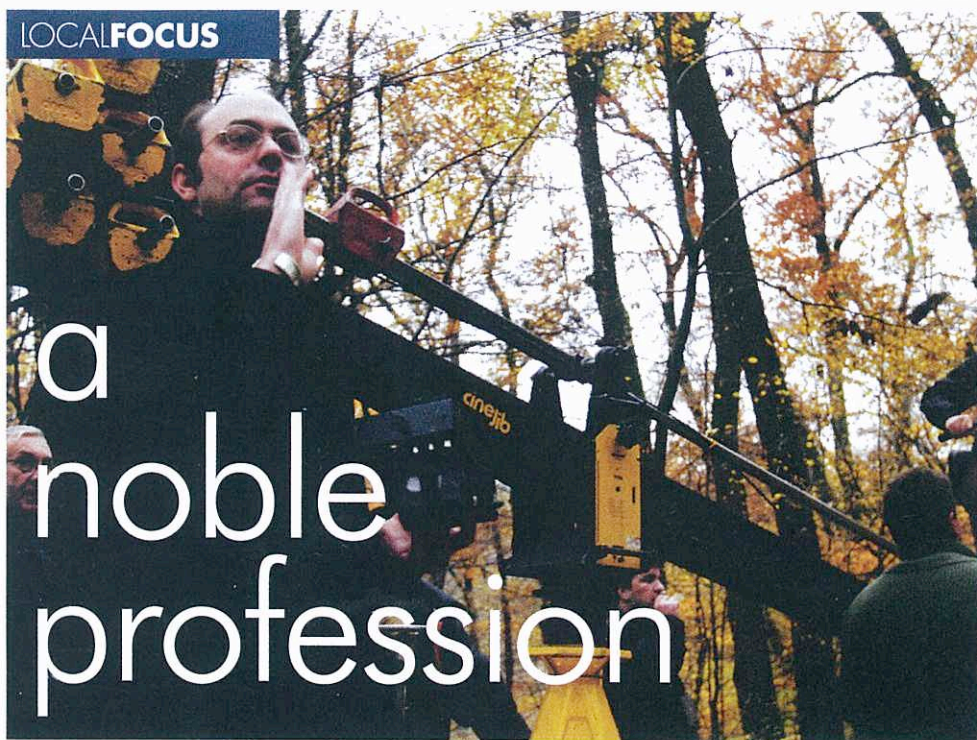


## LOCAL FOCUS



A filmmaker, teacher and genuine supporter of the arts, BEN FERRIS is also executive director at one of Australia's premier filmmaking education facilities, the SYDNEY FILM SCHOOL. BY DOV KORNITS

"My view – and I feel very strongly about this – is that the kind of films that we make [in Australia] are very conservative and safe," says Ben Ferris, the softly spoken, 33-year-old figurehead of Sydney Film School. "I guess it's because my background and interest in filmmaking is a bit more experimental, but the value I see in taking big risks creatively is that you can have runaway successes. *Mad Max* was a huge risk at the time – a crazy idea – and would such a crazy idea get off the ground now? I'm not sure that it would; it breaks all the rules. When taking risks, there'll be a lot of disappointments, but one of them may be a runaway hit, so it's about developing the film culture by pushing it and challenging it."

Ferris' initial interest in cinema was sparked when studying ancient Greek and Latin at Sydney University. "I was showing a dramatic interest," Ferris says over a cup of tea at an inner city Sydney cafe. That interest was channelled into a thesis on the reconstruction of the lost play *Alexandros* by tragedian Euripides. That corresponded with self-confessed poor acting performances in university theatre productions and an up-tick in his involvement with UBS, a campus film and TV production unit that began offering short courses in filmmaking.

After graduation, Ferris spent a year teaching the classics, and then took a year off to complete a master's degree at Oxford University. The combination of education and

film proved a great lure for Ferris, who returned to Australia and to UBS, putting systems in place to avoid it becoming just another private filmmaking course. After a dispute with Sydney University, Ferris and many of his UBS contemporaries opened the doors to Sydney Film School at its Waterloo campus in 2005. Officially christened by then-Premier and Minister For The Arts, Bob Carr, the excitement in the air at the occasion was palpable, as many a film and TV veteran became excited by the prospect of a promising film industry in this country's future.

Although acting as the executive director and as a tutor at SFS would prove to be a full time job for most, Ferris hasn't lost the filmmaking bug himself, with his 2003 short film *The Kitchen* screening alongside *Russian Ark* at the self-explanatory One Take Film Festival in Zagreb, Croatia. The following year, he won the grand prize at the same festival for his film *Ascension*, and he's currently in post-production on his first feature, an Australian/Croatian co-production called *Penelope*, which combines his interest in the classics (Penelope is Odysseus' wife), experimental film (it's almost entirely silent) and Croatia (his fiancée's family is from there). In his capacity as executive producer, Ferris has also been instrumental in getting a number of short films off the ground, as well as Matthew Newton's recent indie, *Three Blind Mice*. "It's important that all the teachers at this school keep active and keep involved in

their own projects," he reckons. "I'd actually like to establish a proper system wherein our staff members get six months off to work on their own projects. That way, they can keep things fresh, and it would also be a great way to get students and graduates involved in projects that are happening."

In the interim, Ferris has seen the home entertainment success of SFS product Maya Newell's documentary *Richard*, as well as the fine performance of his school at international film festivals. "Even though we have a small infrastructure, we made the decision to have a dedicated person getting student films out to festivals," he says. "That's really important because, when filmmakers send their films to festivals and get knocked back, they usually give up. What the distribution does is just keep sending them, because that's what you've got to do. It also builds relationships with the festivals. We're now at the point where festivals approach us for our next films." The future looks bright for the school, which Ferris sees as a good sign for the industry. "I want to get students, at a young age to start taking risks to take themselves further," he smiles. "It's about pushing them to where it gets interesting."

Sydney Film School's open day is on November 15.  
For more information on the Sydney Film School, head to [www.sydneyfilmschool.com](http://www.sydneyfilmschool.com). ■