

THE POT CALLS THE KETTLE

John Maynard

In November this year, I will deliver writer-director S. Shakthidharan's first feature film, *The Laugh of Lakshmi*.

I am a film producer, distributor, and director at Felix Media. I was awarded the Cecil Holmes Memorial Award by the Australian Directors Guild (2005) and an Honorary Master of Arts by the Australian Film Television and Radio School (2003). My filmography can be found here: <https://www.felixmedia.com.au/john-maynard>

A Cultural Safety Plan was required by Screen Australia and Screen NSW as a Condition of Investment and grant for the feature film *The Laugh Of Lakshmi*, written and directed by S Shakthidharan.

Structural racism has been raised with Screen Australia, and our last correspondence duck-shoved it into this forum rather than resolving it administratively or through regulatory amendments. Here it is.

In discussions with Shakthi, and while navigating the *Significant Australian Content* (SAC) test and QAPE implications for the Gallipoli Clause, I came to understand that the current rules are discriminatory and marginalise non-European diaspora stories. Shakthi: "That's how we all feel. It has always been like this."

In 2021, Australia became the first English-speaking country to be a "majority migrant nation", with more than 50% of its population either born overseas or with at least one parent born overseas.

Screen Australia's diversity research acknowledges the ongoing underrepresentation of non-European Australians, yet it also manages the very tools of exclusionary practices, primarily through the requirements of SAC, which is mandatory for eligibility for the Producer Tax Offset. If not structurally racist, it is certainly culturally unsafe for many Australians.

Likewise, Screen NSW relies on SAC as a threshold eligibility test; any project struggling to meet the federal SAC requirements will face increased scrutiny from Screen NSW when applying for production funding. Add to this that Screen NSW isn't just about personal bias; it's about blatant rent-seeking policies that approve millions of dollars in incentives that favour foreign productions over supporting local filmmakers, thereby creating a cultural underclass within diaspora communities.

The eastern suburbs of Sydney have benefited from film subsidies, and it is a fact that, to date, Screen NSW's emphasis on Western Sydney has not led to the establishment of a production house in Western Sydney!

1. Screen Australia: Why Most People Don't Feel Safe

1.1 Significant Australian Content "SAC"

Our experience with *The Laugh of Lakshmi* confirmed that access to the major tax incentive depends on subjective judgments about "Australianess", including in the unfortunately named "Gallipoli Clause".

Although Shakthi, a celebrated Australian writer and theatre director, and I, an Australian with a distinguished filmography and the copyright holder in Australia, required a month of emails and uncertainty before the SAC approval for *The Laugh of Lakshmi* was granted.

The guidelines mention “Australian look and feel,” “Australian” origin, and “meaningful and substantial” Australian involvement in development and creative control. Without a clear diasporic and racial justice perspective, these phrases can be interpreted to link “Australian” with white, English-speaking, mainstream urban experiences, marginalising practitioners whose cultural references, languages, and communities fall outside that norm.

Feeling culturally unsafe is understandable when SAC criteria allow others to decide whether a brown Sri Lankan Hindu Australian writer-director is considered “Australian enough”.

1.2 The Gallipoli Clause

This clause excludes planning and pre-production offshore from QAPE for *The Laugh of Lakshmi*. Although pre-production is vital, it’s excluded from QAPE, whereas later production stages qualify. It makes no sense to exclude the most critical production processes, where all major decisions, including casting, are made. However, Australian pre-production does qualify as QAPE.

POCU’s restrictive and biased application of these rules is prejudicial to diaspora narratives by ignoring individual circumstances. In contrast to standard industry practice, POCU’s enforcement is applied without nuance or regard for creative or film budget considerations.

It’s worth reading the Statement of Compatibility with Human Rights, which is Attachment B to the Producer Offset Rules.

John Maynard 24 May 2026