 1964 eliciting huge amounts of press coverage for the SFF and advance publicity for the film's commercial distributor Columbia. Chris Marker's *La Jetée* was scheduled but failed to turn up in time. The range of short films was often singled out by critics for praise which is indicative of local expectations at the time. While there is a good deal of variety most of the short films were documentaries in the classic expository style (those about art and artists were very popular, unsurprisingly in such an audience demographic) and there were very few examples of experimental or non-narrative films. Nevertheless, this selection indicates some widening of the traditional ideological constraints.

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[143] Films from Asia were sought via *Far East Film News* (SFF Minutes 20/11/1961) and from mainland China and "Formosa" (SFF Minutes 6/2/1962): SFF Director's Report 1964

[144] Interestingly, *A Bout de Souffle* has never played at the Festival.

The SFF was also becoming more of an event. Gradually it was drawn into the city's calendar of society gatherings. Back in 1954, Joseph Lonsdale had been hesitant to involve the NSW Film Council in something as bohemian as a film festival and had only done so because of the imprimatur of Sydney University involvement. That situation had changed dramatically. By the end of the 1960s the SFF was a place for the establishment to be, and be seen to be. This shift in status was to some degree engineered by the SFF itself, especially through the work of Dorothy Holt who had led the Social Sub-Committee since 1959. Holt was a Sydney socialite who looked after film activities at the AGNSW and took a keen interest in the fledgling SFF. She was closely connected to Australia's power brokers through her husband Edgar, public relations officer to the Liberal government. Dorothy Holt combined charm and social grace with professionalism, imagination and efficiency. She provided the style and flair behind the opening night parties and fund-raising events; she drew up the VIP guest list then encouraged and cajoled those on it to attend. The press reported on the parties and on Holt's designer gowns, all of which helped smooth the SFF's path from the margins of Sydney high society toward the centre. Of course this courting of the establishment caused bristles among hard core film enthusiasts:

> The festival is fast becoming one of the cultural events of Sydney's social year. At the opening screening the foyer of the Union Theatre was aglitter with diamond and sapphire. All the worst people were there. [145]

The SFF was establishing itself as an independent business organisation with strong cultural and social connections. This is the point at which it diverged from its film society roots, especially the SUFG which continued to pursue a purist programming philosophy and even dabbled in short film production for a time. There were many who regretted

[145] *Honi Soit*, 23/06/1965

the change but overall, there was a sense that the SFF was growing in both importance and prestige. Much of the press coverage for the 1965 SFF employs phrases like "coming of age", "has arrived", "a new era" and "important cultural event."[146] Martin Long described it as becoming:

…more and more a film festival in the generally accepted sense: that is, a representative showcase of the better films that are being made at the present time …The tenth Sydney Film Festival now current offers 30 separate programmes largely made up of films released in the last 12 months or so. [147]

The SFF may have been coming of age but, as is often the case with adolescents, there was a good deal of insecurity and lack of direction going on beneath the surface which neither the SFF itself nor much of the mainstream press was really conscious of. Financial management, in the hands of John Kingsford Smith and later John Burke, was excellent but major problems like the increasing inadequacy of the university venue, the strong dependency on MFF and the stranglehold of FIAPF smouldered away without resolution, as did the issue of government censorship.

"The Proliferation of Unacceptable Thoughts" [148]

In Australia, the making of a film is subject only to the usual criminal and civil law: within this, you are limited only by your supply of funds, time, energy and creativity. But showing your film is another matter.
Ina Bertrand [149]

[146] SFF Pressbook 1965
[147] Long, 1963
[148] Alomes, 1988, p191
[149] Bertrand, 1981, p1

The topic of one of the discussion forums at the Olinda Festival in 1952 had been censorship and its effects on film society screenings. It was an issue which rankled with many and, from time to time, film societies were prepared to challenge the situation. The SUFG met with the Chief Censor to protest about cuts to von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*. Judith Adamson recalls:

> He told us that he always cuts a kiss down a bit, 'because it's embarrassing for your young lady, a long kiss. [150]

But until 1965 the SFF regarded censorship as something which required careful handling rather than something to be challenged. Committee records and Director's Reports are full of references to placating the censor, buttering him up, keeping him on-side. Yet the Festival was regularly reminded of the hypocrisy and absurdity of Australian legislation through the dealings it conducted with international film producers and agencies. FIAPF forbid cuts to any films it supplied, as did a number of individual directors and producers which left Klava endlessly manoeuvring back and forth between Australian Customs and overseas suppliers. He adopted a policy of conciliation – keep things smooth, encourage goodwill.

Censorship had been in place during WWII and when it carried over into the 1950s there was an acceptance of it amongst the populace in general but it is in many ways surprising that the Festivals followed suit. The issue of government censorship of cultural material struck right at the heart of the new middle class liberal and left-liberal agenda. It was a thorn in the side of both the Sydney and Melbourne Festivals but there was a belief that nothing could really be done to change the law. Erwin Rado, so cosmopolitan

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[150] Gillan, 1993, p19

in other ways, accepted the situation and Ian Klava, like the SFF directors before him, did likewise:

> The films had to go to the censor. The censor had a right to cut things. I thought this was a situation we were stuck with and couldn't do anything about. [151]

Stephen Alomes has observed that abstract issues like peace, capital punishment, racism and censorship are always attractive battlegrounds for middle class radicals.[152] There had long been resistance to literary and other forms of artistic censorship from individuals in the arts community, a community with which many at SFF felt themselves allied. Censorship and its effects on film society screenings had been a topic of formal discussion at Olinda in 1952. Alan Stout had been prominent in the Peace Movement during the 1950s; Bandler, Ashbolt and others were involved in social justice issues,[153] but the beliefs of these and other like-minded people in the SFF seem not to have translated into sufficient "radicalism" for active resistance to limiting freedom of creative expression. As a projectionist, Anton Crouch was very aware of the censor's scissors:

> …the Film Censorship Office was notorious for their lousy splices. The first film I can remember being ruined … was Truffaut's *Kindly Shoot the Pianist* in the 1963 festival. They cut out a piece of the nudity and it was really glaring ...[154]

Argument and complaint did arise from time to time but most of it revolved around the enormous logistical difficulties involved in just dealing with the censor's office. The situation may never have changed had it not been for a young English film enthusiast on

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[151] Klava, MLOH 275/43-47, p28
[152] Alomes, 1983, p30
[153] See Inglis & Brazier, 1983 and Lake, 2002
[154] Gillan, op cit, p19

a working holiday in Australia. David Stratton was responsible for igniting debate about a problem which has smouldered but never sprung into flame within SFF before:

> In England there was legislation which ensured that bona fide clubs were not subject to any kind of film censorship. I just assumed that the festival, of all things, would not be subject to censorship. In 1965 we had *Woman of the Dunes*, and it was so obviously and crucially cut there was no mistaking it. What on earth was going on? I remember going to Ian Klava and saying, "That film looked to me as if it had been censored". He said, "You know we have to go through censorship on our films". Well, I was absolutely flabbergasted. [155]

Stratton confronted Klava about the issue during a Committee meeting and Klava, mindful of the Festival's fragile institutional status and its reliance on MFF for co-operation in the matter of Customs processing of imported films, responded with a plea that they not rock the boat. Stratton made a very passionate speech and won over the Committee which, typically, immediately formed a Censorship Sub-Committee, with Ian McPherson as convenor, to promote awareness of the impact of censorship and to lobby at Ministerial level for legislative change.[156]

A Forum on "Film Censorship in Australia: the Law, the Ethics, the Ethos" was held during the 1966 Festival by which stage the Censorship Sub-Committee had activated an extensive campaign for issue awareness with goals which included exemption for film festivals and film societies on grounds they are cultural events with closed memberships; the introduction of adult classifications; pressure for film studies to be introduced in art schools and; dissemination of information about the current censorship regulations and their effects to as wide a section of the community as possible.

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[155] ibid
[156] SFF Minutes 6/07/1965

These reforms were endorsed by other national film festivals which seemed all of a sudden to have caught the same bug.[157] Quite suddenly the SFF began to run with the censorship issue. John and Beverly Burke, John Connell, Dorothy Shoemark and McPherson became strongly committed to overcoming the problem. It was as if they had just needed someone to focus their attention on the reality of the situation before they could act. Stratton was that person, the one who initiated that kind of a dialogue. The stance on censorship meant the Festival spoke out, with a unified voice, about something which had previously been accepted as an inevitable compromise. With this step, the SFF was catapulted into "the sixties" and into a new level of maturity. Stratton himself and others there at the time were conscious that these changes knocked Ian Klava's confidence. Already exhausted with the long hours and logistical difficulties of running such a big event, Klava now found himself in the shadow of a younger, bolder man. He resigned a few months later and the job of SFF Director was offered to David Stratton.

Communal Rapture: The Start of the Stratton Era

Now that our Film Festival has reached its thirteenth year, it behoves us to take stock and ask ourselves if we have achieved our aims. The objects of the festival are:
To create and maintain interest in the film by introducing worthwhile films to a discriminating audience and to stimulate intelligent film viewing among the general public.
To present films of merit which would not otherwise be shown in Sydney.
To gain attention and publicity for the films shown and to assist in their wider Australian distribution.
To promote better understanding among nations through the film medium.
Frank Bellingham [158]

[157] The SFF Press Book 1966 has clippings about Melbourne, Adelaide, and Hobart Film Festivals as well as the SFF itself.
[158] Bellingham, President's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1966

The objectives set out above and the language in which they're couched seem representative of a passing era. For Bellingham, who had served the SFF since 1956, Stratton's first Festival would be his own last hurrah. His first love, the Amateur Film Program, had been officially dropped in 1965.[159] It was time to move on. White gloves with evening wear, addressing women by their husband's names – these conventions dropped away from the SFF just as they did elsewhere across Australian society. Between 1966 and 1968, just three short years, middle class Australia relaxed into a social informality unimaginable a decade earlier. Barrett Hodsdon uses the delightful phrase "communal rapture" [160] to describe the shared experience of cinema audiences at that time. It perfectly encapsulates the film festival cinephile's experience - an experience born out of the film society movement and nurtured by an expanding film culture milieu within Australia. For Judy Adamson, it was the most exciting period – film societies were still strong, the NFTA was launched, and more and more cinemas were programming "continental" films.[161] The SFF was riding the crest of this wave too but already it seemed evident that to survive long term it would need to move with the times. David Stratton was just the man for the moment.

The enormity of the change which Stratton's appointment initiated should not be underestimated. In the space of a year, the director's role evolved from one of dealing with the minutiae of organisation – administration, presentation, publicity, customs – to the big picture. Stratton went straight to the main themes, the essential issues, and he had an agenda, a personal vision for the Festival, a sense of direction. Under his stewardship the SFF began a process of expansion, consolidating its operational procedures and philosophies and, most importantly, carving out a place for itself in the

[159] SFF Minutes 5/10/1965
[160] Hodsdon, 2001, p164
[161] Adamson, CY MLOH 275/36-38

international arena. Klava was a meticulous administrator and the Festival Stratton inherited was, in many respects, in excellent condition. It had a permanent office in Liverpool Street so the days of lugging files between temporary locations were fortunately in the past though finding adequate previewing facilities remained a headache. Dorothy Holt's influence ensured the SFF's social event status was well established and, after the success of *Dr Strangelove* made distributors aware of the power of positive endorsement, frosty relations between the Festival and the trade had begun to thaw. Another crucial factor was that the SFF committee finally recognised the importance of the director's job and put its weight behind the new incumbent. Unlike his predecessors, Stratton started out with a small but adequate salary and with a full-time assistant, Modesta Gentile, to share the workload.

David Stratton was born in Wiltshire, the oldest son destined, with his younger brother, to take over the family grocery business as his grandparents, father and uncle had done before him. It was a destiny he took for granted:

> I never really questioned that … I was educated specifically to enter the family business … which had been established in the 1820s by my great-great grandfather.

He became an avid filmgoer at a very young age and the passion stayed with him after he left home to work in Birmingham. The city had a vast number of cinemas and Stratton, then still in his teens, would travel from one side of town to the other in order to see every new release and every revival showing. One evening he found he had seen everything on offer at the theatres but noticed an advertisement for the Bourneville Film Society which was screening *Double Indemnity* that evening. It was miles away from his home but he was keen to see the film which he'd read about so he went. The film society introduced him to "continental cinema" and when he moved back to his home town he

decided to start a film society of his own which he did with help from his uncle, also a film enthusiast. He was nineteen years old at the time:

The first film we showed was *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* and the second, I think, was *Seven Samurai*. I did the projection … I ran that society for four or five years before leaving for Australia. [162]

Their venture was a huge success, with one hundred members signing up straight away. Running his own film society gave Stratton experience in programming and in negotiating with distributors and producers. It also gave him an incomparable knowledge of film history.

At a meeting of the British Federation of Film Societies, he made a couple of Australian acquaintances who gave him the idea of taking a working holiday before settling down in the family business. He applied for a _10 passage and was accepted, arriving in Perth in July 1963. He knew Australia was warmer than the UK but not much beyond that. He wasn't absolutely sure it had cities, but he had checked that it had film societies. Stratton did a "Cooks Tour" of the country, visiting every mainland state, eventually fetching up in Sydney where he discovered the WEA Film Group. There he met Ian McPherson, who invited him to join the Publicity Sub-Committee of the SFF. Michael Swan recalls his first impressions:

There was this spotty faced young man who came to a committee meeting one evening and they were asking about a particular film and to my utter astonishment he sat down and typed out a complete review of the thing on the spot and that was young David Stratton. [163]

[162] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p1
[163] Swan, MLOH 275/35, p7

Stratton volunteered to usher at the 1964 Festival which enabled him to see all the films. The range and quality impressed him. That year he was invited onto the SFF committee and then the Film Selection Sub-Committee where he developed a friendship with Ian Klava. It was Stratton's outstanding knowledge of film which first brought him to the attention of McPherson, then the censorship issue brought him to prominence with the full Committee and led to the appointment as Director. It was an enormous change for the grocer's son from Wiltshire - a total reorientation of career, country and future – but he saw the opportunity and grabbed it with both hands:

> I felt, okay, I've sent the Festival off on this provocative anti-censorship road. Now I will be able to see it through, and I'm sure I can do it. I was perhaps a bit naïve about that … [164]

From day one, Stratton looked at things globally. He realised that if it were to transcend its status as just a glorified film society, the SFF needed to enter the international arena. Before that fateful SFF meeting, Stratton had been planning to return to Britain. His passage was already booked and paid for and he persuaded the SFF Committee to allow him to take the trip. He was overseas for five months, much of which was spent with his family but he also travelled the international festival circuit selecting films, establishing professional contacts, and working on the FIAPF relationship. With that first tour, Stratton established the pattern he would follow in subsequent years – travel for several months selecting films and promoting the SFF, then return to Sydney to prepare and schedule the upcoming event.

For the first time, the SFF had someone with the ability to match Erwin Rado. Stratton found Rado "rather a patrician man, closer to my father's generation" and certainly intimidating. At their first meeting, Rado left Stratton in no doubt that he considered him a "young upstart." "but when he saw the new Director would not compromise on the

[164] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p10

censorship issue he gave ground.[165] In subsequent years, the two became very close friends and MFF did support the SFF position in the censorship battle. Together, they made a formidable partnership.

The two Directors devised a policy of selecting films jointly which would then be presented exclusively at both Festivals.[166] In an effort to minimise costs, they initiated a plan by which they would each travel in alternate years and make selections for both Festivals. From 1966 on, the Melbourne and Sydney Festivals were so closely aligned as to be really no more than regional variations of the same event. Surprisingly Stratton carried the Committee along with him on this but there must have been some who recalled the Australian Film Festival fiasco of 1959 and wondered if this might not be a repeat performance. To some extent those fears were justified, for difficulties with FIAPF soon resurfaced along with a number of other concerns. Such worries were dwarfed however by the SFF's elation about its new found vitality and forcefulness. The days of the SFF tagging along in Rado's footsteps were finally behind them.

Between 1966 and 1979, when Rado retired, both Festivals were run by men who grew up in Europe and who came to Australia as adults. The secret of their success would appear to be this global perspective, this broader awareness of and familiarity with life beyond Australian shores. They understood that person-to-person engagement with international festivals and trade forums was not a luxury but a necessity. For most of his period as Director, Stratton was a citizen of the world; a kind of cinematic nomad who travelled in pursuit not just of films for the SFF but of a global network of friends, colleagues and associates with whom he could feel engaged, with whom he belonged. Very quickly he established an international reputation both for himself and for his Antipodean Festival.

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[165] ibid
[166] SFF Minutes, 5/7/1966

Stratton came to the Directorship with four primary objectives – remove censorship from Festival films; relocate the event from the university to a better venue; begin bringing international guests to the Festival and, most importantly, personally represent the SFF and select films for it at festivals around the world. Initially, he thought the censorship problem could be solved quite easily - just alert the relevant government minister and appropriate legislative change would soon be in train.[167] In this he greatly underestimated the cultural and social mindset which dominated Australia at the time. The censorship battle would not be won until 1983, the last year of Stratton's Directorship, but he had more success with his other objectives. These he achieved within his first three years on the job.

The biggest physical change occurred in 1968 with the relocation from Sydney University to the Wintergarden Theatre in Rose Bay. Stratton knew the move was inevitable but he had difficulty persuading the Committee to embrace it, particularly after an experiment in 1967 involving more than four separate venues scattered right across the city – Sydney University, the Wintergarden, the Cremorne Orpheum, and the Elizabethan Theatre in Newtown – turned into a logistical nightmare for all concerned. This had been an attempt by Stratton to circumvent FIAPF regulations which limited films to a single screening and audience numbers to 2000. John Baxter, convenor of the Film Selection Sub-committee, described the SFF's dilemma in a somewhat inflammatory article published in the arts journal *Masque*:

> The films entered fell into two categories: those from FIAPF countries which could be screened only once and those from other sources which could be shown more often. The Festival's budget demanded the income that only 4000 subscribers at eight dollars could provide … Solution: divide the FIAPF films and audiences into two batches, and hold, in effect, two separate festivals. [168]

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[167] Stratton, CY MLOH 275/48-50
[168] Baxter in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, pp308-310

The result was a disaster all round with Festival resources stretched beyond breaking point and audiences angry at the dual ticketing policy, inadequate venues and generally low standards. Baxter's article appeared just before the start of the 1968 SFF and is a brilliant exercise in stirring the possum. In the guise of presenting an historical overview of the issues pressuring the SFF he managed to expose for public scrutiny the behind-the-scenes machinations which had gone on to turn the two Festivals into, in his words, "trade fairs designed to show new films to distributors and encourage their sale." SFF enthusiasts always feared their Festival might turn into a trade fair or a competitive festival like Cannes and in fact the SFF had flirted with this notion from time to time since the 1950s. Baxter rightly points out that the Stratton/Rado collaboration created a monopoly by which the SFF and MFF could secure the best international productions for themselves, effectively cutting out the newer festivals in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane. As far as FIAPF was concerned, the film producers' interests were best served by one screening at one trade style festival which would hopefully lead to the purchase of commercial screening rights for Australia. It did not look kindly on even the Sydney/Melbourne collaboration let alone anything more extensive. Without FIAPF endorsement, the smaller Australian festivals stood little chance of establishing themselves, for filmmakers in the major film producing nations would not send their films halfway around the world without some protection of their interests.

The physical move of the SFF to the Wintergarden became symbolic of the organisational change which Baxter's article exposed so that quite quickly "university days" came to represent the heady period before high ticket prices, society glitterati opening night parties and the presence of film industry types tarnished, in the view of some, the Festival's purity. In reality, the university buildings had long been unable to meet SFF screening needs and for years the event had straddled a range of theatres

and halls all over town including the Hub, a seedy cavernous hall which later became a venue for pornographic films, and the much disliked Elizabethan which was used for live fights and wrestling matches when not screening Festival films. Yet even today there is nostalgia amongst those who spent a good part of their youth dashing excitedly from one university venue to another discovering the cinema of the world. Of course, a slightly younger group feel the same nostalgia for the long ago demolished Rose Bay Wintergarden.

The Wintergarden was an old picture palace (in the days before those words held any particular magic for Sydneysiders). It fronted onto harbour parkland so that patrons could stroll there between films or relax in the theatre's huge ornate foyers. The suburb of Rose Bay had a large Eastern European population of post-war migrants and its cafes and delicatessens vaguely enhanced the sense of the continental which so attracted filmgoers. On the minus side it was run down, had limited projection facilities, was far from the city centre and not very well serviced by public transport but it was the only theatre which was both appropriate and affordable. The SFF did not expect to be based there for very long since, for some years, they had been hopeful of securing a permanent home at the Sydney Opera House then under construction. David Donaldson had first suggested the SFF request "a theatre for showing films" be included in the plans. Both Klava and Stratton lobbied for full projection facilities to be installed in the Concert Hall and the Opera House authorities were in agreement. It was not until 1972 that these hopes were finally abandoned. Until then, the idea influenced the SFF committee's thinking and possibly accounts for some of the prevarication around seeking an alternative long-term venue.

At the same time as he was engineering the SFF's relocation, Stratton was implementing his other major policy initiatives but while he ploughed ahead, the

organisation which employed him was struggling to keep up. Kevin Troy sums up the Festival's *modus operandi* when he says:

> I can't recall anyone making deliberate decisions except perhaps to send David Stratton overseas. That was a fairly deliberate and brave decision. I think we just sort of met the needs as we could afford to. I can't remember any seminal discussion that suddenly said "we're going professional". It happened by stealth. [169]

The 1960s had shaped up to be much like the 1950s in that the sheer logistics of keeping the SFF functioning at all swamped discourse about the organisation's raison d'être, its philosophies, its place and purpose in a society undergoing radical cultural change so that, by default, Stratton's vision prevailed. It was a lot of responsibility for one person and inevitably he made blunders along the way. These tended to obscure the achievements he was making so that, for a while, an "us and him" mentality pervaded the organisation with the result that Stratton met resistance at virtually every turn. The concerns Baxter raised in the *Masque* article erupted in the middle of the 1968 Festival. Stratton came out of the clash a winner but a rift was torn in the SFF fabric which would cause considerable tension in the coming years.

The Anxious Years: 1968 – 1972

Stratton considers the 1968 Festival the first he could really call his own. He was happy with the films, the program design, the general organisation of the event, and, for once, there were no censorship problems.[170] But this state of affairs had been hard won and was by no means a fait accompli. The period from 1968 to 1972 was one of expansion and consolidation but these were also the "anxious years" of Stratton's Directorship,

[169] Troy, MLOH 275/9, p8
[170] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p16

marked, at the macro level, by international and national political upheaval as well as rapid and intense social change and, at the micro level, by difficulties with organisational structure, ongoing problems with censorship and increased dissatisfaction amongst SFF members and subscribers over programming. Of these, the programming issue was the most serious threat to Stratton's hopes and plans.

John Baxter began attending the SFF during the mid 1960s and by 1968 had taken over from Malcolm Otton as Convenor of the Film Selection Sub-Committee. A year earlier, this Committee had divided into, in Baxter's words, "old stagers and young turks".[171] Amongst the latter were Baxter himself, Martin Hibble, Barrie Pattison and Brian Hannant, the last two part of a creative new wave breaking over the CFU just then which also included Peter Weir, Donald Crombie and Hal McElroy.[172] With the Director making most film selections on the spot at international festivals, the group found its creative role increasingly diminished. Baxter supported Stratton but felt the young Director should be more responsive to film suggestions initiated by the Film Committee:

> The term "Film Selection Committee" was a misnomer, since there were very few films to select. We mostly looked at short Australian films and the odd independent feature … I subscribed to Cahiers du Cinema and Avant-Scene, and tried to push some of the newer French films with David [Stratton] but to no avail. In particular I remember urging him to get Eric Rohmer's *La Collectioneuse*, the script of which I'd read in Avant-Scene. He said he'd try but returned with the usual basket of popular successes recommended by Unifrance, the French government film distribution operation. These only arrived a few days before the festival, so we had little or no say in whether they should be shown, a fact that rankled to the extent that I dissolved the Selection Committee – playing, as it happens, right into David's hands, since he was then left free to show whatever he wanted. [173]

From Stratton's point of view:

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[171] Baxter, Email to author, 24/01/2005
[172] ibid
[173] Baxter, Emails to author, 15/12/2004, 24/01/2005

There seemed to be absolutely no point going overseas and selecting films, and then having a sub-committee back in Australia, who didn't know all the problems about the selection, saying "Well we don't think we'll have that after all, thankyou very much." I mean it was ridiculous. So I was very insistent that the Film Sub-Committee become only advisory and that the Director have the right to select the films and work out the programming. [174]

Anton Crouch and many others had a different view about the role and autonomy of the director, arguing that the Festival should not become the vision of one individual but should continue to represent a range of interests and viewpoints. Thirty-two SFF members signed a petition requesting a reconsideration regarding the disbanding of the Film Selection Sub-Committee.[175] Arguments for and against were put at an Open Meeting held on July 2 1968[176] which resulted in a breach between the Committee and the membership and indeed between individuals on the Committee.[177] Baxter resigned and ultimately the Committee endorsed the proposal to create two Film Advisory Panels – one for international and one for Australian programs. SFF President, Ian McPherson, was distressed by these "acrimonious relations"[178] and sought to smooth things down but discontent continued to simmer, erupting again in 1969.

In part, the discontent was a response to the extent and rapidity of the changes Stratton was encouraging the SFF to embrace. The Committee grappled with two conflicting responses to this dynamic, demanding man. Even his harshest critics realised the necessity for the progressive strategies he put in place but there was also a nostalgic attachment to the old days when just seeing films and talking about them had been enough. That generation which had embraced the Festival as a window on the outside

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[174] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p16
[175] SFF Minutes, 16/07/1968
[176] No Minutes exist for this but there are a number of letters from interested parties on file and the meeting is discussed at the next Committee meeting
[177] SFF Minutes, 16/07/1968
[178] ibid

world was fearful that these values were being left behind in the rush, while the “young Turks” chafed at what they saw as Stratton’s conservatism in selection and programming. On June 14, 1969, just two days before the end of the Festival, Stratton called a special meeting of the SFF Committee to discuss a petition which had just been received from 64 SFF members, film critics and filmmakers. Signatories included Tony Buckley, Gary Kildea, Sylvia Lawson, Mike Thornhill, Gil Brealey, John Baxter, John Flaus, Don Anderson, Bruce Hodsdon, and Sandra Levy. They addressed five main areas of concern. The first involved inconsistencies in the SFF approach to censorship. For example, the Festival had screened its Opening night film, Lindsay Anderson’s *If* with cuts but had not screened *I Love, You Love*. The Festival’s relationship with local distributors was perceived as too close, possibly compromising directorial integrity and independence. The purpose and function of overseas visitors was also questioned with the petitioners concerned that guests were too often wheeled out as publicity instruments for the Festival rather than actively engaging with the film community. Then there were issues concerning the SFF relationship with the MFF, which was indeed so close as to effectively be one festival, and with FIAPF, which was seen as another cause of conservative film selection.

Both David Stratton and Ian McPherson realised that the petitioners’ grievances were justified in that the Festival had failed to keep its constituents fully aware of the forces driving structural change. Australia’s distance from Europe was in many ways as severe an obstacle in 1969 as it had been in 1954. The SFF was fully subscribed but was by this stage a much bigger and more ambitious event than it had been in the 1950s. Costs had increased greatly too. As always, the tyranny of distance meant the co-operative arrangement between Sydney and Melbourne was crucial to the survival of both Festivals. Without sharing the expense of airfares and accommodation for visitors, and freight and handling charges for films both MFF and SFF would have been forced to

dramatically scale back their programs. Without FIAPF, they would lose half their suppliers. Membership of FIAPF gave the SFF the credentials necessary to secure invitations to other endorsed festivals. Being "part of the club" ensured Stratton received hospitality at San Sebastian, Venice, Locarno and other important festivals and had direct access to film producers in the Netherlands, Denmark and France. FIAPF was bureaucratic, unreliable and difficult to deal with, but as long as the SFF was part of the Federation, it was part of the biggest film show in the world.

But the petitioners' concerns should perhaps have alerted Stratton that Sydney's cinephiles were deeply attached to the SFF in ways which were in conflict with his own agenda and experience. While Stratton and Rado had both adopted Australia as their home, their "otherness" inevitably created blind spots. In an era when many Australians were trying to flee the cultural and social limitations of their homeland, Stratton was doing the reverse. Australia was still in many ways a frontier experience offering a life of unparalleled freedom to those who sought to escape the class-driven rigidity of British society. One colleague from the period described Stratton as "on the run from his middle class grocer family and the Home Counties in general."[179] If that description is accurate, then Stratton had certainly succeeded in escaping. Here he was, just thirty years old, in a creative and demanding job with considerable responsibility which involved travelling around the world to do what he most loved - watch films. It was an exciting life a million miles removed from the one mapped out for him back home. Young Australians were also seeking to throw off the constraints of the past and take up a more participatory role in the wider world:

> Attitudes were altering more quickly than ever before as a deepening connection with the cultural power-house of the United States allowed Australians for the first time to participate in world

[179] Baxter, Email to author, 15/12/2004

events and important social advances rather than reading about them afterwards. Radio and television played a large part in this process, as did newspapers and magazines which concentrated more on American and South East Asian affairs than they had historically used to. [180]

The South East Asian affair soon to preoccupy the country was the Vietnam war but even as Australians protested their involvement with America they were themselves adopting that nation's culture and conventions:

Those who condemned Yankee imperialism drew on the culture of the American protest movement, its music, its clothes, its drugs: they also learned from its political example. The moratorium of May 1970, which saw the largest street demonstrations in Australian history, was inspired by the American moratorium of October 1969. [181]

The signatories to the petition protesting changes within the SFF were reflecting this new mindset. This generation was open to as diverse a range of cultural influences as possible – Mao's China and Castro's Cuba as much as Johnson's America. At the same time, the young were determined to express their own identities as Australians in cultural terms. Non-mainstream films and filmmaking became central to the quest for national identity but it was an obsession which, at times, must have been a complete mystery to a relatively newly arrived Englishman whose nationalism did not involve a collective crisis of identity.

American culture and Australian nationalism came together in a local manifestation of the Underground film movement, Ubu Films. Phillip Noyce discovered it in his last year of high school and his reflections nicely encapsulate the way in which culture and identity were melding:

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[180] Clarke, 1992, p295
[181] Rickard, 1996, p210

The word 'underground' conjured up all sorts of delights to an eighteen-year-old in the late sixties: in an era of censorship it promised erotica, perhaps: in an era of drug-taking it promised some clandestine place where marijuana, or even something stronger, might be consumed: in an era of confrontation between conservative parents and their affluent post-war baby boomer children, it promised a place where one could get together with other like-minded youth and plan to undermine the establishment. [182]

John Baxter and others like him wanted the SFF to maintain a connection to the emerging counter culture movement, to reflect its values in a truly diverse film selection which did not kow-tow too much to the mainstream. The concerns raised by Baxter and his supporters were replicated in festivals in parts of the world affected by the emergence of a politicised avant garde. In Paris, Prague, California and elsewhere, 1968 had been a socially and politically volatile year and the new generation of SFF patrons was hoping to see a reflection of that in the 1969 Festival. When they did not, they naturally looked for the reasons why, and found them in what they saw to be the SFF's reliance on FIAPF and increased intimacy with the commercial film trade. Filmmaker Michael Thornhill was a vocal critic:

If the film festivals have become established annual events, the nature of the beast has changed in recent years. Their original purpose when they began in the early fifties was to present a selection of unique films unlikely to obtain commercial release. Today, the Sydney and Melbourne festivals are moving, perhaps unintentionally, closer to trade showings, so that many of the films look as if they are sitting and begging for art house distributors to pick them up. With obvious exceptions – like Jancso's *Silence and Cry* and probably Makavejev's *A Love Dossier* – they do not reflect new artistic movements nor are they the works of accomplished masters. [183]

But this viewpoint was in the minority. Taken together, 1968 and 1969 have some high cinematic moments. Both Opening night films – Richard Lester's *How I Won the War*

[182] Petske, 2004, p9
[183] Thornhill, 1969

and Lindsay Anderson's *If* – captured the zeitgeist, as did *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger*, an examination of the Black American anti-war movement. Charmian Clift wrote an emotionally compelling review of Tanya Ballantyne's now classic documentary film *The Things I Cannot Change*[184] and reviewers were unanimous in praise of Hungarian filmmaker Miklos Jancso's *Silence and Cry*. Satyajit Ray was a dignified and scholarly guest in 1968, while Stig Bjorkmann provided a very satisfying scandal in 1969. Most press coverage was generous, with a recognition that the Festival was meeting its aims in presenting a fairly broad coverage of contemporary cinema. The USSR, ever mindful of the power of propaganda, issued all-inclusive invitations to the directors of festivals in the West to showcase each year's new films and filmmakers. This was an intensely creative period for Soviet cinema and Stratton always took advantage of the opportunity to visit Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other Eastern Bloc countries. It was possible, for example, to go "to Budapest for five days, see all the new films, meet many of the filmmakers." [185]

Erwin Rado, a native of Hungary, favoured Eastern European cinema and both Festivals were always a little top-heavy in this but who could regret discovering Milos Forman's delightful *Closely Watched Trains,* Skolimowski's *Deep End*, or the work of cinema's larrikin Dusan Makavejev? At a time when "a commercial showing of an important film in a language other than English is a rarity in this country" the SFF and other Australian festivals provided "short bursts of rain in a semi-permanent drought."[186]

The argument that the Festival is too closely connected to the trade is as fierce today as it was for all of Stratton's tenure. In order to maintain its sense of difference, the Festival audience needed to legitimise itself as serious in its pursuit of the arts. The only way to do this was to create a divide between entertainment cinema, part of popular culture,

[184] Clift, 1968
[185] Stratton, Interview with author, 9/03/2005
[186] Westcott, 1969

and art cinema, part of high culture. But, by the 1970s, it was becoming increasingly difficult to enforce this artificial division, both in economic and cultural terms. Fears that the SFF would be handed over to the interests of the philistine trade were often invoked but the event was, and is still, far more audience oriented than most of the world's established film festivals. It has remained a festival for the people rather than for the industry professional and is therefore seen as a significant cultural event in the life of the city. Both Stratton and Rado valued this free-spirited cultural celebration element but they also understood that if their Festivals were to survive long-term, they would have to have access to the widest possible range of recently made films and that the only way to ensure a flow of new material was to have FIAPF accreditation and court the trade. SFF and MFF did not pay rental for the films they used. Producers needed another incentive to convince them to strike a subtitled print and send it thousands of miles to the other side of the world. That incentive was the possibility of commercial distribution. David Stratton was committed to this strategy because he saw it as the only way to keep the SFF artistically relevant *and* financially viable. By the end of the 1960s every State capital had a film festival of its own but many faded away after a few years of operation. Sydney and Melbourne were the only Festivals to have FIAPF accreditation and the only ones to survive and flourish over a long time frame. But that survival came at a cost.

In 1969, Stratton discovered one cost he had underestimated was the creative compromise necessitated by sharing film selection with MFF. With both parties locked into the alternate year travel policy, the SFF was obliged to take all Rado's recommendations unseen, just as MFF had to take Stratton's choices when he was the one to go overseas. Rado had selected the program for 1969 and Stratton was unhappy with some of the films which he thought below par.[187] He also felt handicapped by having to schedule and present films he had not seen. Rado had been travelling for MFF for

[187] SFF Minutes 24/06/1969: SFF Director's Report 1975

many, many years and was himself becoming increasingly unwilling to keep up such a demanding life. As early as 1970, Stratton began taking over more of this responsibility and so the problem eventually solved itself.[188] But this was just one manifestation of the inevitable tensions created when two people are forced by geographical circumstance and financial necessity to make compromises they would both rather avoid. There were other pitfalls involved in sharing international guests and films. The already complex logistics involved in handling reels of film, transporting them from place to place, keeping them from damage and so on were compounded by the involvement of a third party – the Censorship Board.

Throwing Down the Gauntlet

In Australia in the 1960s, getting films into the country and onto the screen was a complicated and cumbersome business which presented unique problems for festivals. Customs required all imported festival films to be cleared through Melbourne in the name of MFF with Erwin Rado, as AFI/MFF Director, required to sign an undertaking of responsibility for them. This was the case even if the films originally entered through another port so both Festivals frequently found themselves in the absurd position of rushing films from Sydney to Melbourne for Customs clearance, back to Sydney to be presented to the Censorship Board, from there to the SFF for screening and then back to Melbourne again.[189] More often than not, films arrived at the very last moment and the pressure was on to steer them through this bureaucratic labyrinth in time for their scheduled appearance. Despite the SFF's cajoling, the Board seemed often to go out of its way to make difficulties – mislaying prints, refusing to view films which arrived late,

[188] SFF Minutes 3/02/1970

[189] Oddly, posted films were not subject to censorship as there was no ruling in the postal regulations requiring them to be.

ignoring supporting documentation provided by the SFF to give artistic or historical contextualization to the films, and so on.[190]

Internationally there was a liberalisation of attitudes to what could and could not be represented in cinema and, as Stratton had so clearly demonstrated, Australian legislation was out of step with contemporary trends elsewhere. In 1966, Stratton's first year as Director, the Chief Censor, Dick Prowse, made cuts to six Festival films, more than in any previous year.[191] Milos Forman's *A Blonde in Love* was an example of the Eastern European "new wave" of films which seemed both franker about sex and more attuned to life as it's lived. The film screened widely at festivals internationally and received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film. When the Chief Censor hacked out great chunks of it, including the love scene, it created a stir of anger and resentment. So much so that when the film went into commercial release at the Gala Cinema almost a year later, advertisements capitalised on this notoriety.[192]

Ian McPherson joined Stratton as the driving force behind the SFF's new policy. Between them they stirred up media interest and left Festival audiences in no doubt that they were being deprived of something important. They did everything possible to put the issue into the public arena including a novel initiative which proved "the first significant counterstroke" against the authorities:[193]

The Sydney Film Festival has done excellently in throwing down a glove before the Australian censorship system. The organisers have inserted in their programme a sheet listing the cuts made in festival films. [194]

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[190] SFF Minutes 1/08/1972.

[191] Bellocchio's *Fists in the Pocket* was so delayed at the Censor's office that it missed the Festival. This and *Girl in Mourning*, which also missed its Festival dates, were screened later in the year at the Union Theatre with FIAPF approval.

[192] *Masque*, March/April 1968

[193] Troy, MLOH 275/9, p20: Saint et al, MLOH 275/22-24, pp38-39

[194] Lawson, 1966

When Jonas Cornell's *Hugs and Kisses* was severely cut, Stratton instructed Crouch to insert 30 seconds worth of footage displaying the word "censored":

> Thirty seconds sounds like the blink of an eye, but if you've ever sat in a darkened cinema for thirty seconds it seems an unbelievable amount of time. The effect on the audience was absolutely astonishing. They shouted and screamed and guffawed. It almost ruined the movie in fact. [195]

In reality, cuts had been made to six of the 110 films which screened that year but few saw it in that light. By the turn of the decade, censorship had become the new focus for collective resistance to cultural orthodoxy. It was no longer enough just to have access to "continental films", now the issue was one of the individual's right to make adult decisions without the state acting as nanny. Censorship was being challenged right across the arts spectrum.[196] This battle was a coming of age event for Australians and the SFF was on the front line throughout.

Censorship reform became a flagship issue with the SFF and many, though by no means all, other cultural institutions. While Australian Producers' and Directors' Guild president Kip Porteous wrote a letter of support at Stratton's request, the ABC and the CFU declined to do so.[197] Rado and Stratton united to lobby Canberra directly on the matter of an exemption for festivals. By the end of 1967, the SFF's petition for reform had over 2000 signatures[198]but support for the anti-censorship campaign at a wider community level varied. The issue of "cultural event" exemption was a sticking point. *The Melbourne Age* called it an "outrageous form of discrimination" and asked if it might not

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[195] Gillan, op cit, p21
[196] The Way it Happened: A Timeline of Australian Censorship http://libertus.net/censor/hist20on.html
[197] SFF Minutes 7/11/1967
[198] SFF Minutes 5/12/1967

be "the thin edge of the wedge".[199] Within SFF there were some who felt there was a philosophical question at issue – was it right to pursue special treatment for themselves rather than total exemption for all?[200] Prowse's argument that such "cultural event" exemption rulings were impossible to allow was proven false when Stratton discovered that in 1961, the then Chief Censor, G J Campbell, had given a special clearance to Renais' *Night and Fog* on the condition that it be resubmitted if commercially released at a later date.[201] These kinds of anomalies gave more leverage to the Festivals but not enough to budge the Minister for Customs.

The SFF's position on censorship effectively reversed what progress it had made with the commercial film trade. Relations reached an all-time low with the publication of a vitriolic article entitled "Through a sewer in a glass-bottomed boat: Film festivals as seen by commercial film distributors" in the arts journal *Masque* in June 1968. The author, Herbert Hayward, was Assistant to the Executive Director of the Greater Union Organisation. He called the Festival obscene and dangerous, even going so far as to suggest it was involved in illegally copying and distributing pornographic material:

> The very idea of permitting such films, offensive to the sensibilities of the general public, to be screened uncensored on the assurance that same would be returned to bond immediately after viewing by members of a film society, would be laughable if it were not for the danger. It takes only a few hours for a feature film to be duplicated in a laboratory and presto – out go 'bootleg' copies by the dozen. [202]

Hayward's article is positioned in the journal next to two advertisements – one for Ubu Films, the other offering a range of hippy-style suits in paisley brocade. The juxtaposition illustrates just how anachronistic Hayward's diatribe actually was and how desperate.

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[199] Bennett, 1968, p8; *Melbourne Age*, Editorial, 7/05/1968, p5
[200] Tzannes, MLOH 275/64-66, p13
[201] SFF Minutes 3/10/1967
[202] Hayward, 1968, p13

The coming of television and other changes in Australian social life meant hard times for cinemas. Censorship reform threatened their identity as a family-friendly industry. Even more alarming, the introduction of an R-Certificate would, they believed, lose them what audience they still had. Yet, while theatres lost custom, the SFF remained a sell-out event. Perhaps this fact should have alerted the commercial trade that an untapped audience was there if they just knew how to access it. They didn't and, like all their Hollywood parent companies, Australian distributors failed to see that counter culture was becoming big business.

Support for the SFF's stand came particularly from younger film critics. Julie Rigg, writing in *The Australian*, called censorship "a cheap, lazy and, in the end, not very effective way of maintaining standards."[203] Her views were vindicated most dramatically in 1969 when the Chief Censor met his match in a likeable Swedish filmmaker named Stig Bjorkman. Bjorkman was invited as a guest of the SFF and while he was mid-flight to Australia his film, *I Love, You Love*, was banned by the Chief Censor.

> We sent Bjorkman a telegram in Singapore telling him that his film had been banned, "But please come, and let's make a hell of a fuss about it". The festival then issued a press release. When the poor man arrived at Mascot Airport … there was an enormous press contingent there, to find out what was so dirty in his film. [204]

The Swedish filmmaker was personable and clean-cut. At press conferences and interviews his very ordinariness gave greater emphasis to the anachronism of the censor's position. Most media coverage was favourable to Bjorkman and some ridiculed Senator Scott, Minister for Customs, who compounded the problem by upholding the ban unless an offending 45-second section showing a pregnant woman and a man

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[203] Rigg, 1967, p9
[204] Gillan, op cit, p21

supposedly having sex on a bed was removed. Stratton and Bjorkman, along with SFF lawyer and Censorship Sub-Committee member Ross Tzannes, flew to Canberra to petition him directly. Bjorkman got a lot of mileage by going armed with telegrams from the actors involved assuring the Senator that no sex act had taken place nor even looked like having done so.[205] "It surely should be the minimum qualification of the Minister for Customs that he be able to recognise sexual intercourse when he sees it" quipped the *SMH*[206] but Scott refused to budge and Bjorkman withdrew the film from both the Sydney and Melbourne Festivals.

McPherson galvanised the SFF membership into action. Their full-page advertisement in *The Australian* had over 1000 names signed to it. Alan Stout, in his role as Chairman of the NFTA, wrote supporting the SFF's stand.[207] Signatories to a telegram to Prime Minister John Gorton protesting the ban included Gordon Chater, Charmian Clift, George Johnston, Anne Deveson and Pat Lovell. Australian filmmakers with short films in the Festival withdrew them in protest[208] and Bjorkman, with enthusiastic helpers from the new generation of CFU employees, made a short film, *To Australia with Love*, about the hypocrisy of the censorship position, which screened on closing night.[209] The *I Love, You Love* saga was a watershed in the censorship battle but it would be overstating the case to suggest the SFF's very public brawling was pivotal in influencing government.

When Don Chipp took over as Minister for Customs & Excise in 1970, the need for reform in matters of cultural censorship had become pressing. Chipp was far more aware of this than his predecessor, Senator Scott, had been but he was an astute enough politician not to run before the flag:

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[205] SFF Press Book, 1969: Gillan, op cit, p21
[206] *SMH*, 6/06/1969
[207] *The Australian*, Letters to the Editor, 6/06/1969; 11/06/1969
[208] Included among these were Peter Weir's films Count *Vim's Last Exercise* and *The Life and Times of the Reverend Buck Shotte*. Stratton considered their action futile and rather silly.
[209] Baxter, Email to author, 24/01/2005

I was persisting with a policy of gradualism in liberalising censorship because moving too fast could have resulted in a backlash and set reform back for years. [210]

SFF rhetoric on censorship consistently demonises the censorship bodies, particularly the Chief Censor. Both Stratton and Tzannes couch their recollections of the period in classic Manichean terms, casting themselves in the heroic mould as liberators freeing Australians from the clutches of Victorian morality. Yet Stratton was not beyond exercising his own censorship of films which contravened his personal benchmark of good taste. A case in point is Pasolini's *Salo*. A screening at the Adelaide Film Festival in 1976 was a sell-out event but it initiated a huge controversy within the community which resulted in the film being banned from theatrical release. By the time Stratton saw it (via a poor quality dubbed print) the film was a political hot potato. He considered *Salo* "a desolate, horrifying and utterly unlikeable film" which failed to realise the Director's intention[211] but if he were to keep true to his convictions, he was obliged to give Australians the opportunity to make up their own minds. He opted for a compromise and allowed SFF consultant and Pasolini's colleague Gideon Bachmann to present an extremely detailed slide, script and music show which covered almost every scene of the film.[212]

Even for Stratton, there was a point at which a film went beyond community standards. Determining just what those standards were was the role of the Censorship Board which was, at least in principle, committed to following, rather than dictating, public opinion.[213] In essence, the SFF and the censor differed on matters of degree rather than on basic principle.

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[210] Chipp, 1978, p110
[211] Bertrand, 1995, p68
[212] Huntley, 1997
[213] Bertrand, op cit, p74

In his autobiography, Chipp dismisses the role of festivals in the censorship debate as no more than a crude publicity stunt:

> The organisers of these festivals were very able and generally sincere people who spent more than half of each year travelling throughout the world looking at films … However, after spending most of their year and a considerable amount of money in this exercise, they then had to sell tickets … In this regard they were very expert in public relations … In the package of films they brought back, there were always one or two which contained some scenes of a sexual nature which at that time could be regarded as offensive to existing community standards. A firm rule of each of the film festivals was that no film would ever be shown which had been cut to any extent at all … The Customs Minister always obliged them. Immediately they issued outrageous statements to the media, which accommodated them – thus giving thousands of dollars of free publicity to their festivals. It was a very clever operation… [214]

The patronising and cynical attitude Chipp takes here is out of keeping with his usual sympathy for the arts. Chipp's criticism of the SFF and its motivations still angers many Festival members who feel their fight for freedom of cultural expression during that seminal moment in Australia's social and cultural history transcended such petty machinations. Doubtless he was frustrated by the SFF's adoption of the high moral ground on this issue which, when seen from his point of view, involved a total reform initiative across a range of cultural fields. Not just film, and certainly not just art film. Chipp was already committed to the introduction of an R-Certificate and to a transition from censorship to a classification system for film and literature. To do this he needed the commercial film industry on side. Having the censorship debate hijacked by extremists like Hayward on the one hand and zealots like Stratton on the other would not have been seen as particularly constructive from Chipp's perspective.

Chipp underestimates the very real commitment of the SFF to this issue. Out of its film society origins, the Festival retained a perception that an intrinsic relationship existed

[214] Chipp, op cit, p109

between education, knowledge, taste and maturity. Attacks like that mounted by Hayward, which equated an interest in "art" films with a prurient obsession with sex and pornography, cut to the heart of the SFF cinephile's identity not just as a sophisticated and cultured observer but as a connoisseur of realism. Films like *A Blonde in Love* or *I Love, You Love* had a kind of neo-realist status because they showed social interaction the way it was for the generation of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1970s, the era of the personal as political, Festival-goers watched films like *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* and recognised a kinship with the filmmakers' philosophy that personal ideology and lifestyle should be compatible. The fight against censorship was a fight to validate sexual and social mores of the time.

In 1970, the new Minister and the SFF had an opportunity to take one another's measure. That year, Prowse banned a feature, *Like Night and Day* and a documentary, *A Married Couple*. Chipp supported Prowse and upheld the bans. In his view, the scene was certainly beyond what was then deemed an acceptable community standard:

> Nobody likes getting belted by the Press so in an extremely rare moment of inspiration I decided to take the Press on. I wrote a Press release stating that … '*Like Night and Day* contains a scene which depicts a young woman performing cunnilingus on her sister while at the same time a man has intercourse with the young woman..' I called a Press conference and said to the journalists from the gallery, 'Now let's see if you bastards have the guts to print that'. [215]

Chipp was right. The newspapers censored their description of the scene they were arguing should not be censored from the film. The SFF pressured Chipp[216] proposing a special screening of the banned films for accredited film critics and selected community members to gauge public feeling. Chipp called their bluff: his office organised the screening, inviting State and Federal MPs as well as other community

[215] Chipp, op cit, p110
[216] SFF Minutes 7/04/1970, 19/05/1970

representatives.[217] About 100 people attended including a senior Salvation Army officer in uniform.[218] Many reported being bored rather than shocked by "Mr Chipp's film show". Anne Deveson found "The Swedish film was so boring and the characters so stereotyped that the so-called sizzling scene had no impact." [219]

This stoush might have been handled better by the SFF, as might subsequent relations with the new Minister but even as the two faced off, the "community standard" on censorship was getting a shove from a different quarter.

In 1969, Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda had made a low-budget, independent film which featured sex, drugs, lots of violence, and a sound track made up of contemorary rock music. *Easy Rider* was aimed at the counter culture community which supported it in droves. Stratton saw the film in Paris and was impressed by it:

> What I didn't know was that back in Australia, the film censors originally banned *Easy Rider*, and on resubmission, cut it fairly extensively. Now this was one of Columbia's biggest-grossing films in America and in Europe, of 1969. And I think it was a real blow when this film suffered censorship. [220]

The commercial trade realised censorship was going to stand in its way too. From that point on, the big distributors, led by Colin Jones, Managing Director at Columbia and brother of Phil Jones, long time SFF supporter and manager of the Gala, began to rally behind the Festival, effectively removing industry opposition to the R-Certificate which was introduced in 1971. The SFF continued to press for total exemption from all censorship for festivals[221] and Chipp accepted this request though the agreement was

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[217] The Swedish producers of *Like Night and Day* refused to allow the proposed media screening but with both Chipp and the SFF committed, it went ahead anyway.
[218] *The Sun Herald*, 21/06/1970
[219] SFF Press Book 1970; Deveson, 1970
[220] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p25
[221] The existing regulations obliged the Censorship Board to assess all films on the assumption a child could see them, hence the large number of bans and cuts.

always informal, at the discretion of the Censor, and never ratified in law, which left loopholes to trip the Festival in later years.

The fight over censorship is the only issue on which the SFF could be said to have taken a radical position. In virtually every other respect it has stuck closely to its loosely liberal-humanist philosophy and avoided activities of too reactionary a nature. The SFF's historical construction of itself as at the vanguard of change in at least this one monumental area has a certain romantic resonance which connects the Festival to the overarching social radicalism narrative of the 1960s.

Going Global

David Stratton was fast tracking the SFF onto the international stage, building a reputation for excellence and professionalism and bringing Sydney into the limelight. Yet, despite the benefits it obviously brought, the SFF still grappled with the problems created by going global. As early as 1960, the SFF had seen the advantage of having someone on hand to negotiate for them at the major European festivals and with FIAPF. Such arrangements were made in an ad hoc way from time to time – Lois Hunter, John Heyer and others had acted as the SFF's agent when they were abroad. Former DOI Film Unit writer/director Catherine Duncan operated as SFF representative in France for about three years and was able to facilitate arrangements with FIAPF.[222] But ultimately, financial pressure, the vagaries of distance and the SFF's own lack of vision meant no long term arrangement was ever made. When Stratton was appointed he made it clear that international travel was crucial if the Festival was to flourish and grow. The SFF recognised the truth of this. They'd known it from their reliance on Rado all those years, but they found it costly in administrative as well as financial terms. Having a Director

[222] SFF Minutes 1/12/1959, 4/10/1960 et al.

travelling so extensively so often was considered by many to be an unsustainable indulgence.

Their concern is understandable. As per the alternate year agreement, Rado travelled on behalf of both Festivals in 1968 but in 1969, Stratton was away from June 29 to December 15, virtually half the year. He visited thirty-one cities in twenty-three different countries. The longest period he spent in any one place was two weeks. In 1970, he was away almost sixteen weeks and an emergency meeting with FIAPF took him overseas again in 1971.[223] Despite the alternate travel arrangement, Stratton went overseas on behalf of the SFF and often the MFF every year except 1967, 1968, and 1974. He never doubted the benefit of these extended tours:

> Long trips like that enabled me to meet a lot of people and see an awful lot of films. I think it was meeting those people that ensured that over the succeeding years, certainly right through the 1970s, the Sydney Film Festival was able to get a range of films that we might not have been able to get in past years when we made really no personal contacts. Personal contacts were terribly important. I set out to make contacts with filmmakers wherever I could: with film critics and with other film festival directors. I think that was a very, very valuable exercise. [224]

It is a viewpoint which anyone seriously involved in the business of international cultural product would surely endorse. Stratton was working hard building the contacts needed to put the SFF on the international map. He was using his experiences to shape the kind of festival he wanted for Sydney and it was not actually costing all that much. The SFF purchased one round-the-world ticket which included a number of stops. Stratton kept his daily expenditure to a minimum, often stayed with friends, rented cars to drive from one city to another, used every bit of hospitality extended to him. He did everything the

[223] Travel Itinerary, SFF Minutes 6/05/1969; SFF Director's Report 1970
[224] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p24

cheapest way possible but discontent about the expense and time away continued to simmer within SFF.

Stratton was conscientious about keeping his employers informed of his activities and throughout these lengthy trips he kept in touch by sending regular reports by mail – either letters or cassette tapes dictated into a recorder then posted to the SFF administrator, Modesta Gentile, for her to transcribe. But the very real difficulties still prevailing in international communication meant all sorts of problems for both the traveller and those back at home. Tapes and letters often went astray or arrived too late to be relevant. Gentile spent hours transcribing reports for presentation to the Committee then, in turn, was required to type up and return by mail to Stratton's next port of call issues and questions which needed his response. Sometimes these too went astray or arrived after he had departed. For much of the year, Gentile was Acting Director responsible for organising the Festival but with none of the creative decision-making while Stratton was often forced to accept decisions made by the committee in his absence which he would have fought against had he been on hand to do so. It was an unwieldy and frustrating system for everyone concerned. Stratton's proposals for organisational restructure were frustrated by the Committee's undeclared attempts to restrict the Director's autonomy though no-one seemed willing to confront him with their real concerns. Tension was exacerbated over the matter of international visitors.

The first international guest to be brought to Sydney was filmmaker and writer Paul Rotha whose book *The Film Till Now*, first published in 1930, was virtually *the* handbook for cinephiles until well into the 1960s. The 1958 visit was sponsored by a UNESCO grant with MFF also putting up some money. Rotha proved "a most pleasant man who made himself most generously available."[225] He gave a lecture in the Great Hall, participated in a symposium "The Future of Film", and proved to be good media talent

[225] Wishart & Long, CY MLOH 275/54-56

which helped promote the Festival. But for all those thrilled by the chance to rub up against the British film legend, there were as many again who had no idea who the fellow was or why they should relate to him. Despite the success of that first venture, no-one really thought international visitors were essential to the Festival's development. This attitude, along with the fact that the SFF had neither the contacts nor the money for international delegates, meant foreign visitors were few and far between. They did not become an intrinsic feature of the Festival until Stratton's appointment:

> One of the things I had to get across to the board when I became Director was that we had to invite guests. That was impressed on me by people overseas. [226]

It was also one of the stipulations for FIAPF accreditation and Stratton was keen to pursue it for that reason too.

An indication of the impressive reputation Stratton built both for himself and the SFF internationally is the calibre of guest he was able to bring to Australia over the eighteen years of his Directorship. From 1967 on, the SFF had at least one, usually a number, of international guests each year. They tended to fall into three categories – first, what might be termed "serious" filmmakers and scholars, second, representatives of national cultural or trade institutions sometimes invited for diplomatic rather than cinematic reasons, and third, celebrities. Occasionally all these categories came together in a happy package, as was the case with Satyajit Ray, who visited in 1968 and proved that international visitors were indeed a worthwhile investment. When McPherson wrote:

> In Satyajit Ray we had a delegate of exemplary patience and good manners … We shall be indeed lucky if we ever get again such a distinguished filmmaker with a complete lack of temperament. [227]

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[226] Gillan, op cit, p26

he was signalling as much about the behaviour of other guests as about Ray. Overall, guests made an enormous and mainly positive contribution to the SFF and to Sydney's film culture community but there were complications with this, as with so many other, initiatives.

Prior to Stratton's appointment, the SFF had no policy for international delegates so that in the absence of clear guidelines the final decision about guests rested with the Director who, understandably, favoured people he liked and with whom he had developed relationships during his time abroad. As with the film selection issue, consultation on the matter was minimal which meant some in the Sydney film community were inevitably left feeling disenfranchised. High profile visitors guaranteed media exposure for the SFF but these were years when the Festival was always fully subscribed and attracting extra ticket sales wasn't a high priority. What then, were Festival guests actually supposed to do? What were they for? The answers can be found in the unique nature of the relationship festival audiences have with the medium of film. They want to be emotionally moved by what they see but they also want to be stimulated intellectually, and possibly most importantly, they want their experience of watching film to be connected to a body of knowledge – historical, cultural, and political. Adrian Martin captures it when he says:

> …the cinephile's agenda … always opens onto other potential or already contested agendas in the sphere of cultural criticism. Although the origin of cinephilia for an individual or group can only be explained by recourse to a notion of *désir brut* – impulsive fascination, spontaneous attachment – the passion almost immediately discovers (or has thrust upon it) a larger cause, a rationale, a political program. [228]

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[227] McPherson, President's Address, 1968, p2
[228] Martin, 1988, p119

Here I have to depart from Martin's definition of cinephilia as a fixation on American cinema specifically and reframe it in an Australian film festival context as the love of, desire for, cinema in all its manifestations *with the exception of whatever entertainment Hollywood is currently producing*. Attending a film festival in Australia in the 1960s was to take a position in the realm of cultural politics; a position in opposition to film as mass, popular entertainment and aligned with film as art, film as political statement, film as nostalgia (which embraced the Hollywood of the past) and so on. Such ideas were elitist and those who held them considered themselves elite. By the early 1970s, this attitude, tied up as it was to nationalism and cultural identity, began to break down with the rise of the American independent movement but, for the moment, Festival guests, like Festival films, were expected to provide audiences with more than a little mild diversion.

By the beginning of the 1970s, Australians had far greater access to information about the global film scene than they had had in David Donaldson's time. Rotha's film bible was replaced by publications as diverse as *Cahiers du Cinema* on the one hand, and the British Film Institute journal *Sight and Sound* on the other. These were supplemented by local magazines among them *Cantrill's Filmnotes*, *Cinema Papers* and *Filmnews*, which all began publication in the early 1970s. Cinephiles, filmmakers and, a new phenomenon for Sydney, film students, were aware of who was making creative waves in film production around the world but had little chance of directly engaging with these international figures. They looked to film festivals to provide this aspect of Australia's cultural interaction. As early as 1966, Stratton had observed a "distressing lack of liaison" between the Festival and other film appreciation organisations in Australia[229] but in subsequent planning for international guests, the SFF lost sight a little of this fundamental responsibility. At the same time, because Festival audiences and local film culture organisations were so starved of exposure to significant international filmmakers,

[229] SFF Director's Report, 1966

they tended to put unrealistic expectations on those who did reach their shores. Festival guests were so often expected to be everything to everyone and so seldom actually could be.

On paper, Stratton's 1967 line-up seemed terrific – Josef von Sternberg, the great German film director who had brought Dietrich to America and created some of the masterpieces of Hollywood's golden age, and Jorn Donner, a young Finnish director whose work seemed to epitomise the concerns of the baby-boomer generation. In practise, both caused friction when they rubbed up against what they doubtless saw as Australia's cultural primitivism. Donner was arrogant and rudely dismissive of local productions. Comments such as "I've seen quite a few Australian films, mostly on the documentary side. I prefer not to talk about them"[230] cannot have endeared him to those struggling to revitalize their own national cinema. Modesta Gentile considered him "bombastic, big-headed, and rude," a view shared by many others.

It was a feather in Stratton's cap that he had secured such an icon of the Hollywood golden era as von Sternberg but the 73-year-old was cool, distant and seemed a little bored which rather diminished local film enthusiasts' excitement at seeing such a legend in the flesh. Press coverage of the visits was extensive but it often reflected the two directors' displays of attitude rather than their accomplishments.[231] Yet, despite his grim persona, von Sternberg inspired almost by default. Jim Sharman was inspired to follow through on his dream of making films after hearing von Sternberg's response to the question of why Australia had no film industry. "I don't know", he replied. "You have cameras don't you?[232] Other guests that year, Indian actor Nagesware Rao and English actress Laya Raki, though less memorable, were on the whole much kinder to their hosts.

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[230] *The Australian*, 31/05/1967
[231] SFF Press Book, 1967
[232] Stratton, 1980, p171

In 1971, Stratton programmed tributes to three directors, Akira Kurosawa, Jerzy Skolimowski, and Jorn Donner all of whom were invited to Sydney. Kurosawa dropped out at the last moment because of illness.[233] The SFF committee cannot have been thrilled to have Donner for a return visit, especially when his film, *Black and White*, was cut by the censor. At an appeal screening it was discovered that the last reel of the film was missing (as so often seemed to happen at the censorship office) so the film had to be dropped anyway. Stratton's decision to bring Skolimowski, one of a new wave of directors whose work was challenging conventional narrative forms, was a bold one which deserved support from the counter culture community but both Donner and Skolimowski turned out to be nightmare guests as far as SFF organisers were concerned – Donner again arrogant, supercilious and distant, Skolimowski unreliable, demanding and eccentric … though obviously quite fun. The young Polish director insisted on openly smoking marijuana wherever he went and was always on the look-out for a suitable supplier of recreational drugs.[234] His film, *Deep End* , was scheduled to screen near the end of the festival and he insisted it must be moved to the beginning, convinced this would improve his chances with the local women. In an act of slightly misguided indulgence, Stratton agreed to exchange it at very short notice with Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. There were howls from those who missed out on Bertolucci and rage from the Committee that their director should be so frivolous. Stratton concedes it "was probably the biggest mistake I made in the whole time I was running the Festival." [235] As things turned out, the ruse was unnecessary. Skolimowski struck up a relationship with a prominent Sydney actress who had not, as it happened, seen his film. Stratton knew from his extensive exposure to festivals overseas that guests could

[233] The timing suggests this may have been when Kurosawa attempted suicide after the commercial failure of *Dodeska-Den*
[234] Interviews Stratton et al
[235] Stratton, Interview with author, 9/03/2005

be a tricky proposition. He acknowledged that inevitably there would be failures from time to time and it was best to put these occasions down to experience and leave it at that. But many SFF stakeholders didn't see things in that light. The Skolimowski affair stimulated a degree of righteous anger among some on the Committee and Stratton was forced to defend his position at length and in writing in order to keep visitors on the agenda.[236]

International guests continued to be a mixed blessing. No matter how well prepared the SFF Delegates Sub-Committee tried to be, visitors were always something of a wild card. The 1973 event provides a good example. The political activist/filmmaker Costa-Gavras agreed to come but never arrived. The same thing happened, perhaps unsurprisingly, with Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey whose film *Trash* was programmed that year. Iranian cinema had been introduced to the West a year earlier when Darius Mehrjui's *The Cow* won the International Critics' Award at Venice. The film was appreciated by Sydney audiences but its director less so. Mehrjui was fussy, difficult, and openly disparaging about Australian film. His views did not go down well with local filmmakers, especially as he was delegated to give out the prizes to the Benson & Hedges Short Film Competition winners. Stratton had become friends with Zelimir Matko, Director of the Zagreb Animation Studios whom he invited to come and introduce "Z is for Zagreb", a special retrospective program of the Studio's work. The screenings went very well and Matko proved a likeable and generous guest but even this visit created tension between Stratton and the Committee which had held a competition in association with Randwick TAFE for the design of the 1973 SFF program and supporting material. Stratton dumped the winning work in favour of a drawing done by another artist at the Zagreb Studio. Rod Shaw, Sydney artist and Head of Design at Randwick, wrote a

[236] SFF Minutes 7/03/1972

very angry letter about it to the committee but Stratton was unrepentant. For him, the "gesture of goodwill" toward his Zagreb connection was more important.[237]

The fallout around the issue of guests is indicative of a difficulty which simmered through these anxious years. Year by year Stratton's engagement with the international festival circuit was widening and deepening. He was forming close friendships as well as professional relationships with people in this milieu whose advice and judgement were crucial:

> Although it is manifestly beyond the Festival's budget to permit more than one person to travel overseas to make the selections, the films are not chosen in isolation. In almost every country there are informed and helpful people whose advice and often active assistance in arranging screenings has proved invaluable. Very often these good friends write for one or other of the two major publications about world cinema, Variety and International Film Guide. Some of them are directors of other Film Festivals. Put together, they significantly augment the Festival's selection panel. [238]

Stratton was also learning what made some festivals work well while others struggled, how they structured themselves and what external forces worked upon them. In 1968 he saw the Cannes Film Festival brought to a halt by strikes and rioting: in 1970 he witnessed the Berlin Film Festival collapse into a shambles after Dusan Makavejev went public with accusations of political bias. Being *there* inevitably put a distance between Stratton and those holding the fort back *here* in Sydney. By the 1970s Australians had begun to travel more frequently but few in SFF had the opportunities Stratton enjoyed. Resentments and misunderstandings were the outcome. The Committee felt Stratton spent too much time with festival guests, leaving responsibility for running things in the hands of volunteers and festival staff. "Absentee, playboy Director" is the disparaging

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[237] SFF Minutes 7/11/1972
[238] Director's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1974

term applied to him by one Committee member. There was tension between McPherson and Stratton over this and between McPherson and those on the Committee who felt the President needed to take the Director more firmly in hand. It was the kind of minor squabble that could derail the Festival but the overwhelming sense that comes through a study of the existing documentation is that Stratton's was often the voice of reason amidst the mayhem. His responses to sometimes emotionally wrought demands and criticisms were invariably logical and sensible. He thought things through, seldom over-reacted, never panicked. He had abundant self confidence and absolute certainty about the direction he was taking the SFF. Eventually these very attributes would make him vulnerable, but that time was still a few years in the future. For the moment, the SFF trajectory seemed ever onward and upward.

The Festival at the Top of its Form

In 1974 the SFF turned twenty-one. The program reflects a mood of celebration and there is a sense of basking in the glow of many past achievements which Ross Tzannes, now SFF President, took the opportunity to outline:

> Perhaps we can be forgiven at this stage a glance back to our 'youth' in the hope that we can evaluate our role in this city … But for the Festival, many of the developments in world cinema may not have been witnessed here at all: the New Wave of the French Cinema: the early films of such ultimate masters as Bergman, Bertolucci, Ichikawa and Makavejev and great national movements such as the Czech renaissance (so abruptly ended in the political upheavals of 1968) and more recently those of Yugoslavia and Switzerland. We have seen too, the emergence in the 1960s of the Political film to be followed by the Cinema of the Third World … Finally the impact of the Alternative Cinema of the Sixties was reflected in programmes of films by Dwoskin, Baillie and Zwartjes.

Looking back then, the content has changed but the underlying link is there; the desire to bring to Australian audiences cinematic experiences which otherwise might be denied us, and at the same time perform that fascinating cultural exercise uniquely suited to the film, that of creating international understanding by obtaining insight into the lives and hopes of many diverse societies. [239]

The 1974 SFF program catalogue featured, for the first time, a foreword by the Director along with his photograph. Bearded, long hair tied in a ponytail, confident gaze – he seems to bear no resemblance to the "spotty young man" of Michael Swan's memory. Stratton, in his ninth year as Director, was now a man of the world, experienced enough to deal with anything the job might toss up. Tzannes, a young Greek-Australian lawyer, had taken over the SFF Presidency from Ian McPherson in 1972. He was a good organiser, an efficient chairman and he brought his legal knowledge to the position. His appointment marked the end of the "anxious years" and ushered in a period of confidence and success for the SFF. The two men brought complementary skills to their work; they argued but were essentially like-minded in their vision for the SFF's future. Together they made a formidable partnership which would dominate SFF policy and direction until Stratton's departure.

Between 1970 and 1974, the SFF modified its operational structure to more closely reflect its company status; purchased its own premises at 405 Glebe Point Road; abandoned the Wintergarden (and hopes of the Opera House) to take up residence at the State Theatre; introduced a range of more flexible ticketing options which enabled non-subscribers to access many film programs; increased its staff to include, as well as the Director and Administrator positions, a full time secretary and part-time marketing manager; acquired its first commercial sponsorship deal with Fiat; introduced a Short Films Award Competition to support Australian films; expanded programming to include

[239] Tzannes, President's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1974

experimental and avant garde works; started a series of Film Forums to promote discussion about film culture and industry; kept up a steady stream of international visitors; and even found the time and resources to introduce a Travelling Film Festival (TFF) to take a selection of films to rural communities in NSW, Victoria and Queensland.

As Tzannes observes, Stratton was programming a diverse range of films and was abreast of new movements and innovations in cinema. SFF audiences were able to see Coppola's *The Conversation* and Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, Erice's *Spirit of the Beehive*, Warhol's *Trash*, Rohmer's *Love in the Afternoon*, Cammell's *Performance* and Boorman's *Leo the Last*. There were films by Ichikawa, Imamura and Yoshida, by Tarkovsky, Zanussi, Ken Loach, Alain Tanner and Paul Verhoeven. There was Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* and Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*. In 1972 Albie Thoms was asked to arrange an experimental section but the resultant program of 25 films by American "West Coast School" artist Bruce Baillie had only limited appeal. In 1973 the Festival opened with Lindsay Anderson's *O Lucky Man* (which flopped badly prompting Anderson to cut 20 minutes from it) and closed with *Fritz the Cat*. In between it screened *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, Costa-Gavras' *State of Siege* and Lina Wertmuller's *Mimi the Metalworker*. Stephen Dwoskin's *Dyn Amo* turned out to be the surprising crowd pleaser that year. In 1974 the audience favourite was Peter Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris*.

The SFF did all this on a very small budget. In 1972, for example, the festival cost $43,000. The Chicago Film Festival, by comparison, came in at around $150,000 while Cannes was a staggering $700,000.[240] The difference was not just a matter of scale. The SFF was reliant on ticket sales for the bulk of its income, with sponsorship and other subsidies never more than a small percentage. Two things kept the SFF solvent - extremely efficient financial management and an enormous amount of work done by

[240] SFF President's Report, 1972

unpaid volunteers. John Burke, Treasurer for much of the 1960s, describes the input of the various sub-committees as crucial:

> The Festival has always depended, especially in its early days, on unpaid work from committee members and also sub-committees. Now these were not just notional sub-committees … they were very well run and they were very dedicated. And it was very impressive because they kept the Festival alive and afloat.[241]

The contribution of people like Burke and Assistant Treasurer Kevin Troy was vital to the SFF's financial well-being. They were efficient and careful about allocating resources and they planned ahead. It was Troy who encouraged the purchase of the house in Glebe which would be home to the SFF until 2003. Stratton introduced a series of special programs available to the general public at a cost of $10 to help pay for it. The Green Series was so successful that its profits paid out the mortgage within five years.

The TFF was a bold initiative which has survived to the present day. Patricia McDonald describes it as:

> …a deliberate attempt to broaden our base and … [bring] culture to the masses in the country who were languishing without it. That was the sort of philosophy behind it. We really sincerely felt that if you couldn't get to Sydney, that shouldn't stop you being able to see good films. So that's how we started off and we had a mixed bag of responses. [242]

It began as a low key event in 1974, visiting only six centres in NSW. It was financed by a grant from the Film and Television Board of the Australia Council but relied for its success on the same formula as the SFF – unpaid volunteers. Committee members took turns to supervise at each location and one member of staff (David Stratton directed the first year, Carol Hughes the next two) took responsibility for selecting films, arranging

[241] Burke, MLOH 275/5, p2
[242] McDonald, MLOH 275/1-3, p20

freight, booking a projectionist, and finding theatres willing to participate. The secret to success though was the level of enthusiasm from organisers at the local community level – those who wanted the films to come and had lobbied the SFF to put their region on the TFF circuit. Towns with active film societies tended to be most supportive but really taking the TFF to a new centre was always a gamble. There was no way of really knowing in advance whether any anyone would turn up on the night:

> We learnt … that you have to look very carefully at what time of year and if possible what else was on in the town, the centre, and there's always something on. It's the sheep show or the Bachelors and Spinsters Ball, what ever it is. You try to avoid those if you can. And the other important factor was the local committee. We discovered this only gradually, that if you have a local film society … if you can get [that] behind you, doing a lot of local publicity for you, and urging their friends and relations to come, that was a tremendous factor. [243]

The 1974 TFF ran so far over budget that it is surprising the experiment was attempted again but with experience, the SFF managed to streamline organisation and manage the budget to make the Travelling Festival break even or make a small profit.

The choice of films for the TFF was limited by two factors. First, the films had to have commercial distribution in Australia. From time to time, SFF committee members would themselves become temporary "distributors" in order to get a particularly desired film into circulation – paying for rights and crossing their fingers the box office would cover their investment. The second factor was the relatively conservative expectations of the TFF audience. Short films were always popular as was anything which had been well publicised at its SFF screening, such as *The Cars that Ate Paris*. Weir's quirky satire was a bigger hit at these country venues that it proved to be later in the major cities. Perhaps country people understood it better. Variety was the key – by country of origin,

[243] ibid, p21

by genre, by style. Comedy was generally received but “anything with violence in it was a no-no” and even subtitles proved stumbling blocks.” [244]

Again, it is beyond the scope of this study to determine who came to the TFF or what motivated them to attend. From the SFF’s point of view, the Festival was three parts altruism to one part self-interest. The TFF broadened the SFF’s profile and, hopefully, encouraged a few enthusiasts to make the trip to Sydney. But the main purpose of launching the TFF was in many respects a replica of the motivation for launching the SFF itself – a desire to inform and educate, to extend the world view of culturally isolated communities.

While the SFF was busy transforming and expanding itself, the same was going on in the wider community. Outside the SFF, Australia’s cultural landscape had also been undergoing rapid and dramatic change. In 1970, Ubu Films had morphed into the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op which provided support to experimental filmmakers and showed programs of work from the alternative and avant garde film community around the world at its screening venue in Darlinghurst. The Australian Film Development Corporation had been formed with the purpose of funding new and original filmmaking in Australia. In 1973 the Australian Film, Television and Radio School opened. Phil Noyce and Gillian Armstrong were amongst its first students. Initiatives taken by the Gorton administration to kick start the local feature film industry were further developed by the Labor Party when it swept to power in 1972. For the first time in its history, the Australian film industry was subsidized by the public purse.

The Opening night celebrations of the twenty-first Sydney Film Festival reflected these changes and validated, if any validation was needed, the transformation which Stratton’s leadership had brought to it. The event was officially opened by the Prime Minister Gough Whitlam who took the opportunity to announce his governments commitment of

[244] ibid

$14 million to the arts. The film screened was Rouben Mamoulian's 1932 classic *Love Me Tonight* and the legendary director was there himself to introduce it. In keeping with the Hollywood nostalgia theme, Dorothy Holt devised a special fancy dress presentation called *A State Occasion*, which included a stage musical, *Isn't It Romantic* directed by Rex Cramphorn, written and produced by Andrew Jakubowicz and starring Jackie Weaver. Mamoulian presented the first Rouben Mamoulian Award for Short Film to Phil Noyce for *Castor and Pollux*. Noyce's competitors included Martha Ansara, Jeni Thornley, James Ricketson, Gill Armstrong, Tim Burstall and Graham Shirley. The Opening night crowd included cabinet ministers, senators, artists, actors, performers, celebrities, representatives of the trade and a relative newcomer to the Sydney film scene, the funding body bureaucrat. The whole thing was staged in the shabby but picturesque State Theatre which was celebrating its own forty-fifth anniversary that same year. The press was out in force to photograph it all and write it up for the next day's papers. Television went colour in 1974 but the Festival continued to be a sell-out event. In twenty-one years, the SFF had grown from a cobbled together weekend gathering to one of the city's high society cultural events. Something had gone horribly wrong.

The Best and the Most Interesting

A festival can be no better than the films produced during the preceding year.
Richard Roud, Director, London Film Festival, 1960

Ultimately the Festival must stand or fall on the quality of its programming
David Stratton, Director SFF, 1972 [245]

[245] Auty & Hartnoll, 1981, p4; SFF Director's Report, 1972

It was the opinion of a small but significant component of Sydney's film culture community that the SFF had indeed gone horribly wrong, that it had lost its true purpose. Dissenters within the SFF were joined by a number of others – film critics and filmmakers from both the emerging commercial industry and the counter-culture fraternity. In some respects, the issues raised by Baxter, Crouch, Buckley and others in 1968 were not only still unresolved but had increased. In a radio review program broadcast on 2 June 1975, film critic John Hinde encapsulated a concern which was felt by many others too:

> I do love the Sydney Festival a lot more than I hate it. But I can't help being critical of it for moving so fast along that dreadfully old fashioned path of bigger makes better, and especially for growing and glittering in the way it is without taking on any compensations in the way of added functions.

In a seeming contradiction, Hinde went on to list the many functions the SFF had in fact added, including two major retrospectives of Australian film and the travelling festival but the crux of his argument had considerable force:

> Well, these are great things. But what I'm driving at is that they are passive, non-dialectical forms of contact. And what the Sydney Festival is going to need right soon, to justify all its new glitter and celebration, is a lot more two-way participation … Some real extent of two-way participation is the only thing that can keep any big Film Festival from beginning to look absurd and elitist once it really begins to glitter. [246]

What Hinde identified was a shift in the public perception of what a film festival is and how it should serve the community of which it is part. Stephen Alomes, writing about cultural radicalism in the 1960s, describes the emergence, in the 1970s, of the "cult of the self":

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[246] Hinde, 1975

The themes of personal liberation and fulfilment, and youth and sex, encouraged a focus on the self rather than society … In such a climate it was a short step from the 'Now' generation of the 1960s to the 'Me' generation of the 1970s. [247]

This period was marked by an intense desire for self expression. As the 1970s advanced, people came increasingly to want to see the social change happening all about them reflected locally in art and culture. This sense of self-discovery and identity had a unique patina for the "boomer" generation which Stratton and other representatives of the film establishment were perceived not to share or particularly value. Many stakeholders voiced their concern with what was increasingly perceived as the SFF's failure to keep abreast of the times.

One of the most interesting aspects of the SFF story is the contradictions inherent in the person of its longest serving director. In the mid-1970s, Stratton was still a young man, only in his mid thirties, yet he seems remote, distanced from the passions and concerns of men and women only a few years his junior. This may have had something to do with the fact that Stratton was actually physically distant from the Sydney film community so much of the time. Certainly, his trips overseas made him less conscious of events at home so that opportunities to build bridges with local arts and culture establishments were sometimes lost but a more likely explanation is that, in the space of a few years, some fundamental psychological shift took place which separated the old-style film society cinephile from the baby boomer, student radical, counter culture enthusiast. This change in outlook and expectation is perhaps best demonstrated by an examination of the SFF's response to one of the most dramatic social movements of the 1970s – feminism.

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[247] Alomes, 1983, pp 46-47

A Rising Clamour to be Seen and Heard

An urge to create their own cinema and an equally strong urge to interrogate the language and institutions of the whole cinematic apparatus – these are the twin forces that have motivated Australian women filmmakers. [248]

Valwyn Wishart has described the SFF during the 1950s as a place which provided women with a then, in her view, unique opportunity to work on an equal footing with men. It would be a mistake to suggest, though, that this equality in any way reflected what the feminist generation would understand by that term. While there were a number of women serving on SFF committees, they tended to gravitate toward support roles like publicity, public relations and secretarial duties. There were, for example, no women on the Film Advisory Panel until 1977.[249] For the most part, the Short Film Awards followed a similar pattern. No woman made it to the final selection of twelve until 1973 though women were comparatively well represented on the judging panels. Young SFF staff members Toni Barnard and Carol Hughes brought updated gender politics to the office, jolting Gentile and Stratton out of their complacent ways when Hughes instructed the Director to learn not only to make his own coffee but to make it for anyone else who might want some.[250] At this stage, Stratton was, to some degree, sympathetic to the feminist cause but the SFF strongly resisted anything which might make them appear overly political. For example, when Stratton suggested running a series of film clips illustrating gender stereotyping to accompany a special day-long forum, "Film and the Second Sex", held in 1973, the Board vetoed it on grounds it would be using the SFF as a political platform.

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[248] Blonski & Freiberg, 1989, p192
[249] Dorothy Shoemark is the only woman to have served as a film selector on the then Film Selection Sub-Committee in the 1960s
[250] Gentile, CY MLOH 275/69-70

Stratton was a little less accommodating when it came to Festival programming. Between 1965 and 1970, women as filmmakers were present, but barely visible; the odd short film and a few Canadian Film Board documentaries. No feature films by women appeared until 1969 when Tatiana Liosnova's, *Café on Plushicha Street* screened. The following year, one other, then in 1971, a feature by Vera Chytilova, Susan Sontag's *Duet for Cannibals* and Barbara Loden's *Wanda*. One young Australian cinematographer, Martha Ansara, recalls being impressed by Loden's film:

> I was always on the lookout for women's credits on the screen but you hardly ever saw any … there was one very exciting, fascinating film which I can still see in my mind's eye, called Wanda directed by a woman who had been an actor, Barbara Loden … some of the audience rudely stomped out and yet it was a really good film, unmistakeably from a woman's point of view. [251]

In 1970, distinguished filmmaker and long-time SFF member Joan Long wrote to Stratton requesting he appoint a woman to the Film Advisory Panel to help address the issue. His reply was evasive and interesting in that he did say he relied on his overseas contacts to recommend films and some of these were women.[252] This reliance on his international connections may explain why Stratton failed to recognise the strength of local feeling. As the 1970s advanced, many women felt the SFF was unresponsive to the social revolution which was reshaping their own lives. They began actively voicing their sense of disillusionment with it and with its Director who seemed unwilling to take a pro-active position. In 1972 the SFF count of films by women was back to zero but 1973 introduced Australia to Lina Wertmuller and Larissa Shepitko. The collaborative partnerships of Schlondorff and von Trotta and Jef and Su Doring were also recognised as such, though in subsequent years, Stratton showed none of von Trotta's solo work.

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[251] Gillan, op cit, p11
[252] Wishart & Long, MLOH 275/54-56, p46

What these few films do is highlight rather than diminish the failure of Stratton and the SFF to give due importance to women's quest for representation which Blonski and Freiberg identify so eloquently in the above quote.

In the history of the Festival to that point, no retrospectives were devoted to women, either as directors or in any other capacity. No female directors had attended the festival as international guests; indeed none had ever been invited.[253] And in 1975, International Women's Year, in the entire program of forty-five features and sixty-three short films (excluding the Greater Union Awards), only three shorts were directed by women and no features at all. It was time for women to take matters into their own hands:

> A group of us felt that the films that were being programmed in the festival in the 1970s were unrepresentative of films that were being made internationally by women, and that the Sydney Film Festival wasn't being responsive to the times. So the next step was to set up a film festival, in 1975, that would bring in all the films that you'd never see at the Sydney Film Festival. And we called it the International Women's Film Festival. [254]

The International Women's Film Festival (IWFF) was, of course, much more than a knee jerk reaction to the SFF's shortcomings. Organised by a group of about twenty women, many from the Sydney Women's Film Group (SWFG) with funding from the Film and Television Board of the Australia Council, the festival aimed to focus attention on women as filmmakers - their works and their ideas.[255] The program gives an indication of what a handful of women, inexperienced in securing film festival product, could secure globally and locally within a few months. It featured works by Eve Arnold, Germaine Dulac, Agnes Varda, Mai Zetterling, Maya Deren, Dorothy Arzner, Alice Guy Blaché, Mireille Dansereau, Pat Edgar, Joan Long, Paulette McDonagh, Lina Wertmuller, Nellie Kaplan,

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[253] Indian film producer Sarbani Bhattacharya was a guest of the Festival in 1974.
[254] Gillan op cit, p11
[255] Spunner, 1987, p93

Susan Sontag, Leontine Sagan, Leni Riefenstahl, Ayten Kuyululu, Karen Johnson, Susan Shapiro, Joyce Weiland and many others. Only Long, Sontag, Wertmuller and McDonagh had been represented at the SFF.

Jeni Thornley has described the 1970s as the "agit-prop" years when beliefs were strongly held and shared with like-minded groups and organisations through which one was able to express oneself on a political level.[256] Vietnam, equal rights for Aborigines, lobbying for a change of government - these were all part of it, as was the struggle to get women and their issues into the cultural mainstream. As far as these politically motivated people were concerned, the SFF had become part of that cultural mainstream, allied with the ever-growing government bureaucracies shaping Australian film production and with the commercial trade. The independent film community's most repeated criticism was that the Festival had become too commercially oriented and screened too few works of an experimental, non-narrative nature. There was some validity in the latter claim, but there is an argument for the Short Film Awards as a more progressive arena. Barbara Alysen, talking about alternative cinema, has noted that public and critical reception of feminist films changed dramatically in the decade from 1974. She cites the difference between the predominantly negative responses to Thornley's prize-winning film *Maidens* when it screened at the Short Film Awards in 1978, and reception of a number of similarly themed films which screened at the Awards in 1984.[257] These were taken far more seriously and were in general more positively received. The Short Film Awards did not, of course, launch that social change but they did provide one of the pivotal venues at which the development of women's film could be seen and debated.

Awards finalists were chosen by a panel of selectors usually representative of local film industry and culture, a process diametrically opposite to that involved in programming

[256] Thornley, CY MLOH 275/39-40
[257] Alysen, 1985, p311

the mainstream Festival. When Stratton became Director in 1966, he continued the programming policy which the SFF had adopted from the outset – "to gather together each year a cross-section of the best and the most interesting of international cinema."[258] The strategy served well for a long time but eventually there came a point where it began to wear very thin, as did the notion that the quality of the festival was dependent on what was produced in the world in any given year. Until at least the mid 1960s SFF subscribers were, for the most part, more than willing to defer to the Festival Director's programming but as time passed it became increasingly difficult to sustain this rather general acquisition policy. Film industry and culture within Australia had diversified to the extent that simple notions of a good/bad aesthetic were impossible to sustain. Festival audiences became both more discerning and more demanding about the kinds of films they would like to see, the kinds of filmmakers they wanted represented. Because "the best and the most interesting" are completely subjective criteria, the inevitable question arose; best and most interesting to whom? Martyn Auty, writing about the London Film Festival (LFF), notes the way successive festival directors, including Ken Wlaschin, whom Stratton engaged as a Programming Consultant for the SFF, all unquestioningly assume the validity of the "quality" policy:

> The over-riding impulse in all LFF brochures is to defend and celebrate the achievement in the individual films (ergo in the festival itself) of some mystical standard of excellence often referred to as 'quality'. Yet this quality is never defined, let alone interrogated, by its advocates who simply assume that it may be readily recognised, understood and tacitly transmitted within the consensus of 'taste'. [259]

The assumption of curatorial integrity, of the festival director's "mystical" abilities to determine "quality" has wide-ranging implications. Film festivals themselves have

[258] Director's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1980
[259] Auty, 1981, p4

become the conduits through which good cinematic grain is separated from inferior cinematic chaff. As Julian Stringer has noted:

> Festival screenings determine which movies are distributed in distinct cultural arenas, and hence which movies critics and academics are likely to gain access to. This last point is hardly negligible. As so many of the non-Western films that Western audiences are likely to be familiar with emerged as festival entries, scholars tend to approach them through the nostalgic invocation of those moments when non-Western industries were "discovered" – that is, discovered by Westerners – at major international competitions. [260]

Like the LFF, the SFF also never felt itself required to define its standard of quality nor question whether other approaches to programming might be possible. Scott Murray encapsulated the problem in his review of the 1974 International Perth Film Festival:

> The Perth festival has an advantage over the two eastern majors in that it is not constrained by a desire to embrace the widest possible international spread. It can discriminate creatively, sacrificing range for concentration, diversity for quality. [261]

The world of film had become too big, too diverse, too fragmented for the notion of the "best from around the world" to have any real programming integrity. The MFF/SFF juggernaut had itself become too big and unwieldy to respond quickly or imaginatively to change. Again, Perth provides the contrast.

Guests of the 1974 Perth International Film Festival included Adolfas Mekas, scholar, writer and director of the American film underground movement, and Werner Herzog, prominent director of the German New Wave.[262] Sydney's guest of honour that year was Rouben Mamoulian, the Russian/American director of theatre and film who made an important contribution to the development of cinematic art at the beginning of the sound

[260] Stringer, 2001, pp134-5
[261] *Cinema Papers*, December 1974, p303
[262] ibid

era.[263] In 1975, the SFF's high-profile guest was American actor/producer Warren Beatty whose social satire *Shampoo* was opening night film. Such big name actors and directors were drawcards for the media and garnered the most attention from mainstream Festival audiences but often the independent film community, especially the avant garde, felt little connection to them. Ross Tzannes recalls Mamoulian as "articulate, sophisticated, a scholar and a wit" but many others recall him as impatient and arrogantly dismissive of his audience.[264] Mamoulian was in his seventies and not in good health. He and his wife proved difficult from their day of arrival - disappointed in the film tribute program, unhappy with the Festival's facilities, and so on. Beatty had made an impact in Hollywood with the violent biographical picture *Bonnie and Clyde*. Hal Ashby directed *Shampoo* and Robert Towne co-wrote the script with Beatty but, despite the involvement of so much Hollywood talent, both the film and its star seemed a particularly lightweight choice.

Beatty's visit, while successful in publicity terms, was perhaps not worth the one thousand dollar appearance fee the SFF discovered, after the Festival was over, that it had agreed to pay him.[265] These examples illustrate the difference between the older established festivals and the new, leaner versions like the Perth International Film Festival – Sydney and Melbourne might have the wherewithal to draw a legend like Mamoulian or a pop icon like Beatty but Werner Herzog was a legend in the making. To have the chance to meet and talk with him would have been a very exciting opportunity for filmmakers and film lovers attuned to contemporary developments in international cinema.

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[263] The same year, Argentinian director Raymundo Gleyzer came to present his film *The Traitors*. He met an Australian woman and they returned to Argentina together. Gleyzer was a pioneer of the "ciné de base" movement aimed at disclosing social injustice. In 1976 he was arrested, tortured, and murdered by the military dictatorship then ruling his homeland.

[264] Interviews Gentile, Saint et al

[265] As far as I can tell, no other guest was ever paid to appear at the SFF.

For the moment, discontent remained on the margins and did not yet affect the SFF financially. Even those who most complained about the event bought tickets and went along because the Festival still provided a unique opportunity to engage with film in a way impossible within the commercial exhibition milieu. And the programming still offered a range of new and old films which could not be accessed anywhere else in Sydney. While theatrical distribution would enable the public to see films by Ashby, Antonioni, Chabrol, Wenders, Saura and Rivette, other SFF filmmakers like Arturo Ripstein, King Hu, Alexander kluge, even Alain Tanner, were not going to find their way into commercial cinemas any time soon. The counter culture community grumbled but went anyway, joining the aging but loyal band of long-time supporters. The bulk of ticket buyers still came from the professional, middle class heartland which had always made up the Festival's support base. Their subscriptions were supplemented by ticket sales to the "National Cinema" evenings and special screenings open to the general public. It was crucial to satisfy their needs if the SFF was to survive. Stratton understood the Festival must maintain its appeal across a wide spectrum of Sydney's film community. Like any commercial cinema, the SFF relied on box-office takings to survive and that meant programming a range of accessible and high profile films and inviting similarly accessible guests.

The SFF opened in 1975 with as much razzmatazz as the previous year. There was cause for celebration. Not only was the Festival featuring a huge retrospective of Australian cinema, but the Opening night film, Ken Hannam's *Sunday Too Far Away*, was Australian made:

…that year, [the Festival] was paying tribute to Australian cinema old and new, and although Hannam couldn't attend the evening (the film's first public screening in Australia), it was a tremendous success. [266]

Australia's romanticised outback identity was the theme which Dorothy Holt and her sub-committee drew on to create their gala event but any element of jingoism was subsumed by the sheer joy and pride which seemingly everyone there felt. The Australian film industry was once again a living breathing force and the Sydney Film Festival was the perfect place to celebrate that swift and astonishing achievement.

[266] Stratton, 1980, p104

CHAPTER THREE

BEGUILING TIMES: THE SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL AND AUSTRALIAN CINEMA 1954 - 1983

Feature films are made in every advanced country except Australia, and in some which are a good deal less advanced.
Sylvia Lawson [267]

These are beguiling times. For the first time inside half a century Australian feature film production is becoming not only regular but of a standard and diversity quite unforeseeable just seven or eight years ago.
Ross Tzannes[268]

Most film historians have assumed the SFF's interest in Australian cinema began with the film revival of the 1970s[269] but the engagement with and commitment to Australian cinema actually goes back to those first planning sessions in John Heyer's office at the Shell Film Unit. From 1954 on, the Festival made promotion of the Australian film industry a programming priority. This commitment was never merely a question of expedience. The earliest surviving records indicate a clear policy of actively seeking out and programming as much Australian material as possible. By taking Australian films and filmmakers seriously, by profiling their work in a celebratory manner, the SFF helped generate a sense of cultural legitimacy for a national film industry, thereby contributing to the resurgence of film production in the 1970s. Once the revival was underway, the Festival had to reposition itself, philosophically and practically, to deal with the more challenging production environment created by the conflicting demands of audience, filmmakers, funding agencies and the many other groups with an investment in Australian film culture.

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[267] Lawson, 1985, p150
[268] Tzannes, Festival Program Catalogue 1976
[269] Adams & Shirley, 1989, p276 et al

The Old and the New

Much of the Festival's interest in cinematic Australiana was initiated by David Donaldson and Ian McPherson who had become interested in it through their association with the Sydney University Film Group.[270] In 1954 the film group had been responsible for restoring a complete print of Tal Ordell's *The Kid Stakes* and it continued with a policy of promoting vintage cinema whenever possible.[271] Donaldson was also inspired by the dedication to their craft of people like Heyer[272] and Cecil Holmes who would talk of his work on *Captain Thunderbolt*, and wanted to do what he could to have their achievements acknowledged.

With the feature film industry at a virtual standstill, the Film Committee had to find other ways to source material. A small pamphlet advertising the upcoming inaugural Festival noted that 'special emphasis is being laid on Australian films" and called for Australian producers to "submit their best recent films of all types".[273] Each Committee member pushed along his own barrow. Mervyn Scales, Vice-President of the Sydney Scientific Film Society, encouraged screenings of science and natural history films. He invited Patricia McDonald, a science student at Sydney University and also a SSFS member, to come and help out. McDonald would later serve as President of the SFF. Frank Bellingham, President of the Australian Federation of Amateur Cine Societies, was the force behind the Amateur Film Program. Stanley Hawes promoted the interests of the

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[270] Donaldson is still researching and writing about Australian film history. He regards himself as a "film nostalgist" and operates a vintage film library in Adelaide.
[271] SUFG third term Program Catalogue, 1954, p8: Donaldson, 2002: Klava, CY MLOH 275/43-47
[272] Donaldson had been told that Heyer *walked* from Melbourne to Sydney in the hope of getting work on a film he had heard about.
[273] SFF Ephemera Collection, Mitchell Library, Sydney

DOI Film Unit, ensuring Australian-made documentaries got a run, and independent filmmakers such as John Kingsford Smith did the same for their productions.

There were half a dozen Australian films in the first SFF.[274] One of them, *In Harbour*, a 10-minute short shot on monochrome 35mm, was made by a young woman named Joan Boundy who would later make a huge contribution to Australian cinema as the screenwriter/producer Joan Long[275]. The amateur films were presented in a discrete program separate to the main Festival. They were often of a very high standard and found an audience amongst festival-goers keen for any and every experience. The Festival maintained the Amateur Program until 1965 when it was superseded by the emergence of the experimental and avant garde movements, in some senses its natural offspring.[276]

The Scientific Film Program included an item about snake venom, a biography of the motion picture camera and a production of the Shell Film Unit on the subject of testing methods for wear and tear of piston rings. Fortunately Shell redeemed itself by contributing John Heyer's The *Back of Beyond.* It was the first public screening of the documentary which has since become a classic of Australian cinema. Alan Stout speculated this would be the case when he reviewed the film in a radio broadcast the same year. [277] *The Back of Beyond* was received with great enthusiasm and became a Festival highlight.[278]

In 1955 a selection of amateur, experimental, and scientific films was again offered, along with a range of DOI films and a production of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit, *The Hungry Miles*. The biggest attraction proved to be a full screening of

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[274] *In Harbour; Ray of Hope; The Back of Beyond; School's Out; Rabbit's Stew; Overlanders of Tomorrow*.

[275] *In Harbour* also played at MFF and later received a commercial theatrical release.

[276] SFF Minutes, 5/10/1965

[277] Stout, ABC Radio broadcast, 1954

[278] According to one SFF member, Shell dithered for weeks before finally allowing the Festival to screen the film. Rumour has it Heyer had Supreme run off 36 prints before he was happy.

Raymond Longford's *The Sentimental Bloke*[279] though no-one thought to invite the director himself to see his restored masterpiece. The Committee assumed him long dead and were mortified on discovering, too late, that he was still living in Sydney. Stout immediately sent a letter of apology which Longford graciously responded to[280] but this unfortunate omission merely confirmed all Longford's bitter views about the industry and its shabby treatment of him.[281] Longford sometimes visited Supreme Films Studios while John Heyer was working there in the 1950s. Heyer recalled his own sense of sadness as he watched Longford shuffle off to begin his job as nightwatchman on the Sydney wharves.[282]

In 1958 the Festival introduced a Saturday matinee of vintage Australian films[283] and screened Lee Robinson's *Dust in the Sun* with lead actor Chips Rafferty in attendance. It did not go down well with the audience.[284]

Selecting Australian content could be a complex and at times troubled business. Between 1954 and 1967, Australian film selection was the responsibility of the Film Committee and the Festival Director. Malcolm Otton convened the Committee for much of this period with Dorothy Shoemark taking over in 1966. It was always a large group and everyone on it was strongly opinionated and outspoken, with "forceful, individual egos" which required considerable management skill to keep under control.[285] There were sometimes displays of arrogance. In 1963, the ABC withdrew *Dancing Orpheus* in protest at what it took to be an insulting program annotation. Otton defended the

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[279] See the ScreenSound monograph of Tony Buckley's Longford Lyell Lecture for a moving account of the film's discovery and restoration. A complete negative was discovered in 1975 and the film has now been restored to the original release version by the National Film and Sound Archive.

[280] A segment of his reply is quoted in Gillan in which he describes the film as a tribute from himself and Lyell to "the lives of a tough mob" (Gillan, 1993, p14)

[281] Gillan, 1993, p14

[282] Heyer, CY MLOH 275/67-68

[283] *The Romance of Runnibede* 1927; *The Kelly Gang* 1920

[284] Klava, MLOH 275/43-47, p39

[285] Shoemark, Interview with the author, 14/8/2004

Committee's right to critical comment but patronising and high handed attitudes in program notes occurred sufficiently often for Martin Long to observe, "The lofty prejudgements served up as programme annotations are a continuing irritation."[286] Despite bouts of cynicism, the Committee was serious about local production and endeavoured to make the best of what was available. With such sparse material there was little need for editorialising but the political climate of the times did affect the SFF's decision on one Australian production.

Cecil Holmes 1956 feature film *Three in One* has been called the best of the few made in the 1950s.[287] Holmes was a member of the Communist Party of Australia at a time when that affiliation severely limited opportunities for a career in film. Holmes offered the feature to Donaldson:

> Like any other film I was listing it sight unseen … suddenly I heard we had to preview it! Quite a large ad hoc panel arrived, to my surprise. I thought the film had substantial, indeed exciting merits together with the over statement that one came to recognise as Cecil Holmes' style … But everyone seemed to be down on the film, even before we discussed it. John Kingsford Smith seemed to be the leader of this strange little event. [288]

The film was rejected but this decision caused fierce division amongst the membership. The more conservative, feeling nervous that the Festival, only in its third year, would be tarnished by association, endorsed the decision. Others felt that the opportunity to screen any new Australian film, particularly one which had some merit, should be taken. Then there were those who lined up for or against the film on ideological grounds. Bad feeling persisted sufficient for SFF President Frank Bellingham to write exhorting the membership to "all be individuals of the one corporate body, working together with

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[286] SFF Director's Report 1963, p4: Long, 1963
[287] Murray, 1994, p31: Stratton, 1980, p4; Weir, 1985, p147
[288] Email from David Donaldson to David McKnight, 21/5/03 quoted in McKnight, Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture, SFF, 2003

common interest toward the same ideals."[289] Today, there is a general sense of regret amongst those involved in that decision.[290] It was a moment when the political climate overwhelmed good intentions but it is rather a shabby story made worse by the fact that Holmes continued to provide the SFF with information, film recommendations and on occasion film prints of Russian classics which he had imported through his own distribution company New Dawn Films.[291] *Three in One* sold to six countries and was well received on the international Festival circuit, screening at Venice and winning prizes at Karlovy Vary and Edinburgh. It was never released in Australia though Ken Hall, then General Manager of GTV-9, acquired it for commercial television.[292] Perhaps the only positive outcome of the whole incident was that it alerted the SFF to formalise the role of the Film Selection Sub-Committee.[293]

While the *Three in One* case is an example of the impact of the prevailing political climate it is also evidence of a general tendency in film festivals all over the world to favour those films which most closely reflect liberal humanist values. Certainly in its formative years, the SFF's most successful films were by filmmakers – Kurosawa, Ray, Bergman, and others – whose work is underpinned by humanist ideology and who seldom challenge the political order. *Three in One*'s socialist philosophy pushed it beyond the SFF's comfort zone.

In its first twenty years of operation, the Festival screened tributes to Charles Chauvel, Frank Hurley, Damien Parer, Arthur Higgins, Ken Hall and many others. Wherever possible, connections were made to current activity in the industry. For example, the Higgins tribute, which the cinematographer attended, also featured three films by a new

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[289] SFF Program Catalogue 1965; Donaldson CY MLOH 275/27-31; Barr, MLOH 275/61-63, pp19-20
[290] Donaldson CY MLOH 275/27-31; Barr CY MLOH 275/61-63, pp19-20
[291] Donaldson, MLOH 275/27-31p59 & 69
[292] Shirley & Adams, 1989, p191; Holmes, 1986, p45
[293] Donaldson, CY MLOH 275/27-31

Australian cinematographer, David Muir.[294] Where possible, the subjects of the tributes attended screenings and participated in Q&A sessions and film forums. In almost every case the response from public and press was enthusiastic.[295] Film critics such as Sylvia Lawson at *Nation* were quick to hook Festival success stories into their argument for revitalising a home grown industry. Other trade papers did likewise.[296] Again, the Festival's ability to attract media attention meant the positive message about the by then virtually abandoned tradition of film production reached a wider public. In 1960, John Griffen-Foley, SFF committee member and film writer for the *Daily Telegraph* ran a story on the Chauvel retrospective which he described as the "first-night highlight" of the Festival.[297]

Donaldson was behind this particular event too, securing an introduction to Charles Chauvel's widow and creative partner Elsa Chauvel who had many of the complete films stored in cans in the basement of her house.[298] With her support, he negotiated with rights holders Universal Pictures for permission to screen a selection of films[299] and then lobbied the National Film Library to have new negatives made. Elsa Chauvel agreed to speak at the opening which, as intended, drew media attention.[300]

The Festival's strong commitment to Australia's cinematic history helped keep the film industry issue in the public arena. It provided excellent ammunition to throw at a recalcitrant government and, most importantly, it established, to the trade as much as to the government, that Australians themselves responded positively to their own world

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[294] *The Sun*, 31/05/1962
[295] SFF Press Books 1961-1975
[296] For example *Film Weekly* 21/05/1964, 18/06/1964; *Daily Telegraph* 15/06/1964; *SMH* 15/06/1964
[297] Griffen-Foley, 1960
[298] Donaldson, op cit
[299] *In the Wake of the Bounty* 1933: *Heritage* 1935: *Uncivilised* 1936: *Forty Thousand Horsemen* 1940. Interestingly *Jedda* 1955 was not among the films screened. Possibly the rights were not with this distributor.
[300] SFF Press Book, 1960

represented on the screen. In June 1964, less than two months after parliament abandoned debate of his report, Senator Vincent addressed an SFF Forum entitled "The Australian Film Industry: What of its Future?" in which he encouraged the audience to keep lobbying for implementation of his recommendations, stressing that without such pressure no change was likely to eventuate.[301] The SFF joined the film industry guilds and other organisations in agitating, unsuccessfully, for resumption of the debate.[302]

In 1967, the Festival ran three extremely well received screenings of Tony Buckley's documentary *Forgotten Cinema* which featured extracts from a number of early Australian films. As David Stratton has noted, this exposure spring boarded the issue into the political arena.[303] Senator Doug McClelland organised a screening before Parliament, famously requesting members hang their heads in shame for what had not been done for the local industry and Prime Minister Gorton was cajoled into agreeing to future support for the industry.[304] On the strength of the great public interest it had generated at the Festival Buckley felt able to offer his documentary to Bruce Gyngell who purchased television rights for ATN-7.[305] *Forgotten Cinema* wasn't a one-off. Films on the same topic, *The Passionate Industry* and *The Pictures that Moved*, both produced by Joan Long, were similarly received when they screened.[306] Buckley and Long were important advocates for the film industry, committed to ensuring an Australian film presence in the SFF. Both continued their involvement with the Festival long after their own film careers were firmly established, though both were often in disagreement with its policies and direction.

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[301] Shirley & Adams, 1989, p213
[302] SFF Minutes 6/10/1964
[303] Stratton, 1980, p11
[304] ibid
[305] Buckley, Interview with author, 3/12/2004
[306] Made in 1973 and 1982 respectively

Perhaps one of the most effective ways the Festival helped the industry was by the sheer force of contrast it could illustrate through its programming. The 1964 program included Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*, Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel* and Ozu's *An Autumn Afternoon*. What did Australia have to match those? With the exception of Cecil Holmes's *I, the Aboriginal* [307] which was moderately well received, local offerings were perceived as less than inspiring. The press was quick to pick up on this troubling discrepancy. *The Bulletin* had a go, with Martin Long observing that, "even those Australian films that could be called worthy and promising still seem to be decades behind those from other countries in style and expertise." [308] John Baxter called CFU productions of this period "no more than bland and dishonest commercials typifying the worst aspects of the local cinematic establishment".[309] Neil Beggs articulates the shortcomings in his 1960 article for *Film Journal*:

> The faults of Australian documentaries are legion. After seeing a few dozen, one begins to suspect that all the scriptwriters were trained in radio, that the cameramen have not grasped the idea of movement and excitement in their subject, and that the editors have had no say in the photography and shooting-script of the films (if there has been a shooting-script) ...Shots of cranes hauling bales up into a ship is excuse enough for a long tally of statistics about Australian exports, or for a fruity-voiced homily on the virtues and advantages of team work in industry. Often the words could be run on with any of a score of other shots in the film: there is no immediacy or relevance about them at all … The cameramen linger on the obvious humdrum aspects of their subject. [310]

One documentary which came in for special criticism was the CFU production *Music in the Making* by Malcolm Otton and R. Maslyn Williams, which Long, in the same *Bulletin*

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[307] The political environment had altered enough for Holmes now to be directing documentaries for the ABC
[308] Long, 1964
[309] Baxter, 1970, pp 81-82
[310] Beggs, 1985, pp 100-103

article called “a dully functional compilation”[311]. Its limitations were so evident to one young Englishman that he wrote to the SFF Committee demanding an explanation for its inclusion. That young man was David Stratton. The SFF responded by inviting him to join the Festival – an act of considerable generosity considering Otton himself was on the Committee. Ian Klava programmed a good deal of CFU material but Stratton felt most CFU films were below Festival standard and was frustrated by the poor quality of short films made locally until 1969 when Peter Weir’s work impressed him.[312] But the mid 1960s to mid 1970s was a decade of creative expansion for the CFU[313] and some of its more innovative productions did screen in the Festival during those years.

O’Regan divides film society engagement with cinema into two phases - the "discourse of the documentary" in the late 1940s and early 1950s and "the discourse of the feature film" in the late 1950s and 1960s. He sees this division as representative of the “diminishing social importance of films in terms of aiding post-war reconstruction and national development and its replacement by a perceived cultural importance of film as an art and as the expression of ‘the personality’ of a ‘people’ or its director.”[314] The SFF bridged this divide, creating a continuity of discourse about both documentary and fiction film so that, by the 1970s, documentaries and short films particularly came to be seen in nation building terms once more. But the frame of reference is very different. The CFU model was replaced by one in which individual filmmakers used their work to engage with contemporary notions of the nation. I’m thinking here of people like Martha Ansara, Tom Zubrycki, Jeni Thornley, and Curtis Levy all of whom used the SFF to showcase their films both as artworks and as political arguments.

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[311] This production probably reflects less on the filmmakers than on CFU Producer-in-Chief Stanley Hawes who implemented a set of conservative regulations which many filmmakers at the unit found stultifying. (David Stratton, 1980, p59: Albert Moran, 1991, Chapter 3)
[312] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p22
[313] Moran, 1991, Chapter 4
[314] O’Regan, 1987

In 1975, the Festival ran what is probably the first major retrospective of Australian cinema[315] - almost 70 full feature films and selected excerpts under the title "Salute to Australian Film". Among the films screened were *Captain Thunderbolt* and *Three in One*, which perhaps went some way to redress the poor treatment Cecil Holmes had received in 1956. The program was financed by the Film, Radio & TV Board of the Australia Council and was accompanied by a twenty-page booklet which included an introduction by David Stratton, an essay by Joan Long and a comprehensive filmography of all known productions from 1906 to 1975 compiled by Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper. There was enough interest in the event for an anonymous donor to provide the necessary $1700 required to have a 35 mm print struck of Maslyn Williams's marvellous 1951 documentary *Mike and Stefani* so Festival-goers might see that previously maligned director at his best.[316] Again, public response was strong and again, media and interested cultural institutions used the Festival screenings to publicly debate the issue of a film industry which by this stage actually had a number of new films to talk about.[317] Hodsdon, Moran and others have written about the rhetoric of loss which built up as Australians identified and embraced their early cinema. There is evidence of this in the SFF audience response to cinematic Australiana. Until the 1975 retrospective, most programs had screened only one or two features in their entirety, plus fragments of other features or short excerpts from documentaries. This presentation tended to reinforce the belief that there was a deep wealth of other material waiting to be unearthed, a belief further enhanced by the Buckley and Long documentaries. This element of nostalgic loss coloured the way SFF audiences received the first offerings of the revival period, creating a disparity between desire and reality.

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[315] According to Edmondson & Pike, 1982, p59
[316] *SMH*, 4/06/1975
[317] SFF Press Book, 1978

The Film Buffs, the Festival People, the Trendies, the Underground

By the mid to late 1960s, film all over the world was in a state of experiment, innovation and change. Despite its tiny population, Denmark was producing features. Economically impoverished India was making art house masterpieces to complement its Bollywood output. In 1968 David Stratton found himself trying to explain to a bemused Satyajit Ray why Australia had no film industry of its own.[318] That state of affairs was about to change – quickly and dramatically. But back in 1968 Stratton had no idea just how difficult the rebirth process would prove to be for himself and for the Festival.

Under Ian Klava's directorship and subsequently under David Stratton's, the Festival continued to support Australian short films, documentaries and, as soon as they began to be made, feature length films too. In 1960 Tim Burstall and Bruce Beresford[319] both had shorts in the Festival's main program heralding a new generation of filmmakers. Richard Mason's controversial CFU production *From the Tropics to the Snow* screened in 1965 and was well received by audiences and critics. Aboriginal welfare groups handed out leaflets in the foyer before the screening of Ian Dunlop's *The Aborigines of Australia.* Giorgio Mangiamele's feature film *Clay* was scheduled the same year. Klava recalls it was openly laughed at while Ron Blair wrote that the film "…compared rather badly even with the small amount of the Festival's dead wood."[320] Today, Stratton is a great supporter of Australian film. He has published two books on it and in his current role as film critic, is generally sympathetic to its productions. Through the 1960s and 1970s, as Director of the Festival, he maintained the same policy of support and encouragement believing, I think, that the public would do likewise. Unfortunately audiences that had snuggled up to the old proved less willing to embrace the new.

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[318] Stratton, CY MLOH 275/48-50

[319] Burstall, *The Black Man and his Bride;* Beresford, *The Hunter*. Burstall's *The Prize*, which was screened very successfully at MFF seems not to have been seen in Sydney.

[320] Klava MLOH 275/43-47, p40: *Honi Soit*, 23/06/1965

Festival-goers, it seemed, would not support a film just because it was made in Australia. In fact, familiarity sometimes bred contempt … or embarrassment. In 1969, Stratton got another chance to run an Australian feature film but the experience again proved less than encouraging.

Tim Burstall's directorial debut *2000 Weeks* had had a brief commercial release through Columbia earlier in the year and been mauled by Melbourne critics.[321] Festival audiences in both Sydney and Melbourne had been sympathetic to Burstall's short films and Stratton felt the feature deserved support despite its flaws.[322] It was not to be. The screening, attended by key cast and crew, was a disaster. The audience sniggered and guffawed to such an extent that lead actress Jeannie Drynen ran from the theatre in tears. George Miller was there and recalls someone connected with the film standing up and shouting "Give it a go you apes!"[323] Stratton would later write that the experience soured Burstall, alienating him for all time from "the film buffs, the festival people, the trendies, the underground"[324] though Burstall himself observed, perhaps facetiously, that he'd found the "audience feedback" very helpful.[325] Even those most desirous of supporting the new industry found themselves damning the film with faint praise. Anne Deveson, reviewing it in *The Sun*, wrote "I once said I would never make allowances for something on the grounds that it was Australian. I am about to break that rule."[326] The evening proved a terrible disappointment to both the filmmakers and the SFF which had struggled so hard over the years to keep Australian film alive but *2000 Weeks* did have an impact on others who saw it such as the 19-year old Gillian Armstrong who was

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[321] Stratton, 1980, pp 23-24
[322] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p20
[323] Gillan, op cit, p15
[324] Stratton, 1980, p22
[325] Burstall in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p261
[326] Deveson, 1969

"freaked out" by the experience of seeing her own countrymen and women up there on screen. [327]

The *2000 Weeks* episode was indicative of a problem which came to preoccupy the Festival. Tim Burstall sums up the prevailing realities for filmmakers seeking support from Australian distribution companies which he describes as nothing more than "office boys for their [U.S.] parent companies".[328] Active investment in local productions would need to be levered a little at a time and the best leverage was positive audience support of films which did get made. Burstall's next film *Stork* did so well commercially that its initially reluctant distributor Roadshow decided to begin investing in local film production[329] but less commercial productions – those "adventurous in concept and scope … which had some intellectual content and signs of cinematic literacy"[330] – what chance did they have of reaching a receptive audience? This is where the Festivals could and sometimes did provide the necessary brute force but the policy could be counterproductive when the product either wasn't up to a standard the audience expected or the audience wasn't quite up to the demands of the film. On this particular issue, the Festival found itself between a rock and a hard place – many filmmakers wanted to litmus test their films at festivals but the producers and the extended trade remained cautious, fearing a poor reception would signal box-office death. The SFF was dogged by this difficulty until well into the 1980s and to some extent remains so today.

While the SFF was dedicated to the advancement of Australian film, it did not become deeply involved in lobbying for political change as it had on censorship. The censorship battle was more contained and manageable, the outcomes more delineated. Also censorship was something which increasingly affected the SFF right across its

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[327] Stratton, 1980, p214
[328] Burstall, op cit
[329] Dermody & Jacka, 1987, Vol 1, p118
[330] ibid, p171

programming and was crucial to determining its international credibility. From 1968 on, Stratton's desire for, and commitment to, an Australian features industry is never in doubt but his personal vision for the SFF was dominated by international rather than local considerations. He saw himself as an "international" person and the Festival as part of an international network of festivals. In one sense, screening poorly made local features and shorts went against every programming bone in his body. But it is also true that Stratton and others at the SFF found the complex relationships within the local industry trying and sometimes a little soul destroying. There seemed never to be any commonality of purpose. This was especially so with short films which everyone on the Festival Committee felt were, at various stages, simply not worth the trouble and stress their programming caused.

Once the 1970s revival took hold, the Festival's philosophy of aligning itself primarily with the interests of the trade and government funding bodies caused some conflict with its supporters within the counter culture movement who believed a film festival the appropriate venue for presenting bold, innovative and challenging work even if it was unlikely to please everyone or generate commercial sales. This criticism is fair to the extent that the SFF was inevitably linked into a policy which favoured the middle ground so that its greatest advantage – connecting filmmakers with possible distributors and future investors – also meant the marginalising of filmmakers who sought a different agenda.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the alternative film community developed a kind of love-hate relationship with the SFF which it saw as part of the film culture establishment and therefore in some sense an adversary. In the drug culture era of "happenings", experimental filmmakers thought the Festival represented the wrong kind of screening environment – too staid, too conservative, its audiences not tolerant or open enough to engage with the avant garde. Rejecting the SFF was a way to assert sub-culture status

but at the same time, experimental filmmakers strongly desired successful screenings at the Festival and deeply resented the failure of its audience to embrace their work. Experimental filmmakers Arthur and Corinne Cantrill vented their bitterness in their own journal, writing, "Should [experimental] film be shown at the Sydney or Melbourne Film Festivals, it will be merely meat for the howling fascist film buff hyenas to tear apart." [331]

Many experimental filmmakers, Paul Winkler, Albie Thoms, Aggie Read and Sydney Film Co-Op manager Phillip Noyce among them, continued to engage with the SFF as it represented one of the very few opportunities they had to have their work screened beyond their own circle and to see a range of contemporary international cinema. Money was always an issue for local filmmakers. A screening at the Co-op cinema meant a sympathetic audience and some box office return while the SFF did not pay for participating films and its audience was often hostile to the work itself. These factors would certainly have influenced Albie Thoms' decision to launch his first feature, *Marinetti*, in a commercial cinema rather than at the Festival.[332] The film played at the Wintergarden the evening after the SFF closed with the Festival providing projection facilities. The furore that resulted has become part of Australian independent film legend but in a way, both parties benefited. Thoms made most of his budget back on the night while many festival-goers remain convinced they saw *Marinetti* at the SFF that year.

Philosophical differences between local filmmakers and the Festival increased once the experimental film community found itself disenfranchised by the post-revival institutional support structures which favoured industry over art.[333] As Barrett Hodsdon observes, "Inevitably independent film would be politically over-ridden as cultural nationalism was harnessed to build a broader film industry base." [334] In essence, the SFF hitched its

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[331] *Cantrills Filmnotes*, March 1978, p6
[332] Petzke, 2004, p19
[333] See Zuvela, 2003; *Cantrills Filmnotes*, April 1981, p6
[334] Hodsdon, 2001, p108

wagon to the same horse, but, as the *2000 Weeks* episode showed all too plainly, it wasn't always a comfortable ride. There was much to be said for the approach adopted by SFF President Ross Tzannes who wrote:

> Our concern as Australians is the concern for the attainment of excellence in Australian film … We believe that in presenting to our audiences a representative sample of the best cinema from a great number of countries we best serve this goal. [335]

It was perhaps an early manifestation of this philosophy which prompted the SFF in 1971, to spend an Arts Council Grant of $3,000 given to "help with the promotion of contemporary Australian films" on an airfare for an overseas delegate to come and judge the Short Film Awards.[336] International judges turned out to be something of a problem but the Awards scheme itself was a truly inspired idea.

The Short Film Awards

With issues around feature production proving so difficult, the SFF began looking for another way to make a positive contribution to local film production and culture. It met with the independent film sector to toss around suggestions and Aggie Read came up with the idea of an industry-sponsored short film competition.[337] Oddly enough it was a cigarette company, W.D.& H.O. Wills, which first sponsored the Awards, later Greater Union picked up the tab and now the competition continues as the Dendy Awards. The AFI Awards had been operating since 1958 and the Melbourne Film Festival had an

[335] Tzannes, President's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1976
[336] SFF Minutes, 7/07/1970
[337] Thoms, Email to author, 22/12/2004

International Short Films competition.[338] The SFF felt the Sydney competition would complement these and provide local audiences with the opportunity to see all the films of all the Awards finalists which had a great impact on the filmmakers themselves as I discuss later in the chapter.

The Benson & Hedges Awards for Australian Short Films were introduced in 1970 by which time the SFF was based at the Wintergarden Theatre in Rose Bay. The judging panel included Don Anderson, film critic for *Nation*: David Bairstow, from the National Film Board of Canada, and long-time SFF supporter Phil Jones, Manager of the Gala Cinema. John Heyer selected the final winners. Entries included Christopher McGill's *No Roses for Michael* (the winner), Chris Noonan's *Could It Happen Here?* and an animation by Yoram Gross. As early as 1971 film critics were taking the event seriously. *The Bulletin* devoted three pages and cover lines to an article, delightfully entitled "The Underground Filmmakers Crop Up" in which Sandra Hall analysed the films as the inaugural productions of the Experimental Film and Television Fund.[339]

In following years the SFF, in consultation with representatives of the independent film sector in Sydney, revamped the event, greatly lifting its profile by programming the films together in a session open to the general public.[340] This decision angered some in the filmmaking community who felt it ghettoized Australian work,[341] but it proved popular with the public. For example, in 1972, 780 people paid their $1 per ticket to attend a mid-week screening of the final selection. A total of sixty-six films (all completed after April 1971) were entered and there were twelve finalists in three categories – Documentary; Experimental; Fiction - with a winner in each. Total prize money came to $3000 and the other nine finalists received box office takings divided equally. CFU films were barred

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[338] AFI History, http://www.afi.org.au/about/AwardsHistory.pdf: Kalina, 2001, p37
[339] Hall, 1971, pp34-36
[340] Originally, competing films were programmed throughout the Festival rather than together in a separate category.
[341] Thoms, op cit

from the competition as it was specifically for the promotion of new, independent talent.[342] In 1974 the " Rouben Mamoulian Award for Best Film" was initiated. Mamoulian himself viewed the final twelve films and selected the winner - Phillip Noyce's *Castor and Pollux*.[343]

But problems persisted, with selection, judging and other processes coming in for strong criticism from the filmmaking community. This is in itself indicative of the investment people made in the scheme, and of how few other forums were available for the advancement of locally made films. Categorization, of which Miller's *Violence in the Cinema Pt 1* is the most notorious victim, was one of the ongoing issues. Films were sometimes rejected merely because the judges could not agree on the category to which they might belong. The Festival overcame this by abandoning Experimental and bringing in a General category.[344]

Judging was another minefield for Festival organisers. Noyce himself, writing for *Honi Soit* in the early 1970s was a very harsh critic of judges' decisions. There was quite a stir when Bob Ellis, who served as a judge in 1973, wrote an article in which he ridiculed the process.[345] The policy of having overseas guests as judges was particularly disliked.

There was tension in 1971 with regard to a film by Peter Weir called *Homesdale*. David Stratton recalls:

> …the audience (which included Customs Minister Don Chipp) was wildly enthusiastic over Homesdale but the judges (visiting directors Jerzy Skolimowski and Jorn Donner and Sydney critic Beverley Tivey) gave the prize to Melbourne filmmaker Brian Davies for his film Brake Fluid.[346]

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[342] Australian Films Program Committee Report, 16/01/1973. From 1978, Film Australia productions were able to enter as it was felt the funding situation was better balanced by then.
[343] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p38
[344] This did not mean an abandoning of the avant garde – films by David Perry, Garry Shead, Paul Winkler, the Cantrills and others continued to be selected and screened.
[345] Ellis, 1973, p1147
[346] Stratton, 1980, p60

Stratton goes on to defend the decision quite convincingly but adds that "it was Homesdale that people remembered, and the film was as widely shown as its … format would allow." [347] His point is an important one for it confirms the degree of exposure these Awards gave the films and filmmakers involved. They focussed attention on the fact that films were being made in ever greater numbers so that, in 1972, Albie Thoms was able to write, "The dozen or so Australian films shown at the Sydney Film Festival are a sure sign that something is really happening in film here at the moment." [348]

Occasional open forums enabled filmmakers to thrash out their differences with the Awards format and the judges' decisions and the SFF was always responsive insofar as it could be. An increase in prize-money and commercial distribution for the films through Greater Union were ever reiterated demands which the SFF had no power to implement but it did keep tinkering away with endless modifications to the category and judging systems which never seemed to please anyone very much. The whole idea of a competition was generally unpopular, critics holding to the view it forced filmmakers in an already tiny marketplace to fight over small rewards rather than form co-operative structures. In 1982 Thoms had a chance to see things from the SFF's perspective when he convened the GU Awards Forum. In a letter to Tzannes he wrote, "I found chairing the forum a thankless task and would not be happy to do it again." [349]

Stratton left the management of the short film competition in the hands of Tzannes, Buckley and others willing to take it on. In part this was because he was so often overseas and unavailable but also because he was not a filmmaker himself and I think did not fully grasp the importance of the Awards to filmmakers just starting out in a

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[347] ibid
[348] Thoms, 1978, p72
[349] Correspondence Albie Thoms to Ross Tzannes dated 16/06/1982 tabled at SFF meeting 3/08/1982

difficult industry environment. Nor did he fully appreciate the significant role the scheme might come to play in the development of the local feature industry – that future film makers might come from such a pool. As a relatively recently arrived migrant he was not particularly attuned to Australian nationalist sensibilities and consequently had little patience with quibbles over international judges and other such issues.

In 1973, an already nervous W.D & H.O Wills decided to terminate sponsorship when the short film *A Motion Picture,* which showed in full colour 35mm and from the point of view of the bowl, a bodily function normally reserved for the privacy of the toilet, was selected as an Awards finalist . For "filmmakers" Hayden Keenan and Esben Storm it was no more than a silly joke but it made the press and embarrassed the company.[350] The withdrawal of the cigarette manufacturer may also have been an indication of shifting social values – there had been growing opposition to cigarette companies as sponsors and anti-smoking leaflets had been handed out at recent screenings.[351] Fortunately Greater Union's Managing Director David Williams, perhaps in an attempt to reverse the company's poor history as a supporter of Australian cinema, persuaded Sir Norman Rydge to take on the troubled infant in 1974, the same year SFF took up residence in GU's aging picture palace, the State Theatre.[352]

Every year since their inception these awards have featured at least one, more often many, finalists who made film their life's work. It is worth listing a few of them here:

Gillian Armstrong; Dr George Miller; Phillip Noyce; Peter Weir; Jane Campion; Chris Noonan; Tim Burstall; Bruce Petty; Jeni Thornley; Michael Thornhill; James Ricketson; Arthur & Corinne Cantrill; David Perry; Esben Storm; Paul Cox; Martha Ansara; Bill Bennett; David Caesar; Monica Pellizari; Franco Di Chiera; David Bradbury; Tom Zubrycki; Laurie McInnes; Jacki McKimmie; David & Judith MacDougall; Bob Connolly & Robin Anderson; Kriv Stenders; Dion Beebe; Liam

[350] SFF Press Book, 1973, p11
[351] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p35
[352] Tzannes, CY MLOH 275/64-66; Stratton CY MLOH 275/48-50; Gillan, op cit, p31

Egan; Barbara Chobocky; Curtis Levy; Bob Humphries; Erika Addis; Paul Winkler; Safina Uberoi; Rowan Woods; John Polson; Adam Elliot; Cate Shortland

– the list goes on. Many of these filmmakers acknowledge the significance of the Festival Award in their career development. For some, like Campion, the idea that they could actually become real filmmakers was born as they watched their work up on the big screen. George Miller has even drawn a direct connection between the showing of *Violence in the Cinema Part 1*, which screened in the main Festival after being a victim of category wars within the competition, and the production of *Mad Max*. "It was," he wrote, "the thing that triggered us into doing a feature … It was a direct sequence of events".[353]

The Festival formed an adjunct to the handful of independent distributors and exhibitors – film societies, the Sydney Film Co-op and others – which provided opportunities for the public to see new work but by the 1970s it was no longer really part of that network. It had become too big, too mainstream, too deeply involved with the trade, too conservative in outlook to really be a brother to the avant garde, the Underground, the genuinely experimental. But it never abandoned those movements either. A smattering of such films continued to reach both the Awards and the main Festival program, and to attract an audience and media coverage which they could not otherwise get. The Festival could be the bridge which allowed those who wanted to cross into mainstream production the exposure and support to do so. By the 1970s SFF audiences regularly included representatives from the trade which meant some shorts, including *Violence…*, received local theatrical release. Armstrong's *The Singer and the Dancer* was picked up for international distribution after Williams (for Greater Union) and Michael Tarant (for

[353]Gillan, p16

Columbia) saw it at its Festival screening.[354] The Gala Theatre, keen to tap into this new minority audience, ran a season of local short films with some success. Television networks were encouraged enough by the response to purchase films which were Awards finalists or winners.[355]

During the 1970s, the SFF and especially the Greater Union Awards became a platform for the expression of political views. Radical social change was reflected in the films made and in the filmmakers making them. Acceptance speeches became opportunities to air grievances or pursue social and cultural reform agendas. This was never something the SFF organisers much liked, especially as protests tended to be staged on opening night thus leaving the Festival exposed along its corporate sponsorship flanks. But if Stratton was growing less sympathetic to the spirit of the times, he never considered abandoning the Awards or the SFF's support for Australian film. He could be pedantic, not hugely sympathetic to the demands and trials of independent low budget filmmaking and at times overly officious but he was also quite capable of taking a film which had proven too demanding for the GU selectors and slotting it into the main program if he saw its merit.

The Awards scheme did have many shortcomings. Forcing films to fit into categories was always too limiting; the selection process baffled some and angered others. Too often the choices were safe and again, commercially oriented, narrative films with high production values tended to predominate. It did ghettoize Australian work so that films which surely warranted their own place amongst any distinguished international selection – *Frontline, First Contact, Backroads* – were marginalized.[356] But, on the other hand, by the 1980s the Greater Union Awards regularly featured outstanding work,

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[354] SFF President's Report, 1976

[355] Gillan, op cit, p31; Zubrycki, MLOH 275/7-8, p12; *Filmnews*, April/May 1983, p8

[356] *Backroads* was originally entered into the Awards but failed to be selected as a finalist so Stratton programmed it in the main Festival.

diverse in style, subject and genre. The 1982 selection included *Atlantis* by Laurie McInnes, Bruce Curry's animation *Flank Breeder*, and Mary Callaghan's *Greetings from Wollongong*. The Documentary Award in 1983 went to the Connolly/Anderson documentary *First Contact*. *Stations* by Jackie McKimmie won the Fiction section and Helen Grace took the General Award for *Serious Undertakings*. Another finalist, *Peel,* didn't win a prize but the following year its director, Jane Campion, won the Rouben Mamoulian Award for *Girl's Own Story.* The importance of that recognition to the young director is clear in her recollection "that was the first award I'd ever won and it is still the best award. I knew that it could be a career changer." [357]

The actual awards themselves were made of heavy glass produced by Kosta Boda. Towards the end of the 1980s they were discontinued as they had become too expensive to produce. When the Festival tried to retrieve an award to donate to the Powerhouse Museum not one winner would agree to part with theirs.[358] It seems indisputable that these awards contributed significantly to the development of the contemporary Australian film industry by encouraging those most in need – filmmakers themselves – and providing a forum which showcased their work to the trade as well as a generally broad audience.

A Thrilling New Wave: the Film Revival and After

Where else can you sit in a coffee lounge in Kings Cross with two very young directors called Phil and Gill discussing where the hell Australia's film and cinema is going to …
Robert Thorsby [359]

[357] Gillan, op cit, p17
[358] McDonald, CY MLOH 275/1-3; Gillan, op cit, p17
[359] Thorsby, MLOH 275/22-24, p53

At the end of the 1960s, no-one knew if Australian films would ever fulfil the ambitions advocates for the revival had for them but Stratton, Tzannes, Buckley and others felt they had to back local films no matter what. By this stage, Australian content was in the hands of an Australian Film Advisory Panel which included the Director, with power of veto, and others with industry or film culture experience. Make-up of the panel for 1968 is fairly typical – Malcolm Otton, Roland Beckett, President of the Producers and Directors Guild, AFI Governor Bill Judges, Ian Klava, John Burke, and David Stratton.[360] There are no women on the panel, no representatives of the avant garde and no filmmakers other than long-time CFU stalwart Otton so that a slightly stuffy atmosphere pervades it.

With Stratton overseas for three to six months of the year, the task of hunting down suitable material fell to the others who remained mindful that ultimately the Director had final say on the program. It cannot have been a very satisfying job. The SFF was aware of the need to screen new films to supplement the retrospectives but there was so little production that, in 1969, the panel reported response to its "Australia-wide canvass" for recently completed films had been "practically nil" and it would not be able to fill a separate program.[361] Eventually, nine Australian films were chosen including the ill-fated *2000 Weeks*, the documentary *The Pictures That Moved*, Peter Weir's short film *Life and Flight of the Rev. Buck Shotte*, and at least one Ubu film, *Vision for a New World* by Chris McCulloch.[362] There are no films by the Cantrills, Paul Cox, Martin Fabinyi, Garry Shead or Jane Oehr, all of whom were prolific around this period.[363] The selection did open up over time and eventually all these filmmakers were screened in either the GU Awards or the main SFF program but it is indicative of the Festival's commitment to its

[360] SFF Minutes, 3/09/1968, 29/10/1968
[361] SFF Minutes, 7/01/1969, 4/03/1969
[362] These never screened as Weir and other Australian filmmakers withdrew their work in protest over the banning of *I Love, You Love*.
[363] Herd, 1983, pp 58-68

general audience, which provided the bulk of its income, that it shied away from local productions which might prove too controversial or "difficult".

These decisions reflect the Festival's policy of positioning itself as a kind of middleman in the sphere of cultural production. Tzannes and Stratton saw the SFF not as a radical or hugely adventurous enterprise but rather as a forum in which interested parties could gather in civilized and cultured surroundings to partake in an enjoyable and sometimes glamorous exploration of the newest and the best in world cinema. It was a celebration of film and film culture but it was also a business – a place where the distributor and the producer could sit down and talk a deal. To stay afloat the Festival needed corporate sponsorship and full ticket subscription. Neither Stratton nor anyone else at SFF wanted to see the Festival become another Cannes, but there was a desire to make it as prestigious an international event as possible, as popular as possible with the public and the industry. There was little room for risk-taking.

In 1970, film critic Colin Bennett, a staunch advocate for Australian film, saw lively experiments like the Gil Brealey/Richard Mason produced feature *Three to Go* as heralding a "thrilling new wave".[364] Ever hopeful, the SFF continued to screen domestic features as often as possible. Four Australian features were programmed in 1972 under the banner "New Developments in Australian Cinema" [365] and were warmly received by audiences. As the films got better, support for them started to materialise amongst Festival-goers and film critics alike. In 1974 the SFF was able to premiere Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris* to an enthralled audience and considerable critical acclaim.[366] Even so, audience reception to local productions continued to be as uneven as the films themselves. In 1976 a poor response to *Mad Dog Morgan* added to the trade's belief

[364] Bennett, C, 1985, p112

[365] Priv*ate Collection* (Keith Salvat): *The Office Picnic* (Tom Cowan)(scheduled but not completed in time to screen): *A City's Child* (Brian Kavanagh): *Shirley Thompson Versus the Aliens* (Jim Sharman).

[366] SFF Press Book, 1974

that the Festival was the kiss of death to a local film. On the other hand, in the same year, Fred Schepisi's *The Devil's Playground* came in as a late entry and was then voted most popular feature.

The sometimes fraught relationship between the Festival and the industry, especially mainstream distributors and exhibitors, remained an issue. A case in point is the Phillip Noyce feature *Newsfront*. The SFF had screened *Backroads* and many of Noyce's short films. Stratton saw a rough cut and was knocked out by it, immediately deciding to open the 1978 Festival with the completed film[367] but rights holders the NSW Film Corporation dragged their feet:

> Conferences were held, the premier himself intervened, but the corporation remained adamant, even to the extent of informing the premier that the film was not good enough. [368]

Neither Noyce nor the film's producer David Elfick recall this incident but it rankles still with Stratton who was very disappointed by the outcome.[369] The Festival eventually opened that year with *The Night, The Prowler* which received a mixed reception despite its screenwriter, Patrick White, making a rare appearance on stage to support it:

> …an expectant audience had gathered to hear the premier of NSW, Neville Wran, introduce the first production of his state's Film Corporation to be shown publicly. In hindsight, it is a little difficult to gauge the reaction of the audience: some obviously disliked it but most seemed impressed with the skill and daring of it. [370]

If the audience was in two minds the critics were not. The film was panned in the press which prompted the film's distributors to hold back release. Once again, the SFF had

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[367] Stratton CY MLOH 275/48-50
[368] SFF President's Report, 1978, p2
[369] Petzke, Email to author, 17/01/2005; Stratton CY MLOH 275/48-50
[370] Stratton, 1980, p168

proven an unkind launching pad for a new Australian work but the film's producer, Tony Buckley, does not regret taking that chance.[371]

In 1975, the year which featured the "Salute to Australian Film" program, the Festival opened with *Sunday Too Far Away*, the first production of the newly formed South Australian Film Corporation (SAFC). An area of Market Street outside the State Theatre was closed to traffic to make way for an extravaganza of roving searchlights, rock musicians (including Richard Clapton), actors in period costume, bush-ranger re-enactments, colonial cannon, a horse-drawn carriage, and "one of Australia's top shearers on a truck … shearing sheep". The Festival had to buy its own sheep for the purpose.[372] The film went into its commercial theatrical release soon after and was quick to capitalise on the publicity generated by the sheep stunt. The Greater Union Awards that year featured short films by Ken Cameron, Russell Mulcahy, Paul Winkler, Jane Oehr, and Chris Noonan; the main Festival program featured another seven Australian shorts. Now, finally, it looked as if the revival had really arrived.

Elsewhere in this study I look at the role the Festival played in educating local filmmakers through exposure to international films but the importance of seeing Australian productions was of equal, sometimes greater, value. On June 25 1970 a film review appeared in *Honi Soit* for the Festival screening of *Jack and Jill: a Postcript*[373] in which the reviewer notes the use of newsreel footage to create a sense of reality within the narrative. The reviewer was Phillip Noyce. Eight years later he would employ the same device to great effect in his film *Newsfront.* Seeing Australian short films at the SFF convinced Tom Zubrycki to join the Co-op so he could see more.[374] Jeni Thornley

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[371] ibid, p170: Stratton, Interview with author 3/12/2004
[372] Gillan, op cit, p15; SFF Program Catalogue 1975
[373] The film, produced by Phillip Adams, was originally rejected by Stratton after it arrived too late to schedule but was slotted in to replace *A Married Couple* after that film was banned by the censor.
[374] Zubrycki, MLOH 275/7-8, pp 3-4

has described the way the Festival gave a cultural framework to many young filmmakers working independently in Sydney.[375] Tom Zubrycki called it an important opportunity to "critically evaluate our own work in public and show our work to others." The SFF may not always have lived up to their desires and expectations but it was there for them and there was nothing else in the same league.

The SFF was closely aligned with every aspect of the emerging film industry through the 1970s and 1980s. SFF President Ross Tzannes was on the Film Board of the Australia Council and served as solicitor to the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op for a period.[376] The SFF not only influenced those whose creations appeared on the big screen but also those who worked behind the scenes. Even today film festivals everywhere are dependent on volunteers to keep them going but this is especially true of the SFF. As I indicate in Chapter One, the Committee in the early days was made up of a range of people some of whom were already part of the industry such as it then was. Others came because cinema was a hobby or a great love and some just for the social life it offered but when the Festival expanded to include a full-time staff, it became, for some, a stepping stone on the path to an industry career. Film producers Antonia Barnard and Carol Hughes both acknowledge the importance of their experiences at SFF in the development of their subsequent careers.[377] Lynn McCarthy, the independent distributor behind Dendy Films, was the SFF's Administrator in the 1980s and John Burke, long time committee member, left the SFF to take up work with the SAFC.

By the mid-1970s, the Festival was operating within a film culture environment unimaginable only a decade earlier. The NFTA was running; AFTRS was established; the Australia Council was backing experimental film projects; the AFC and State film corporations were financing features; the Co-op, the Sydney Women's Film Group, the

[375] Thornley, CY MLOH 275/39-40
[376] Macdonnell, 1992, p163; Thoms, 1978, p379
[377] Barnard & Hughes, CY MLOH 275/4

Super Eight Group, Paddington Video Access and many other similar organisations provided the informal infrastructure to support independent film production; film journals and magazines were writing about new Australian work. None of this was imaginable in 1954. By 1983, Stratton's last year as Director, the SFF was just one link in the network which made up Sydney's film industry and culture environment. But it had begun with an ambition to represent Australian films and it had done so, to the best of its ability, for 30 years.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHANGE AND NEW DIRECTIONS: 1976 - 1983

I'm livin' in the 70's
Eatin' fake food under plastic trees
My face gets dirty just walkin' around
I need another pill to calm me down
SkyHooks[378]

All Federal and State governments are now in the movie business.
Phillip McCarthy [379]

S*unday Too Far Away* starred Jack Thompson, an actor whose rugged features and no-nonsense manner seemed to personify Australian masculinity in the way Chips Rafferty had done in the 1940s and 1950s. But three years before his appearance as gun shearer Foley, Thompson had posed for Australia's first nude centrefold picture in the newly launched women's glossy magazine *Cleo*. Within 48 hours of the magazine's release in November 1972, all 105,000 copies had jumped off the newsstands, "snapped up by women eager to see … Thompson in all his glory, except for a hand gently covering his rude bits."[380] The alignment of popular culture, female sexual expression, nationalism and consumerism which Thompson's appearance in these two forums demonstrates was totally without precedent in Australian society. So rapid was the pace of social and cultural change that the censorship furore caused by Stig Bjorkman's naked couple in *I Love, You Love* in 1969 seemed to belong to another era altogether. The Sydney of 1976 bore little resemblance to the city of 1966 let alone that of 1954.

In the period between Stratton's appointment and the SFF screening of Hannam's film Australians recognised the right of Aborigines to citizenship of their own country, the

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[378] Macainsh, *Living in the Seventies*, Skyhooks, 1974
[379] McCarthy in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p339
[380] ACP History, http://www.connectionswithacp.com.au/aboutacp/History.asp

Whitlam government was elected in a blaze of glory which would soon burn out, the Vietnam war was lost and the Australians who served in it found themselves alienated from the rest of their generation in a way they had never imagined could happen. Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch*, radical youth radio station *Double J* began broadcasting and *Countdown* was launched on ABC television. Australian rock and pop music written and performed by Australian musicians was played in clubs and pubs around the city. International artist Christo, helped by art students and other enthusiasts, wrapped Little Bay in 93,000 square metres of cloth supplied by a commercial fabric manufacturer and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi visited Sydney in search of cheap real estate.[381] And, more than ever before, in numbers greater than ever before, Australians travelled the world. Jumbo jets hauled hundreds of them at a time between Australia and Europe in a little over twenty-four hours. Thousands more followed the example of the Beatles and trekked the "hippy trail" through Asia on a journey of self discovery.

Change was also underway within the film distribution and exhibition industry. Film societies were in decline while the NFTA struggled on and the Sydney Filmmakers' Co-op entered its peak period of activity. By the 1970s, the term "art house" had replaced "Continental" to describe those films not emanating from the Hollywood studio system. The word better suited the complex reality of the Sydney commercial cinema scene which, by 1976, included films by the American independent "movie brat" generation of Scorsese and Coppola, the Hollywood releases of European directors like Truffaut, (*Fahrenheit 451*), Polanski (*Chinatown*), and Forman (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), as well as films in a variety of genres from Europe, Asia, South America and Africa. Whatever cache the term "Continental" held for those who sought an alternative

[381] Cockington, 1992, pp326-329

cultural identity in the 1950s and early 1960s had passed away by the 1970s. As Mischa Barr observes, foreign films were becoming increasingly integrated into the mainstream:

> *Film Weekly* for example no longer marvelled at the meteoric rise of Continental cinema nor did its review section distinguish Continental films primarily according to their nationality. It was a sign of their incorporation into the mainstream market that the genre, cast and director took precedence over the language of the film. [382]

Even the Hollywood blockbuster had taken on a new shape with young directors Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas reinventing the action thriller in *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. In response to the demise of suburban theatres, the great casualties of television's arrival, the major exhibition chains withdrew "into the cities like armies preparing for a long siege".[383] The new style multiplexes (a number of small cinemas within one building) they erected were an acknowledgement of "…the commercial necessity of catering for increasing diversity within even this audience." [384]

At the same time, there was an increase in intimate, boutique style duoplex theatres – Village Pitt Centre, Village Double Bay, Academy Twin - designed to cater to the art house demographic and supported by the major distribution and exhibition chains which owned them.[385] This then, was the new social, cultural and political landscape in which the SFF was operating and from the effects of which it remained to some extent immune.

The remaining Stratton years saw a return of old problems which the Director had hoped were behind him. After several years of uneasy truce, the SFF again found itself drawing up battle lines with both the Commonwealth Censor and FIAPF. At the same time, it was becoming increasingly clear that band-aid measures would not solve the problem of

[382] Barr, 2002, p64
[383] Brand, 1983, p244
[384] Bertrand in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p331
[385] Barr, op cit, p67, 69

growing demands for a new approach to programming. Added to these were the twin pressures of rising costs and falling subscriptions.

From the early 1960s, the SFF had been a financial success story. Subscriptions sold out well in advance, single ticket sessions open to the public were generally well supported, and despite increased costs in areas like airfreight and travel, organisers had been able to begin each year with a small but adequate profit with which to establish the next year's event. The penetration of television into Australian homes which cut audiences for commercial cinemas so drastically had little impact on the Melbourne and Sydney Festivals. Erwin Rado speculated that television may in fact be " … a cause for the swing-over to the specialised cinemas which show films least related to those shown on the small screen." [386]

In the 1950s, the high culture aspirations of the SFF had led to some debate about whether the Festival should screen films intended for later broadcast on television, but such reservations were quickly swept aside as the new medium spawned new programs, particularly documentary films.

By the 1970s, film festivals held an attraction which television and mainstream cinema could not replicate. The SFF retained, at its core, a sense of what festivals had been in their traditional manifestation – sites of ceremony and ritual in which, in Donald Horne's words, "institutions parade and display their glamour in a form of civil ritual."[387] The institution was film as art; its celebrants ranged from worshippers to habitual users to recalcitrant non-believers. University and film school students, film industry practitioners, the counter culture community, the film society cinephile, the experimental avant garde practitioner, the casual enthusiast – whatever their opinion of the venue, the timetable, or Stratton's programming, they all continued to participate.

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[386] Kalina, 2001, p18
[387] Horne, 1989, p63

A Lean Operation

By 1976, the SFF was as efficient an operation as it was possible to be on so tight a budget. There were fourteen directors on the SFF Board, all skilled, dedicated, and, in many cases, with years of experience. A full-time staff of four, including Stratton, ran the Festival with part-time help from a number of others, among them Wally Peacey in the crucial role of Film Handler. William Maxwell still audited the SFF accounts, a service he had provided since the Festival's earliest years and continued to provide until 1983. In 1977 Modesta Gentilé, who had joined the staff in 1966, and Carol Hughes both left the SFF. Ian McPherson took over as Administrator and Antonia Barnard added the job of TFF Director to her SFF responsibilities. The TFF was becoming an establishing part of cultural life in regional Australia:

> The interest generated in each centre by the TFF is extremely high and in many places local committees have been formed by hardworking film enthusiasts dedicated to making the TFF a regular part of their community activities … It is becoming an event which people are now expecting to occur every year. [388]

The Festival was split into two sections. In September/October it travelled a circuit which included Lismore, Newcastle, Wollongong, Orange, Albury, Dubbo and Bowral, then in March/April it visited Mt Gambier, Launceston, Geelong, Ballarat, Canberra, Armidale, Pomona and Yarram.[389] The Melbourne Film Festival assisted with organising screenings in Victoria which enabled the TFF to cover an enormous area of the South Eastern States but the Festival was still dependent on government subsidies and the SFF to cover its costs. Co-operative ventures of this nature between government and

[388] TFF Director's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1976
[389] ibid

independent organisations were still a novelty in the cultural field. The TFF came under the aegis of the Australia Council which, as Hodsdon observes, tended to take up those kinds of projects which formed "an uneasy element" in government arts policy.[390] At a time when State and Federal governments were pouring money into developing the Australian film industry, film festivals which, along with film societies, had for so long been the only means by which Australians could engage with film as an art form and as an international creative force received virtually nothing.

The TFF was, like the SFF, a commercial venture, but because it extended the arts into regional communities it came within government's funding guidelines. The SFF, which had a long history of independent operation with only minimal support from government, had much more difficulty convincing any of the funding bodies that it was worth assisting. The Australian Film Institute, a body ostensibly created to further film culture and initially associated with the MFF, put its resources behind the NFTA rather than the festivals. By the late 1970s, the SFF had been hit hard by severe inflation in the Australian economy and it was becoming ever more difficult to make ticket prices cover costs. In 1978, for the first time in well over a decade, the Festival found itself with a financial loss. The shortfall, a little less than 10% of total costs, shocked the Board which was used to a healthy financial situation. There was no fat to cut. Diversifying its income sources was crucial if the SFF was not to price itself out of existence. The Festival was supplementing its box-office income with grants from the Australian Film Commission and the NSW State government, and with sponsorship from Fiat, Greater Union Theatres, and Adair Insurance Group. Ron Adair had long been associated with the SFF as a member and subscriber. His contribution helped finance delegate visits and similar ventures. In total, this extra income made up only a tiny percentage of the SFF's total budget. In 1979 the

[390] Hodsdon, 2001, p43

Festival earned approximately $180,000 only $4,000 of which came from a government source.[391]

Moves over the previous decade to professionalise the Festival had meant an increase in costs as the workload shifted from unpaid volunteers to salaried staff. Such changes had a psychological as well as physical effect on the SFF. The decision taken in 1972, to adopt a Board of Directors management structure more in keeping with the SFF's company status was one indication of the way Festival organisers had redefined the organisation:

> We were limited by guarantee so I guess we should have called ourselves a board … Changing the nomenclature did change the way we saw ourselves and perhaps that was a mark of going professional. [392]

The SFF identified itself and conducted itself as a professional business but it remained hampered by its severely limited financial resources. Stratton was finding the long hours and poor pay rates personally restricting. The extensive travelling was also beginning to wear him down. When Greg Coote at Roadshow offered him a job programming one of the Village cinemas he jumped at the chance to supplement his income. Tzannes quashed arguments from SFF Board members about conflict of interest by pointing out that if you pay a man less than a living wage you have to allow him some personal flexibility. Overall, staff salaries were low and turnover was high; sometimes because the relentless workload and pressure didn't suit and sometimes because other opportunities beckoned. Barnard left at the end of 1978 which meant only Stratton and McPherson had any long-term experience of running the business side of things. Then, in 1980, the SFF lost one of its staunchest and most loyal supporters. On August 22, 1980, Ian

[391] SFF President's Report, 1979
[392] Troy, MLOH 275/9, p11

McPherson died of cancer. McPherson came into the SFF story before the Festival had even begun. He was at Olinda in 1952, served on the SFF Committee from 1957, was President from 1968 to 1971, directed the TFF in 1978 and was the Festival's administrator from 1977 until the year of his death. In recognition of his great contribution, the SFF introduced the Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture "to promote debate on issues of major importance to the continued health of Australian film."[393] The inaugural lecture was given by British film historian and critic John Gillett in 1981, the next by British film director Lindsay Anderson and in 1983 by Chief Executive of the AFC Joseph Skrzynski.[394]

Some of the People, Some of the Time

The SFF had always attracted people to its management who brought with them a range of vested interests. Its audience did the same and, by the 1970s, it seemed everyone wanted a piece of the action. Patrick Cook offered a tongue-in-cheek description of the 1976 Festival:

> Day and night the foyers, balustrades and curio nooks of the State were draped with young things and, except on some of the women, there was scarcely an unbearded jowl to be seen. There was a little brisk ethnic cavorting on opening night and a mild exhibition of exalted patronage. Whitlam received an ovation. Cotton and Anthony received a raspberry: not wise perhaps, but frank. [395]

The presence of the Prime Minister and other politicians at the SFF Opening Night was indicative of another shift in social values – culture had become political. As one commentator noted, "Whatever its other merits, the SFF seems to prove irresistible to

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[393] President's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1981
[394] The lecture series was sponsored by Adair Insurance
[395] Cook, 1976

politicians, both practising and lapsed." [396] Dorothy Holt no longer needed to entice and cajole the country's leaders. They came along willingly because there could be votes in it. The response of the SFF audience, with its booing and cheering, showed the Festival had become a platform for the expression of political dissent. Stratton was more comfortable with this than many on the Board who, much like their 1950s counterparts, felt the Festival should keep as apolitical as possible. Such a policy was difficult to maintain at a time when protest seemed, as Jeni Thornley indicates, woven into the social fabric:

> Cultural and political activity, the two things were connected then. I was becoming completely dominated by the political imperative of seeking change through whatever public platform you could find. [397]

The old association between leftist politics and an intellectual interest in film which Cunningham and Routt identified as pertaining to the post-WWII era[398] was again in evidence. Elwyn Morris, reviewing the twenty-fifth SFF in 1978, wrote of the opening night audience:

> If Fraser had had a bomb planted under the State Theatre (not far from the Hilton), he could have eliminated much of the troublesome opposition in the media, the arts, the professions and the universities in one neat explosion. [399]

Thornley, who won a Greater Union Award for her short film *Maidens* in 1978, took her protest to the stage of the State Theatre devoting much of her acceptance speech to condemning the Australian Film Commission for a particularly sexist film promotion

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[396] *Billie Blue*, June 1982
[397] Gillan, 1993, p11
[398] Cunningham & Routt, in Bertrand (Ed), 1989, p208
[399] Morris, E. 1978

campaign it was then running in Cannes. Stratton was equally critical of the AFC campaign and of the competitive way the State film funds and the AFC marketed their respective products.[400] Such indulgence is in marked contrast to the operating policy of the SFF.

Money was never wasted, excess never encouraged. Whatever their individual differences, SFF Board members were united in their belief that putting films on the screen was their core task. As ever, there was disagreement amongst SFF subscribers about what those films should be. It was a situation Stratton was familiar with and took in his stride. But in the period from 1976 to 1983, demands for diversity of programming greatly increased. Stratton and Tzannes found themselves devising a range of new initiatives in the hope of satisfying as much of the SFF constituency as was possible without alienating the more conservative elements. As the years passed, it became evident that another change in aesthetic sensibilities was taking place so that what Stratton saw as alternative cinema was regarded by the baby boomer generation as mainstream fare. Added to this was the shift toward a less ostentatious and more politicized engagement with culture.

Stratton's favourite film festival, and the one he considered a perfect model for the SFF, was the San Francisco International Film Festival (SFIFF). The SFIFF featured the cream of new cinema at its evening sessions with many of the filmmakers in attendance while daytime was given over to retrospectives programmed by Albert Johnson a film academic from the University of California, Berkeley. The "Craft of Cinema" program was a series of tributes to significant artists including Gene Kelly, Walt Disney, Fred Astaire, John Huston, Bette Davis and Frank Capra. Johnston had a genius for casual structuring. He would invite these cinema icons who would stay on stage sometimes for hours and talk about their films which were then screened, in part or sometimes

[400] Stratton, 1980, p18

complete just at the whim of the participants. The retrospectives drew big audiences as the tickets were much cheaper than those for the more glamorous evening sessions and Johnson had the great teacher's gift of deeply engaging and stimulating his audience. The sessions often ran over time, holding up the start of the evening program, a lack of formality which appealed to Stratton's "sense of anarchy".[401] Johnson himself was a very popular guest when he visited as a guest of the SFF in 1978, lecturing at AFTRS and other venues as well as being widely sought for interviews and discussions.

Stratton tried to replicate the immense energy of the San Francisco event bringing high profile guests like Mamoulian, Beatty, Antonioni, Lindsay Anderson, Keith Carradine, David Mercer, Istvan Szabo, even Jamie-Lee Curtis. Stratton strongly believed that overseas visitors were of immense importance to building the SFF's international reputation and it is an indication of the regard in which he was held abroad that he was able to entice so many significant people in the film world to make the long journey to Australia. For Stratton, guests like Beatty "helped put the Festival on the map properly."[402] But apart from a great deal of publicity, it is difficult to see what map Beatty really helped put the SFF on. Stratton failed to fully grasp that Sydney's film community was inherently different from that of San Francisco. The SFIFF model could never really be effective in a society only just finding self-determination in a cultural context. Australians were in the process of fashioning a national identity for themselves which necessarily meant redefining their relationships with other nations. Colonial bonds with the United Kingdom were being loosened and many Australians resisted what they saw as attempts by government to replace that patrimony with an American version. Australia's reinvention of itself as a filmmaking nation was part of that search for a national culture and identity. Because of this unique local context, international guests

[401] Stratton, Interview with author, 9/03/2005; Obituary Albert Johnson, Berkeleyan, 28/10/1998, http://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/1998/1028/obits.html
[402] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p42

sometimes failed to make the connections with the Sydney film community crucial to a successful dialogue.

Film enthusiasts wanted SFF delegates to respect their filmmaking endeavours by engaging with them in an informed way about Australian productions but, at the same time, they were highly sensitive to anything which might be considered slighting of their achievements or which had even a whiff of patronisation. One SFF subscriber, recalling the heckling which Warren Beatty received during a Q&A session in the State Theatre, put it like this:

> We were arrogant. It was a time when we could say, 'oh, Australian films are crap' but at the same time, we didn't want the British and Americans coming here saying they were rubbish. Beatty was there, cigarette in hand and we thought it was fine to be rude to him. We were a bit pompous about ourselves. It was all part of that insecurity and self discovery going on then.

Beatty was bemused but generally unfazed by his reception, even when one subscriber told him to his face that *Shampoo* was "a pile of shit", but Carradine walked off stage in the middle of a Film Forum after being rudely heckled by a member of the audience. The Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture was the site of some controversy in this regard as well. The inaugural address was given by British film critic John Gillett, a close colleague of Stratton's and a programming consultant to the SFF. His lecture prompted Susan Dermody to write:

> The inauguration of the Ian McPherson memorial lecture is a good idea, but it is to be sincerely hoped that something more worthwhile than the platitudinizing of John Gillett, about the avuncular outsider's view of Australian film, will be risked next year. [403]

[403] Dermody, 1981

British filmmaker Lindsay Anderson, who cheerfully acknowledged his complete ignorance of Australian film, met a similar response the following year after he delivered what many considered an ill-informed rant against film criticism. Also during the 1982 Festival, John Baxter, former SFF Committee member and now long-time expatriate, presented a Forum entitled “No Sex Please – We’re Australian” in which he accused Australian filmmakers of playing coy about sex in their films. Responses to Anderson and Baxter are indicative of the manner in which the Sydney film community engaged with those it considered ill-informed outsiders. In a lively article for *Filmnews* entitled “The Fresh Air Follies or no thinking please – you’re Australian”, Meaghan Morris attacked Anderson’s speech:

> At the end of the Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture … David Stratton thanked Lindsay Anderson for introducing a breath of ‘fresh air’. Now it’s hard to disagree with a breath of air, whether hot or bracing, fresh or foul. It’s also hard to criticise a lecture when the speaker can boast that he doesn’t know what he’s talking about and go on to give the evidence himself with such devastating persuasiveness that the critic is rendered speechless … I can find no basis or motive for arguing against insult, innuendo or caricature: and while I can only agree with Anderson’s call for wisdom and understanding in debate, I do not see how those qualities may be developed without some dealings with accuracy, coherence, complexity, generosity, and the attempt to understand the position of one’s opponents.

While Morris concedes Baxter raised many issues worth pursing, she and other Australian cultural critics such as Laleen Jayamanne and Dave Sargent, criticise both Baxter and Anderson in terms not unlike those used today against Australian expatriates Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes, who pontificate about Australian culture but fail to keep abreast of movements and debates within the country so that their observations appear stale, out of date and patronising.

Morris also notes the manner in which the Anderson and Baxter events assumed a passivity of reception by the Australian audience and, when the right to respond was sought, attempted "to stifle or disqualify discussion from the floor:

> Local festival director introduces a distinguished overseas visitor to launch a polemic against critical trends in other countries, and about one thousand locals get ten minutes for 'questions only'.
> Recently returned expatriate shows the erotic inferiority of Australian cinema with a clip from a 1973 film, and is just on his way out the door … when he is airily surprised to find that a question time was expected. [404]

I have suggested that during the period in which he directed the SFF, Stratton was something of a citizen of the world. It is a view with which he concurs:

> It is true that during those years I had many friends and colleagues in different parts of the world – festival directors, film makers, critics etc. And it's probably true that I had closer contact with some of those people than with anyone in Australia at the time. [405]

Stratton supported Australian cinema; he took its productions seriously but he was blinkered about the degree to which Australian intellectual engagement with its own and other world cinema had matured. In his two published books to date, *The Last New Wave* and *The Avocado Plantation*, Stratton gives factual histories of the films of the revival and the origins of their directors. He does not attempt to place them in a broader national social or cultural framework. By his own admission, this is not his territory:

> … I have been more concerned to explain how and why the films were made than to discuss the films themselves in aesthetic terms. [406]

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[404] Morris, 1982, pp 3,4,15: Jayamanne & Sargent, 1982, pp10,11
[405] Stratton, Interview with author, 9/03/2005
[406] Stratton, 1980, pxvi.

It is not, of course, the role of a festival director to be a textual analyst. An abiding love of film, business skills and supreme self-confidence are ideal attributes for the job. Stratton brought these qualities to his work at the SFF but by the 1980s both his commitment and his ability to respond to new and different demands from a new and different generation of SFF subscriber were waning.

The SFF was aware of these winds of cultural change and encouraged Stratton to make adjustments to accommodate them. From 1976 on, there was a toning down of the Hollywood-style glamour which had dominated opening night ceremonies though not of the by this stage slightly ridiculous publicity stunts which had become a feature of the evening. In 1981, the Festival opened with Norman Dawn's 1927 silent film *For the Term of His Natural Life*. The 78-year-old actor Edward Howell, who had played the part in the original film, agreed to be tied up and "flogged" in Market Street by a band of "soldiers" borrowed for the purpose from Old Sydney Town. The stunt was made doubly regrettable when Howell found the scene itself was missing from the film version screened that night. By the 1980s, the whole opening night rigmarole had an anachronistic quality to it which led journalists reporting the event to dampen their enthusiasms with satirical comment:

> Greater Union's refurbished State Theatre looked utterly dazzling, with gilt glistening suitably (wonderfully Hollywood Royal don't you think?). A charming touch was the red carpet regally laid and cordoned off…but for whom? No-one seemed to know. [407]

The times called for a different kind of engagement with film from the relatively passive one which had prevailed in the 1960s. A fresh approach to programming was needed;

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[407] Holt, 1981

something more than simply "revelling in plurality" as Ross Gibson put it.[408] Yet, for the remainder of his Directorship, Stratton adhered closely to the smorgasbord approach to film selection which had been SFF policy since 1954.

Backing Winners

Clearly, the Sydney Film Festival feels a pressure to please its large subscriber base of middle-aged, middle-class, middle-range-cinephile patrons. The rhythm of the Festival is slow and even. To the more hardcore cinephiles and critics living in Sydney, the festival has little to offer. Maybe a change is on the way. Then again, maybe not. In this increasingly commercialised and streamlined world, however, I, for one, am happy to gobble up whatever interesting cinematic morsels are thrown my way.
Bill Mousoulis [409]

Mousoulis is here talking about the SFF of 2002 but his critique would have served just as well in 1980, or 1970, or even 1965. Successive SFF Boards have believed that the Festival's longevity is dependent on courting and winning the middle ground and on getting as many of its films into commercial distribution as possible. The cost of this policy, in Mousoulis' words, is to make the SFF "modest and unassuming … safe and easy".[410] The payoff has been survival.

The "best and most interesting" policy did, as intended, provide a general sense of cinematic tastes and trends over a given period. In the years from 1976 to the end of the decade, political themes dominated global cinema and these films duly made their appearance in the SFF's programs: Frederick Wiseman's *Welfare*; Emile de Antonio's extraordinary documentary *Underground,* about the American terrorist movement known as the Weathermen; Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County;* the Schlondorff/von Trotta

[408] Gibson, 1983
[409] Mousoulis, 2002
[410] ibid

collaboration *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum;* Bellocchio's *Triumphal March* and *The Travelling Players* by Theo Angelopoulos; Phillip Noyce's powerful first feature *Backroads;* Shyam Benegal's *Manthan* and Humberto Solas' *Cantata de Chile;* Carlos Saura's *Raise Ravens* and the film which marked the rebirth of the New Zealand film industry; Roger Donaldson's *Sleeping Dogs* – the SFF provided a sampling of the films which defined the times.

The impact of feminism meant a great increase in the number of films dealing with women and their identity. Many, such as Krzysztof Zanussi's *The Balance* were written and/or directed by men but perhaps in response to the IWFF (which proved to be a one-off event), Stratton programmed a greater number of films by women, including Anja Breien's *Wives*, Karen Arthur's *Legacy*, Helma Sanders' *Shirin's Wedding* and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*. Kopple's landmark documentary *Harlan County* screened in 1977 along with works by Martha Coolidge, Joan Micklin Silver and Agnes Varda. The Georgian director Nana Mchelidze, who came as part of a Soviet delegation, was possibly the first female director ever invited to the SFF. Lina Wertmuller, whose film *Seven Beauties* opened the 1976 Festival, was also asked to attend.

The controversial Italian filmmaker had not been invited by Stratton himself but by Gideon Bachmann. Bachmann, American, Rome-based journalist and film maker, had contacts within the Italian industry which Stratton had been unable to form on his own. He offered to help the SFF by putting together a program of Italian films. Communications with Italy being what they were, Stratton had no control over any of the arrangements and just had to put his faith in Bachmann, who, fortunately, delivered as promised. The "Salute to Italian Cinema" program comprised six feature films, an opening and a closing night film, and a delegation which included the great director Michelangelo Antonioni. Wertmuller didn't come but her favourite actor/collaborator Giancarlo Giannini, star of both *Seven Beauties* and the closing night film, Visconti's

L'Innocente, proved a hit with the media and Festival goers. Modesta Gentile recalls him reciting poetry at the dinner table. Scheduling the Wertmuller film was a departure from the 'keep it safe' approach which usually applied to Opening Night but *Seven Beauties* went over extremely well, another indication perhaps of the more liberal times. Its SFF success prompted Greater Union to secure the feature for distribution in Australia and the USA.[411] Bachmann also gave a detailed slide presentation and talk on Pasolini's extremely controversial film *Salo* which was, at the time, banned from commercial release in Australia. The SFF could have screened the film in its entirety but as Stratton was unable to secure a satisfactory print, and as he had grave misgivings about the work himself, this compromise solution was provided. Unsurprisingly, there was a great deal of public interest and the presentation was well attended.[412]

Gideon Bachmann was one of a group of programming consultants Stratton had gathered together over the years which included Michel Ciment, and John Gillett, film critics and writers; Ken Wlaschin, Director of the London Film Festival and prolific author; Wolf Donner, Director of the Berlin Film Festival; film producer Pierre Rissient; Lynda Myles, film producer and Director of the Edinburgh Film Festival for most of the 1970s; and Gene Moskowitz, *Variety* film critic and close friend who acted as consultant for SFF until his death in 1982. It was a distinguished, knowledgeable and influential group, a mix of film scholars and filmmakers. Between them, they made a far greater contribution to the selection of feature films for the SFF than the Film Advisory Panel back in Australia. By 1976, the two Advisory Panels had been merged into one very small group comprising Stratton, Tzannes, and one or two others, among them Richard Keys and John Rochester. Its main task was to preview and make selections from unsolicited material, for the Director's autonomy over program selection was now generally

[411] Bachmann stayed in Australia for almost two months and, on his return to Europe, wrote an extensive essay for *Sight and Sound* on the emerging Australian film industry.[411]

[412] Huntley, 1997

acknowledged as the only workable model. But this was by no means any longer the case.

The SFF audience was fragmenting into separate interest groups, all of which confronted the Director with demands that the Festival reshape its formats and programming to meet their individual needs. From the mid-1970s, the SFF had been attempting to find creative solutions to this problem but with only partial success; its chequered response to the feminist movement is a good example.

Czech director Vera Chytilova came as a guest in 1978, along with Helen Brew, a New Zealand documentary filmmaker who was showing one of two scheduled films about childbirth both of which were extensively discussed and reviewed widely in the media.[413]

A forum entitled "Women and Film" was well received in 1979[414] but in programming terms the SFF was going backwards again with only one feature by a female director. Of the *nine* retrospectives programmed that year, not one contained a single film by a woman.

In 1979 women filmmakers scooped the Greater Union Awards[415] and continued to be well represented in following years but only a handful of features and documentaries by women made it into the general festival program during the remaining Stratton years and most of these were in programs which Stratton did not himself curate. Of the forty-nine retrospective programs scheduled between 1979 and 1983 only two contained films by women. Only one of the eight programming consultants who advised the SFF was female. If Stratton was sympathetic to the wishes of the feminists in the SFF audience he was simply not pro-active enough about accommodating them. What more might he have done?

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[413] SFF Press Book 1978
[414] *Filmnews* July, August & September 1979
[415] *Filmnews*, June 1979, pp12-13

Again, the stumbling block here is the "best and most interesting" programming policy. Stratton maintains that he selected films by women whenever he came across productions of sufficient quality.[416] Within the parameters of his selection criteria this was the only option open to him but here certainly is an example of a circumstance in which the usual practice needed to be set aside for a more dynamic engagement.

In the 1970s, the institutions which represented Australian cinema production were not particularly sympathetic to women filmmakers, or indeed to women interested in films by and about their own gender. In such an environment, organisations like the Sydney Women's Film Group became enormously important because they provided women filmmakers with a degree of economic and creative autonomy. Many women looked to the SFF as the logical forum for screening and discussing their work and for introducing them to as broad a range of international films by women as possible. Stratton did not recognise the need for the Festival to nurture this special interest group.

For Jeni Thornley, the SFF, which she had originally perceived as "middle-class and elitist", became part of the survival network which she drew on for inspiration and support as an independent filmmaker but she never reconciled to what she saw as Stratton's "limitations" as a film critic and programmer.[417] Her position is mirrored in the independent and avant garde film communities. As the decade turned, these groups too became more and more dissatisfied with Stratton's dominance of the SFF's programming.

In the first half of Stratton's Directorship, the limitations of expense and distance had made the current policy the only viable one but by the late 1970s, modes of communication and transport had greatly improved and it would have been quite straightforward for the SFF to divide its programs between Stratton and one or more

[416] Stratton, Interview with author, 9/03/2005
[417] Thornley, CY MLOH 275/39-40

other curators. The need for this diversification of selectors became so pressing that eventually the Festival had to respond. Even more pressing was the need for a theoretical component to the Festival; an opportunity to engage in debate and discussion.

In response to pressure from the filmmaking community, especially the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op and the Sydney Women's Film Group, the SFF introduced a series of annual film forums, beginning with "Film Forum 77". These panel discussions, which sometimes included film screenings, were intended to address the need for "two-way participation" which Hinde had identified as crucial if the SFF was to maintain its relevance. Tzannes reported the Film Forum program was "designed to create debate within the Film industry and at the same time make delegates more accessible to subscribers and other interested film bodies." [418] Topics covered in the inaugural year included Recent Works of Agnes Varda (a timely look at this important *Nouvelle Vague* director; Animation in Australia; National Cinemas in Sri Lanka (featuring work by and a discussion with Sri Lankan director Lester James Peries) and Canada (a discussion with the five-member Canadian delegation attending the Festival); Independent Film in the UK with a screening of *Riddles of the Sphinx*, a film by Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, two important film scholars, which has been described as a "landmark fusion of feminism and formal experimentation"[419]; the New German Cinema movement, which Stratton had been quick to recognise; as well as discussions on government funding policy to minority commercial film and video activities. The most popular of the forums was a "meet the filmmaker" session with British director and left wing political agitator Peter Watkins who had made a reputation for himself when his television film *War Games* was banned by the BBC which considered it depicted the effects of nuclear

[418] SFF President's Report 1977
[419] Women Make Movies catalogue, http://www.wmm.com/catalog/pages/c471.htm

war too realistically. Consequently *War Games* became an underground cult classic and made a hero of its young director who received a great reception from every sector of the local film community and industry but who frightened the SFF Committee with his political activities.[420] In keeping with its long tradition of encouraging critical engagement, the SFF devoted a Forum session to the Greater Union Awards where organisers and judges were required to meet their critics face to face. Tina Kaufman recalls it as:

> … a regular and very lively session … with filmmakers who had won or lost, or not made the list of finalists, taking on at least some of the judges, including the overseas guests who had judged the Rouben Mamoulian Award, on their choices and priorities. [421]

An added advantage of Forums was flexibility of programming which made it possible to "screen such unexpected films as Godard's *Numero Deux* and Dwoskins' *Central Bazaar*, the prints of which were only available to us, at no notice, for twenty-four hours." [422] The Film Forums seemed to offer the very thing filmmakers had for so long been requesting so it must have been frustrating for Tzannes to note the sessions were "generally successful albeit under-attended and it was particularly disappointing that the Film School and Film Australia, who had agreed to participate, failed to turn up." [423]

The Forums came in for considerable flack, especially from the alternative and avant garde community of which Thoms was the most prominent representative; a community by definition outside institutionally organised film culture and practice. Albie Thoms was appointed director of the Festival Forum program in 1979 after he wrote an article deeply critical of the preceding year's events (yet another example of the SFF's tendency to

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[420] SFF Minutes, 12/12/1978
[421] Gillan, op cit, p13
[422] SFF President's Report 1977
[423] ibid

embrace its harshest critics). His own newly made feature film *Palm Beach* was programmed in a Forum that year.

As Charles Merewether has observed, these filmmakers identified closely with their European (and by extension American) counterparts[424] and always resisted the ghettoizing of their own productions and of experimental films in general, from the main body of the Festival. They also wanted more informal gatherings which would provide a freer and hopefully deeper level of engagement. Finding suitable venues for Festival goers to engage meaningfully but informally with visiting delegates and with each other was a problem which both Tzannes and Stratton were very aware of. The State Theatre did not have the small, separate spaces needed for such groups to gather while its cavernous auditorium sometimes made the "Q&A" sessions which accompanied screenings impersonal, even intimidating affairs. The choice of Anzac Auditorium as a venue for Forums seemed only to exacerbate the discontent. Subscriber feedback indicated high levels of dissatisfaction with the State/Anzac option and Stratton began hunting around for alternatives, though with little success.

The SFF opened more direct lines of communication with its members and audience through regular questionnaires, and, from 1980, through the Discussion Session held at the end of the Festival in which Stratton took the stage to answer any and every criticism and question about the event. The feedback sessions were personally confronting and at times, even distressing; Stratton described them as a masochistic experience.[425] Subscribers did not hold back in venting their anger and it is again a mark of the Director's self-confidence and resilience that he could engage with his critics in a moderate and reasoned way - and there were plenty of critics. The questionnaires seemed mostly to confirm the view that no two subscribers could agree on anything but

[424] Merewether, 1985, p338
[425] SFF Director's Report 1979

even when the responses did indicate a preference, the SFF failed to adequately address it:

> For the first time that I recall, several subscribers … pleaded with us not to take over much notice of the popularity polls, as we should always be testing frontiers of cinema and not resorting to safe middle of the road choices which often are less original cinematically and certainly less challenging intellectually. There has been frequent debate about this both inside and outside the Festival. The Festival has usually decided in favour of the more radical policy and I must say I strongly support this.

wrote Stratton in his 1977 Director's Report. Yet he was himself becoming less able to determine just where that frontier actually was. Already, he felt alienated from some of the international trends in filmmaking:

> I was feeling that I was perhaps getting a bit out of sympathy with some of the young filmmakers, especially those who were into structuralism and semiology. I thought they should be shown in the festival … but I just didn't consider myself qualified to select them. [426]

Much of the opposition Stratton faced had less to do with what he was programming than with the manner in which he was programming it. The ghettoizing of particular films to special programs outside the main body of the Festival in an apparently arbitrary way became an issue of growing concern to SFF audiences beyond the alternative community. Stratton met complaints with the response that he was constrained by the quality of international production in any given year, an obtuse reasoning which merely frustrated his critics.

Stratton did better with his selection of international guests which was strong and well diversified over the last years of his tenure but the now habitual hit-or-miss nature of

[426] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p50

their visits continued to frustrate the SFF. Every year there were problems - guests were demanding and difficult, failed to show up for events organised for them, and created a logistical headache for those responsible for ferrying them about. The SFF hosted sixteen delegates from seven countries in 1977 alone which put great demands on the scant resources of the Delegates Sub-Committee whose job it was to look after them. From the delegates' point of view, the SFF was also found wanting. The magnificent State Theatre did not always compensate for what some clearly saw as a parochial and self-obsessed community and for the SFF's clearly cash-strapped position. In 1979, Delegate Sub-Committee convenor Barbara Gibbs was forced to arrange home billets with SFF Board members for many visitors as her budget would not stretch to hotel accommodation for them all.[427]

In the years to 1983, visitors included Indian director Shyam Benegal, Hungarian filmmaker Vera Chytilova, Filippino activist filmmaker Lino Brocka, Eastern European directors Jiri Menzel and Krzysztof Zanussi, the American filmmaker Kenneth Anger, French actor Xavier Saint-Macary and the English film critics Derek Malcolm, Molly Plowright and Patrick Gibbs (the latter three excellent value in terms of audience and media response). Menzel, despite his charm and best efforts, was not much feted by the locals but did create some interest when he had to be rescued by Lifesavers at Bondi Beach. Zanussi, Watkins, Malcolm and many others did lengthy interviews for *Filmnews* and other cinema journals, addressed film forums, and attended social gatherings and other events, making an important contribution to local film culture.

It was always frustrating for the SFF if guests failed to arouse interest from the mainstream media but many of the delegates were known at all only to a very specialist section of the Sydney film community. For example, in 1981, SFF guests included film critic John Gillett from the British Film Institute; Tony Rayns and Peter Wollen,

[427] Delegate's Sub-Committee Report, SFF Minutes, 24/07/1979

representing theoretical and intellectual aspects of film culture; film directors Connie Field, Feliks Falk, Veronica Soul, Michael Raeburn, and John Lowenthal, who made the documentary *The Trials of Alger Hiss.* All these would interest any serious student of cinema but, despite their erudition, Wollen and Gillett failed to connect for much the same reasons as Anderson and Baxter had done. Both audience and critical response reflected the discontent felt by a growing number of film intellectuals at the SFF's seeming refusal to take its constituency seriously; to actively engage with contemporary issues of cultural theory and to provide environments in which Australians could debate and discuss the topics which concerned them without feeling they were being talked down to by foreign experts. As Australia's film community grew and diversified, it became increasingly difficult for the SFF to cater to all its various facets. This failure to modify the Festival's programming and structure to meet a wide range of specific interest groups was to become a major area of contention in the remaining Stratton years.

Old Problems, New Pressures

In heterogeneous societies, the struggles between diverse groups and aggregates over the allocation of resources and power are not limited to strictly economic and political issues, but also extend to cultural ones. [428]

The downturn in its financial fortunes could not mar the SFF's celebration of its twenty-fifth anniversary. Despite its patchy beginnings, the Festival had indeed achieved international recognition as amongst the best of its kind - an achievement to be proud of. There is an indication of this in a booklet published by the SFF to record milestones in its history which contains an introduction by Derek Malcolm, Film Critic of the Guardian in

[428] Gans, 1975, p3

London, a message from the NSW Premier, Neville Wran, and a photograph of the SFF Director lined up alongside Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray and Michelangelo Antonioni.[429] The SFF had proven itself a stayer but it was about to face a new set of challenges.

In 1978, FIAPF renewed efforts to enforce separate programming on the Sydney and Melbourne events. The Federation's policy had always been to endorse only one national film festival in any country and it had only reluctantly accepted Australia's special pleading on grounds of the great distances between the two cities and the whole country's isolation relative to Europe, the source of most festival films. John Hinde succinctly outlined the probable outcome if either Festival tried going without endorsement:

> …experience has seemed to show that it's not wise to buck the FIAPF. A few of the bigger overseas [festivals] have tried it, and they've either faded away, or else they've turned into leather, drag and porn Festivals … and not even good ones at that, because the FIAPF decisions do govern most of the even halfway-good pornmakers just as much as all the rest. [430]

Stratton, Rado and other representatives met in Australia with the Head of the Federation, Pierre Brisson, and managed to again negotiate a compromise solution by which the two Festivals agreed to share no more than 30% of their programming.[431] The resultant increase in freight costs and other previously shared expenses put them both under renewed pressure[432] and alerted Sydney's film reviewers that their Festival may be in danger of extinction. The expected ticket price blow-out prompted Paddy McGuinness to observe that:

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[429] SFF, 1978
[430] Hinde, 1978
[431] An indication of just how difficult communication with Brisson and FIAPF could be can be found in an interview which *Filmnews* attempted to conduct with him. His responses are monosyllabic, terse and insulting.
[432] SFF Minutes 23/05/1978, 7/06/1978, 21/10/1978

this will bring home just how cheap the festivals are at present. Having followed the finances of the Sydney festival closely for one year, I am convinced that it is both efficiently and even parsimoniously run and that the ticket prices are, even though they seem high, just about rock-bottom. [433]

At the end of 1979, Erwin Rado retired after twenty-four years as Director of Melbourne's Film Festival, his departure initiating a lengthy and difficult period of transition for that Festival and marking the end of an often turbulent but ultimately fruitful partnership with the SFF.[434] Rado had been infuriated by the antics of FIAPF and the renewal of these old battles may have contributed to his decision. Stratton was more philosophical but he too was tiring of facing these same old hurdles every few years. FIAPF took issue with a number of other aspects of the SFF and MFF operations, including the Travelling Film Festival and that old perennial, film censorship.[435]

A Sort of Terrible Regression

The threat to the status of the Festivals posed by the action of the Film Censorship Board must be finally settled. [436]

The war which SFF and MFF had waged with Australian censorship over a decade and a half was never really resolved. Concessions given by the Minister for Customs[437] in 1971 were endorsed by the Attorney-General's Department in 1975 but were still not drafted in law which left all Australian film festivals vulnerable to intervention from both

[433] McGuinness, 1978
[434] Kalina, op cit, p35
[435] SFF Minutes 7/06/1978: SFF Press Book 1982, p13
[436] *Filmnews*, August 1982, p15
[437] Every festival film be registered for screening without prior showing except in the case of films rejected previously for commercial use. Films must not be shown outside the festivals, must be shown only to festival subscribers, must not be shown more than twice and not to any person under 18 years of age.

State and Commonwealth censors. In 1977, an issue arose over Nagisa Oshima's study of sexual obsession, *In the Realm of the Senses*. The film was requested first by the Perth Film Festival but the Western Australian censor called for a ban. The Commonwealth deferred to State's rights with Chief Censor Dick Prowse vowing the film would never be released in Australia. The SFF prepared for a fight which proved unnecessary as the NSW Censor actually passed the film for its SFF screening, but the whole episode reminded Stratton and Tzannes of their vulnerability.[438] Their concern was validated by problems which arose at the 1980 Adelaide Film Festival. Several films were cut and others, including Melvin Van Peebles' 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, banned by the State Censor, leaving the event in a shambles.[439]

When Janet Strickland became Chief Censor she took the debate back to where it had been almost a decade earlier. At issue was whether the Festivals still constituted a special interest group justifying their "cultural exemption" status. In her view, there was little difference between a commercial distributor and a festival which functioned, at least in part, as a marketplace from which films could gain commercial distribution.[440] It came down to whether festival films could be considered of artistic merit and whether those who chose to see them could still be identified as a discreet audience different in a fundamental way from the ordinary viewing public. In 1982, Strickland forced the issue by imposing a ban on Hector Babenco's docudrama about life in the slums of Brazil, *Pixote,* because of a scene she considered depicted child pornography. Two years earlier she had recommended cuts to *The Tin Drum* on the same grounds but that decision was overturned on appeal. Now Tzannes took *Pixote* to the Board of Review:

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[438] SFF Minutes 12/10/1976
[439] *Cinema Papers*, Dec-Jan 1980/81, p417
[440] Tzannes, Censorship Report 16/02/1982: *Financial Review*, 26/05/1982

I had to argue very strongly for *Pixote*. I argued it was a tale of our time having an equivalent impact on audiences of today as a Dickens novel in its day, on a very important contemporary social issue. It was in fact a highly moral film. [441]

The film was passed on a split decision but the episode renewed fears amongst Sydney's film community about the impact of such intervention not just on the viewer but on the filmmaker as well.[442] For Stratton, it was:

…a sort of terrible regression … I thought all those battles were gone and over with and finished. To suddenly find that they were there again in 1982 was deeply depressing for me … It wasn't a fight I wanted to continue fighting for the rest of my life. [443]

When Labor came to power in 1983, Attorney-General Gareth Evans ratified the censorship-free status of the SFF into law. From that year, films shown at festivals in Australia no longer needed the approval of the Film Censorship Board. In the year that David Stratton directed his last Sydney Film Festival, the long war against censorship was finally won.

The Last of the Stratton Years

After 18 years, David Stratton, the man synonymous with the Sydney Film Festival, is taking his final bow – and has just announced his final program. Not a vintage year he admits. But then his job has been to represent what's been happening in the world of film. He can't invent masterpieces. [444]

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[441] Gillan, op cit, p21
[442] *Screen International*, date unknown, SFF Press book 1982: Blonski, *Filmnews*, August 1982, p15: David Stratton, CY MLOH 275/48-50
[443] Stratton, MLOH 275/48-50, p52
[444] *SMH*, 17/05/1983

The restoration of the State Theatre in 1981 was a mixed blessing for the SFF. Improved facilities and levels of comfort were offset by the loss of 700 seats and a hefty hike in rental fees. Theatre hire was an enormous expense – in 1982, it was $57,000 out of the SFF's total budget of $285,000[445] – and the Festival again began hunting for an alternative venue, again without success. The loss of seating capacity left the SFF with a serious ticketing problem. Stratton responded by introducing a new version of the Green Series which had helped to pay off the Glebe mortgage so speedily in the mid-1970s. This time the series offered subscribers a daytime repeat of the main Festival programs at half the ticket price. It was an immediate success. In the same year, Stratton invited members of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, Glenys Rowe, Dave Sargent, and Meaghan Morris, to select works for a "New Cinema" strand, the title of which, Susan Dermody observed, " left the mainstream of the Festival curiously open to being considered old."[446] Stratton took care to publicly distance himself from the innovation, writing in his Director's Foreword:

> On page 51 of this programme you will find information about our so-called "New Cinema" section. Nine of these programmes will be presented on weekday mornings at Anzac auditorium.[447]

Hardly a glowing endorsement. Stratton did not acknowledge the curatorship of the Co-op members and he scheduled the section in a way which necessarily isolated it from the main Festival through separate ticketing and unsympathetic screening times. Dermody, reviewing the SFF for *Cinema Papers*, pointed out the counterproductive effects of this scheduling:

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[445] SFF Director's Report, SFF Minutes 19/10/1982
[446] Dermody, 1981, p360
[447] Director's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1981, p9

Pragmatically, once a Green Series ticket has been purchased, it is financially immaterial to the Festival whether a subscriber "chooses" to be present at the daytime screenings of the Festival or chooses one of the conflicting offerings instead. But the audience for the marginal, the experimental, the analytical and participatory aspects of the Festival were artificially depleted by the logic of scheduling these events against the Green Series. [448]

Most of the films programmed as "alternative" were not radical in form or content and would have been perfectly acceptable in the main Festival but Stratton kept them distinct. He settled on a pattern for future programming of 30/10/10 - thirty new feature programs, ten retrospective and ten alternative – a ratio he believed would accommodate demands for more experimental works without alienating the traditional audience.[449] This compartmentalizing of Festival films and the subsequent "flagging" of alternative programs to alert audiences of a possibly demanding viewing experience strongly indicated the SFF was getting out of touch. A decade earlier Stratton would not have considered compartmentalizing films like *Trash* or *The Decameron* but now he was less certain, less willing to take risks. In fact, the alternative selections were well received and enthusiastically reviewed with wide appeal right across the festival audience. In 1982, Glenys Rowe curated the section, this time entitled "An Alternative Selection" which included films by Marleen Gorris, Rosa Von Praunheim, Robina Rose, Jon Jost, and Helma Sanders-Brahms. British writer and film theorist Don Ranvaud's selection the following year featured work by Armand Gatti, Raul Ruiz, Chantal Akerman, and Chris Marker. The unsatisfactory Anzac Auditorium was replaced, from 1982, with the much more genial Dendy Cinema but the conflicting programming problems which Dermody highlighted remained.

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[448] Dermody, op cit
[449] Stratton, CY MLOH 275/48-50

The SFF was not alone in finding itself under attack. The London Film Festival, under the stewardship of Stratton's colleagues Ken Wlaschin and later Derek Malcolm, was under fire for very similar reasons. David Will, in a scathing review of the 1984 LFF, expressed years of accumulated frustrations:

> The main achievement of the LFF is the careful avoidance of any sense of commitment or direction, for the LFF there are just tendencies, trends, all of equal value. The promotion of a critical understanding of these various trends and of the directions they point to, might lead to a questioning of the consumerist approach to film viewing that is advocated. That is forestalled by large doses of liberalism presenting the festival as a large quantity of 'good things'. [450]

Throughout these years, the LFF was constantly compared to the revitalised Edinburgh Film Festival which, under Myles' Directorship, had abandoned Realist cinema to become, in the words of one reviewer, the "central rendezvous of progressive and radical film culture."[451] By making screen theory and culture the dominant interest, Myles had been able to keep the EFF abreast of social change at a time when film theory, experimental cinema, and politically motivated cinema were in the ascendency. Stratton's inclination was to position the SFF alongside the LFF. External pressure groups had forced him to bring it somewhere between the two prominent British Festivals but in so doing, he had begun to lose his way.

By the 1980s, the SFF seemed less relevant, credible and diverse than it had a decade earlier and Stratton was often on the back foot defending his programming:

> Though it isn't possible to send a team of selectors from Australia to the various countries where films are made and shown, discussions always take place with experts in different countries (critics, filmmakers, other Festival programmers) and their advice is taken. In the end though, there's no getting away from the fact that the selections are a matter of personal choice.

[450] Will, 1984, p152
[451] Rodrigues, p46

Therefore, say some, the person doing the choosing should not do it for too long: alternative choosers should be found. And there's really no answer to that one, except to say that I hope my choices will continue to satisfy the majority of the people who attend the Festival. [452]

When he wrote those words in 1980, Stratton had been creative director of the SFF for fifteen years, the last nine of those in a close partnership with SFF President Ross Tzannes. Inevitably he became complacent over time, tracing familiar patterns of operation which he was unaware needed updating. There was a certain sameness to the program each year - same format, same style, same filmmakers over and over when their films had long since ceased to excite. Eastern European cinema dominated the selection and films from Japan far outnumbered those of any other Asian country. Compare the SFF program with, for example, the program of the 1981 Toronto Film Festival which included:

Galas –held each evening in Toronto's biggest cinema

Critic's Choice – Eighteen new films programmed by David Overby

Culture Under Pressure – Nine Third World programmes

Animation – Eight programmes of animated short films

Less is More – Nine programmes of low-budget fiction features

Real to Reel – Nine programmes of documentary features

Buried Treasure – Nine programmes of rare or seldom seen films programmed by Jonathan Rosenbaum

A Deeper Look at 3-D – Nine vintage 3-D movies from the fifties

Laughing Matters – a comedy retrospective from the silent era to now with fifty features

A special screening of eight features defined as "unclassifiable"

A Yilmaz Guney retrospective comprising five of the great Turkish director's films

A variety of Forum discussions.[453]

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[452] Director's Foreword, SFF Program Catalogue, 1980

In the 1980s, Toronto and Sydney were similar in size and population yet so diverse and extensive a festival was beyond the realms of possibility in Australia.

Stratton's salary may have been inadequate but in every other respect, the position of Festival Director had brought him prestige and opportunity. He was the face of the Festival, on radio, television, and in the print media but Stratton's influence went beyond the SFF. During the 1970s, he had begun developing an independent career as a film critic with regular articles in *Cinema Papers* and occasional contributions to the American entertainment magazine *Variety* as well as a regular spot on 2GB Radio's *Today* program. He was often invited to contribute to a number of international film festivals, including London, Montreal, Berlin and Los Angeles, either as a jury member or programming consultant.[454] In 1980, he published the first of his two books on the Australian film revival, *The Last New Wave* and in the same year, received the offer which would determine the future course of his career – feature film consultant and presenter for the just-launched multicultural broadcaster Channel 0/28, now the Special Broadcasting Service. It was time to move on.

1983

I'm sad, and I'll miss it, but it's time for a new approach. I suppose after 18 years you inevitably get into a rut and there are other things I want to do.
David Stratton [455]

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[453] Stratton, SFF Overseas Reports 1981-2
[454] *Variety Magazine*, http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=bio&peopleID=1251; SFF, 1978; *Cinema Papers* 1978
[455] Baker, 1983, p138

In 1983 the SFF was thirty years old. It was looking tired, no longer had the vigour of its youth but nevertheless, remained an important element of Sydney's cultural life. The city's film lovers and film industry practitioners still bought tickets and went along so they could see and discuss films which would otherwise never be available to them; so they could meet and talk with filmmakers, critics and theorists; so they could have access, in some small degree, to the world of cinema beyond what was in commercial distribution.

The 1983 Festival opened with *The Draughtsman's Contract*, the first big-budget feature film of a major new filmmaking talent, Peter Greenaway. In typical fashion, the SFF tapped into the zeitgeist by bringing Michael Nyman, composer of the film's musical score, as a Festival guest then in a clumsy piece of organisation, had him play a selection of the music on stage just before the screening; an idea Leo Schofield thought " … akin to having a pianist at the Opera House play gems from *La Traviata* before curtain-up." [456]

As a gesture to the censor, Stratton programmed a retrospective of previously banned films including *A Blonde in Love* and *I Love, You Love*, prompting journalist Susie Eisenhuth to write:

> If there's one thing that stands out as a signature touch in David Stratton's last picture show, it's the way he's chosen to thumb his nose publicly at his old sparring partners, the film censors. [457]

There was a retrospective of Greenaway's early work to complement the opening night feature. Other highlights were Gary Kildea's *Celso and Cora*, Wajda's *Danton*, Neil Jordan's debut feature *Angel*, the Central American co-production directed by Miguel Littin, *Alsino and the Condor* and a program dedicated to new British cinema which was then undergoing a creative renaissance stimulated by the "Film Four" initiative. Wu Yigong's *My Memories of Old Beijing* and Xie Jin's *The Herdsman* were amongst a

[456] Schofield, 1983
[457] Eisenhuth, 1983

selection from the People's Republic of China. There was a special screening of Buster Keaton's *The General*, which had played at the first Sydney Film Festival thirty years earlier and the Festival closed with Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*.

Stratton's departure was a low key affair. There was a good deal of press coverage, almost all of it positive. Those reviewers traditionally most vocal in their criticism of the Director stayed quiet. John Hinde, film critic for the ABC and long-time SFF reviewer, perhaps best summed up Stratton's contribution in the almost two decades that he dominated the Festival:

> Part of his achievement has sprung from his almost mystic devotion to film in all its manifestations. To Stratton, nothing is too good for film…which is why he's been able to move the Sydney Festival onwards and upwards from the scatter of lecture theatres where it was being held at Sydney University in 1966 … through the Gothic romance of the old Wintergarden … and then on again, and certainly upwards in terms of glamour, to the heart of the city and the State Cinema – one of the finest of the great baroque cinemas left in the world.
>
> One other secret of David Stratton's success has been continuity. Changes at the top every other year destroy organisations or else turn them into faceless things that no arts festival can be for long. David liked what he was doing so well that he stayed for 17 [sic] years. Some have claimed there's been a penalty: in a predictably 'David Stratton' Festival. But there's been a reward. To put it at the very least the reward has been: that there is a Festival, and a good one, and that there's never been any doubt that there will be another Festival next year. [458]

1984: Brave New World

The SFF which Rod Webb took over at the end of 1983 - strongly independent, free of its subservience to MFF, with an international reputation for excellence - was in these crucial respects very different from the one David Stratton had taken on in 1966. The

[458] Hinde. 1983

ennui which settled over it in the later Stratton years would be swept away by Webb's energetic approach and radically different style which brought its own set of problems.

For a short period in the 1980s, under Webb's influence, the Festival became much more overtly engaged with public debate and aligned itself, through its selection of films, with the dominant themes and issues concerning wider Australia. This period has gone down in the collective memory of SFF staff and supporters as one of turbulence, distress and upheaval. Webb's personal management style was indeed turbulent and ultimately unworkable but his Directorship marks, in some ways, the intellectual high point of the SFF.

Throughout this history, I have privileged the SFF's long life as if longevity and cultural value are intrinsically connected. Perhaps in some way they are, and perhaps the cost of that is a certain restraint, a sense of moderation in all things. Australian festivals which flouted these – Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane - all flew high for a brief period then crashed and burned. If there is credit in longevity then the Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals have earned their place in Australian film culture.

CONCLUSION

It is possible to see the SFF, like the film societies which preceded it, as a product of a time and place no longer in existence. The political/cultural nexus which shaped it in the 1950s and 1960s was subsumed by the social revolution of the later 1960s and 1970s which has in turn been subsumed by a generation which sees the Festival as just one of a seemingly innumerable array of film related products and services. The force of technological, economic, cultural and social change has so accelerated that film festivals of the size and structure of the SFF have come under severe strain. Yet, at time of writing, the SFF is again in a process of adjustment – reshaping itself to fit contemporary demands.

Albert Moran describes film societies and film festivals as forums which "rearrange the relationship between film and the viewer".[459] Sydney documentary filmmaker Tom Zubrycki has commented on the way the SFF engendered a spirit of fellowship amongst "people who either make films or seriously analyse them."[460] It has been the focal point at which a community of filmmakers, industry practitioners, film students, academics, critics and cinephiles has gathered to celebrate a love of films and to share knowledge, opinions and ideas. This creation of a distinct community with its associations of celebration and even glorification implied in the appellation "festival" is perhaps the reason film festivals have proven so abiding.

In 1978, Paddy McGuiness wrote that festivals, "made immeasurable contribution to the understanding of world cinema in Australia, and have contributed more to the essential education of our filmmakers than even the film school."[461] It is a fair assessment of the SFF's contribution over its more than fifty year history. The Sydney and Melbourne

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[459] Moran, 1995, p120
[460] Zubrycki, CY MLOH 275/7-8
[461] McGuiness, 1978

Festivals have endured in a way no other Australian festival has been able to do, influencing and educating film lovers for four consecutive generations. Albert Moran credits festivals with "advancing an alternative conception of film as art rather than film only as entertainment" [462] and this is certainly true though definitions of what is film art and what worth advancing have been in contention within festival administrations and amongst festival audiences for more than half a century. If film festivals have been instrumental in creating a canon of classic cinema they have also been hesitant analysts of both what constitutes cinematic excellence and their own roles in perpetuating it. From time to time in its history, the SFF has had heated internal debates about these issues ultimately adopting the policy of directorial autonomy as the most effective response to them.

The SFF has been an integral component in the development of Australian film culture. It has contributed to the recognition of Australia as a site of cultural significance. Its position in the global network of film festivals contributed to building the international reputation of the Australian film industry in the post revival period and its domestic reputation in the years before that. In a broader cinematic context it has provided access to a range of cinemas beyond the mainstream Hollywood entertainment format for over fifty years and it has done so primarily as an entity independent of government or other institutional intervention. It has operated as a nexus between commercial cinema and art house cinema, building audiences for the latter and providing marketplace and testing grounds for the former. In this sense it has functioned at a utilitarian as well as aesthetic level; a division which has caused some anxiety amongst those committed to film as a high culture form. Indeed to some extent, the existence of film festivals is predicated on their status as oppositional to cinema in its mass culture Hollywood manifestation.

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[462] Moran, op cit, p129

The politics of culture have affected film festivals in other ways too. The SFF has been a platform for the expression of resistance to dominant social and cultural conventions. In the 1950s membership of film societies and festivals alone constituted an act of resistance to what Dennis Altman has called the "smug philistinism" of the Menzies era.[463] It is borne out too by the SFF's frontline position in the battle against excessively rigorous censorship in the 1960s. The SFF became a platform for expression of their beliefs and their protest. This is especially so in relation to the Short Film Awards which often screened work, particularly feminist films, motivated by socio-political movements. The SFF's commitment to documentary meant the form was both critiqued and celebrated. From CFU productions to the contemporary work of independent documentary filmmakers like Tom Zubrycki, the SFF has kept up a tradition of engagement with non-fiction films.

During the period covered by this study, the SFF was connected, through its membership, staff and Board, to virtually every film culture and industry institution and to the dominant intellectual publications of the day. It was a career-maker for some involved with it, most prominently for its seventh and longest serving Director David Stratton whose phenomenally successful subsequent career has been based on the reputation and public profile he built up at the SFF.

The SFF today has the same fundamental administrative and artistic structure as the SFF of 1983. The pattern of international and national film selection, forums, retrospectives, visiting delegates, Q&A sessions, experimental programs and the Ian McPherson Memorial Lecture is still in place. It is interesting that this structure should have endured at the SFF (as well as at other film festivals around the world), given that monumental changes in technology have made the Festival's original role as sole access point for non-mainstream cinema effectively obsolete. Its survival indicates that

[463] Altman, 1988, p308

the social and communal functions of film festivals are of equal if not greater importance than the engagement with films themselves.

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