

There is so much film and television production going on in Victoria that there's not enough crew to go around. But how long will the good times last? **Karl Quinn** reports.

Judy Davis, Charlotte Rampling and Geoffrey Rush in *Eye of the Storm* (main). From left: *The Cup*, *Eye of the Storm*, director Fred Schepisi, *Underbelly* and *Summer Coda*. Below Matthew Newton in *Underbelly*.

You can see it in the location trucks parked in clusters all around the city. You can see it, if you're lucky, in the famous faces around town. You can even see it in the "coming soon" posters at the cinema. Victoria is in the middle of a film and television boom.

"You know there's a boom on when you can't even hire a Portaloos," says Wayne Hope, director of the ABC sitcom *The Librarians*.

There are three major features

now being shot in Melbourne: Fred Schepisi's *Eye of the Storm*, an adaptation of Patrick White's novel, starring Charlotte Rampling, Judy Davis and Geoffrey Rush; Simon Wincer's horse-racing film *The Cup*, starring Stephen Curry as Damien Oliver; and the \$66 million action thriller *The Killer Elite*, starring Englishmen Clive Owen and Jason Statham and, in a small role (but major coup) Robert de Niro.

Also in the works are romantic comedy *Big Mamma's Boy*, and Bollywood films *Orange* and *Crook*. Shot elsewhere, but in town for post-

production work, are Kriv Stenders' *Red Dog*, and the James Cameron-produced cave-diving adventure *Sanctum*.

There's so much work, in fact, that finding the people to do it has become a real problem. "We've had to get a number of crew down from Sydney, because there just aren't enough down here," says Hollywood veteran Wincer. "I asked one of my department heads when it was last this busy and he reckoned not for a decade at least."



While you'll have to wait a while to see the fruits of all this labour, there's plenty of films shot in Victoria that are on — or almost on — the screen already. These include the critically lauded crime film *Animal Kingdom*, set around Hawthorn, which opened earlier this month.

The Wedding Party, which includes a scene at a Collingwood-Carlton game at the MCG, has just been announced as the opening-night film for next month's Melbourne International Film Festival. *Matching Jack*, the new made-in-Melbourne film from Nadia Tass and David Parker of *Malcolm* fame, will debut at the festival too. The Omeo-shot mod-Western *Red Hill* and the Mildura-set romance *Summer Coda*, starring Rachael Taylor and Alex Dimitriadis, are both set for release in October.

But it's not just the film sector that's booming: TV production is enjoying a purple patch too. Channel Nine recently announced three *Underbelly* telemovies, all of which will be made in Melbourne.

Channel Seven has just finished shooting the pilot of a new drama series, *Winners and Losers*, at Melbourne Central City Studios in Docklands. An adaptation of Christos Tsiolkas' novel *The Slap* is now being produced for the ABC.

Fremantle Media — the production company best known for reality shows *MasterChef* and *Australian Idol* — is currently shooting the 10-part series *Killing Time*, based on the recollections of disgraced former high-flying lawyer and cocaine addict Andrew Fraser. Key cast members include David Wenham and Colin Friels.

But wait, there's more. Channel Ten has a new season of *Rush* in production, plus a new series called *Offspring*, set in Fitzroy and produced by John Edwards of *The Secret Life of Us* and *Love My Way* fame. New seasons of *City Homicide*, *Tangle*, *The Librarians* and *Bed of Roses* are either under way or have recently wrapped. And Chris Lilley's new comedy series *Angry Boys*, which finished shooting in May, is now in the edit suite.

Of course, there have been booms and busts in Victorian production before, most of them spurred by the presence or absence of big-spending productions from Hollywood (known in the industry as "runway" productions, because they fly in and fly out). But what's notable about the current spike is that it is all locally driven, and it has happened in spite of a worldwide crisis in film financing on the back of the GFC.

"We do have a boom at the moment, and it's not just feature films," says Sandra Sdraulig, head of the state government agency Film Victoria. "It's a tremendous combination of a whole lot of activity in different mediums, which would suggest it's more sustainable."

While feature films get the headlines and it's "tremendous to have a highly esteemed director like Fred Schepisi working at home", Sdraulig points to the TV sector as Victoria's engine room right now.

"Over the last few years, we've seen a really strong undercurrent of television production activity, which has been the backbone of the industry, and those productions have resonated with audiences and have gone into repeat series."

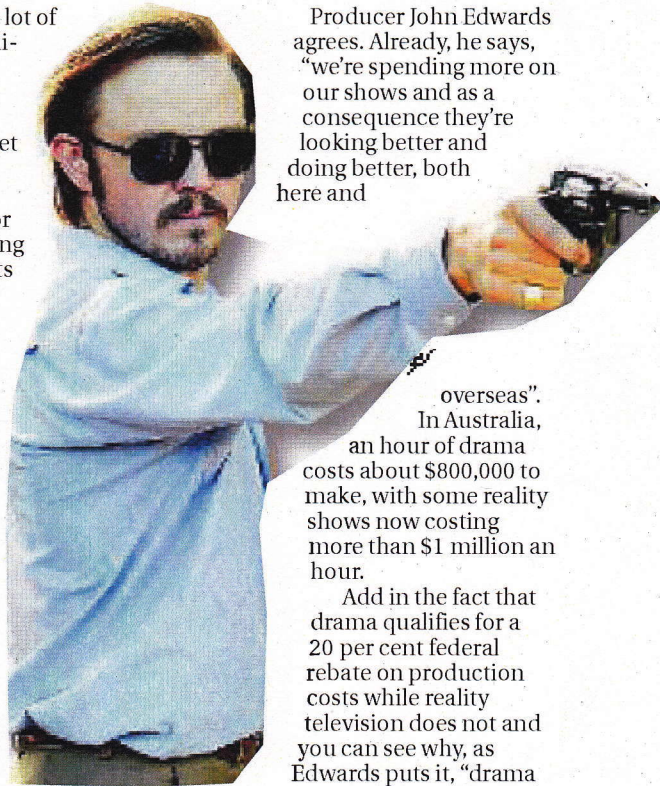
That's important for the sustainability of the industry because a second or

third season of a TV series means cast and crew get some security of employment, and the opportunity to refine their skills. That, in turn, translates to better product on screen, which translates to more consistent audiences. And a healthy audience means more seasons, more skills and even better product. That's the theory anyway.

"We're a fragile industry, because a lot of it is fashion and public mood," says Showtime boss Des Monaghan, the driving force behind the *Underbelly* franchise. "As long as audiences want to see their own stories the industry will continue to prosper. But the next phase of growth will depend on international success."

According to Monaghan, the budget for an hour of drama made in the US is about five times that of an hour made in Australia, and he says it shows. "The audience doesn't sit at home and say, 'Oh, I know why they're able to do that, it's because they've got a lot more money'. All they're interested in, and quite properly, is 'is it enjoyable to me?'"

Producer John Edwards agrees. Already, he says, "we're spending more on our shows and as a consequence they're looking better and doing better, both here and



overseas". In Australia, an hour of drama costs about \$800,000 to make, with some reality shows now costing more than \$1 million an hour.

Add in the fact that drama qualifies for a 20 per cent federal rebate on production costs while reality television does not and you can see why, as Edwards puts it, "drama



has become more sensible again”.

If the TV sector can convince the federal government to increase the producer offset (a rebate on production costs paid through the tax system) to 40 per cent — the same level as applies to the film sector — it could even start to look like a no-brainer.

There's little doubt the offset, which was introduced in 2007 with the aim of shifting the burden of finance from the public sector to the private, has become a key tool for getting film and TV made here.

But there are other factors that make Victoria a desirable place to mount a production says Rod Allan, head of Melbourne Central City Studios in the Docklands.

“Melbourne’s advantages are that we have a new facility, it’s well-built, it works well, it’s very well-situated in relation to the city, which all our clients see as an advantage, and we work really closely with Film Victoria.

“Film Victoria sets the benchmark in terms of state film commissions attracting and servicing international productions.”

That’s not just parroting the party line, either — it’s a refrain that many in the industry echo.

“Film Victoria makes sure that we as producers are aware of what Victoria can offer,” says Showtime’s Des Monaghan.

“Sometimes it’s people and resources, sometimes it’s cash incentives, and often it’s a combination of the two. But they’re in stiff competition with the other states, because production activity brings a lot of employment and a lot of spending into a state.”

To that end, and with Victoria’s success in mind, NSW has announced it will spend an additional \$25 million on trying to attract productions north of the border.

To the naked eye, “incentives” can look a little like bribery. But the thinking behind the approach is that a little money laid out now to entice productions to the state can pay back many times over down the line.

John Edwards says *The Secret Life of Us*, in which St Kilda played such an integral part, was originally going to be set in Bondi, but was relocated partly because of an incentive pay-

ment. “It was something like \$200,000, and the net effect was Victoria got about \$40 million of production out of it,” he says. “It’s a pretty good investment.”

But an incentive alone is of little value if the locations don’t make sense. Thankfully, Victoria seems to be reasonably blessed in that regard too.

“We were wonderfully surprised with the locations. We found elements of the Middle East, Paris, the UK,” says Christopher Mapp, managing director of Sydney-based Omnilab Media and executive producer of *The Killer Elite*.

“We’ll be shooting elements of true locations, too, but I challenge audiences to pick which is which. People from the actual countries wouldn’t guess it.”

attracting foreign productions to Australia is Jackie O’Sullivan’s mission as chief of government agency Ausfilm. But it hasn’t been easy

lately, what with a strong Aussie dollar and an incentive scheme for foreign productions that lags way behind what other countries, and even US states other than California, can offer.

O’Sullivan, like many others in the industry, has been tracking the decline of our currency against the US dollar in recent weeks. At the 90 cent-plus highs of a month ago, Australia was simply too expensive for American productions (in fact, two — *Green Lantern* in Sydney and *Battleship* in Queensland — bailed because the strong dollar blew out their budgets). At about 75 cents, though, shooting here becomes attractive once again.

“If it went even lower, that would be even better,” says O’Sullivan. “But what really needs to happen is that our foreign production incentive, which is at 15 per cent, needs to go up. We have to be competitive with the other territories in the world. When we cease to be competitive, we cease to be sustainable.”

It’s important to help the local production sector too, O’Sullivan says, but “you need a hell of a lot of

Killer Elite-type films to balance things out when there are no international productions coming.”

The past two years have been very lean, but O’Sullivan says in the past week or so there have been some nibbles of interest from overseas. “Nothing concrete, but solid inquiries from the US and the UK for three productions in the \$30-\$50 million range.”

Victoria would be in with a shot for films of that size, but if they are much bigger, it becomes problematic because the Docklands studios are not big enough. “If we want to attract big international productions, we need more infrastructure,” says Docklands boss Rod Allan. “We’re going to need bigger sound stages. The other option is to look at additional space for television productions. But that’s ultimately a decision for the government.”

Having commissioned a \$770,000 report on the future options for the studio complex, the state government is, in fact, expected to make a decision on that sometime soon. And having allocated \$4.4 million in the last state budget to improvements aimed at making one of the soundstages more suitable for television production, it has shown it remains committed to the complex.

Film Victoria’s Sandra Sdraulig is convinced a new soundstage is precisely what the state needs because the studios weren’t built to attract the huge productions NSW is able to attract.

“On its own, local activity is not able to sustain the industry; international activity is critical and pivotal,” she says.

“We’ve worked hard at Film Victoria to grow this industry, we’ve succeeded in leaps and bounds, and we want it to continue to grow, not have it stagnate. And that level of growth depends on both forms, local and international. A healthy industry is a combination of both.”

Karl Quinn is entertainment editor.