

# THE FILM INDUSTRY AT THE THRESHOLD: EXPORT OR PERISH

By SANDRA HALL

"TO MY MIND, the Press should report the industry in such a way as to help us with the fantastic story that everything is lovely. We are not like shoe manufacturers. If the public associate us with failure, they're going to keep away from us."

Those words belong to Paul Riomfalvy, chairman of the New South Wales Film Corporation, and, while nobody else is being quite as blunt, they do express a mood which pervades the film business at present. What good news there is is passed around with a feverish desire to cure the paranoia and dispel the confusion, and newspaper interviews about the state of the industry are full of airy displays of instant economics.

When the British critic Alexander Walker was here recently someone asked for a phrase to describe the kind of film being made in Australia and he thought for a bit and said he saw it as a "cinema of worry". He could have been talking just as well about things off-screen, for people are worried — about high budgets, recent disappointments and the weaknesses inherent in a system relying on direct government subsidy. But they worry, most of all, about seeming worried. While there can be few businesses with greater love for the sound that figures make when rattled around in conversation, a reliable guide to the way things are is hard to come by.

Yet one thing is clear, Australian audiences are no longer automatically enchanted, as they were for a while, by the sight and sound of Australian characters and attitudes on-screen. While budgets have risen, the home audience's expectations have fallen — a fact which bewilders the industry



Fred Schepisi with Tom Kenneally on location on *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*

because internationally, the opposite is happening. Since last year's Cannes Festival, the British, the Europeans, and, most recently, the Americans have been paying good money for Australian films and have shown signs of being willing to do much better than that.

The \$1 million paid by American distributors for *Mad Max*, George Miller's intensely violent and extremely accomplished exercise in cheap thrills, has given Australian film-makers a tantalising glimpse of something rather different from their customary dogged battle to break even.

The atmosphere has been colored by the misty generalisations and bright superlatives of the British and American critics who have been lately discovering that something has been going on after all. The British have been especially kind, applauding Australia for even

having an industry at a time when the once-great British studios have become what Alexander Walker calls "filling stations" for international co-productions, and the American critics have been astounded to find that in such an out-of-the-way part of the world (known to them previously only as the home of the kangaroo and Rupert Murdoch), there exists a culture which actually has something in common with their own.

"The continent known more for its animal life than for its artistic achievement is in the midst of a cinematic renaissance that sets a standard for our own films to match," declared *New West* magazine's critic Stephen Farber recently in a three-page rave over the Australian films shown at the Los Angeles Film Festival. "Unlike many of the acclaimed German films of recent years, these Australian movies are