



The Meeting of Cultural Ministers
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10 December 2018

National Arts and Disability Strategy

To whom it may concern:

Well told and engaging stories lie at the heart of human social interaction and cultural cohesion, and play a central part in our collective identity and communal evolution. Stories guide us, entertain us, and bring us together to understand our histories, our modern world, and the futures that may await us.

Screens - from cinema screens to televisions and mobile phones - are increasingly the dominant way that we share stories. Screen Australia researchⁱ demonstrates that dramas and documentaries can resonate with audiences for decades after their release: for example, our understanding of the Gallipoli campaign and commemoration of Anzac Day was forever changed by Peter Weir's *Gallipoli*. Screen stories employ other artistic forms such as visual art and music to create a uniquely powerful artistic expression.

Screen Australia is the Commonwealth Government agency responsible for the Australian screen production industry. We support Australian screen stories released through cinema, television, and online platforms at home and abroad. We support and connect cultural, commercial and governmental stakeholders, ensuring the production of high quality, culturally significant and innovative Australian screen stories.ⁱⁱ

The cultural value of screen stories can be particularly important for people with disabilities. Australians who find it difficult to visit live events or exhibitions in person can use broadcast, satellite and online options to watch their choice of content on screens. But while Australian screen stories have a long history of cultural impact, representations of disability on Australian screens have been scarce. Authentic representations that place disability at the centre of the story, such as *Annie's Coming Out* (1984), *House Gang* (1996-98) and *Dance Me To My Song* (1998), are extremely rare. Other notable screen stories have focused on characters with disability but cast actors without disabilities: examples include *Tim* (1979), *Struck by Lightning* (1990), *Proof* (1991) and *The Black Balloon* (2008). There are few prominent screen stories that have been created by Australians with publically-disclosed disabilities.

Seeing Ourselves

To benchmark levels of diversity and explore challenges and opportunities, in 2016 Screen Australia published *Seeing Ourselves: Reflections on Diversity in TV Drama*. The report found that while people with disability represent 18 per cent of the Australian population, just 4 per cent of main or recurring TV drama characters on screen from 2011 to 2015 had an identifiable disability. 10 per cent of programs included at least one character with disability.

Seeing Ourselves consulted with industry practitioners, including those with disabilities. The report identified several barriers to participation, including risk-averse casting, inadequate community consultation on content, and a fundamental lack of opportunities throughout the industry. The report also identified that the power of authentic storytelling was becoming more prominent and expected, and that new opportunities in front of and behind the camera were slowly becoming evident. Online platforms, which are open to anyone and enable storytellers to aggregate audiences from around the world, were identified as a promising opportunity for content creators.

Screen Australia's role

Screen Australia has an important role in supporting stories about, and created by, Australians with disabilities. Screen Australia is the Australian Government's direct funding and administrative body for the Australian screen production industry. We are an independent agency that funds drama and documentary content on all screens, for Australians of all ages. We support quality projects of scale and ambition, projects of cultural value that are intrinsically Australian, and projects that encourage practitioners to innovate and embrace risk.

Australian Governments have for decades supported screen stories because they are a central part of contemporary life, and can reflect and shape our sense of who we are and who we might be. In this context, Screen Australia supports screen stories that reflect the experience and potential of Australians who have disabilities.

Support for storytellers

The screen industry is fiercely competitive, and Australians who have a disability can find it difficult to 'break in'. For several years, Screen Australia has funded strategic programs and partnerships that fund content creators to increase their skills, develop their projects, and showcase their talent to the screen industry. Strategic and sustained support that offers pathways into the industry elevates talent, promotes inclusion, and will provide increasingly diverse, creative and impactful content for audiences.

Screen Australia's support for practitioners includes the following programs:

- Story developers evaluate and assist stories and scripts that are yet to mature, and play a vital role in the creation of screen stories. The **Developing the Developer** program increases the diversity of screen story developers by offering professional development workshops and industry opportunities to applicants who have historically not had opportunities. To date, the program has assisted three practitioners with disability: following the program, Fiona Tuomy and Anthea Williams secured

development placements within production companies, while Ade Djajamihardja currently has a project in development with Screen Australia.

- Screen Australia has reformed its **drama development funding** by removing eligibility criteria and reducing administrative barriers. These historic changes open the program to all Australians and are expected to increase the diversity of screen stories, and of the people who are creating them.
- Most Screen Australia-funded productions must offer a meaningful, paid, **Inclusive Attachment** opportunity for an emerging practitioner. The attachment can reflect the theme or content of the project and can be offered to Australians with disability.

Partnerships across screen agencies, broadcasters, production companies and industry bodies have created programs with industry-wide impacts:

- ABC Children's Content and Screen Australia recently partnered on an initiative to support and showcase the best of Australia's next generation of content makers with disability. '**DisRupted**' will fund standalone screen stories for children, told by people with disabilities, that reflect and capture the experience of a person with disability living in Australia today. Content will premiere on ABC ME and iview in December 2019 around the International Day of People with Disability.
- The Screen Australia and Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) **Diversity Showcase** put emerging talent on stage in front of key industry decision makers. From 500 applications, 10 performers, 6 writers and 5 directors were selected, including performer Adam Bowes, a double above-knee amputee.
- Screen Australia, the Australian Film and Television Radio School (AFTRS) and state and territory screen agencies have partnered on **Talent Camp**, which sought stories from talented creatives from under-represented communities with reference to cultural background, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, geographic and/or socio-economic circumstance. 11 of the 97 Talent Camp participants to date have a disability, and Alister Baldwin has progressed from a writers placement with Guesswork Television to a credited writing role on series two of *Get Krack!*

The programs explored above support talented screen storytellers by encouraging them to apply, enhancing their skills, connecting them to collaborators, and opening industry doors. We have found the following factors provide the best chance for success:

- Programs should be based on research, consultation, and respect for the capabilities and potential of applicants, and should adapt to suit their needs.
- Adequate funding is required to ensure programs meet the needs of applicants and offer them equitable opportunities to reach their potential.
- Partnerships can provide unique access to community consultation, industry expertise, and/or audience impact.
- Programs should encourage innovative thinking that addresses the opportunities and challenges brought by digital disruption.

Screen Australia is seeking to make our own practices more accessible. All official Screen Australia events follow procedures that ensure they meet the diverse needs of participants and audiences. We are continuing to evolve our funding programs, policies and procedures, and our other outputs.

Support for content

Australian screen stories have the capacity to deliver tremendous cultural value to audiences: they inform our sense of who we are, offer unique forms of cultural expression, and provide culturally relevant experiences shared by millions of Australians.

But while Australian screen stories have at times reflected the lives of people with disability, and storytellers who have disabilities have occasionally played an active role in the industry, the number of projects and variety of voices remains limited. To ensure more Australians have the opportunity to see their lives and stories reflected back at them on screen, and to provide Australians without disabilities with authentic and diverse stories, Screen Australia has committed support to several projects that reflect the varied on and off screen perspectives of people with disability:

- *Young, Dateable and Disabled* (2019) - an upcoming SBS documentary following six individuals with intellectual disabilities as they navigate the challenging, funny and heart-warming quest for love.
- *Standing Up for Sunny* (release date to be determined) - an isolated guy with cerebral palsy (*Breaking Bad's* RJ Mitte) is railroaded into helping an unassertive comedienne, and finds love and acceptance through stand-up comedy.
- *Gurrumul* (2018) - this feature documentary about the life of blind Indigenous musician Dr. G. Yunupingu earned \$971,000 at the Australian box office and became the tenth highest-grossing Australian documentary of all time.
- *The Angus Project* (2018) - created as part of ABC's Fresh Blood comedy initiative, this half hour pilot offers a darkly funny but warm take on life lived with a significant disability in a conservative country town. It explores the real-life experiences of co-creator Angus Thompson, a hard partying guy with cerebral palsy, and his reckless carer Erika.
- *Employable Me* series 1 and 2 (2018, 2019) - an ABC documentary series which uses science to uncover the hidden skills of jobseekers with Autism, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Tourette's, and change the attitudes of employers and colleagues.
- *Defiant Lives* - premiering at the Sydney Film Festival in 2017, this feature documentary chronicles the rise and struggle of the disability rights movement in the United States, Britain and Australia. Screen Australia support also helped the filmmakers travel to New York to present the film at the 2017 UN Conference on the Convention on the Rights of People With Disabilities.
- *Oddlands* - a 2017 pilot supported through an initiative with the Adelaide Film Festival, and developed by the Back to Back Theatre Company's ensemble of actors with disability. *Oddlands* follows two members of a clean-up crew in a strange toxic wasteland who stumble upon the last human survivor and have to decide between saving humanity and saving themselves. The pilot won Best Short at the Adelaide Film Festival, and a half hour series is currently in development.
- *Spin Out* (2016) - a comedy feature set around a Bachelor & Spinster's ball, co-written and co-director by wheel-chair bound comedian Tim Ferguson.

Support for audiences

Screen Australia's Terms of Trade require that feature films that receive Screen Australia production funding are captioned and audio-described, to provide access for the hearing and/or visually impaired. The Terms of Trade require producers to budget for the provision of captions and audio description in theatres and on video formats such as DVD, and to use reasonable endeavours to ensure that all Australian distribution agreements include access to captions and audio description. We also encourage producers of all non-feature film content to budget for captioning and audio description, and for accessible web design, to provide access to their projects for both hearing and visually impaired audiences.

Support for festivals

Screen Australia offers triennial support to a variety of local film festivals to ensure that quality Australian stories, made by a diverse range of screen practitioners, continue to feature in festival programs alongside the best from around the world. Support is currently provided to three festivals focused on improving access and participation for practitioners and audience with disabilities.

- **The Other Film Festival** was established by Arts Access Victoria and has been held biennially since 2004. The festival is led by staff who have disabilities and offers a three-day program of screenings, industry panels and talks. The 2016 program featured 32 titles from around the world, including 16 by emerging Australian filmmakers with disabilities.
- **The Wide Angle Film Festival** (formerly the Access All Areas Film Festival) is able to utilise considerable community reach to bring its four programs of short films to audiences all around the country, through a series of screenings hosted by community groups and schools.
- Now in its 10th year, **The Focus On Ability Short Film Festival** presented by NOVA Employment has used sponsorship, media partners and patrons such as actress Paula Duncan to attract 210 entrants from 19 countries in 2017. Films are hosted online for free viewing before the festival culminates in a red carpet screening and awards night.

Screen Australia also offers support that enables content creators to travel to international markets and festivals. In 2017, Screen Australia supported the creators of low-budget feature *Pulse* to attend the Busan Film Festival. *Pulse* tells the story of gay teenager Olly, who takes up the chance to abandon his disabled body by transferring his consciousness into the body of a young woman. *Pulse* was written, acted and edited by Daniel Monks, who drew on his own experience with disability. It won the BNK Busan Bank Award at the Busan Festival, and Monks' performance was nominated for a 2018 AACTA Award.

The Screen Diversity and Inclusion Network

The *Seeing Ourselves* process, along with the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) *Inclusive Pathways Framework* and PwC's 2016-2020 *Outlook* report, all documented the impact of exclusion and the potential benefits of greater diversity. Further consultation identified that a collaborative approach could coordinate efforts across research, initiatives and programs, and create deep and lasting change.

In 2017, the screen sector formally acknowledged the need for effective, collaborative, long-term and industry-wide change by forming the Screen Diversity and Inclusion Network (SDIN). The SDIN is a network of Australian broadcasters, screen funding agencies, business associations, guilds and industry-aligned education and training organisations committed to working together towards a more inclusive and diverse screen industry.

The SDIN actively seeks to improve the diversity of the talent that shapes Australian content, and the types of stories that are reflected on our screens. It recognises that screen storytellers should be drawn from the widest possible talent pool, and that the industry should welcome a range of backgrounds, influences and experiences when generating Australian screen culture. The SDIN has clear potential to coordinate efforts and monitor and champion change across the sector, for both storytellers and audiences.

Wider industry examples

As noted above, meaningful change cannot occur without efforts from across the sector. The following are examples of just some of the screen organisations that are working to provide bespoke, flexible and enhanced opportunities for stories and storytellers that have a disability.

- Bus Stop Films is a Sydney-based charitable organisation that provides people with intellectual disabilities, and other marginalised communities, with opportunities to learn about professional filmmaking and take up cast and crew roles. Practitioners with disability have been involved in the production of numerous short films, whilst the training received by program participants has led to other opportunities: for example, performer Benjamin Phillips was chosen for a guest role in the series *Offspring* in 2016.
- In 2013, the Media and Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) established the Equity Diversity Committee. In 2016/17, it formed a disability sub-committee convened by Kate Hood. An early recommendation of the committee that has been adopted was the introduction of a disability membership rate, which gives access to a reduced rate for a three-year period.
- In 2016, Screen NSW (now Create NSW), launched Screenability, a program to create opportunities in the screen industry for people with disabilities, in partnership with Ai-Media, AFTRS, Carriageworks, Bus Stop Films and the Sydney Film Festival. Screenability has funded short films and an annual film festival, and provided paid internships in writing, camera, editing and production roles. In 2018, Create NSW in partnership with the Department of Family and Community Services and Accessible Arts, launched the Createability program, which has funded internships at the ABC, Animal Logic, Goalpost Pictures and Jungle Entertainment.
- National broadcasters have backed initiatives and content that focus on disability.
 - The ABC documentary series *You Can't Ask That* (2016-2018) was hailed by both audiences and critics for its thoughtful and challenging discussions around many social issues including people with disability, whilst the SBS series *The Employables* championed entrepreneurial opportunities for disabled jobseekers.
 - SBS and the South Australian Film Corporation's Full Tilt program provides paid attachments on SAFC-supported productions that develop the skills of

practitioners with disability, as well as opportunities for underrepresented communities to produce a short documentary for premiere on SBS On Demand, with the potential for broadcast on SBS Viceland.

- In late 2016, SBS and state and territory screen agencies launched the Talent Escalator Initiative, which aims to increase the representation of Australia's diverse communities within the television production sector.
- Across the Arts more broadly, Bridie McKim was the National Institute of Dramatic Arts' first graduate with cerebral palsy, and was also the 2018 recipient of the Arna Maria Winchester Award. Since 2017, NIDA has also provided support to Midnight Feast, a theatre ensemble with disability, including rehearsal space, costumes, and mentoring and assistance in script writing.

A renewed strategy

Screen Australia suggests that a renewed National Arts and Disability Strategy:

- acknowledge the significant potential that screen stories have to reach large and diverse audiences, and to create cultural impacts
- take advantage of the substantial opportunities that online platforms such as YouTube and Facebook offer for screen storytellers to bypass traditional 'gatekeepers' and aggregate audiences from around the world
- prioritise actions that provide strategic and sustained opportunities for screen storytellers that have a disability.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important process and thank the Department for considering this letter.

Yours sincerely



Michael Brealey
Chief Operating Officer

ⁱ *Screen Currency: Valuing Our Screen Industry* <<https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/reports-and-key-issues/reports-and-discussion-papers/screen-currency>>

ⁱⁱ Further information on Screen Australia's role can be found in our Corporate Plan, available here: <<https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/about-us/corporate-documents>>