

Media Release
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Sydney Film Festival 2008 a hit with audiences and filmmakers

Sydney, Australia: The Sydney Film Festival today declared the completion of the 55th festival, with its inaugural Official Competition for the Sydney Film Prize, a success.

Screening over 19 days from 4 – 22 June 2008, the festival realised 130,000 attendances and took in excess of AUD\$1.13 million. SFF President Virginia Gordon said “This is a strong and encouraging result. In increasing box office at the same time as achieving the global recognition that has accompanied the Sydney Film Prize for ‘audacious and cutting edge filmmaking’, we have realised our principal objectives in staging the inaugural competition for the festival”.

Sydney Film Festival 2008 has put filmmakers and their films at the heart of the festival. The festival hosted 48 international guests and 122 Australian filmmakers who introduced their films, participated in Q&As, discussion panels and industry events. The presence of the filmmakers treading the red carpet ensured many informal opportunities to mingle with audiences, as well as the industry. The warm response to the festival guests was apparent in the increased interest in both the question and answer forums as well as the program talks series.

“We are pleased that the delivery of the first year’s competition under the artistic direction of Festival Director Clare Stewart has increased the festival’s profile and relevance internationally, whilst enriching the program and festival experience for both audience and film industry alike. The Board congratulates Clare on her strong program in this first year of the Sydney Film Prize”, President Virginia Gordon said.

The Official Competition was established through the support of \$1.8M over four years from the New South Wales Government with a substantial cash prize of AUD \$60,000 generously provided by SFF Principal Sponsor Hunter Hall Investment Management. The Sydney Film Prize acknowledges ‘audacious, cutting-edge and courageous’ filmmaking and was presented by Jury President Gillian Armstrong at the Sydney Opera House to Steve McQueen’s *Hunger*, selected from 12 films in the Official Competition.

“Awards and the critical reviews they attract fulfil a hugely important role in the future business of a film like *Hunger* and I hope the Sydney Film Festival and its Official Competition goes from strength to strength” commented Laura Hastings-Smith, producer of *Hunger*, who attended the festival with Director Steve McQueen and fellow producer Robin Gutch.

“The Official Competition provided a significant focal point for the festival, with double the international filmmakers in attendance and some real business opportunities created through the aligned industry program” said Festival Director, Clare Stewart, speaking from Sydney today. “In addition to enhancing our program the Official Competition increased the glamour factor for audiences and filmmakers, and created heightened levels of excitement and anticipation over consecutive nights of red carpet gala screenings”.

Consistent with recent survey results from the (former) Film Finance Corporation, Australian films proved very popular with audiences, with feature films *Men’s Group* and *Son of a Lion*; documentaries *Salute*, *River of No Return*, *Glass: a portrait of Philip in twelve parts* and *Playing in the Shadows*, and short films *Wanja* and *My Rabbit Hoppy* amongst the top-rating films at the festival. Popular program strands included the topical *Apocalypse Again*, a collection of documentary and feature films about the conflict in Iraq; *Kids’ Films* including *Where is Winky’s Horse?*, the sequel to last year’s Audience Award winner; and the retrospective program *From Kerr to Eternity*.

The introduction of an industry program that augments the Official Competition saw overall film industry participation increase by 62%, engaging 520 industry guests. Media participation also increased, with a 20% rise on 2007 accreditations. The introduction of free lunchtime talks with filmmakers visiting for the Official Competition saw the turnout at free public events double.

The success continues beyond the festival for Canadian film *Fugitive Pieces*. Immediately following its win in the SFF's World Movies Channel Audience Awards, the film confirmed an Australian distribution deal with Aztec International. "Receiving the Audience Award from the Sydney Film Festival is a great honour and a perfect caper to a wonderful overall experience. The enthusiastic response of the local audience was very moving to experience and was no doubt an important contributing factor in the subsequent acquisition of the film for Australian theatrical release", said director of *Fugitive Pieces*, Jeremy Podeswa, who was a guest at the festival.

The Sydney Film Festival looks forward to building on the success of this year with its 56th edition and second Sydney Film Prize in 2009.

NOTES TO EDITORS

FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

Audience response

- 55 sell-out screenings
- attendances to free events more than doubled
- Gross Box Office 2008 \$1.135 mil (2007 \$1.106 mil)
- **The World Movies Channel Audience Award winners:**
 - o State Theatre: Fiction *Fugitive Pieces*, Documentary *Young@Heart*, Short *Green Porno*.
 - o Satellite Venues: Fiction *Red Like the Sky*, Documentary *Anvil! The Story of Anvil*, Short *Frederikke*.

Favourite moments included:

- **Justine Clarke's** live narration of *A Tale of Two Mozzies*, and **Guy Maddin's** live narration of *My Winnipeg*
- **Jack Black's** energised storming of the red carpet for *Kung Fu Panda*
- the traditional Maori welcome for the World Premiere of **Vincent Ward's** *Rain of the Children*
- The overwhelming audience response to *Salute*
- The Q&A with **Chris Waitt**, director of *A Complete History of My Sexual Failures*
- Producer **Rebecca Yeldham** calling Canadian metal band frontman **Steve 'Lips' Kudlow** on her phone following the screening of *Anvil! Story of Anvil*, so he could hear the audience cheer

Red carpet attendance

- **The Official Competition Jury** – Australian director **Gillian Armstrong** (Jury President), Australian actress **Essie Davis**, US film writer and critic **Scott Foundas**, Iranian director/writer/producer **Majid Majidi** and Hong Kong producer **Nansun Shi**.
- **Official Competition film guests included** – UK actress **Alexis Zegerman**, Mexican director **Carlos Reygadas**, Italian actor **Alessandro Gassman**, New Zealand director **Vincent Ward**, UK director **Steve McQueen**, Australian director and actor **Matthew Newton**, Canadian director **Guy Maddin**, Japanese director **Kiyoshi Kurosawa**, Mexican producer **Jaime Ramos**, US director **Kimberly Peirce**, Australian director **Nash Edgerton**.
- **Red carpet appearances included** – Academy Award-winning Australian producer **Eva Orner**, cinematographer **Christopher Doyle**, actors **Emily Barclay**, **Brendan Cowell**, **Alex Dimitriades**, **Anthony Hayes**, **Martin Henderson**, **Marcus Graham**, **Sacha Horler**, **Claudia Karvan**, **Ewan Leslie**, **Pia Miranda**, **Barry Otto**, **Gracie Otto**, **Peter Phelps**, **David Roberts**, **Richard Roxburgh**, **Toby Schmitz**, **Rachel Taylor**, **Clare van der Boom**, **Jackie Weaver**, directors **Scott Hicks**, **Greg McLean**, producers **Niv Fichman** and **Rebecca Yeldham**.

Industry activity

- over double the number of international guests year-on-year
- overall film industry participation increased by 62%, engaging 520 industry guests
- events and matchmaking services encouraged cross-pollination and collaboration between festival guests and the local industry, including:

- **Trans-national funding models and co-producing with Asia.** Nansun Shi (Producer, *Seven Swords*), Wouter Barendrecht (Co-Chairman HK Fortissimo Film Sales), Jonathan Shteinman (Producer, *Children of Huang Shi*) in conversation with Sandy George (*Screen International*)
- **Exploring the convergence of animation, gaming technology and filmmaking with the world's top Machinima filmmakers.** Frank Dellario (President Ill Clan, Vice President of Machinima Electric Sheep), Bernie Burns (Creator of Red vs Blue), Chris Burke (Creator This Spartan Life) hosted by Peter Giles (Director, Digital Media AFTRS)
- **The Director Performer Relationship.** Kimberly Peirce in conversation with Cherie Nowlan.
- **Positioning Australian Screen Content in the US Marketplace.** Bob Pisano, (COO of the Motion Picture Association of America), Courtney Gibson, (Executive Head of Content Creation, ABC TV) Rosemary Blight (Producer, *Clubland*) Ben Goldsmith, (Senior Researcher and Lectuer AFTRS)
- **The Warp X Pitching Session,** with Robin Gutch (Managing Director, Warp X), Anna McLeish (Warp Australia)

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Sydney Film Festival screens feature films, documentaries, short films and animations across the city at State Theatre, Greater Union George Street Cinemas, Metro Theatre and Dendy Opera Quays. The festival is a major event on the New South Wales cultural calendar and is one of the world's longest running film festivals. In 2008, SFF introduced the inaugural Official International Competition, a FIAPF-accredited competition for 'new directions in film', which rewards courageous and audacious filmmaking.

The 55th Sydney Film Festival opened on **Wednesday 4 June 2008**, with the Official Competition red carpet galas screening for the first 12 days, culminating in an Awards ceremony on Monday 16 June. The Closing Night Gala was on Saturday 21 June with the festival finishing on Sunday 22 June.

The 55th Sydney Film Festival 4–22 June 2008 www.sydneyfilmfestival.org

Photographs from a selection of SFF 2008 films & events are available for media at www.image.net

