Equity Diversity Committee

Submission to The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts inquiry into: Factors contributing to the growth and sustainability of the Australian film and television industry

March 31, 2017

Equity Diversity Committee - who we are

Equity Diversity Committee is a member-led sub-committee of the Equity (performers) section of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the union and professional association for Australia's creative professionals. Our focus includes addressing the lack of representation of diverse communities in the media, arts and entertainment industries and advising on and developing strategies with these industries to improve the representation of diverse communities. Our remit includes communities from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, people with disabilities, LGBTQI people, older Australians, women and other communities that make up the broad range of diverse people we see in our everyday lives in Australia.

1. Building audiences

Australia is a diverse and inclusive society, however our diversity is not reflected in our screen industries.

Screen Australia's 2016 report *Seeing Ourselves - Reflections on diversity in Australian TV drama* surveys the 1196 "main" characters portrayed in 199 Australian dramas broadcast on Australian television between 2011 and 2015. The report confirms that while Australians from non-European backgrounds make up 17% of the wider population, only 7% of TV drama roles can be broadly categorized as such. Similarly, people with disabilities make up 18% of the population but only 4% of characters. There is also an under-representation of LGBTQI characters (5%) when compared to the Australian population (11%). (Screen Australia, 2016).

There is an opportunity for content makers, producers and broadcasters to grow their audiences by telling stories attractive to Australians from diverse backgrounds. While there has been little research conducted around the correlations between diversity and audience share in the Australian context, *The Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies* at the *University of California (Los Angeles)* publishes an annual report on diversity in American film and television content. The latest report 2017 *Hollywood Diversity Report: Setting the Record Straight* (which examines the 2014-15 ratings year) demonstrates that median 19-49-aged viewer ratings were highest during the 2014-15 scripted programs with casts composed of more than 40% diverse casts. Similar outcomes were also recorded in terms of box office receipts and return on investment. (Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies, 2017)

> *"The study found that diversity is good for business. The median global box office peaked in 2015 for the 25 films with casts that were from 21 percent to 30 percent minority ($105 million). Films in this category included "Spectre," "Ant-Man," "San Andreas" and "Terminator: Genisys."*
> *By contrast, median worldwide box office was only $41.9 million for the 64 films with casts that were 10 percent minority or less. The numbers are also glaring in that while this category contained the poorest performing films, it also encompassed the highest number of movies.*
> *On TV, too, shows with more diverse casts fare better in the ratings, with shows like "Empire" and "black-ish" thriving in primetime, and white, Latino and black households giving the highest ratings to shows that had a majority diverse cast. For the coveted 18-49 demographic, shows that are 41-50 percent diverse (like "Brooklyn Nine-Nine," "New Girl" and "Elementary") had the highest ratings."*
> (Ge, 2017)

There is a compelling case to be made that people will more likely attend a performance or watch a film or TV show if they identify with the stories they see. The Equity Diversity Committee believes this would result in greater box office sales and presents opportunities for significant and sustained audience growth. The future sustainability and growth of our screen industries must be considered within the context of an increasingly diverse potential audience.

Parallel Examples - live performance

There are a few theatre companies and film and television production companies who are harnessing the power of Australia's diverse cultural landscape. *La Boite Theatre Company* in Brisbane programmed *Single Asian Female* as the production to launch their 2017 season. This show demonstrates how giving a platform to stories and faces that represent multicultural Australia can grow and nurture new audiences whilst also retaining existing audiences. Theatre in Australia is so white, says *Single Asian Female* playwright Michelle Law, that if you are a person of colour, "it almost feels like you don't have a right to be there". Numerous tweets shared throughout the season demonstrate audience members ruminating on their experience.

> @flora_violin: **#SingleAsianFemale** is wonderful - I laughed & cried; it hit so close to home. Congrats to the entire team! @LaBoiteTheatre

> @elkepancake: **#singleasianfemale** at @LaBoiteTheatre is transcendent I almost had an ugly sobbing breakdown because 3 ASIAN FEMALE LEADS & ALSO TINA ARENA

> @karenkhlee: Bowing down at the genius that is @ms_michellelaw's **#singleasianfemale** #tearsandlaughter #representedmystory

> @cannibalkate: So many young Asian women in the audience tonight and I f***king love it! **#singleasianfemale**

These thoughts were shared by audience members from both Asian and non-Asian backgrounds, highlighting that people from non-Asian backgrounds can still enjoy, be affected by and relate to stories that represent cultures other than their own. Audience members who have previously felt excluded, unimportant, and invisible are evidently hungry for more stories and faces that represent their own. *Single Asian Female* is just one example of how key visibility is in the drive for a truly diverse and united Australia.

2. Improving employment opportunities

'If she can see it she can be it' This is a phrase championed by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. The Institute recognises that "Omission or negative gender stereotypes (of women and girls) in media can generate life-long imprints that can shape feelings of self-worth and behavior", and has undertaken data driven analysis which identifies the lack of representation of women in US television and film. (Geena Davis Institute in Media, 2017)

The Equity Diversity Committee supports this analysis and believes it extends to people from all manner of diverse backgrounds. The benefits of representing diverse faces and stories not only increases employment opportunities within the industry, but will create powerful, relevant and positive role models for children and adults. Showing a person with a disability working in an office, or a young person of colour succeeding in sport or as an entrepreneur (for example), not only nurtures the self-worth of similar individuals, but also confronts and challenges stereotypes employers may hold and encourages more inclusive employment practices generally. The benefits of these positive outcomes can be shared by older workers, women, people with disabilities and members of the LGBTIQ+ community in Australia.

Within a screen industry context, Screen Australia's *Seeing Ourselves* report highlights a lack of employment opportunities for performers from diverse backgrounds, noting significant under-representation of performers from non- Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. While the report does not unpack employment participation rates amongst performers with disabilities and other markers of diversity, one can surmise from their reporting on roles represented (referred to earlier in this submission), that performers from these backgrounds do not secure work at levels commensurate with their representation in wider society. (Screen Australia, 2017)

Screen Australia's Seeing Ourselves (2016) report does note a positive trend in the engagement and representation of Indigenous Australians in television drama, with five per cent of roles and performers over the period studied being from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. This compares with the 2011 Census figures demonstrating Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islanders comprise three percent of the wider population. This result can be attributed in large part to various development and production opportunities supported by dedicated Indigenous units at Screen Australia and the ABC. (Screen Australia, 2016)

3. Why representation matters

In his foreword to the Federal Government's recent *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful* statement, Prime Minister Turnbull states that Australia is the most successful multicultural society in the world. He goes on to say that "(a)t a time of growing global tensions and rising uncertainty, Australia remains a steadfast example of a harmonious, egalitarian and enterprising nation, embracing its diversity." (Australian Government, 2017)

In order to embrace our rich diversity our screen industries must represent the people, cultures and stories that make up Australia, and provide opportunities for participation of Australians from diverse backgrounds. This is also key to ensuring the growth and sustainability of the Australian screen industries. New census data has revealed that almost a quarter (24.6 per cent) of Australia's population was born overseas and 43.1 per cent of people have at least one overseas-born parent (Australian Bureau of Statistics). More than eleven per cent of Australians born overseas come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Australians broadly identify with about 300 ancestries. Apart from English, the most common languages spoken in Australia are Mandarin, Italian, Arabic, Cantonese, Greek, Vietnamese, Tagalog/Filipino, Spanish and Hindi and more than 60 Indigenous languages are also spoken. (Australian Government, 2017)

Australia's multicultural statement declares that the Government supports a strong and diverse multicultural media through radio, print, online and television. (Australian Government, 2017) The Equity Diversity Committee supports this aspiration, and continues to work with key stakeholders to realise its' potential.

4. Funding

The Equity Diversity Committee supports the full restoration of funding to Screen Australia and our public broadcasters to pre-2014 levels, as these institutions have been the main drivers of diverse screen content in Australia. Further, we believe that indicators of diversity should be built into selection criteria for projects receiving development and production funding. Until our screen content reflects the diversity of the community in which we live, diversity should be central to decision making about public funding to support screen content.

The British Film Institute incorporates diversity standards in its framework for assessing applications for various forms of funding support from the Institute. The standards focus on disability, gender, race, sexual orientation and also consider lower socio-economic status, within a framework in which applicants must meet at least two (and preferably three) out of four standards:

1. On screen representation, themes and narratives
2. Project leadership and creative practitioners
3. Industry access and opportunities
4. Opportunities for diversity in audience development (British Film Institute, 2015)

The BFI Diversity Standards were only introduced in late 2015, and consequently there is as yet no published reporting on outcomes. However *The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media* has compiled statistics on female participation rates in key production roles across twelve film industries globally, and found that Britain leads the way in participation rates for female directors (27.3%) and writers (58.8%). (di Nonno, 2016)

5. Conclusion

Diversity must be at the heart of any discussion about factors contributing to the growth and sustainability of the Australian screen industries. Our communities are rich with untold stories, and our increasingly diverse population provides

immeasurable opportunities to grow audiences. In order for performers and other practitioners from diverse backgrounds to break into our screen industries, we must create a policy framework that supports their development and ongoing participation.

References

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