



THE HECKLER

When passion isn't enough

We need to support documentaries so we can tell our own stories, argues **Tom Zubrycki.**

Last week I drove an extremely nervous but excited Darlene Johnson to the airport to board a plane. Her documentary *Stolen Generations*, which I produced, had been nominated for an International Emmy in New York. Darlene has a strong idea for another documentary and is writing a treatment for her first feature. She's passionate to make these films. I believe she will, but statistically the odds are against her.

Figures published by the Australian Film Commission (AFC) in September state that 86 per cent of film-makers who direct their first feature film cannot expect to make another. Anecdotal evidence suggests the same applies to documentaries. Most experienced directors I know survive on less than \$30,000 per year. Why should that be? Surely documentaries as a form of cultural production must occupy a central place in any sophisticated "caring" democracy. Yet the opposite seems to be true.

The Australian documentary industry has been stagnant for a decade. This is reflected in figures on the ABC, which, in the 12 months to June 30 this year, showed 69 first-run Australian

documentaries – six fewer than the previous year. Only 37.8 per cent of documentaries on ABC television are Australian.

This is an appalling statistic for a national broadcaster.

While the ABC is struggling to fund the number of quality documentaries it would like to with its ever-decreasing resources, pay-TV operators happily run their business in a deregulated environment. The government's unrestricted licensing of pay-TV operators has meant that American-based documentary channels such as National Geographic are flooding Australian pay channels with a huge number of programming hours. Investment in Australian stories is virtually non-existent. A call to set minimum documentary quotas has been made by the industry and the Australian Broadcasting Authority is preparing a final report on the matter.

The shrinking of the domestic market stands in sharp contrast to the ready availability of cheap digital cameras and desktop editing. Making documentaries is now within the grasp of anyone with the intelligence and imagination to use the new technology. Many aspiring film-makers see this as a good way of entering the industry. A few, after a protracted struggle, eventually succeed – selling their first documentary to TV, usually with the help of State and Federal agencies.

When they try to finance their next film it's a different story. The competition for broadcast

presales is so tough that many eventually give up, their talents lost to the industry. The same, unfortunately, goes for film-makers with years of experience. Meanwhile, those few who are making a living from film-making complain how hard it is to raise adequate finance for series and high-end programs, even though these are the most popular documentary forms internationally.

In this context, one might expect the documentaries made now to be far less brave and adventurous than those made in the '80s when Government support was at its highest. Happily, this hasn't yet proved the case. Each year throws up new gems – my present favourite is *Chasing Buddha*, about an Aussie martial arts-trained Buddhist nun who counsels death-row inmates in the United States. The film has played in Sydney cinemas for some time, proving that a story well told is what counts with audiences.

The trends overseas paint a sobering picture. Globalisation and the digital media landscape are changing broadcasting in a big way – driven largely by market forces. Documentary "game shows" such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* (soon on Channel 10) have swept the world and become television's holy grail.

In the face of such an onslaught one would have expected quality documentaries to be pushed more and more to the margins. Interestingly, the

opposite is happening. In Europe and North America, governments have acknowledged the need to strengthen national identity in the face of globalisation. They have moved to allocate additional funds to public broadcasters to tell local stories to national audiences.

Perhaps here in Australia we can take a lesson from these overseas trends. The Olympic Games and upcoming centenary of Federation celebrations have seen a wave of unprecedented national pride. To build on this renewed sense of who we are as Australians we must continue to tell our own stories. It's time our Government realised that documentaries are a precious part of our national heritage and need to be supported.

The problems facing documentaries are not unique. They are all part of a larger problem – the continuing emasculation of the ABC and film-making agencies such as the AFC. If we don't act to arrest this cultural erosion we'll soon lose "the power of making drama from our daily events and poetry from our problems", as John Grierson, the acknowledged father of documentaries, so succinctly and expressively put it.

Tom Zubrycki's new film *The Diplomat* has two AFI nominations and will be premiered on SBS on Sunday, November 26. This is an edited version of the speech he will deliver at the NSW Premier's History Awards Presentation lunch in Wollongong today.

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BACKSTAGE

FILM WE MUST REMEMBER HIM

The producer of *Caddie*, *Bliss*, *Bedevil*, *The Sugar Factory* and Bryce Courtenay's *The Potato Factory*, Anthony Buckley, has been presented with this year's Ken G. Hall Award, given each year for outstanding contribution to Australian film preservation. Buckley was presented with the award at the Screen Producers' Association of Australia conference yesterday, in recognition of his work since the 1960s in locating important films and...