

# National Cultural Policy Submission

By

Kingston Anderson



## About Kingston

Kingston is currently consulting on a number of projects in the screen industry including a new studio complex in NSW and to increase screen production in regional areas. He is also producing for his production company Wonderland Productions. His most recent full-time position was as the CEO of the Australian Directors Guild and Australian Screen Directors Authorship Collection Society. He comes from a theatre and film background working as a theatre director, film and television producer as well as a consultant for screen organisations across Australia. He was the Film commissioner for the state of New South Wales in Australia and has served on a number of boards including the ASSOCIATION OF FILM COMMISSIONS INTERNATIONAL (AFCI), the AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY CONFERENCE (AIDC) and the AUSTRALIAN COPYRIGHT COUNCIL (ACC). He has been a judge for the documentary category of the Australian Walkeley Awards, the Australian Subscription Television & Radio Association Awards and on the jury for the Oceania Film Festival. He directed theatre productions for the Sydney Theatre Company, Belvoir St Theatre, Melbourne Theatre Company, South Australian Theatre Company, was Artistic Director of the Hunter Valley Theatre Company and was a founding member of the Shopfront Theatre for Young People. He is best known for his production of “Capricornia” which toured Australia. He has produced a number of documentary programs for Australian television including the series “TAXI SCHOOL” for SBS Television Australia and ‘A FRONTIER CONVERSATION’ and ‘KULKA’ for National Indigenous Television (NITV). He was also one of the producers on the SBS drama “AFTERSHOCKS” about the devastating Newcastle earthquake that was based on a verbatim account of events. This film won the Best Actor Award at the Australian Film Institute Awards for its lead Jeremy Sims. Most recently he has sold a documentary to the ABC which will air in 2023 and continues to work on a number of other projects with the company.

My submission will focus on two areas of cultural importance that need to be addressed in any cultural policy –

1. Community/Regional Arts
2. Screen Culture

### **COMMUNITY ARTS**

My early years working in youth theatre and the beginnings of community media provided me with a clear understanding of the importance of Australian culture being at the centre of any developed country. Two major influences in my life as a professional working in the arts and screen industries were developed and supported by innovative policies put in place by successive federal governments. In some situations these policies were radical for their time and were heavily criticised and eventually closed down, however their legacy still lives on to this day and show that the right investment in cultural policy can bring benefits to the Australian community long after those policies have lapsed.

I refer specifically to the Australian Assistance Plan. In 1973, the Australian Labor government under the leadership of Gough Whitlam instituted the Australian Assistance Plan, which was a visionary program for local and regional development. The aim was to provide support for local community organisations and get community input into the planning processes. This plan created a number of organisations and programs in the area that I grew up in, south-west Sydney. In particular, it helped establish the Shopfront Theatre for Young People, which still exists after almost 50 years and Southern Media, which eventually became amalgamated in Metro Screen which only closed down several years ago. It also provided support for a myriad of local community radio stations many of which still exist to this day.

The decentralisation of funding was key to this growth in cultural activity across multiple artforms and media. This regional approach ensured funds for social and cultural development was more evenly distributed and not centred in the large cities and their central business districts. I think the key to making sure you have a policy that covers all of Australia is to develop a regional strategy and devolve funding regionally. This is not to say that high calibre artistic endeavours should not be supported like Symphony Orchestras or major theatre companies, but a better distribution of funds locally is required especially if you want to increase diversity and truly provide a cultural experience for all Australians.

This will also ensure the creation of culture by Australians. It is ironic that we currently see the Bell Shakespeare Company receiving enough funding and support from government that it has a new home on Sydney Harbour while the Griffin Theatre Company has had to beg from the philanthropic community to survive. I believe that Australian content and the creation of Australian stories should be the at the centre of any Cultural Policy, otherwise it will have failed.

This means priority for all forms of Australian Content Creation across all genres. Now this might seem obvious, but my example above of the Bell Shakespeare Company shows that we still value foreign culture above our own.

### **ACTION:**

1. Devolve funding for cultural activities to regional areas either through local councils or regional arts offices;
2. Break up the function of organisations like the Australia Council and decentralise its activities;
3. Continue to provide support for peak bodies such as major theatre companies and orchestras but prioritise those organisations by their level of Australian content which should be a specified percentage of their output each year.

### **SCREEN CULTURE**

Screen Culture is probably the most important section of our cultural diaspora that reaches all corners of our country and the globe. It is the way people around the world identify us as Australian. On a trip to Canada I met with varying cultural funding bodies as part of my job for the NSW Government. In each case the Canadians would ask me to name a Canadian film. I struggled to name one. They would then list ten Australian films and had many more providing me with a clear demonstration of the power of screen culture. This is a story that has been repeated around the world and many of our diplomats tell us that it is through screen culture that the world knows Australia. It is therefore crucial that we prioritise Australian content in any cultural policy that involves the screen.

The continued priority of Australian stories across all mediums is crucial. The fact that streaming services which collect over \$4bn a year from Australian subscribers have no obligation in regards to Australian content is quite astounding. It is also quite concerning that the ABC and SBS have no obligation to show Australian content on their screens unlike their commercial cousins. There should be an obligation on all broadcaster and streamers to create Australian content and this should be mandated. We saw what happened in the 1950's and 60's when there were no obligations on television. We had de-facto US networks operating with programming that was no different to NBC and CBS in the United States.. There are many screen agencies and organisations lobbying for this regulation and they have outlined how it could be done with a 20% quota on streamers and the application of the Broadcast Act to SBS and ABC. Although this should also serve as a way to bring the Broadcast Act into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The other area that needs reform and would mean a renegotiation of the US Free Trade Agreement is our cinema culture. Until we can regulate what goes into our cinemas all Australian films will struggle to find Australian audiences. The disadvantage Australian films find themselves in when they try to get an audience is overwhelming. Overseas films, in particular US films, will always find an audience in our cinemas due to their massive marketing budgets and star power. We are one of the only countries in the world that do

not support our films in the cinema. This must change. If we are to truly develop culturally important films that reach Australian audiences, they must be supported. Obviously changing a free trade agreement for one sector is not practical, however, greater support for Australian films in the cinema using more innovative approaches is required.

The continued reduction in support for organisations such as Screen Australia also helps to degrade and diminish our screen culture. This can also be said for the ABC and SBS. But any increased support for either of these broadcasters must be tied to increased Australian content, otherwise we will be watching more English whodunnits on the ABC and eventually start to see game shows and reality shows dominating the national broadcaster.

**ACTIONS:**

1. Impose a quota on Streaming services of at least 20% and have sub-quotas devoted to Drama, Documentary and Children's.
2. Revise the Broadcasting Services Act to ensure that any new ways that content is supplied to our screens is covered. The idea that streaming is not considered a broadcast in the 21<sup>st</sup> is ridiculous;
3. Ensure that any regulation for a free-to-air broadcasters includes the ABC and SBS;
4. Work with the screen industry to find innovative ways to increase access to our cinemas for Australian films;
5. Increase support for Screen Australia to bring it back to levels it had over ten years ago.

Much of what I have outlined has been looked at by government and the cultural industries in the past. Many reports and ideas have been put forward for a cultural policy and ways to increase access to culture by Australians. Much of this has been lost to political expediency and vested interests who lobby to stop any change going forward. We should therefore enshrine in any Cultural Policy the need to review and update it regularly so that it does not become just another exercise in expediency for the government of the day.

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