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Feature: Secrets to survival: A decade long partnership in program making

With more than a decade of producing award winning documentaries, Iris Pictures is the result of a very successful partnership between two women, Mary-Ellen Mullane and Jessica Douglas Henry. With their most recent production, **Maternity Unit** just completed and **Divorce Stories**, currently screening on SBS, Mary-Ellen speaks to **Off the air** about how their company has managed to grow in an industry where many don't survive – and how she and Jessica maintain a creative partnership.

Mary-Ellen began her working life as a social worker. "A large part of social work is about communication," she said. "The transition to the film industry came about because it seemed to me that film was a far more effective way of communicating and educating." She met Jessica, who had left school to work in film, through a mutual friend.



Mary-Ellen Mullane

The pair set up Iris Pictures, and immediately began to specialise in child and family health education programs. The move into broadcast production was a gradual one, with SBSi being a "greater supporter".

"They've helped many people like us make that transition," Mary-Ellen said. "And many other filmmakers shared their knowledge, helping us along the way."

The company's specialisation in health education has been one of the keys to its continued success. It is also a subject area that does well in the educational market, and with their strong Australian focus, their productions are in demand.

"Our stuff sells," Mary-Ellen said. "Our Screenrights' royalties have also increased over the years. Often they arrive just at the right moment to keep us going."

"We have tried to do many other things, like dramas, comedy and features, but factual program making is the most successful for us," she said.

Some of the company's productions include: **Handle with Care** a four part series following the work of mobile paediatric intensive care teams, **From Korea with Love** (a documentary following a couple who adopt a baby from Korea), and the very personal **Our Brother James** (a documentary about the impact of Jessica's brother's suicide at age 20).

"We have an established track record and we have learnt by doing," Mary-Ellen said. "It's not that we don't ever want to move into other areas but at this stage in the company's development it is better to stick with what we're good at."

The decision is also a financial one. Like most small independent production companies, Iris Pictures self-funds most of the development of its projects. Only recently, the AFC and NSWFTO have begun investing in producers and independent production companies like Iris by way of development grants.

"We simply couldn't afford to spend too much time on things that don't produce results quickly," Mary-Ellen said, although, more recently, they have applied for funds, with the AFC supporting the recent development of **Maternity Unit**.

Working closely with one other person is not always easy, but Mary-Ellen and Jessica have maintained a productive creative relationship and a friendship. Their differing roles within the company have evolved over time.

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"I knew we had to develop business skills," she said. "Iris Pictures' future depended on that. So I run the company, manage the finances, the employees and take producing roles on the documentaries and series. Jessica brings in a lot of the projects and directs a lot of our productions."

"We have always tried to look ahead, to be flexible and, on a more personal note, to recognise each other's contribution to the business and tolerate each other's shortcomings."

The importance of communication is again something that Mary-Ellen stresses. "If you stop communicating, then you run into real problems. If you are talking, I mean really talking, then you can work effectively."



Jessica Douglas Henry

Perhaps it is because of her background, but Mary-Ellen has spent quite a bit of time thinking about how partnerships work, what are the danger signs, how to resolve conflict, maintaining a common goal.

When she describes how she and Jessica work together, it is not about who makes the coffee in the morning. It is more like a marriage. "A business partnership requires the same amount of attention as any other real relationship."

Both women have children, and aiming for more flexible work conditions is important to their continued survival within the industry.

"A lot of TV broadcast production is very inflexible. Things are done in very hierarchical old fashioned ways, and industrial reform hasn't filtered through in terms of hours of work," Mary-Ellen said. "For example, you don't see many part time independent producers or directors. Increasingly, we understand that you don't always have to be in the office, that you can use remote technology and work from home with the kids. We both do a lot of that now. We're very conscious of the need for flexibility, not only for us, but we'd also like to offer other women with kids possible work opportunities, because for many, the film industry just isn't an option."

"Recently we undertook a business review. The most important take home message was that to grow your business you must have synergy between your personal and professional goals and interests. It is important to make programs that you are passionate about. It is essential to get personal satisfaction from the work that you do. If you are a creative type, then your work should reflect this and present lots of opportunities to express yourself. It sounds obvious, but it was very exhilarating to have the opportunity to talk about business practices in this way."

As far as future projects go, Iris Pictures would like to develop an increased number of longer form series and international co-productions, as well as continuing to make educational programs.

Their longevity in an industry where many don't survive augurs well for the company's continued success. The company has seen a decade-long period of dramatic change in the film and television industry. The rapid change in technology, the move from analogue to digital and the huge growth of the independent production sector have all impacted on their work.

"The production budgets for factual programs have not changed much in ten years, in most cases, on a real basis, they have decreased. But some of this can be offset by the availability of cheaper technology, like small digital cameras," Mary-Ellen said.

"We have stayed positive. It's very easy to become cynical about the state of the industry, and it is important not to," she added. "At heart, we are both optimists."

Further information about Iris Pictures can be found at their website: www.irispictures.com.au Information about the currently screening **Divorce Stories** can be found by visiting Film Australia's website: www.filmaust.com.au

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Screenrights International sets 12% administration fee

Screenrights International has set an administration fee of 12% on royalties collected from 1 July 2005 to 30 June 2007.

Screenrights Chief Executive Simon Lake said this rate meant members were not only assured of getting a very competitive service, they also had the certainty of knowing that this would continue for two years.

Screenrights International collects blank tape and retransmission royalties from societies in the United States, Canada and Europe.

Members simply need to register title details once with Screenrights. Screenrights then supplies these details to other societies in the correct format and by their specified deadlines, removing the complexity of managing international returns.

"And with members now able to register with us for retransmission royalties in Australia it makes more sense than ever to make this registration global," Lake said.

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\$3.8 million paid out in latest distribution round

Photographs by the late Tasmanian wilderness photographer, Peter Dombrovskis, were among the works that received Screenrights royalties in the latest round of payments.

Copyright in the iconic images, which were included in the Film Australian television documentary, *Wildness*, are now owned by Liz Dombrovskis, who continues to license her late husband's work.

"The royalties were a lovely bonus after filling out some forms," she said.

Her company, West Wind Press has put out over 30 calendars of Dombrovskis' images, which were influential in the campaigns to save Lake Pedder and the Franklin River.

The latest round of payments, from 1 May to 31 August 2005, totalled \$3.8 million, leaving only 14.56% of last year's Australian educational royalties left to distribute.

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Register now for new Screenrights royalties

Screenrights is now taking registrations for its new retransmission royalty service, with money to be paid to rights owners once the rate is determined by the Copyright Tribunal.

Screenrights has been appointed by the Government to collect royalties from pay television operators for the retransmission of free to air broadcasts.

The retransmission royalty rate is currently being determined by the Copyright Tribunal, with royalties to be paid to programs broadcast by a free to air channel since March 2001.

To ensure a speedy distribution of these royalties, Screenrights is now taking title registration details – simply visit our web page (www.screen.org) and download the forms.

Registration can either be done directly with Screenrights, in which case you will only pay Screenrights' administration fee, which is charged on a cost recovery basis. Alternatively, if you choose to go through an agent to register, it is worth noting that you may be charged both Screenrights' administration fee and the agent's fee, reducing your returns from your work.

Make your registration global

When you are completing your registration form for retransmission royalties, you may also choose to register for Screenrights' international Service to collect retransmission and private copying royalties in Europe and North America. There is no need to provide further registration details, you will simply need to select the services and territories from which you would like Screenrights to collect for you. Screenrights will then use your registration details to ensure that your titles are lodged with the relevant collecting societies in Europe and North America in the correct format by their specified deadlines. A single registration with Screenrights acts as a one-stop shop for global returns, and with a 12% administration fee set until 30 June 2007, Screenrights' international service is one of the most competitive in international collections.

For further information about the retransmission service, email memberservices@screen.org To find out more about the international service, contact Screenrights' International Services Co-ordinator Maha Ismail (maha@screen.org).

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Voting for Screenrights directors

Voting material for nominations to the four vacancies on Screenrights Board of Directors should be received by members at the end of September.

Voting closes on the 19th of October.

The Board is comprised of 12 elected directors, each with a three-year term. Each year, four Board members come to the end of their term, leaving their positions up for re-election. Retiring members may recontest their seat.

The results of the election will be announced at Screenrights' Annual General Meeting to be held on 26 October.

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Technological protection measures

The Attorney-General's department is currently developing amendments to the Copyright Act to ensure Australia's compliance with its technological protection measures (TPM) obligations under the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA).

The AUSFTA obliges Australia to introduce civil and criminal remedies in relation to:

- Acts of circumvention of TPMs that prevent access to copyright material;
- Dealings with (manufacturing, selling etc) devices and services that may be used to circumvent a TPM that controls access to copyright material; and
- Dealings with devices and services that may be used to circumvent a TPM that protects copyright other than by restricting access to copyright material.

The AUSFTA allows certain limited exceptions to liability in relation to each of the above categories of activity.

In addition to developing these amendments, the Attorney-General's department has also referred the question of whether there are any additional exceptions to TPM liability that would be appropriate for Australia to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. Information about the reference can be found at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/laca/previinq.htm

Information about the implementation of the AUSFTA TPM obligations can be obtained by contacting Kirsti Haipola, Copyright Law Branch, Attorney-General's Department, kirsti.haipola@ag.gov.au

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Upcoming conferences

With an emphasis on New Zealand's identity in a global market, this year's Screen Production and Development Association of New Zealand Conference will be held from 17 to 19 November in Wellington.

As part of its commitment to the industry, Screenrights is a sponsor of the conference. For more information, go to www.spada.co.nz

Screenrights is also sponsoring the upcoming Australian Teachers of Media Awards on October 7 (www.atomawards.org) and the Small Screen Big Picture Conference in WA from 23-25 November. This is WA's premier screen industry event, bringing together industry professionals from around the world. Information about the upcoming conference can be found at www.ssbp.com.au

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Dramatic growth in enhancetv use by educators

Enhancetv, Screenrights online portal of resources for educators, now has more than 850,000 hits in a month, making it a valuable free promotional tool for filmmakers wanting to market their content to the education sector.

The number of hits has grown by 170% from July 2004, which had a total of 317,044 hits.

There has also been a dramatic increase in the file downloads from the site. In July 2004, there was a total of 5,384 downloads, compared to 22,284 in August 2005.

Downloads include study guides to help teach with audio-visual material, and features on specific curriculum relevant topics.

Filmmakers who are interested in finding out more about how they can promote their content should email jamie@enhancetv.com.au To find out more about the site and how it can work for you, visit www.enhancetv.com.au