



VICTORIOUS VICTORIA

THERE WERE NO MAJOR CONTROVERSIES WHEN LAINE LISTER SPOKE WITH VICTORIAN INDUSTRY FIGURES; THEY ALL SHARE A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND PRIDE IN THEIR STATE AGENCY'S WORK.

FILM VICTORIA'S CHIEF EXECUTIVE SANDRA SDRAULIG DOESN'T exactly have the best luck. In the past week she has taken a tumble during an early morning run and broken ribs. Fortunately, luck doesn't come into play in her work or in the success of Victoria as a filmmaking state. Rather, it's a mix of charm, elbow grease and passion, which Sdraulig and her team at the State Government agency have in spades.

In recent years, Film Victoria has hatched dozens of initiatives to ensure the local industry has a running start.

It has invested around \$2 million annually to support Victorian businesses as part of its digital media prototyping program – it's the equivalent of script development in film and television for the digital sector.

And then there is the script writing development initiative that gives writers not only financial support but also hands-on advice in the form of training workshops and through consultation with experienced practitioners.

"We try to equip the team of writer/director/producer

by helping them to understand how to antagonise a text and to develop the tools to do this for themselves rather than bring in the experts from different fields that come, provide insight and then leave," Sdraulig explained.

The agency is also funding a writer's fellowship – worth \$50,000 over two years – to six applicants, to save writers reapplying for funding in stages.

And for experienced writers, the State will invest funds to support them as a talent, rather than for specific projects. It has also added international writer's fellowships to its expanding industry-help list.

"We recently presented the industry with two expenses-paid script writing opportunities with CBS/Paramount where each person spent 12 weeks shadowing a writer on the hit series *CSI* with the intention that those practitioners return with new skills and knowledge to share with the industry," Sdraulig said.

Not surprisingly, Victoria's drama slate racked up \$250 million in the 2007/08 financial year. That was an

increase of more than 60 percent on the previous year, according to figures from Screen Australia's *National Survey of Feature Film and TV Production* (2007/08).

"We had the highest production activity on record and employment ever in Victoria to the level of \$162 million, which translated to about 700 to 800 full-time jobs.

"We accounted for 37 percent of all activity that took place in Australia [in that financial year] and eclipsed all other states in the country," she said, triumphantly.

Next best was NSW with 35 percent of national activity – down from 45 percent in the previous year.

The jump was mainly due to activity by the foreign slate, primarily the new HBO miniseries *The Pacific*.

Simon Rosenthal, executive producer at visual effects firm Iloura – which produced a pack of VFX shots for *The Pacific* – attributes local industry successes to the terrier-like determination of the state agency.

"The State Government is a huge assistance to us. Film Victoria has been the benchmark for state film

offices over the last five years; they have been aggressive, proactive and very positive about getting work into the state," he said.

Iloura's portfolio boasts a long list of State-funded projects including *Balibo*, *Dying Breed*, *The Home Song Stories* and *The Loved Ones*.

Film Victoria also has an effective introduction process, according to Rosenthal, who said his post-production facility benefits from inbound tours organised by the state.

"They are looking at the bigger picture; it's not just about the production, rather it's post-production, visual effects, sound, camera gear; all those elements are very important as part of the selling proposition [to international and interstate filmmakers]," he added.

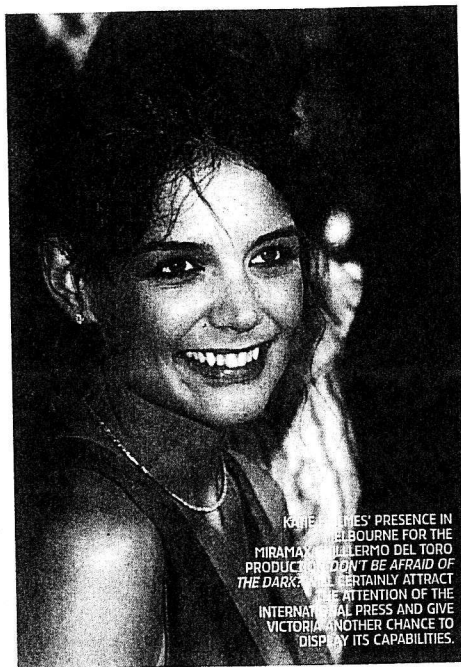
EXPANSION TIME?

Like Rosenthal, many of his peers also hold a great affinity for the screen agency, an *Encore* poll of Victorian film industry practitioners has revealed.

"They market well internationally and provide a good service; if an international production makes an enquiry about overseas locations, Film Victoria responds very well," said Rod Allan, chief executive of the Melbourne Central City Studios (MCCS).

Formerly the head of Sydney's Fox Studios, Allan said Melbourne is an easier place to get a film made than others, due to its supportive film body.

"Film Victoria has a very good team of experienced people who understand the filmmaking process and the demands during that process," he said.



KATHERINE JAMES' PRESENCE IN MELBOURNE FOR THE MIRAMAX PRODUCTION *THE DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY* WON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK. SHE CERTAINLY ATTRACTS THE ATTENTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS AND GIVE VICTORIA ANOTHER CHANCE TO DISPLAY ITS CAPABILITIES.

Ayres said: "We have a very supportive industry in Victoria, particularly among producers and practitioners; there's a real will for everybody to succeed".

Sdraulig agrees: "It's one of the reasons why some of our international practitioners like coming back and why the interstate practitioners have enjoyed working in

"The most significant factor in giving Victoria its cultural vitality in terms of film and television is the success of Film Victoria as an organisation."

The State agency will go into bat for local industry when the Department of Innovation, Industry and Region Development investigates the MCCS to determine feasibility of site expansion.

"Formally, Film Victoria will be involved in the steering committee and informally we'll be there as part of the discussion," Sdraulig said.

The feasibility study will determine options for the future of the site; whether MCCS can accommodate both television and film and increased capacity.

Allan said: "Those options might include building new sound stages; they'll look at building new offices and support facilities".

"This study will all be in the context of looking at the special constraints and also the financial constraints. It will look at what are the best options for us to expand the studio in the future so it can provide more of a complete industry hub here in Melbourne," Allan explained.

A WIDER SCREEN CULTURE

The *Encore* poll also revealed that a strong community spirit exists among filmmakers in the state.

Big and Little Films writer/script editor/director Tony

Victoria; there is a 'can-do' attitude".

Other drawcards to Melbourne and regional Victoria include the world-class production and post-production facilities, Ayres said. Locations are diverse across the state; from rolling green countryside, deserts and snowfields, to golden beaches, forests and rocky canyons, Victoria has plenty to offer filmmakers. In fact Melbourne's range in architectural style means streetscapes can replicate cities around the world such as Boston in *Knowing*.

"Also Melbourne is an easier city to live in than Sydney [where Ayres filmed *Walking on Water*] and it's less expensive, which frees up resources.

"Even in terms of parking and council rates, Melbourne is easier to film in than Sydney," Ayres added.

"Without a doubt, the most significant factor in giving Victoria its cultural vitality in terms of film and TV is the success of Film Victoria as an organisation," Ayres said.

Melbourne is also home to the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), which provides a space for film appreciation and discovery year round, rather than being limited to the context of festivals.

The Centre, set in Melbourne's Federation Square, provides (mostly) free exhibitions, programs, hands-on

workshops, film archives and live debate (between filmmakers and audiences) to the general public.

ACMI director Tony Sweeney said the Centre exists to create a milieu in which people with an independent voice can feel comfortable and thrive.

"There's no doubt that we can capture new talent; get it inspired, build a broader reference to bring bright, and often independent, voices which are very important in a relatively small industry like Australia," he said.

With around half a million visitors through its doors annually, ACMI aims to provide opportunities for people of all ages to become "cultural creators" not just cultural consumers.

"We have offers that attract a broad range from the real casual browser who'll just pick up something from going through the shows and learn a bit more and hopefully get a bit more interested in the subject matter, through to young kids who'll we bring in to early drop in workshops, right through to researchers, film historians who might start using our archives for research into the future, as well as industry groups who'll use it for industry events, debates and so on," he said.

The state also punches well above its weight in terms of cultural stimulus with its many sporting events including the Grand Prix, Australian Open and AFL; and literary and art centres as well as festivals including MIFF opening later this month.

Rosenthal sums it up like this: "God forbid I should say this but the weather works for international clients – and the domestics – we get so little rain down here".

SHARED PROBLEMS

But it's not all blue skies for Victorians; filmmakers in the state have their share of obstacles, most of which are experienced nationally.

"Filmmaking by its nature is challenging because you are always trying to punch above your weight; always trying to do more than you can for the money you have," said Ayres.

Another challenge faced at the end of 2008 was the scarcity of international projects using local facilities, which was largely driven by a strong Australian dollar. When it hit the 90 cent range, our ability to compete on a world market shrunk.

After the writer's strike in the US, fewer films were being made and no Australian state secured foreign feature production in the last financial year. Despite a lack of imported projects, Sdraulig insists local industry is growing solidly this year, propped up by plenty of local projects, particularly for television.

"We'll be depending on local activity for this financial year and so far I'm fairly pleased with the way we've been tracking," she said.

Looking ahead, the state agency will continue its work seeking out new content to develop, push projects through the development cycle into production, and work to increase skills and jobs in the state. Analysing audiences is another area Sdraulig can't wait to get stuck into, and don't think a few broken bones will dilute her enthusiasm.

"Nothing is too difficult". ■