



MIFF: GIVING BACK



'The Song Keepers', a MIFF Premiere Fund film.

Melbourne International Film Festival industry director Mark Woods explains to Jackie Keast why the festival sought to give back to the industry by establishing a film fund, a market and a talent accelerator program for emerging directors, and how each initiative complements the other.

As far as possible, Melbourne International Film Festival's industry program aims to build a "page to premiere" relationship with filmmakers.

It consists of three main strands, the Accelerator Lab, a workshop for emerging directors whose shorts have been selected to the festival; the MIFF 37th South Market; and the MIFF Premiere Fund, which offers minority co-financing to features which then go on to premiere at the festival.

According to the festival's industry director Mark Woods, the hope is for a relationship with talent to begin at Accelerator and then move forward for there. Accelerator alumni include the likes of David Michôd, Justin Kurzel, Taiki Waititi, Sophie Hyde, Matthew Bate, Zak Hilditch, Glendyn Ivin and Nash Edgerton.

"People on the cusp of making their first-time film – we want those directors to come to Accelerator... [Then] we want their producers to come back for a few years to 37th South to assemble your sales agent, your distributor, maybe your gap. And then we want them to then come back and apply to the Premiere Fund," Woods says.

"That's the ideal journey for us with talent. But... once you have a director in the Accelerator program,

it's kind of like you're in a club. We do pay special attention to those directors, and we track what they're up to as far as possible. Certainly I will say when an application comes into the Premiere Fund that involves an Accelerator director they do get a much closer look."

While he can't announce the 2019 Premiere Fund slate yet, Woods says the six films are all from Accelerator directors. "That speaks for itself – most years we will have one or two Accelerator directors, but now they've all come together."

The festival formulated the industry program just over a decade ago, with Woods noting the decision behind it was firstly to see the festival be a greater part of the industry it draws itself from, and secondly to deepen relationships with content creators.

"MIFF began thinking about its place in the festival landscape and looked to some of the major overseas public festivals, and how those festivals had taken the next step in their growth. There was a recurring theme, from the likes of Berlin and Rotterdam, and then later Toronto, of adding industry, which created a stronger interface between the cinema loving attendee of the festival, and the content creators."

Having such a program is of mutual benefit for both the industry and the festival, says Woods.

The Premiere Fund, for example, not only helps creatives to get their projects off the ground, but also guarantees MIFF a pipeline of content.

"We care about all the films we show at MIFF, and all the films we premiere. But obviously having that little bit of extra skin of the game, being one of the commissioning investors, we give those films even more love."

The fund's tagline is "stories that need telling", and Woods says they have a focus on films that contribute in some way to the national conversation, be that through Indigenous themes or a focus on politics, social issues, or the artistic endeavour. In its 10 years, it has backed the likes of *Balibo*, *Bastardy*, *Paper Planes*, *These Final Hours*, *Bran Nue Dae*, *Putuparri* and *the Rainmakers* and *The Turning*.

Premiere Fund films are often given special "uplift" by the festival in terms of event screenings. For example, last year's premiere of *The Song Keepers* saw the film's choir perform and for *Have You Seen the Listers?*, Anthony Lister came and did a live painting. Over the years, the fund has also contributed several opening night films to MIFF, like *Not Quite Hollywood* in 2008 and *Jungle* last year. "That's pretty amazing given that the fund doesn't get any special dispensation; the

artistic director chooses that of their own accord," says Woods.

If a Premiere Fund film is finished and doesn't have a distributor or sales agent, it will automatically be put through to the Breakthru Screenings at the 37th South Market.

"We've had some great outcomes from that. Last year's screening alone, *The Butterfly Tree* found a sales agent [and] *The Song Keepers* found both a sales agent and a distributor."

The market itself is a tailored, invite-only event seeing up to 50 sales agents/distributors meet with 100-110 pre-selected Australian/Kiwi producers. In terms of how producers are selected, Woods says they cast their net wide – they want everyone from the Jan Chapmans and Liz Watts of the world down to first-timers. Previous guest companies have included the likes Amazon, Bankside, Fortitude, Paramount, Vendetta, XYZ and Level K. A growing strand of the market is also the Books stream – which aims to foster adaptations – last year there were 32 publishers in attendance.

Each guest to the market would take 45-50 meetings, says Woods. Last year's market there were 2,753 meetings in total, all scheduled individually. "My team, we sit around for eight days in a room, and we start with producer number one and we work our way through to producer 110. Then we sit down with guest number one, identify all their priorities, and we individually match and tailor each [meeting]."

MIFF runs 2 – 19 August and the 37th South Market 2 – 5 August. 