

Trading as: Majestic Cinemas Port Macquarie, Sawtell Cinema, Belgrave Armidale & Riverside Movies Kempsey and Manager of Inverell Cinema

National Cultural Policy Submission to the Minister of the Arts – May 2026

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I am the CEO of Regional Cinemas Australia (RCA), which currently owns or operates 5 cinemas in regional NSW (Port Macquarie, Kempsey, Sawtell, Armidale and Inverell) ranging from 1 to 5 screens. We (and our predecessor, Majestic Cinemas) have operated 11 regional cinemas in NSW and Qld over the last 23.5 years.

I am a life member and Board Member of Independent Cinemas Australia (ICA) and past President and Vice-President of ICA for 17 years until October 2024.

The following submission relates to 3 Pillars of the review of Australia's cultural policy from the perspective of cinema exhibition, which is the coalface of audience interaction with Australian stories on the big screen.

Introduction

Australian stories on film are disappearing from the cultural conversation. While Australia continues to attract major international productions, including films such as the recent *Mortal Kombat II*, genuinely Australian stories are increasingly absent from cinema screens and from the shared cultural experiences that cinemas help create.

This decline is occurring despite cinema remaining one of Australia's most accessible, affordable and widely attended cultural activities. ABS 2022 data confirms cinema as the highest-attended cultural venue category.¹ Made, Not Seen 2026 further notes that the combined weekly average attendance of Australia's major sporting codes, even when doubled, is still below an average week at the movies.²

Cinema therefore remains one of the most powerful ways Australians engage with stories, ideas and identity. For this reason, not only the production of Australian films, but also the way they are distributed, marketed and connected with audiences, is culturally critical.

The fact that Australian films have fallen to around 1.5 to 3 per cent of the national box office over the last decade, while Indian films now capture around 9 per cent and Hollywood films account for the vast majority of the remainder, is alarming and should be a call to action for government and its agencies. These figures are supported by Comscore data presented to the 2026 ICA Conference.

Recent studies have shown that production of Australian films has almost doubled over the past couple of decades, while the cinema audience for them has halved. This is in stark contrast to many other countries around the world, where a strong local film industry is seen as essential.

Pillar 2 – A Place for Every Story

Cinemas, especially in regional areas, are the ultimate form of place-based access to Australian film and culture. Independent cinemas in particular, many of which are in regional areas, represent a high share of the audience for Australian stories on film.

Our cinemas not only provide jobs and pay taxes but they represent one of the few communal gathering places in many regional areas, and usually the only place where locals and visitors can see their own culture reflected on the big screen.

Our cinemas are a place where people can see and interact with important Australian stories, often presented through Q&As. In recent years across RCA's cinemas, this has included Life Could be a Dream on coercive control, Rachel Ward's farming film, music documentaries on Mic Conway and others, local surf films, films and special offers on wellbeing, mental health and suicide prevention, films on conquering cancer and much more. In addition, we see cinemas used regularly for conferences, corporate and community events, and special accessible screenings for hearing impaired people, neuro-diverse and parents.

Our cinemas are also important parts of the local community. Over the last 5 years, RCA has raised over \$40,000 for Lifeline for suicide prevention, and in the last year have provided over \$240,000 in donations, vouchers for junior sporting communities and others, and discounted screenings for fundraisers.

Pillar 4 – Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Cinemas are part of the cultural infrastructure of Australia, especially in regional areas. They are one of the few cultural institutions that still generally exist without government support or subsidy, other than during the Covid period or through limited grant funding for developing cinemas or maintaining community cinemas.

However, these cinemas are facing an existential crisis. This is not from a lack of audiences or engagement with local communities, as cinema experiences a resurgence, but because after the Covid years, their aftermath and the Hollywood strikes of 2023, many cinemas are low on capital, high on debt and carrying years of accumulated losses.

Their owners have kept them going at great personal cost in many cases because they care about the cultural impact they have on their communities. However, we are starting to see some of these cinemas close where they are no longer commercially viable. RCA alone has, in the last few years, closed three cinemas in regional NSW that will never reopen, in The Entrance, Singleton and Nambucca Heads, due to excessive rent requirements from landlords and the need for significant capital investment, neither of which could be commercially justified.

In particular, after the move to digital around 12 years ago, which was subsidised by film distribution because it also benefited distributors' cost base, projection equipment is now ageing, starting to break down and in need of replacement over the short term, especially with the advent of more energy-efficient and net-zero-friendly laser projectors. It is estimated that this area alone will require \$138 million of investment over the next four years, representing 60 per cent of projectors nationally.

At the same time, audiences in regional areas (many of whom have migrated to the regions in recent years) are increasingly asking for better seating experiences, with reclining and premium seating required to elevate the out-of-home experience.

Both of these upgrades are extremely capital intensive. Some overseas governments, including across Europe, particularly in countries such as France, the UK and Germany, have recognised this and provide public funding to assist cinemas to upgrade, particularly in regional areas that can least afford the capital investment.

It is essential that the government, either directly or through Screen Australia, consider financially supporting cinemas, especially independent regional cinemas, to get over the re-investment capital cliff that is looming, and ensure these important pieces of community and cultural infrastructure continue to service their local communities. Once they are lost, in many cases they will never be revived, and local communities will be the cultural losers.

Pillar 5 - Engaging the Audience

Screen Australia is a publicly funded agency whose purpose is to promote and support local production of feature films, documentaries, television shows and other screen content. It does not, to my knowledge, have a specific mandate to ensure that these productions meet their audiences, whether at the cinema or via other platforms. This does not mean it does not try to engage audiences, but the statistics on box office for Australian stories at the cinema indicate that this has not been successfully executed over the last two decades.

The Australian Government, through tax rebates, subsidies, incentives and grants, is a major investor in the success of screen production in Australia. Much of this investment goes to overseas productions, and it would be preferable for a greater share of this investment to be redirected towards the development, marketing and audience engagement of Australian stories on film.

As stated previously, cinemas are the most widely attended and accessible cultural infrastructure in the country. However, most of the films people see in our cinemas are not Australian stories.

In our cinemas, we employ many young staff, from 15 years old and up. Given the very low admissions achieved by Australian films over the last decade, it is highly likely that many young Australians, including some working in cinemas, have had little or no experience of seeing Australian stories on the big screen. This is a failure of cultural policy that needs to be

addressed as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, by largely constraining big-screen Australian stories to dramas for an older audience, we risk raising whole generations who do not see Australian stories as part of their cinema-going lives.

As stated previously, cinemas are the most widely-attended and accessible cultural infrastructure in the country, however most of the movies people see in our cinemas are not Australian stories. In our cinemas, we have many young staff, from 15 years up, and many of these young people have NEVER seen an Australian movie on the big screen – they flock to big Hollywood blockbusters, horror movies and the like, but they do not get to see their own culture on the big screen. This is a failure of our cultural policy which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency – otherwise, by largely constraining big-screen Australian stories to dramas for an older audience, we will find that we have whole generations who never watch Australian stories on the big screen.

I believe consideration should be given to specifically mandating Screen Australia, via its Act, to include the following objectives:

- Promote the production, distribution and marketing of Australian stories on film with the aim to ensure they reach their potential audiences. This may require influencing the types of movies made in addition to non-commercial (but important) movies – for example, encouragement to make movies that meet the 3 Fs – Fun, Female and Family – as key elements of the movies that Australians want to see. This could be done by directing more marketing support to commercially attractive movies with emphasis on these 3 Fs – comedies (think *The Castle*, *Muriel's Wedding* and *Kenny*), family movies (think *Babe* or *Paper Planes* or *Oddball*), and female-skewing (think *Priscilla : Queen of the Desert*, *Mao's Last Dancer*, *The Sapphires* and *The Dressmaker*). It is notable that none of these movies were made in the last decade, and it is notable that a recent Sydney Morning Herald article on the 50 best Australian Movies of all time had virtually no recent movies listed. We cannot rest on our laurels of the past success of Australian movies.
- Measure and be judged on audience engagement for Australian stories on all types of screens, to ensure that our stories are actually reaching audiences and not just becoming part of the ether.
- Ensure better alignment between production volume, audience strategy, release planning, marketing support and risk-adjusted financial return to government, private investors and artists or creators. This should include a focus on theatrical distribution for appropriate content, where appropriate, as one of the best ways to monetise Australian stories and make them part of the cultural zeitgeist.

Conclusion

Australian stories on screen are important culturally. Cinemas are an essential part of engaging audiences with those stories, and are essential cultural infrastructure, particularly in regional areas.

Our National Cultural Policy needs to recognise this by promoting a more effective means of making the right films for audiences, getting those stories more effectively to audiences, ensuring appropriate financial returns, and supporting the cultural infrastructure represented by cinemas in Australia.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, 2022.

² Made, Not Seen 2026 industry report.

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