

Art under-rated says actor

EMMA SWAIN

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Matthew Newton strolling down Dowling Street, Jeremy Sims chatting to Chris Haywood, Noni Hazelhurst ordering breakfast while talking enthusiastically about Australian film.

It was Dungog Film Festival 2008 and it was wonderful. Or fabulous, as Hazelhurst put it.

"It's five times bigger than last year. I think it's fabulous and that's because it shines the light on our talent," she told the Mercury yesterday.

"Within Australian film we offer cultural exactitude, familiarity. I mean a good story is a good story wherever it comes from and if it's told with a cultural truth it will resonate for everybody. But we have a unique environment which no-one knows in the world, no-one has the same environment as us."

The star of Little Fish, Candy and, more recently, television's City Homicide was in Dungog yesterday for the Australian premiere of Bitter & Twisted.

The film - also starring writer/actor Christopher Weekes, Leeanna Walshman and Gary Sweet - was the surprise hit of New York's Tribeca Film Festival and is now the buzz of the Australian film industry.

An industry, Hazelhurst believes needs a lot more media support.

"If only the film industry could get as much publicity as ageing footballers who make fools of themselves, it would be really fabulous," Hazelhurst said.

"I wish the artistic aspect of our culture could get the same publicity as the sporting part of our culture. You look in a major newspaper and you've got two pages, if you're lucky, of arts and 17 pages of sport so I think the community misses out by not having a focus on the things that the arts can do, including cinema."

Hazelhurst was quick to applaud the talents of Australian actors, directors, cinematographers and crews but lamented at the lack of investors and script development.

"We have great writers but I don't think there's enough focus given to the scripts.

"And it would be fantastic if we could lure investors back to the cinema because they're running like startled gazelles and it's a real shame because it's a civic duty really to invest in the local film industry.

"Americans have more money to spend on their publicity than we do on our whole film so it's really hard to compete."

But competing with the American market isn't the only struggle Aussie actors have to face. According to Hazelhurst, there's also the constant battle with being pigeon-holed and the lack of roles.

"Acting is one of those things . . . there are 90 per cent of actors out of work at any given time. So you don't become an actor if you think your are going to be fully employed because the chances of that happening are zero to nothing," she said.

"The thing about actors is very few of them get the chance to show a range of things that they can do. People are so quick to pigeon-hole you. If you do a film as a young rebel then you'll get 15 young rebel scripts.

"I also don't think people understand acting. Some people think actors are slighting hysterical and delicate but most actors are as tough as old boots. There's no more maniacs among actors than there are in any other societal group. I think people like to point the figure and say we're all a bit shifty, a bit shiftless, and not to be trusted not reliable but actors are just artists trying to make a living, like most other people.

"So the more publicity we can give Australian film the better."

The three-day Dungog Film Festival - which included three Australian premieres and five world premieres - ended last night after

becoming the single biggest showcase of Australian film content in the world.

“Australia deserves a strong local film industry that’s proud to tell Australian stories using local actors and drawing on the vast wealth of ideas and talented filmmakers in this country,” festival director Allanah Zitserman said.

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FESTIVAL: Well known Australian actor Noni Hazelhurst paid a visit to Dungog at the weekend as part of the 2008 Dungog Film Festival. Picture by Cath Bowen 010608CB1

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