

Fresh Shorts investment Details – An investigation by Marian Evans.

Here are the Fresh Shorts investment details.

Sixteen films were greenlit, eight with \$30,000 budgets and eight with \$10,000. There were 229 applications, and Juliette Veber has said I can analyse the gender of writers and directors attached to applications if I go into the NZFC in January.

\$30,000 budget

Five with male writers and directors \$150,000
Two with female writers and directors \$60,000
One with a mixed gender \$30,000

\$10,000 budget

Seven with male writers and directors \$70,000
One with a female writer and director \$10,000

Total investment in projects with male writers and directors: \$220,000 (69%)
With female writers and directors \$70,000 (22%)
With mixed gender writer and director \$30,000 (9%)

When combined with the most recent Premiere Shorts short-list (no projects yet greenlit that I can find), where women wrote only 13% of the short-listed projects, this seems to indicate that the short film 'pathway' to feature filmmaking in NZ is not working for women. In addition, on the NZFC website, the stills from short films are overwhelmingly images of men and boys, which I only just noticed: <http://www.nzfilm.co.nz/FilmCatalogue/ShortFilms/LatestShortFilms.aspx>.

And, because it's possible that not many women applying for the short film programmes here's a little bit of background re 'talent', which Graeme Mason referred to at the NZFC meeting last night, from one of my blog posts.

The NZFC review report says: "A creatively successful film industry is as much about talent scouting as it is about training, and once a talented individual is found, they must be nurtured and supported. Variations on this theme are found at the heart of any meaningful film industry and especially within the Hollywood studio system...In the Hollywood industry, talent has long been

the organizing principle. The very structure of the industry reflects this with the talent agencies directly rivaling the movie studios in their power and control of the business. In their fierce competition they scour the world for new talent, beating a path to every promising door. The intensity of the search confirms the importance of the target.”

Unfortunately, the Hollywood talent agencies studios do not beat a path to every promising door. The Writers Guild of America (West) is the writers guild most closely associated with the Hollywood industry. Its commissions reports about one essential element of the ‘talent’ required for making a film: the screenwriters. These reports consistently show that Hollywood’s intense search for talent is focused largely in a single direction, towards young, white, men. Here’s a quote from the 2005 report, which showed that:

The industry... provides few points of access for writers traditionally denied the chance to demonstrate their skills and gain experience. Until this basic structural truth is addressed, and until a norm of inclusion is enacted by industry gatekeepers both large and small, it is unlikely that the familiar story told in this report will change in any dramatic way. Without meaningful interventions targeted at the industry status quo, the industry will fall further and further behind a changing America.

According to the reports, offering access programmes (like those offered under Britain’s Skillset programme) won’t make a lot of difference, though the 2009 report provides details about a diversity blind script reading exercise that I found very interesting. What’s needed is a change among decision-makers, here the NZFC, who must decide to search out talent from groups that are under-represented.

In the past, the Guild has found value in the establishment of access programs and many such programs have been implemented by our employers. However... we must seriously consider whether access can be truly provided by programs or if it is people who provide access. Ours is a business based on personal relationships and social contacts. Work is distributed most fundamentally on the basis of a hiring party’s personal knowledge of a writer’s talent, commitment, character, work ethic, and overall appeal. This requires a social integration within the professional community and a personal access to company decisionmakers that is too often lacking for our colleagues who happen to be neither male nor white... It is abundantly clear to me that diversity in hiring requires a firm commitment on the part of decisionmakers...to actively seek out and read the work of writers who are women and people of color.

The Writers Guild research is ongoing and relentless, as it needs to be. This from the 2009 executive summary of the report:

... the Guild encourages the broader industry to rethink business-as-usual practices on the diversity front. The Guild encourages key industry players to join with it to establish clear goals,

reasonable timetables, and effective mechanisms for progressive change. It's extreme folly to continue to do the same thing and to expect a different outcome. Breaking out of the stagnation in writer diversity documented in the last few WGAW reports will require bold, new approaches. Only then will we begin to make appreciable progress toward catching up with a changing America. Only then will we move closer to making sure that all of our stories are told.

I'd like to think that the NZFC will start to develop a strategy to "actively seek out and read the work of writers who are women and people of colour" that matches and complements their Maori strategy, because some change is necessary! When I spoke with a script writer friend last night we realised that the NZFC probably doesn't have a talent-finding strategy at all, and just waits for people to apply (& this would fit with Graeme Mason's reluctance to shoulder tap Maori people for NZFC staff). For instance, when I won the Embassy Theatre Trust Award for Screenwriting a while back, TV producers' reps approached me, but no-one from the NZFC.

I also believe that there's enough evidence that women do not necessarily support projects with women writers and directors for questioning whether having women assessors and selectors to be an effective strategy for ensuring that women's projects are taken seriously.