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MODERNISING SCREEN FUNDING FOR A FUNNIER WORLD

We are **Humdinger**, a production studio, creative co-working space and multi-arts practice in Melbourne - and we love Australian comedy.

For over ten years we have produced television programmes, short films and online content with a focus on funny. We are key production partners of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, filming and producing their special events for broadcast including SBS's *Raw Comedy*, NITV's *Deadly Funny* and Channel 10's *The Big FOUR-OH*. Our studio space in Brunswick has been home to innovative comedy teams like **Toot Games**, **Grouse House** and **Haven't You Done Well Productions**.

Each year, we employ 33 people across our productions and 40 independent creatives call our offices home, utilising our co-working space and facilities.

We provide the infrastructural backbone - including multi-camera studios, podcasting suites, hot desks, production and directorial support, on-site filming and even bridging employment - for **hundreds of Australian working performers, scriptwriters, game designers and filmmakers** who want to make people laugh.

Comedy Lab is our flagship talent initiative that supports emerging Australian comedians. We provide a number of comedians with no-cost access to professional production facilities and co-working space to work on new screen production ideas from video podcasts to proof of concepts for pilots and series.

The program is into its third year and is crowdfunded by comedy fans. Despite very little resourcing to promote the program, each round is highly competitive, with more than 30 applications, awarding up to 5 groups each year.

In addition to this formalised program, we also heavily subsidise comedians, writers and creators access to our studio and co-working space with a membership model. Creatives pay no more than \$300 per month for membership which includes a work space, meeting rooms, rehearsal areas, a world-class podcast studio and, importantly, access to a community of creators.

This is where sketch comedy group Aunty Donna made their home from very early in their career, as well as a whole slew of successful comedians including Sammy J, Anne Edmonds, Greg Larsen, Michelle Brasier, Rhys Nicholson and many more.

We offer all of this **at or below cost**, subsidised by our small leadership team running a parallel studio hire and video production practice. We have been willing to take this loss because we believe it's important to make the kind of comedy that reflects our generation's perspective, which is still underrepresented in mainstream channels.

But **we shouldn't have to**. We're providing this service because our screen institutions and cultural policy ecosystem has failed comedy. We've lost the pipelines that created jobs, funding opportunities and advancement for working comedians.

The Importance of Australian Comedy

Comedy is one of Australia's greatest cultural exports, and our national identity is closely tied to our sense of humour, but the genre and artform is perceived to have less cultural value than other forms. This is especially true of unscripted comedy, a format which has given rise to many of our most successful comics. Good comedy work, like any other artform, takes talent, skill and hard work to produce, but is treated as simple, cheap and disposable.

Screen Australia does not provide funding for unscripted projects like comedy specials, entertainment shows and reality. We believe that is due to a closed-minded view that scripted narrative and documentary projects are how Australian stories are told on screen, but there are two important points here. Firstly, unscripted projects allow for a wide range of interesting and innovative ways to tell our stories, and for audiences to engage with them. Unscripted can allow comedic voices to share their personal stories in a way that truly connects one-on-one with the audience. Secondly, unscripted projects nurture a talent pool (plus crews and screen-servicing businesses) that prop up and feed into scripted projects.

Unscripted shows are typically cheaper to produce than narrative, and can provide more opportunities for on-screen talent than narrative, providing great value for money in platforming emerging artists. **Funding one unscripted program may not cost much, but its potential impact to Australia's cultural capital is immeasurable.**

As the industry turns more to buying international formats and programming in the name of cost-cutting and safe bets, funding bodies continue to arbitrarily limit eligibility to scripted projects, creating a widening gap. Closing this gap will provide ample opportunities for innovative ideas with less overall financial risk.

It's worth noting that this lack of support is not just isolated to the screen industry. Live comedy is often overlooked at all levels of funding and support in the country despite Melbourne being host to one of the largest comedy festivals in the world.

Though narrative content is important, there is no reason it should be the only funded method of sharing comedic Australian stories. And the more we ignore opportunities for unscripted comedy formats to be supported, the more chance we have of homegrown talent seeking international support and losing money that could have been kept in our own economy.

Supporting Emerging Talent

There is a stagnation in mainstream comedy, with broadcasters and streamers elevating a select group who have previously proven their cultural capital to pay for their next project. Shows and comedians that were popular 20 years ago remain on television today and despite giving limited opportunities to younger comics within these systems, networks are hesitant to allow emerging comedians to create these structures for themselves. **Because comedy is at its core a risk - every joke is gambling on a laugh - new voices struggle for narrowing opportunities from mainstream sources.** Comedy in Australia lacks a pipeline for truly radical or innovative ideas.

Over the past 10 years Humdinger Studios has supported over 150 creatives providing \$950,000 worth of support in the form of free or subsidised studio hire, production support and heavily subsidised or free access to our production space via our membership or Comedy Lab program. These have included Screen Australia funded narrative projects and projects supported by national broadcasters ABC and SBS. These creators and projects have gone on to great success, accumulating millions of views across online and traditional platforms. Without our support, there's a high likelihood these projects would never have happened.

In the last two decades there have been genuine attempts by networks to get new talent and ideas onto screen, but none have created real structural change in the industry.

Channel 10's *Pilot Week* in 2018 was an ambitious attempt to air multiple new programs in a single week - leaving it up to audiences to decide who should get commissioned. However, when the initiative later returned as *Pilot Showcase* in 2022, the pilots were not aired on TV, instead uploaded to Tenplay with little fanfare. This and commercial pressure led to none of the pilots being developed into a full series. The pilots also mostly featured established performers, leaving emerging talent in the margins of these programs.

Screen Australia and ABC's *Fresh Blood* initiative was designed to funnel new talent into the ABC, providing emerging creative teams with funding to create proof of concepts. Like *Pilot Week*, very few projects made it to full series and the initiative itself seems to be in limbo. A sustainable pathway like *Fresh Blood* for new talent in front of and behind the camera unfortunately still eludes our national broadcaster.

A system is needed that incentivises broadcasters to produce new comedy projects from pilot to full series, and showcase new talent. This is the intention of Australian content quotas being applied to streaming services. These came into law late last year and we are yet to see the outcome of the initiative.

However, these program quotas exclude entertainment programs, meaning unscripted panel shows, talk shows, comedy specials - the type of programming that is ripe for new faces and new risk-taking creative ideas - do not get a look in. It also isn't based on hours of content created, but instead on a percentage of revenue. This means that streaming services could invest in fewer, larger scale programs that they know will hit - with little incentive to try new things and invest in smaller ideas.

The type of creators that Humdinger regularly works with span a range of backgrounds, ages and skills, and despite many of them being in the industry for years they are still considered "emerging" talent. That's simply because **dwindling opportunities and limited funding for independent productions have left nearly two decades of Australian comedians ready to take the next step but without a platform to step onto.**

There are so many talented, experienced comedians whose unique ideas do not fit a neat, six-part narrative series. If our funding bodies do not change, we will never hear their stories. And that doesn't sound very funny to us.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Modernise the enabling legislation, strategies and definitions that shape Screen Australia's decisions to reflect the realities of Australia's current screen market, and ensure Screen Australia is empowered to fund screen enabling or adjacent projects through **a “no gaps” power**.
2. Recognise the critical contribution non-screen work makes to the screen industry. Writing, live performance and podcasting are areas where prospective screen practitioners get their start, and without them the screen industry has no talent pool to draw from. Therefore, **screen-enabling arts initiatives should be eligible** for funding through screen industry and screen culture programs.
3. Expect ABC to produce significantly **more iView Original series** - particularly for experimental or original unscripted concepts - with a refreshed *Fresh Blood* initiative that **commits to creating 100 hours of new programming** each year.
4. Rethink **local content requirements to be points-based** with credits for Australian talent, stories and original ideas to allow broadcasters and streamers to create unscripted programming without diluting the pipeline of prestige scripted content.
5. **Fund audience and market development** for Australian comedy and unscripted content globally.