

# Too many plaudits, not enough quality

**S**URELY now something will be done rather than continually skating over the problems with our film industry.

In a year when 10 mediocre films are nominated for Australian Film Institute awards, and one acceptable film wins every one of them, it should be obvious to everyone that things need to change.

Australia simply doesn't make enough high-quality films to justify yearly AFI awards, and persisting with them in their current format cheapens every award handed out on the night.

Certainly, *Somersault* is an accomplished and thought-provoking film, but the fact it won 13 awards against such pedestrian fare as *Love's Brother*, *The Honourable Wally Norman* and *Finished People* is akin to Steven Bradbury's Winter Olympics speed skating gold medal — everyone is happy for the film, but nobody really believes it warranted the hysterical accolades.

It's hard to get excited about someone holding an AFI award for *Somersault*, given pretty well everyone who worked on it got one.

The *Somersault* caterers must be very peeved there was no "Best on-set nibbles" category.

In any other year *Somersault* would have been a worthy contender, well deserving of a nomination. But 13 awards? That kind of crazed adulation should be reserved for a work of true genius.

The Australian Film Institute is like the emperor minus his threads.

While the general public stays away in droves, unwilling to risk their money on a

## Claire Sutherland

ticket to an Australian movie after having been burnt so badly so many times, and informed critics who are unwilling to treat the local industry like a sheltered workshop hold local films to the same standard as American ones, the AFI ignores reality and indulges itself in a yearly orgy of self-congratulation.

The big white elephant standing in the middle of the room (psst, all the movies are rubbish!), is carefully ignored by the very people who should be acknowledging it.

In the media room at last Friday's AFI awards, the presenters and winners — understandably — didn't want to hear a word against their industry.

Geoffrey Rush name-checked one critic on stage for his brutally honest assessment of the state of the industry.

Best supporting actress winner Lynette Curran shook her head sadly when asked if she'd read recent press criticism about the local movies. "I don't know why they do that," she said.

John Clarke rightly pointed out it's easy to be an expert in hindsight.

"One of the things we do in this industry is we speculate and we bungy jump," he said. "Afterwards everyone can see that *Shine* was going to work."

John Doyle, a winner for his screenplay for the TV mini-series *Marking Time*, blamed economies of scale, pointing out Australia simply doesn't make as many films as the US, so there's fewer to choose from.

And of course he's right, which is a powerful



Won 13 awards: Abbie Cornish and Sam Worthington in *Somersault*.

argument for holding the awards once every two years.

Sure, it will cause some headaches for producers who will be reluctant to release their films at the start of the two years lest they are overlooked when judging comes around, but with Australia only producing a handful of films each year, that would seem unlikely.

And the advantage would be an AFI awards in which people might take a genuine interest, where several

worthy films knock heads in an attempt to win an award that actually means something because it was gained against stiff competition, as opposed to a handful of wet squibs.

Then too, a TV network might take enough of an interest to televise the event live, something they wisely didn't consider worthwhile this year.

Despite what Australian film industry players might think, critics don't relish

tearing down local films, but neither do good critics feel they should hoodwink their readers into parting with \$15 for a sub-standard movie-going experience.

Allowances *shouldn't* be made just because a film is Australian. No, we don't have the big budgets of the Americans, but good stories and fine writing don't have to cost the earth.

A glance at the kind of films New Zealand is bringing to the world lately —

*Whale Rider*, *In My Father's Den* to name just two — and a glance back at the utterly brilliant Australian drama *Lantana* or *Chopper* should be proof enough.

Until things change, the Australian Film Institute should save time and money and simply send everyone who makes a local film in a given year a congratulatory plaque.

**ACTOR John Howard on the state of the Australian film industry, Hit liftout, today**

# It's win-win no matter who wins

**M**Y STOMACH hurts. Again. Just as it did four years go when George Bush was elected US President.

And again I'm standing at the US Consulate's Election Watch, seeing the returns trickle in. Now my head hurts too.

Full disclosure: I voted for Kerry weeks ago. But I did the math and predicted a Bush victory. Bush may be unpopular abroad but the Americans love him. Why?

Well, fear. Fear defines human behaviour. Terrorists scare us. Most Americans perceive Bush as the person best able and most likely to stand up to terrorists. As one voter told me, "I like Bush because he's decisive, even when he's wrong." Exactly.

Well, I like Kerry because he's worldly.

He understands diplomacy and that the globe is actually inhabited by non-Americans. This is not self-evident to all.

Take Iraq. Hailing from a military town in a southern state, I can attest that Americans wish to preserve their special self-appointed status in the world. Evidently, they judge



## Duff Watkins

Bush as the man most likely to protect that image. In the parlance of the street, it's all about respect. While their notion of respect may seem like a silly, gun-slinging, cowboy caricature to you, it's an act that plays well in the theatre of US politics.

If Bush is re-elected, expect more of the same.

Regardless of who wins though, Australia will continue to benefit from the US defence budget.

Let's get real. There's only one superpower in the world and they are our best mates. Is that so bad?

Moreover, they spend trillions of dollars on weapons, training and defence R&D and then virtually give the fruits of it away to Australia.

This is not a bad deal for a small nation that cannot even defend its own coastline. In exchange, the US simply asks us to police the neighbourhood, which is fair enough given that Australia is the prime manifestation of Western civilisation in the region.

Remember, it's not just the US that the terrorists hate, its Western civilisation.

**B**UT WAIT, there's more. There exists a close, personal and genuine friendship between Prime Minister John Howard and Bush. Let's be real again: nothing replaces personal chemistry and George and John have it.

All the better for us because what Australia wants, Australia usually gets.

The Free Trade Agreement is an example. The FTA may be the best thing to happen to Australia since Federation. Why? Because it puts Australia on the "preferred supplier" list for some major markets while eliminating competition.

Bill Clinton repeatedly focused himself and his staff on what was important by reciting, "it's the economy, stupid." It worked. He was elected and re-elected.

Today's mantra is, "it's the system, stupid." That's what is really important for Australia. Truth is, it doesn't much matter who wins.

The political, economic and electoral systems in Australia and the US are so strong, robust and time-tested that they work well regardless of who wins.

Many people think that the strong Australia-US alliance was forged by the heat of world wars. Maybe.

But the mundane truth is that it's our similar accounting practices and standards that matter more. They're transparent and allow us to see into each other clearly.

That's why we do business together. Battle may have formed our friendship, but commerce is what furthers it.

Western civilisation won't end if Bush is re-elected because our systems won't allow it. It's a tonic to my spirit to see the system working. Again.

**Dr DUFF WATKINS is a dual citizen of Australia and the US. He is a businessman and a Governor of the American Chamber of Commerce. dw@execsearch.com.au**



Personal chemistry: John Howard and George Bush.