



New Zealand - our stories, our songs, our selves.

DRAMA SYMPOSIUM

Sorrento in the Park, Auckland
Thursday 28 July 2005

Key Points

These were the key points that came out of the day:

- In its 40-year history local television drama has developed and improved, at times despite political and economic constraints.
- The presence of long-form popular-styled shows, soaps and returning series provides a vital industry infrastructure that makes other types of drama – anthologies, telefilms, period drama – more possible.
- Long-form drama naturalises the presence of local drama on New Zealand television.
- Local drama needs to have high exposure i.e. more than one screening a week, a strategy that was used with *Insider's Guide to Happiness*.
- Audiences have high regard for the quality of writing, acting and production and welcome, as part of the mix, stories that are intellectually stimulating and/or adventurous.
- Satisfaction with the quality of local drama is not always matched by ratings.
- The convergence of media, IT and telecommunications is driving the development of new tools, platforms and devices for media content.
- For business sustainability, producers must develop strategies that take account of factors like the borderless marketplace; the importance of 'brand'; consumer expectation of targeted, interactive services; and communication being consistent and across several platforms.
- The new production motto is 'create once ... publish many times'.
- Cottage industries cannot survive. Collaboration is key.
- It is very difficult to create drama productions on your own, outside an enterprise with a portfolio of programmes in development.
- Producing a variety of programmes across a range of platforms promotes creativity and business sustainability.
- Production costs are still escalating.

- The migration of foreign production to New Zealand is putting huge pressure on local drama production e.g. there is a new generation of technicians who have only ever worked on international productions. The impact on a small industry like New Zealand's is more significant than in other countries.
- The international market is looking for something unique. Local audiences are the primary target but if a production is distinctive enough it will sell in other markets.
- Audiences relate to universal themes, the 'human emotional' aspects of a story, no matter how local the setting. Dramatic stories revolve around life, laughter, triumph and tragedy.
- Internationally, one-hour drama, including serials, is making a comeback, and audiences are looking for "the exotic".
- Audiences want local drama but while it is good for a network's branding it carries a considerable degree of financial risk for them.
- The target drama hours identified by each network if money were no object are at least double those currently seen as affordable, given the level of funding for NZ On Air and TVNZ's Charter.
- Sustainability issues are not unique to us.
- Identify your market, know where you fit within it, and identify your point of difference.
- Programme-makers are the people best equipped to go to the markets, look at schedules, target territories and find distributors.
- Low-budget drama offers a low-risk opportunity to newer filmmakers. To succeed, they must accept the limits of the budget and work within them.

Where to from here?

NZ On Air wants to identify potential strategies for strengthening local television drama and while the symposium was not able to reach definitive answers to the question "Where to from here", some issues for consideration can be underlined:

- The quality vs. quantity debate – should NZ On Air scale back the number of hours it funds in favour of contributing more per hour.
- The possibility of NZ On Air, the broadcasters and the producers together working out an overall strategy for drama production.
- The recoupment issue, currently being discussed by the funding agencies, SPADA and the Screen Council, needs to be resolved.
- Can an effective business case be constructed to present to Government to win further financial support for television drama, or for a specific sector such as children's drama which is perceived to have a strong market internationally?

We welcome further thoughts on the key points from the symposium and how NZ On Air might meet its objectives of achieving a "sustained, consistent presence of drama across the main free-to-air channels". Please e-mail to:

shona@nzonair.govt.nz