



Mark Woods: Bringing People Together

By Anthony Frajman

01 December 2019 (FilmInk Magazine)

We spoke with the Executive Producer of the MIFF Premiere Fund at Screen Producers Australia's Screen Forever conference.

*As Executive Producer of the MIFF Premiere Fund, Mark Woods oversees a slate of up to seven Australian films a year that put the issues, challenges and identity of Australia front and centre on the big screen. With a focus on diverse, new and thoughtful voices, and nurturing talent through MIFF's Accelerator Lab (an initiative designed to fast-track short film directors into feature films); the Premiere Fund's historical slate is the only feature film fund of its kind run by a major film festival in Australia, and includes titles such as **Bran Nue Dae, These Final Hours, Jungle and Paper Planes.***

*With a record seven movies as part of the Premiere Fund in 2019, including **Buoyancy**, which was awarded the 2019 Panorama Prize at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival, we caught up with Woods to get his thoughts on the challenging film landscape, what exhibitors can do to support Australian film, and what the Premiere Fund is looking for.*

In your role as Executive Producer of the MIFF Premiere Fund, you invest in an annual slate of feature films and documentaries which have ties to Victoria. What is the focus of the MIFF Premiere Fund and what exactly are you looking for from producers and filmmakers?

We invest in up to six and seven movies a year and provide minority co-financing. In return for that we secure the premiere of the movie, preferably the world premiere. We're looking for films that satisfy the central mantra of the fund: stories that need telling. We've been about diversity and inclusion for a very long time, for over 10 years. We are about stories that need to be told from a wide range of voices. We want films that, yes, have a Victorian connection. A film like *Buoyancy* is a bullseye for us. *Buoyancy* is a Victorian director telling a big story with global significance. One of the big issues of our age is modern slavery. It's a film that has to be told. That *must* be told. So, we're looking for the next *Buoyancy*; we're looking for the next *Below*, a story about incarceration of refugees, another big issue of our time. I think people have a certain feeling before watching a Premiere Fund movie. We're also really keen to work with directors from the MIFF Accelerator Lab. Part of our strategy as a Festival, is we have the Accelerator Lab to nurture existing and emerging directing talent making the transition to features. And on our 2019 slate, *Buoyancy, Below, A Family and H is for Happiness* were all made by Accelerator alumni.

You've run the MIFF Premiere Fund for 12 years. From your perspective, how do you see the current landscape and the challenges for releasing Australian films?

It feels like it has never been tougher. It's always been tough to finance Australian films. Distribution is harder, distributors are perhaps more risk averse. There are always a big range of sales agents for Australian films, but locally, distribution has gotten harder. In terms of securing the screens, I think you can do that, but holding onto them is another matter. I think in the end, screen financiers will have to realise that we need to fund cinema in a way that we fund theatre and the way that we fund visual

arts. You fund it because you want to reach an audience, no questions there. But you also fund it to be part of the national conversation. Would something like *Buoyancy* have been as effective on television? Probably there's a documentary to be made that would be, but in terms of a narrative feature that captures people's imagination, only cinema can do that. I think, cinema is still a big shared experience of like-minded people in a room together, sharing an experience, and then discussing it. I think some of the big opportunities for quality cinema, are more about the engagement and activations around them. And that's where festivals come in. Festivals are an economical way of activating and eventising your film. So yes, you can go all around the country and organise your own Q&A screening, but nothing compares to really being part of something bigger than your film itself in a curated atmosphere. These opportunities elevate your film. And that is still I think a big opportunity for Australian films.

I think the public funders in this country might need to think about even more distribution support – along the lines of many of the European screen agencies which often have strong emphasis in this area. Equally we want to think about how to incentivise and support Sales Agents handling Australian films. Some foreign agencies, I think the Korean Film Council even offer support to overseas distributors releasing their films. As distribution becomes more challenging, how do we support distributors to make sure the films get the play and advertising they need? That is the big challenge.

What are some things that can be done to give locally made films more support to reach audiences?

I do think that as an industry there could be though given to having more distribution support programs. Perhaps there should be proper grant-based funding for distributors to release Australian films. Grants which state “we'll give you this money specifically for advertising” and “this much specifically for talent”, whatever it is. I don't think we should be frightened to admit that we now definitely find ourselves in a situation where quality cinema and even some of the more commercial Australian cinema cannot compete with the advertising budgets that come in from overseas. If we're providing production funding to address a budget shortcoming, why should we be frightened of providing distribution funding as well? We had a government funded distributor once upon a time in this country, AFI distribution. I think as a country, we should be unafraid to subsidise distribution.

And for that matter, we used to have subsidised movie theatres in Sydney and Melbourne. I don't think we should be frightened of doing something with exhibitors. Anything that you can do in any way shape or form to level the playing field just a tiny bit. Between the might of foreign distribution and local distribution. Anything you can do to level the playing field for independent exhibition and the big exhibition chains. Anything you can do to provide a little bit more breathing space for Australian films. We need to do something in this country about distribution.

Are there any Australian narrative films you've seen recently which you've admired?

Hearts and Bones is a terrific film, I loved it. That's exactly the sort of film we want to do. A story that needs telling. We love anything with an indigenous theme, films that talk about the refugee experience. Environmental films. Things around the theme of extinction we'd like to look at next.

Can you tell us about what's on the slate for MIFF Premiere Fund next year?

I can't tell you too much. But there is a Hugo Weaving film, which is *Lone Wolf*. So we're excited about that. I've seen a cut of that. We have a new documentary called *Uluru & the Magician* from filmmaker Anna Broinowski (*Forbidden Lies, Aim High in Creation*) which will be produced by Rachel Clements and Trisha Morton-Thomas who produced the Premiere Fund-supported documentary *The Song Keepers*. It's about Uluru and it's about race relations. This is a project made in collaboration with the local community which we're very excited about. There's also *My Big Fat Italian Kitchen* (working title), which is from director Trevor Graham (*Monsieur Mayonnaise*). It looks at a hotel-restaurant in Italy staffed mainly by young people born with Down Syndrome. All three films speak to our values and interests. One of the films is a First nations story. One is about disabled people reaching their full potential through the prism of food and creativity. *Lone Wolf* is based on a Joseph Conrad novel and about privacy and surveillance. Each of these films are about issues of the moment. And about bringing people together.