

# **ACOFS - The Australian Council of Film Societies**

## **Film Society Handbook**

### **Chapter 10: PICKING A PROGRAM**

[Jan 2010]

The program is the most important aspect of any film society. It is the *raison d'être* and the only reason people become members. Although local circumstances must be taken into account e.g. the existence of a nearby cinema or a nearby film society, there are a number of other factors which should be borne in mind when selecting your annual program. But how and when should you do this?

#### **Assessing Your Membership**

The film society is vulnerable to public taste. If your members do not accept your choice of films they vote with their feet and the society dissolves. Therefore you need to ask yourself a few questions about your perceived audience. Are the majority of members already attuned to viewing films as an art form rather than primarily as a form of entertainment? Are foreign language films with subtitles acceptable? What effect will screening older or black-and-white films have on an audience? Should you avoid R or MA rated films, or ones with violence, bad language or blatant sex? What is the age range of the majority of your audience? A few more questions of similar nature should pinpoint the type of audience and hence the type of film most likely to be acceptable.

#### **What is a good film?**

The judging of films is far from a precise and quantifiable process. Professional film critics may have a more sophisticated way of viewing films and a keener eye for the merits and flaws in a film than the members of a film selection committee, but ultimately the intuitive feeling and the personal taste of the individual will play the predominant role (this applies to film critics as well as to your members). The important thing when selecting films for a short list is to have access to review material. You may need more than one or two reviews to get a good overall impression of a film, and get to know your reviewers – it is good to be able to trust the ones with views and tastes similar to yours and your members. Personal experience of a film is best, but you may not have seen all the films under discussion, but even so, don't necessarily reject a film because *you* don't like it. Others may think it's terrific.

#### **The Selection Committee**

The actual selection of the program should be in the hands of a small selection committee. It is worth getting suggestions from members or getting their feedback on a short list of suggested films, but the final decisions should be in the hands of a small group if the program is to be balanced and well shaped. In some larger societies with many program slots to fill this 'small group' may constitute the entire committee of management with different members of the committee taking a particular interest in different areas in which they have a particular interest or expertise. The program

should rarely be the compilation of the individual choices of each committee member, since this would result in something of a rag bag of tastes, although, this approach appears to have worked with some societies. Similarly, a program based entirely on the most popular films voted for by the members should be avoided because this, by definition, avoids the “unknown” films. The other trap is that members often vote for the films they have seen and enjoyed, but if selected they may not attend the screening because they have seen it.

Ideally, the selection committee should know more about films than the average film society member or have access to good information and should be responsible for introducing members to new and exciting cinema.

A good film officer or program planner is worth his/her weight in gold. A film selection committee can meet and plan programs roughly but it may be advisable to have one knowledgeable and able person to finalise programs, check running times and make decisions on which films should be screened when, during a program. Some film societies spread the workload, and have separate selection committees for features and shorts. At some stage, these committees would have to come together to balance their selections.

Where a film society focuses on recent releases (eg on 35mm and DVD), most members of the selection committee will keep their own lists gathered during the year, of films recommended in newspapers, TV reviewers, magazines, festivals etc., which will provide a good starting point for a short list of films to choose from.

### **Balance**

A balanced and varied program reflecting the best in cinema is what you should strive for. There are many areas from which to select:-

- Current films which have not had wide or any commercial viewing.
- Foreign films portraying life in other countries.
- Films which raise particular issues of importance to society.
- Classic and revivals of outstanding films from the past.
- Documentary films.
- Animated films.
- Experimental films.

### **First and Last Film**

The opening and closing screenings of a season are extremely important since it is then that new members acquire their first impressions of the society or decide whether to rejoin for another season. It is therefore advisable to choose a strong film of wide appeal for these two screenings.

### **First Season**

For new societies starting their first season, the program should be broadly based with general appeal to a film-minded audience. It should not be too esoteric or one-sided, and it is generally advisable to include the more difficult films gradually over a

number of seasons, in order to introduce the membership to them in an accumulative and critical way.

## **Experiment**

Once the society is established the Programming Committee should be prepared to experiment. A film society is not a commercial cinema whose sole purpose is to entertain. A film society aims at furthering the appreciation of film and of new experiments in the medium; entertainment value cannot be the sole criterion of film society programming, nor can audience approval or disapproval. Film societies must remain at least one step ahead of their audiences and this means trying to stimulate excitement and even controversy about certain films. This is not to say however, that your films should not be entertaining. Without this element many members may not rejoin next year.

## **Shorts**

The overall balance of your year's program with a mixture of light and heavy feature films, films from different countries, different periods and different genres is very important, but equally important can be the balance of the films shown at each screening. Usually the shorts are programmed after the main features are chosen. It is itself an expression of film as an art, and when carefully chosen to be in harmony or in contrast to the feature film, the short can enhance the enjoyment of what follows.

There is a tremendous range of free 16mm short films available; documentary, experimental, short story, comedy, animated, puppet, abstract, avante-garde, scientific. These are largely unknown to the general public but offer many examples of exciting technique or content. These should be programmed in such a way that their impact won't be lost. If you are programming shorts with a short main feature, stick to one or two long shorts. Above all program your shorts intelligently, not just as "fillers", and if you want plenty of discussion at interval, throw in a controversial film just before the coffee break.

There are increasingly more and more good short films available on DVD also. The growth in short film competitions and shorts festivals means that short films are still being made and audiences are providing good feedback.

For many members an evening of short films is well worthwhile. When programming such an evening it is best to have a 5 minute break after 4 or 5 films to give the audience a chance to collect their thoughts.

## **Sample Programs**

If you would like to examine current examples of good programming by other film societies then contact ACOFS or your State Federation. Many of their newsletters or websites provide information on what other film societies are screening.

The simple classification shown below assists greatly to focus attention on the key elements in composing a well balanced program.

## TYPE OF FILM

- LIGHT: Comedies & light entertainment.
- MEDIUM: Films with appeal to broad viewer spectrum.
- HEAVY: Films demanding a sophisticated appreciation of the cinema.

## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

- Western culture: Australia, USA, UK, Canada
- European: France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Scandinavia
- Eastern Europe: Czech, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Russia
- Asia: Japan, India, Indonesia, China
- Africa, Northern, Western, Eastern, Southern

## TECHNICAL

- Colour or Black & White.
- Sound or silent.
- Modern, nostalgic or Classic.

## GENRE

- |                |                   |                |
|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| • Drama        | • Musical         | • Political    |
| • Comedy       | • Adventure       | • Western      |
| • Romance      | • Fantasy         | • Avant Garde  |
| • Documentary  | • Mystery         | • Experimental |
| • Biographical | • Historical      | • Anime        |
| • Thriller     | • Children/Family | • Animated     |
| • Crime        | • Epic            | • Classic      |
| • War          | • Horror          |                |
| • Action       | • Science Fiction |                |

## Availability

The programmer must also take note of the availability of the preferred movies on film or DVDs. When selecting a 16mm film program the selector might find it easiest to make a short list from the catalogue of available films for the members to vote on. The job of 35mm film selection is easier as virtually any title screened at any venue in Australia is likely to be available from one of the many 35mm film suppliers. With DVD societies, the selection will be limited to those in the NTLC at the NFSA or because of the need to obtain screening rights, to those titles released on DVD in Australia, and in many cases, only those released in recent years. Your preference for source of films and DVDs may depend also on the likely charges levied by the different suppliers.

## Source of films and DVDs

**35mm films** are available from a number of sources such as:

Roadshow,  
Paramount,  
Rialto Entertainment,  
Sharmill Films,

Palace,  
Potential.  
And many more.

You can expect to pay from \$100 to \$400 to borrow a 35mm film depending on the year of release.

**16mm films** are available from only a few sources, and these are becoming fewer each year:

NTLC (Non-Theatrical Lending Collection) at the NFSA (National Film & Sound Archive) in Canberra. They will charge \$27.50 per film (at Jan 2010) but this may include a free short film.

ACMI handle the French Embassy and German Embassy films which are available for a nominal charge.

Amalgamated Movies handle a large catalogue of older titles and are generally charged at up to \$100 per screening.

**DVD** titles are available for loan from:

NTLC at the NFSA, available for \$9.90 per screening, but this collection does not include many recent titles.

ACMI have recent titles, but they may not be licensed for “public” viewing. They have a membership fee and no further charges for borrowing.

Roadshow have many recent titles available for up to \$150 or \$200 per screening.

Madman DVDs are generally available for up to \$100 per screening.

DVD titles can be purchased from many sources, even Coles, BigW, etc, but the two largest catalogues are currently JB HiFi and Ezydvd (the latter being an internet sales outlet). Where a DVD is purchased for screening the key is to locate the Australian screening rights holder so that permission to screen can be sought. This information is constantly changing but the state Federations tend to have the latest information on who to approach for the relevant DVD screening rights.

Screening rights are normally available from the co-operating distributors for \$55 per title per screening.

The rights holder is normally the distributor whose name is on the DVD cover, or they can put you in touch with the owner. See chapter 10 for more on copyright and the ACOFS DVD screening rights agreement.

### **Information on good films**

Probably the best and easiest source of information on films can be found by using the internet to access the Internet Movie Data Base [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). On it you can find out details of almost any known film as well as finding references to external reviews of the films from reviewers published in world-wide newspapers and magazines.

IMDB also has a star rating (out of 10 stars) for all films, based on feedback from the thousands of IMDB member voters. While this represents the “popular” view of each film, it does help sort out the extremes and generally gives an indication of the acceptability of most films. Being American based, the scores for Australian and foreign language films are perhaps lower than you or I might score them, but this is simply a matter of getting to know your reviewer!

## **Short Films**

Information on short films is much harder to find than for feature films. Generally personal experience through appraisal panels, attendance at film festivals or reading reviews published by the state federations is the best way to select shorts. Federation newsletters are a useful source of information.

### **Where to start when picking a program.**

#### **16mm.**

Start with a catalogue of titles available from your preferred library and prepare a short list for the members or selection committee to think about.

#### **DVD**

Again, start by deciding whether you can afford to buy DVDs and pay \$55 per screening, or need to limit your choice to the NTLC or ACMI because of price.

In the former case you can select from any DVD currently available for sale in Australia and then follow the process described in Chapter 7 on “Copyright” to find and pay the appropriate rights owner for the screening rights.

If you are limited to the NTLC or ACMI because of cost, start with their catalogues and select a short list from this.

Then when you have taken into account your members’ suggestions and preferences make up your own mind what to select to make a balanced program - as described earlier in this chapter.

Some points to remember though, are:

- Members will often suggest a film they have seen and enjoyed, but if you choose to screen it they are likely to stay away “because they have seen it”.
- Members are more likely to select films from a short list if they have heard of them previously. Don’t be afraid to select a film that is “unknown” to the members as long as you know that some reviewers recommend it.
- You generally require some films that are already well known to convince your members to rejoin for the next year. This will also make it easier to attract new members into the film society.
- Because your program plays such a big part in attracting people to join the society it is recommended that you select titles a full year in advance and make an annual calendar of films in a poster form to attract new members – and to convince members to rejoin for the new year.