Introduction

I am a screen professional working in Scotland today. I work mainly as a storyboard artist for various productions. I have worked on short films, commercials, UK TV and high end international television productions in Scotland.

I’ve also produced and directed my own work. I’ve made funded short films through the old Scottish Screen short film schemes, directed commercials and a low budget feature film. I have a BAFTA Scotland New Talent Award for Multimedia.

Response

What kind of screen industry does Scotland want? There are no wrong answers – but there are competing visions.

Is Scotland a country that solely serves the interests of incoming productions, creating jobs and bringing inward investment to the Scottish economy?

Is Scotland a country where it’s government investment is spent to solely support resident filmmakers to realise Scottish cultural work, to the detriment of possible job creation etc?

Or can we find a happy medium between the two?

From my perspective, at the moment we are heavily skewed to the first option – we are serving incoming productions to the detriment of our own cultural work.

But this is not necessarily a bad thing! It creates jobs. I benefit from this daily myself. This is where most of the money should be spent to have the biggest benefit on people’s lives.

Outlander has undoubtable been a great thing for everyone, financially and emotionally. It raises everyone up. But it will not last forever. What happens to the Scottish crews there when the show, hopefully way in the future, is wound down? What will replace it? If there is not a similar level of production, we will lose experienced crew. They will leave.

More needs to be done to encourage large productions to come here and that absolutely involves building studio space and quickly. Imagine the new Lord of the Rings TV show coming to Scotland if there was space for it?

The urgency of a studio build makes the Pentlands project a must for many. But how long will it really take before it happens? A recent report suggested there may be significant delays:

https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3986447/Open-Letter-From-Alison-Piper-on-Pentland-Film.pdf
Are there other options that Creative Scotland or the Scottish Government could encourage should the delays become a reality?

The new screen agency needs to be selling Scotland as a place to base big productions. Is this currently someone’s job at Creative Scotland? Do they speak to large productions? Do those connections exist and how can that be improved in the new agency? How is that and will that be evaluated?

There are many people that are more experienced and better placed than me to talk about studios and inward investment and I’m sure there will be lots of submission on these subjects. What I can speak of is being a resident filmmaker in Scotland, that wants to create work here. What will this new screen agency do to ensure that resident filmmakers are supported and nurtured?

Where is Creative Scotland’s budget currently being spent? Are companies outwith Scotland being supported to the detriment of ones based here?

What is the definition of a Scottish production? The UK definition is extremely wide, allowing all sorts of loop-holes and off shore tax regimes that I don’t personally think Scotland should be a part of. When that definition is based on the talent involved how is someone regarded as Scottish? Place of birth? Residency? I realise this can be a touchy subject, but it matters when funding is being given to non-resident filmmakers and the people who live and work here are ignored. Creative Scotland funding has been awarded to filmmakers of Scottish decent who live elsewhere. Is that right when our creatives here are struggling to finance their work?

From my perspective, there seems to be an expectation that you have to go elsewhere to be a success, then come back to Scotland. Only then will you get Creative Scotland support as a writer/director/producer. When is “new talent” no longer defined as such? When they’ve left the country?

I want to stay in Scotland and tell stories here that are relevant to the people that live here but also find an audience elsewhere. This is an area that is being neglected. The new screen agency needs to be honest about this. If it doesn’t want to support resident writer/director/producers and merely views Scottish talent as a part of a wider UK framework, where you do some short films here then go to London to make anything bigger, then that’s fine. But it needs to let us know that so we are not wasting our time.

If the new agency does want to really support resident writers/directors/producers then there needs to be a drastic re-think of the barriers to entry for Creative Scotland support. At the moment it is impossible in Scotland to do funded short films, move onto developing feature length projects for cinema or tv and realise them here without leaving the country to find some way of meeting Creative Scotland’s stifling criteria for support. Once someone leaves, why come back when they’ve found success elsewhere? The current system is top-down and doesn’t work for the majority. Yes, there needs to be a guarantee of quality, but imagine if our theatre producers, musicians or visual artists were treated in the same way?

Imagine the National Theatre of Scotland didn’t exist and funding for theatre was given to companies from elsewhere to come here and put on their work. Resident Scottish playwrights, producers and directors would exist in the wilderness. Could this really be called Scottish Theatre at all? That is what it’s like to be a
writer/director/producer in Scotland at the moment. We even gave the Scottish BAFTA for best feature film to non-resident filmmakers this year.

My experience with development funding comes mainly from the old UK Film Council Digital Shorts scheme. I was funded on two occasions to make short films through this scheme. The scheme has since been replaced by the Scottish Film Talent Network, now funded by the BFI. From what I can see there has been very little change in the ten years since I did my short films. They seem to commission the same number of films with the same level of budgets, despite the funding from the BFI being significantly larger than was ever give by the UK Film Council for Digital Shorts. Where is all the money going?

My two shorts screened at festivals worldwide, did what they were supposed to do. After that there was very little opportunity for me to continue as a funded director.

I believe one of the reasons for this was the high barrier for entry for development and production funding for anything beyond short films. The producers I made my short films with were similarly not eligible for Creative Scotland support. This has not changed in the intervening ten years, they are still not eligible and have no way of becoming so. Some have stayed, working in other areas such as advertising, some have left the country or moved into other industries, taking their talent and enthusiasm with them.

You need to have a significant track record of theatrically released work to apply. So why give Scottish talent the opportunity to do their shorts, then have no support for anything further? There is a missing middle step between shorts and TV/feature films.

Other countries have Micro-budgeted feature film schemes and the BFI even supports one in London. So why do we not have that here? Considering the potential local audiences, a micro-budget feature film scheme could start a renaissance in Scottish screen storytelling, from the perspective of artists based here. This could tie in with the new BBC channel. They could place the projects on the iPlayer at very little cost and feedback with audience data. This would create projects for companies with a clear route to local funding and distribution and a clear way for talent to move up. The new screen agency could work with the BBC to curate projects.

These micro-budget films could also reach an international audience as can be seen with other filmmakers around the world.

Scotland could be a laboratory for this kind of work, but there is absolutely no interest in it from Creative Scotland that I can see. There’s a considerable movement of people out there doing this already in Scotland with no support. Look at Tartan Features as an example.

A great example of this lack of interest is the specific exemption that bars filmmakers from applying to the Creative Scotland Open Fund. Why is this? Why not let filmmakers use the Open Fund in the same way other artists can? Especially when there are so many ways of consuming things digitally that could lead to critical or commercial success. Let’s try some new ways of doing things.

There is a major lack of advocacy. We need someone who will fight our corner and advocate for resident writers, directors and producers. Someone who will advocate
on our behalf to broadcasters, financers and distributors - whatever the project. Because why should these people support us if we don’t even have the support of our own screen agency?

Similarly, new writing, directing and producing talent needs a screen agency that will be honest with them, that will manage expectations and will make sure there is some direction to their development. All too often new creative talent is left to wither on the vine for lack of a bit of industry knowledge.

Diversity has to be key to the workings of a new agency. Diversity of ethnic background and economic background. Where are the working class voices in Scottish film and TV today? It’s very hard to establish a career without support from elsewhere. This is a huge barrier to entry for working class people and a national disgrace when it comes to cultural work.

The people in these roles in the new agency need to come from the industry. They can’t be civil servants. They need to have a passion for developing screen projects and developing people, not just doling out public money and ticking boxes.

The roles at the new agency should also have a fixed term, like many screen agencies around the world. Something like 3-5 years before you return to the industry. This would insure fresh ideas come regularly, favouritism does not take root and the roles are seen as a service to the industry - you leave things better than you found them for everyone, including yourself.

The new agency needs to embrace a culture of experimentation if it wants to support resident filmmakers. This would involve talking to the grass-roots people and organisations that are out there. Supporting them financially. Taking risks and trying something new.

The top-down approach is not working and many are afraid to speak out for fear of not getting future support that they are very unlikely to get anyway!

If the screen sector you want to create supports resident writers, directors and producers then look to Scotland’s other national companies as an example. The NTS, Scottish Opera, Scottish Ballet – all organisations with a cultural remit that comes before an economic one. Why can’t screen have that too? Where is our national body that encourages, educates, curates and archives Scottish screen culture? Why does that have to be the same body that encourages inward investment?

Let’s take what’s working elsewhere and create a good balance in our screen sector. Look at countries such as New Zealand who have supported resident filmmakers and have great inward investment off the back of that support.

Let’s look at successes here, such as Blazing Griffin and their first feature film Anna and the Apocalypse. How was that financed and supported? What made that different? Why did that work?

A change of direction is needed when it comes to supporting Scotland’s resident filmmakers or very soon we will not have any.