

Deborah Sims from the ABA's Standards section attended the 7th Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) in Perth from 6-9 March 2001.

## Australian International Documentary Conference 2001

Under the banner of the Edge of Reality, the 7th Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) explored a number of central issues facing documentary, including the continuation of the form and its relationship to the rise of reality TV.

The conference, the largest yet, attracted 540 delegates from Australia and overseas. Attending were pay TV and free-to-air broadcasters, commissioning editors from Australia, Europe and North America, government film support agencies, academics, and documentary producers and filmmakers. This mix ensured a diversity of views and wide-ranging debates on the past, present and future of the form.

The conference program was a blend of key note speeches, master classes, critical perspectives, screenings, the Australian DocuMart plus a lunchtime pitching session with development funds from the ABC and the CBC (Canada) on offer. A notable feature of the conference was the high level of enthusiasm and participation demonstrated by many of the Australian and international speakers who attended sessions and screenings throughout the four-day event.

It is difficult to fully cover the scope of the AIDC, so this report focuses on some key points for the Australian documentary sector and some of the overall highlights of the conference. For more information, go to the conference web site for the conference ([www.aidc.on.net](http://www.aidc.on.net)).

Professor Michael Renov from the University of Southern California delivered a thought-provoking key note speech on the first day that argued for the convergence of the subjective and avant-garde

in documentary practice and for a diversity of approaches to non-fiction filmmaking. Professor Renov called for a reclaiming of the documentary aesthetic and a move away from the 'copying' of the real. He saw subjectivity as the pivot point of documentary practice.

Once again the AIDC provided an opportunity to get to know one of the giants of cinema verite. This year the special guest was Richard Leacock who began his career working as a cameraman for Robert Flaherty, and went on to be a major collaborator with verite greats such as the Maysles Brothers on *Gimme Shelter* (Albert Maysles appeared at the 1999 AIDC), Bob Drew on *Primary*, DA Pennebaker on *Monterey Pop* and Fred Wiseman, *High School*. He appeared in conversation with Canadian filmmaker Peter Wintonick whose recent documentary feature, *Cinema Verite: Defining the Moment*, screened at the conference. Mr Leacock also appeared several other times on the program including with his partner, Valerie Lelonde, who shares his passion for the creative liberation offered by the latest digital technology.

Representatives from international pay TV channels operating in Australia spoke about how they brand and program their services. Carl Meyer, Managing Director The History Channel Asia, said The History Channel was the fastest growing cable channel ever in the USA. The channel takes a local partnership approach internationally, setting up local co-ventures such as that in Australia with Foxtel. Mr Meyer said that the channel looks different

around the world but commented that there is not enough content from this part of the world — presenting an opportunity and a challenge to local producers. He felt that it is not possible to fund a documentary for The History Channel from one country outside the USA. He saw an answer to this very difficult issue of financing as being programming that crosses regional areas and allows budgets to be put together across Asia.

Vikram Channa, Senior Manager Program Evaluation and Development, Discovery Asia, spoke of customising Discovery's global strands and sub-brands. He spoke of the 'Southern Cross' customised strand for the Australia/New Zealand Discovery Channel (he explained that the



Australian channel is a feed from Asia). He also saw difficulties in financing local programs and outlined his strategy of programming 'sarongs'. These are local documentary programs shown an hour before or after (that is, wrapping around) 'global super promotables' such as 'Cleopatra's Palace'. This approach assists expensive local programs to be seen by the largest possible audience. He also favours a 'smart' approach to interstitials, and is looking for series of 2-5 minute documentary programs with a regional focus.

Andy Thomson, Executive Vice President, Alliance Atlantis Factual, from Canada, said that he was appalled to see the amount of licence fees for Australian programs and the low amount of Australian documentary programs on Australian pay TV. He identified the problem as being the fact that Australia does not have any local content regulation of pay TV documentary channels. He compared this to Canada, where Discovery has 60 per cent Canadian programming and pays licence fees competitive with free-to-air television. He said that there are up to forty cable channels in Canada that pay 'decent' licence fees. Sixty to eighty per cent of the budget for Canadian documentaries is put together in North America, with only about twenty per cent coming from second markets. He considered that Canadian regulation has been fundamental to the creation of the current Canadian documentary market and urged Australian documentary producers to lobby for the introduction of local regulation of documentary channels in Australia.

A strong theme of the conference was the relationship of documentary to, in particular, the rising genre of reality TV, but also to other non-fiction programming. There was much discussion about 'contrived reality' or 'constructed reality' programs, such as 'Survivor'. Steven Hewlett, Director of Programmes, Carlton Television, suggested the success of such programs is that within a fabricated construct that is obvious to the audience, the programs still provide key moments that are 'authentic' or 'true'. The reality TV program has therefore become a more

predictable way than a traditional documentary or a docusoap of delivering the moments that the audience craves.

Australian distributor Jenny Cornish felt that the growth of pay TV would result in the decline of free-to-air slots for documentary programs. David Franklin, Program Director Documentary Acquisitions, Seven Network, said the network was programming the successful quiz show, 'The Weakest Link', in its former 'weather disaster' documentary slot. Programming in this slot aimed at attracting audiences not interested in programs such as 'Friends' on competing networks. Mr Franklin said that the network had more than sixty hours of first run Australian documentaries on the shelf or in production. With the quota set at 20 hours per year, he said that he would not be looking for new product until 2004. There may be a shortlist of four or five hours of new documentaries each year, however, but these must be aimed at getting ratings from both male and female viewers. Mr Franklin stated that in Queensland the mix of Australian documentaries in Seven's 'World Around Us' slot includes local history and environment documentaries that Seven in Brisbane produces with significant financial assistance from the Queensland government. This funding allows the local Seven station to do more local programs, such as one on Moreton Bay funded by the Queensland Museum that was linked to the release of a museum publication.

Dennis O'Rourke's film *Cunnamulla* was one of the featured Australian documentaries at the conference, with Mr O'Rourke appearing at the conference and participating in a number of sessions. *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* was perhaps the hit of the screenings. One of the makers of the film, Fenton Bailey, from World of Wonder Productions, introduced it and discussed the announcement, in the USA during the conference, of his company being chosen by Monica Lewinsky to produce a documentary telling her story. After seeing *Tammy Faye*, the general talk at the conference was that Ms Lewinsky had certainly made the right choice of filmmaker.

## Prix Jeunesse Suitcase

The differences in program content and treatment of subject matter in Australian and European children's television programs was one of the key issues explored at the ABA's presentation of the 'Prix Jeunesse Suitcase' on 14 March 2001.

The suitcase is a selection of award-winning international television programs for children that have been presented at the Prix Jeunesse Children's TV Festival. The Prix Jeunesse is the premier children's television festival, held every two years in Munich. The ABA's presentation of the suitcase was held in Sydney in cooperation with the Sydney branch of Goethe-Institut Internationales.

The suitcase is designed to simulate the Prix Jeunesse Festival's blend of outstanding programs and challenging discussions. The current suitcase contains the 'top of the crop' of the 2000 festival, including fiction and non-fiction programs for preschool, primary and teenage children.



L-R: (back) Patricia Sharpe, ABA; Kylie McCarrol, Nickelodeon; (front) Brent Ebert, Nickelodeon; Veronica Weir, ASTRA