

## **MIFF: An Industry Perspective**

By Rochelle Siemienowicz

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The **Melbourne International Film Festival** [<http://www.melbournefilmfestival.com.au/>] is about to take over the city (22 July – 8 August) and while film lovers gear up for the annual orgy – a glorious glomming of films from all over the world – there's a whole other strand of MIFF that happens outside of the cinema. Designed especially for those in the film industry – the people who write, direct, produce and sell films – it's a rapidly expanding program of events. Sitting at the hub of this busy hive is Mark Woods, executive producer of the **MIFF Premiere Fund** [<http://www.miffpremierfund.com> ] and manager of the **MIFF 37°South Market** [<http://www.miff37degreesSouth.com>], Australia's only festival-based film co-financing market.

“What's incredibly exciting,” says Woods, “is that this year, for the first time, there isn't actually a day during MIFF where there isn't an industry offer and that's partly come about, we'd like to think, through the magnetic pull of MIFF 37°South. In addition to having this massive whopping festival with all these films, running alongside that we now have an industry program that literally spans the entire length of the festival, and that's a considerable source of pride for us all.”

Woods has a background that spans film journalism, acquisitions and commissioning (Showtime) and heading up the Irish Film Board and AusFilm. But for the last four years he's been busy working with the festival's strategic film financing arm, the MIFF Premiere Fund, and establishing the profile of the 37°South Market. This latter project has involved Woods “wearing out the shoe leather at international festivals,” opening up his “little black book” and networking like crazy to persuade distributors and sales agents to get on a plane down to Melbourne – no easy sell in its first years. Woods is happy to report, however, that this year, “there's very much a surplus of companies wanting to come.” In the end, this means that Australian producers are getting unique opportunities to advance their projects, **contacts** and show off their work.

While the four-day market (in the festival's first days) remains the core industry offering, there are a host of other activities and workshops revolving around writers, directors, short filmmakers, publishers and producers. Of course, for the general audience member, MIFF's industry commitment is most clearly on view when we sit back and enjoy the five Premiere Fund Films, which look like a terrific crop this year. Check them out below.

To scan the five MIFF Premiere Fund Films showcasing at the 2010 festival, click **here**.

For a list of the industry offerings at MIFF this year click **here**.

A full interview with Mark Woods can be accessed **here**.

**The MIFF Premiere Fund** [<http://www.miffpremierfund.com>]

The MIFF Premiere Fund commenced operations in September 2007 with a \$1.6 million grant over two years from the Victorian State Government. This was renewed with a further \$1.6 million from July 2009 **and was recently renewed for a further four years**. The fund provides strategic minority financial support to feature documentaries and narrative feature films that will have their premieres at MIFF, with funding typically spread over four to six projects annually.

Previous MIFF Premiere Fund films include:

2009: *Balibo*, *Bran Nue Dae*, *Blessed*, *The Loved Ones* and *Indonesia Calling*.

2008: *Not Quite Hollywood*, *Rock n Roll Nerd*, *Bastardy*, and *Celebrity: Dominick Dunne*.

The films premiering at MIFF 2010 are: [Leo, could you please build each film a coloured box with image as per the Sydney Film fest rundown?]

### **The Wedding Party** (Opening night film)

Writer-director: Amanda Jane

Producer: Nicole Minchin

Starring: Isabel Lucas, Kestie Morassi, Essie Davis, Steve Bisley, Adam Zwar, Geoff Paine, Nadine Garner, Josh Lawson, Bill Hunter and Rhonda Burchmore.

**Synopsis:** A romantic comedy set against the backdrop of an impending wedding, the film follows the romance and drama of the Thompson family who are dealing with the ins and outs of relationships. From a deviant brother, a sister with intimacy issues, to parents who have separated due to infidelity, each couple must face the one lesson that will get them through the complications of love.

### **Blame**

Writer-director: Michael Henry

Producers: Michael Robinson, Ryan Hodgson and Melissa Kelly

Starring: Kestie Morassi, Sophie Lowe, Damian de Montemas, Simon Stone and Mark Leonard Winter

**Synopsis:** A psychological thriller about the quest for justice and revenge, the story follows five friends who violently attack a man in his remote country house. Their plan: the perfect murder. Confident that their victim's death by his own hand will not be questioned, they overdose him on sleeping pills, but it all goes horribly wrong when their attempt fails and their victim fights for his life.

### **Matching Jack**

Writers: Lynne Renew and David Parker

Director: Nadia Tass

Producers: David Parker and Richard Keddie

Starring: James Nesbitt, Jacinda Barrett, Richard Roxburgh, Kodi Smit-McPhee and Tom Russell.

**Synopsis:** A romantic family drama about a mother who discovers her husband has had multiple affairs throughout their marriage, but the possibility of an illegitimate child could be the very reason that their son, Jack, might live. Jack needs something only a sibling can provide: a perfect match. So her search begins, unearthing both a new man for herself, and a new beginning for her son.

**Machete Maidens Unleashed!** (feature documentary)

Director: Mark Hartley

Producer: Veronica Fury

**Synopsis:** A fast-moving odyssey into the B-grade genre films that American production houses shot in the Philippines during the 1970s – complete with miniature James Bonds, karate-kicking soul sisters and gun-toting nuns.

**Mother of Rock** (feature documentary)

Director: Paul Clarke

Producer Robert de Young

**Synopsis:** A profile of Lillian Roxon, the pioneering Australian-born 1960s New York-based rock journalist. Features interviews with Germaine Greer, Helen Reddy, Alice Cooper, Iggy Pop and David Malouf.

For MIFF Premiere Fund guidelines and application forms, go to  
<http://www.miffpremierefund.com>

Note: In addition to being offered production co-financing, successful applicants to the MIFF Premiere Fund also receive complimentary registration to MIFF 37°South Market and receive priority for 37°South: Breakthru Screenings, which showcase films requiring sales and/or distribution to the market's invited buyers.

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**MIFF 37°South Market** [<http://www.miff37degreesSouth.com>]

Begun in 2007, this invite-only program enables Australian/NZ producers with market-ready slates of feature-length projects to meet with key international film co-financiers in Melbourne at one-to-one meetings, roundtables and informal networking sessions.

Financing guests include sales agents, distributors, private financiers, studios, bank gap funds, government funders and tax funds.

The program comprises:

**MIFF 37°South: Bridging the Gap**, the core product of the market, with meetings, roundtables and public panel discussions.

**MIFF 37°South: Breakthru Screenings** of completed films seeking local distribution or world sales agents.

**MIFF 37°South PostScript & Direct**: offering Victorian scriptwriters and directors the opportunity to meet registered Australian/NZ producers.

**MIFF 37°South Accelerator Express**: giving one emerging producer the chance to attend MIFF 37°South: Bridging the Gap and also showcasing the work of emerging short film directors to registered Australia/NZ producers.

**MIFF 37°South Books at MIFF (BaM)**: bringing together the book publishing and film financing industries with screen adaptation case studies, public pitching of books ripe for adaptation and scheduled meetings between publishers and film producers. The first event of its kind in Australia.

In addition to the MIFF 37°South Market, this year sees a number of other industry programs happening in conjunction with festival.

### **Robert Rosen Lecture Series**

Screen Australia, in association with MIFF 37°South Market, presents educator and critic Robert Rosen speaking on narrative storytelling and its significance both on and off the screen. [For more information click here.](#)

### **Digital Summit**

MIFF 37°South Market presents two programs of workshops, conferences and labs focusing on new opportunities arising from digital media. [For more information click here.](#)

### **State of Play**

A newly expanded series of public forums about the Australian screen industry. [For more information click here.](#)

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## Q&A with Mark Woods

Here the executive producer of MIFF Premiere Fund and manager of MIFF 37°South Market talks about the challenges of the role, and the satisfaction of being a part of MIFF's fast-growing tradition of industry engagement.

**AFI: The festival is nearly upon us. Is it an incredibly busy time in your office right now?**

**Mark Woods:** Yes! With the MIFF 37°South Market we'll have about 75 producers from Australian and New Zealand, and for the first time a few international producers here via our international partnerships, and then 35 sales agents and distributors [and others]. So as you can imagine it's a huge logistical exercise. At the moment it's just one foot in front of the other to get through an increasingly large amount of paperwork.

**AFI: Can you run us through the MIFF Premiere Fund Films that will be unveiled this year?**

**Mark Woods:** Well, we have five films. First up is *The Wedding Party*. That's exciting because it's been selected to open the festival. Then there's *Blame*, a Victorian/West Australian co-production, which is actually the first film to be financed through 'PostScript & Direct', a division of 37°South...Then there's Nadia Tass's latest film, and probably her first fully Australian film in about 20 years, *Matching Jack*. We also have two wonderful feature documentaries: *Mother of Rock*, which is the Lillian Roxon story. It features Germaine Greer quite heavily and she'll probably be coming to Melbourne to launch the film. Our fifth title is *Machete Maidens Unleashed* which is the very welcome return of Mark Hartley, who directed *Not Quite Hollywood*, which was also a MIFF Premiere Fund Film that opened the festival in 2008. He's back taking the same sort of sartorial eye to the Filipino exploitation film industry of the 70s as he did with similar subject matter here in Australia.

**AFI: Are all of these films finished and ready to screen, or will they be rushing to make the date?**

**Mark Woods:** Some of them are more advanced than others. *The Wedding Party* is just about to start delivering its materials, *Matching Jack* is well ahead of the pack with a lot of the delivery done. Meantime *Machete Maidens* is just finished grading now so that will be down to the wire. That's the interesting thing about filmmakers and working with the MIFF Premiere Fund: the major tripwire is that we do have a drop-dead delivery date.

**AFI: Amiel Courtin-Wilson's Ben Lee: Catch My Disease was originally slated for this year's festival wasn't it?**

**Mark Woods:** Yes, that's been pushed back and is now going to premiere next year, hopefully. Amiel's films are famously long-gestating affairs and he always finds new storylines to pursue. *Bastardy* was like that and certainly worth waiting for. Of course we would have loved to have [the Ben Lee film] for this year, but that film is still very much on our slate.

**AFI: Is there a set number of films that the fund hopes to see premiering each year?**

**Mark Woods:** Basically the underlying objective for the fund is that we try to generate a minimum of four and a maximum of six titles a year to contribute to the MIFF lineup.

**AFI: You've been there right from the start of the fund?**

**Mark Woods:** I have. It's certainly performed and probably exceeded our expectations. I don't think anybody saw we would start this mini-tradition of having our Premiere Fund Films all pitching for opening night. [2009 opened with *Balibo* and 2008 with *Not Quite Hollywood*, both MIFF Premiere Fund Films.] It's actually not an outcome that we would have dared to hope for, to be honest, so I'm very happy.

**AFI: There is \$1.6 million to distribute over two years. What's the decision making process of dividing that up?**

**Mark Woods:** Basically there's about \$700,000 to distribute in each financial period and we do try to spend that as far as possible. It's government money and it's not given to us to sit on, so we try to commit that amount in each given year. That is partly to demonstrate that we are able to spend the money and that there is demand for that money – which there sure is! This is not a general production fund, it's a fund designed expressly to secure content for our festival. There is a committee that makes various decisions, and there are a number of guidelines and criteria. We try to make the money stretch as far as we can across as much content as possible. The cap for a narrative drama feature is [an investment of] \$175,000. Originally it was \$150,000 but that was increased in August last year. For feature docs there's a cap of about \$90,000.

We do have as one of our criteria that the project has to demonstrate need; we're not giving them cash for the sake of it, and we're not here to replicate other sources of funding that are available. Basically we require the filmmakers to demonstrate 'additionality' – a wonderful made-up word which means you have to prove a few things: Number one, we need you to demonstrate that if you get the money, what exactly is it adding to the project? Obviously a very easy case is documentary. Many docs are made for a TV hour, so people come to us for extra money to enable a feature version.

**AFI: Who's on the committee making these decisions?**

**Mark Woods:** Basically the process works that people show [their proposal] to me and I would read the script and go through the financing. Obviously we have to love the film and think it's going to work for us. I conduct those initial investigations and draft recommendations, and those recommendations go to a committee comprised of myself, the festival director, the chair of the MIFF board, who is also the chair of the MIFF Premiere Fund subcommittee. And then we have two other board members who rotate each meeting, so we have two different members each meeting. Then we also have an external advisor who also rotates as well, and we always ensure those advisors are from outside Victoria because we want very objective feedback that's not influenced by who they know here in Melbourne. So 50 per cent of our committee varies with each meeting, and the reason for that is that every project is allowed to apply twice, so if

they're not successful in the first instance, they can come back and reapply, and 50 per cent of the eyeballs will be fresh.

**AFI: Is it ever an issue for filmmakers that they are constrained to have their premiere at MIFF?**

**Mark Woods:** For some filmmakers it may be an issue, and at the end of the day we're not compelling anybody to apply. What we're offering is extra funding into the pot, and obviously every bit of extra or discretionary funding comes with strings attached, and we want a premiere. Having said that however, we do make exceptions and that is specified in our guidelines. For example, if the film happens to be selected for Cannes then obviously we wouldn't stand in the way of that. The same goes for Official selection for Sundance, Rotterdam, Berlin...interestingly, that hasn't happened yet, purely because the cycle of timing for delivery of our films is late May or June, and so a lot of films are rushing to make that deadline, and are therefore not ready for earlier festivals.

**AFI: Moving on to the 37°South Market, when will the guests be announced for that event?**

**Mark Woods:** The international guests will be announced two days before the event. We're going into our fourth edition now so people know what the product is and there is an element of trust I suppose, that we are actually generating the range and depth and quality of guests for them, which each year we've done. People know that they can rest assured that there will be some really big financiers. They also know there's going to be a small number of sales agents with a small amount of money to attach to very arty projects. And they know that in the middle there'll be a very large number of bread and butter companies who frequently do business in and with Australia.

**AFI: The Australian producers who are participating have already been decided?**

**Mark Woods:** Yes, applications closed in April. The producers know that this is a four-day event of meetings, networking events, round table events and screenings, and that in addition to the meetings they take there's a lot of offline networking time where you really get to spend quality time that you would never get at something like Cannes or Berlin, where you're competing against the rest of the world's producers. The key outcome for 37°South is really that Australian producers at every level are getting to make those connections; basically they can induce these sales agents to read their scripts – because the hardest thing nowadays is if you go in with an unsolicited script, you can't get people to read it, and it goes to the bottom of the pile.

**AFI: What is the personal highlight of 37°South for you?**

**Mark Woods:** Finishing it and getting to the last day without any major calamities! The closer you get to the actual event it becomes more and more of a logistical exercise. When you're there, all you see are the moving pieces: you see the 75 producers, the 30-40 financiers, the 20 publishers for the 'Books at MIFF' module. You see the 30 writer/directors for our 'PostScript



Direct' module. They're all moving pieces and there's potential for things to go horribly wrong, which thankfully they haven't thus far.

**AFI: What are some examples of success stories to come out of 37°South?**

**Mark Woods:** One of the great offshoots of the market is the 'Breakthru Screenings'. We only introduced that two years ago when we figured out that we have all these sales agents in town, and also that we had a lot of films submitted that didn't have sales agents attached. We had all these sales agents who were kind of exhausted by the non-stop stream of meetings, so we thought we could just break off the meetings each day with a screening in a small theatre, and see what happens. That became one of the great success stories.

One of the most pleasing examples was *Lake Mungo*. That was a small film that was having trouble getting arrested, to be honest, and sadly it hadn't been selected for MIFF that particular year. But I saw the film and thought that it was a good little film, and knowing what I know about sales agents and film financing, I knew sales agents who would take it on and, at a minimum, want to make some TV sales on it. Sure enough, the film got picked up by Arclight and has gone on to have a fabulous career overseas and been picked up by Paramount for remake rights. And the same with *Van Diemen's Land*, Bavaria [Film International sales agents] picked that up from a Breakthru screening. *Blind Company*, that got picked up by Media Luna for foreign sales, as did another film called *Strangers, Lovers, Killers*, that got picked up by sales agents from our screenings.

**AFI: Can you talk about the international partnerships that 37°South has built?**

**Mark Woods:** Yes, the London Film Festival has the PFM – the Production Finance Market, and 37°South is the exclusive Australian partner of the PFM. They've never before selected Australian projects and now under our partnership arrangements, all 37°South producers and projects are automatically considered for the market, and they guarantee to take three producers from our market. We also have a partnership with the Abu Dhabi Circle that's connected with the Abu Dhabi Film Festival. We have the London partnership which is with a very established film financing part of the world, and we thought it would be good to have one with an emerging part of the world, which is one day going to be a very important part of the film financing circuit.

**AFI: Thanks for your time. We're very much looking forward to the festival.**

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