

INFORMATION SHEET 28 - (31st March 2026)

PROGRAMMING FOR A FILM SOCIETY

Film society selection committees and members have their own ways of programming for their film society, and for the uninitiated it can be both exciting and daunting. This information sheet highlights some of the key considerations when putting together a programme. It also outlines a **variety** of tried and tested ways to consider a selection process that will depend on the size, capacity and ethos a committee. Above all, there is no right or wrong way to approach programming – just many different ways – all of which have different pros and cons.

One thing to remember is that what you are doing is ‘curating’ a selection of films for your members. Putting together a successful one will take time, thought and a keen sense of knowing your members and indeed attracting new ones. It is a really fun job to put together a film program. Prepare for it and ‘act’ like a professional reviewer. Just think how many hours Margaret and David must have used to take to select and review their films!

*****At this time, the majority of film societies screen DVDs (or Blu-ray), so comments here have been made based on this, but many of the processes will apply to screening DCP (Digital Cinema Package) 35mm or more rarely, 16mm film.*

Questions to consider very carefully

- **Who are you programming for, yourself or your members?** Where a single programmer chooses purely on the basis of their own likes and dislikes, the result may not satisfy all the members. From our experience, there have been several instances where the outcome has been a loss of members and ultimately closure of the society. The upshot of this then: *know your audience and be aware that you are selecting for your members, not just yourself.*
- **Who might be or is your audience?** Older generation, youngsters, diverse, coming for just a catch up, or serious film viewers? Is your town seeing newcomers arriving? What population is in your town? Do you get the sense your film society will cater for the absence of a cinema in town? Hopefully, you will have a mix so firstly, gauge who your audience might be composed of and program accordingly. Also, keep in mind the aims and purpose of the film society which would have been decided in your constitution. With this in mind, always keep up with what your audience will attend.
- **Is the proposed program balanced?** Different film societies may prefer to focus on different genres of film, so a balanced program for one society may not satisfy the taste of another. For example, if you want to attract younger members, program a film or two for them. Can you include a documentary or two?
- **Do you want to widen the horizon of the members?** Programming only what the members are used to can lead to complacency, so be prepared to include some films which “stretch” the members somewhat and offer them the occasional surprise. Films are not always just for entertainment: they are a reflection of our world. Including one

or two films that bring a new world to your audience is most likely to be welcomed and provide food for thought and conversation.

- **What is the nearby competition?** Are there public cinemas nearby which screen the sort of films you might want to see? Are there other film societies nearby? If you don't have any cinemas nearby, then your local community really is your only audience so you need to understand things like: how often they would come; what night would be best; how many times per month?
- **Has a film you are considering been on TV?** The question is, does it matter? The thing is, now almost any film released in the cinemas will find a platform to be streamed on. Ensure you understand your film society goals: to screen good quality films that contribute to your member's filmic experiences. What about Foxtel or Netflix you may say? Some members may not come to a film that has been shown on TV, while others may be happy to see it a second time "on the big screen". Your role as a film selection committee is to present a wide range of films that will suit your members considering films that complete a 'film society' program rather than a local cinema program.
- Be consistent. If you change your direction, or balance of genres, you may find you lose the members you had previously but need some time to grow the numbers of those who favour the new genres. If you change direction too often you may end up with no satisfied members.

How many people should be on a film selection committee?

This will be different for each film society. When a film society is just starting up, there may be only a few people who are willing to get the film society up and running. There will need to be a few people who know their films and are prepared to learn where to access films and how to present an initial program. But the danger is that all the knowledge of the processes involved and the 'tricks of the trade' are known only to those few people. If they move on, there is no back-up person to carry on. Alternatively, a new person could take over with a new approach to film selection which may not satisfy all members! An important thing to focus on is that the film selection committee or group must be well informed and able to *work together as a group*. Here are a few points to consider:

- **With a *small* committee** the work of canvassing members, researching titles, preparing short-lists of films, and deciding on a final programme can be spread across several people. The advantage is that the procedures and programming "philosophy" of the film society can be maintained and passed on to newer committee members.
- **To involve all members needs a lot of coordination.** Some members may have lots of suggestions while others may have little input. Experience shows that the larger the selection committee the more likely the programme will end up "middle of the road" or the average of all contributions. But by all means get the members involved in suggesting titles for the committee to consider. That way they all feel they are part of the society.
- A film society usually needs more than one programmer for a diversity of opinion and to spread the work-load.

- For a February screening start, begin to secure screening rights no later than the 1st of January, but earlier is better. Film programs should be published at least one month prior to the first screening to maximize your potential membership reach.
- **How do you judge what the members want?** Feedback is the answer. Ask the members to suggest titles they would like to see and at least consider them when making your final suggestions. Use the FVFS **Star Box** to collect feedback from members after each screening to judge how well each film has been received.
- **Should you adhere to members' requests implicitly?** Many members will request films from long ago which may no longer be available, and are of little interest to others, so programming them just because a member asks, may not always be a great idea. Quite often the requesting member may not even attend the screening because they have seen it!
- **Be prepared to accept members' suggestions 'for consideration'**, but still subject to the requirement of selecting a balanced program.

Should you select a 12 or 6 months program?

Whether you program for the full year of 10-12 months, 6 months or just a few screenings such as 3 consecutive months will depend on your society and your aims. A 12-month program gives a structure to your program, and your audience can lock in dates. Key points to consider include:

- The best marketing material is your printed program poster/leaflet/ brochure, which is much more likely to attract annual members if it includes all films for the full year. This of course can be done on hard copy and distributed to cafes, as well as emailed out as a digital copy to interested people and members. You can find examples of programs on the FVFS website. Put one on your website too.
- Programming for six months at a time results in extra programming and marketing effort mid-year. Admittedly, this may mean you can take advantage of recent releases - but you still run the risk of a DVD not being released in time. Programming on a month-to-month basis (ad hoc) allows you to take advantage of recent releases, but the selection work is never-ending and the society would lack an annual program poster which is essential for marketing the society.

Screening Rights – Essential points

As it can effect on your programming choice, it is worth considering the availability of screening rights for your DVD screenings prior to selecting your films. Member film societies can access the special agreement that has been made with DVD distributors on your behalf, for your non-theatrical screenings (screenings to members only, in a public venue, and where there is no admission charge).

The implication of the agreement (and Australian copyright law) is that if you cannot find a current rights owner, or the rights have expired in Australia, then you **cannot** screen that title legally in public (which covers most film societies). One alternative is to find the owner of the international rights and seek their permission to screen the DVD. Generally speaking, the older a DVD movie is, the less likely that any Australian distributor still has current screening rights. If a DVD is currently available from Australian retail or on-line stores then some distributor will have screening rights, so it is just a matter of finding them. More information

about how to obtain screening rights for your DVDs can be found in the ACOFS Fact Sheet 3B. Their website is www.acofs.org.au

Recently, we asked film societies 'what makes for a great film program'? The point of the exercise was to examine the processes involved in making a successful film selection for an annual program. Here are their key findings:

1. Know your audience – critically think about what they are coming to or not coming to.
2. Focus on a balanced program – a range of genres, countries of origin, themes.
3. You are selecting films for your group *not* just yourself – motivation should be showing films for a community of viewers.
4. Be familiar with the titles under consideration. Such as:
 1. Storyline/plot
 2. Genre
 3. Length
 4. Subtitles available
 5. Classification (Rating, G, PG, M, MA etc)
 6. Colour / B&W
 7. Read reviews and watch trailers
 8. Some believe the film should have been viewed by at least one member of the committee

Criteria for a balanced annual program

1. Begin the year / season with an audience 'grabber'.
2. Finish the year / season on a high note.
3. Have a balanced range of content throughout the season.
4. Select from different film eras.
5. Be aware of the level of violence or bad language tolerated.
6. Different genres.
7. Foreign language / cultures.
8. Documentaries.
9. Animation.
10. Alternate genres / styles between screenings. eg Do not run 2 documentaries back-to-back.
11. Celebrate particular times: NAIDOC Week, Christmas, winter, summer, diverse cultural celebrations.
12. Have a reserve list of a few extra titles (you can always roll them over to the following year)

Be cautious about:

13. Subtitles- make sure your DVD or film has English subtitles before purchase.
14. Violence- vet it for this.
15. Sex- vet it for this.
16. Bad language- remember your audience.
17. Horror- remember who you are screening to.
18. War- can be sensitive.

19. Cost of accessing and screening.

20. R, MA or M ratings- always good to display on the program and newsletter. It is actually a Government requirement to do so!

Many societies insist that at least one member of the selection committee see each selected film before-hand. But if you know your reviewers and trust their judgement, that may not be necessary. After all, if you have already seen all the films, where is the incentive to join the film society?

There are almost as many ways to go about selecting a film program as there are film societies, and each society will argue that their way is best. This information sheet has attempted to highlight the main factors that main influence your situation.

Once selections have been made, identify current holder of non-theatrical screening rights

Once you have selected your program, it is time to write up the notes that will give a brief statement on the film. This is also an important part of the program as the way you describe the film is what will attract a member to attend or actually join your film society. www.IMDb.com is a good source of reviews for you to consider.

Other Sources of DVDs

DVDs are available from other sources apart from the retail shops and eBay. The Norwegian Embassy has a range of films on DVD available for free loan (see details in past ReelNews and on the FVFS website). No rights are payable when screening these DVDs non-theatrically. The FVFS Indi Library (i.e. independently funded and produced) is available for a moderate rights fee. In general, these titles will not be available commercially, and in many cases the director is willing to speak to the film at the screening.

Shorts. Consideration should be given to screening short films, either with each feature, or even as a special "shorts day". Some of the Short Film Festivals, of which there are several now, may be able to provide short film packages for your society.

More information can be found on the FVFS website www.fvfs.org.au 03 9874 5270 Federation of Victorian Film Societies.

Some examples of how film societies select their programs

YARRA RANGES FILM SOCIETY (180 members)

In October, we are starting to seriously think about a film program for the next year. We have a democratic process which begins in August and is finalised in November before the December screening. To start the ball rolling, the committee members are asked to suggest any films that they may have seen. With the Melbourne International Film Festival happening, many people get to see a range of new recent releases which are not yet screened at the cinemas. There are usually many suggestions from these. It is a great start towards putting together a film program. This is followed by a member suggestion sheet

available at the September screening. All members are encouraged to add their suggestions to this list. Again, many members, especially those who have a strong interest in film, are able to make great recommendations. All the suggestions are then compiled, and I would call this the long list of possible film screenings. All suggestions are considered and then a number of criteria are applied to produce the short list. Some of the criteria to be considered for a film to progress from the long list to the short list include:

- Are the screening rights available?
- Is there a copy of the film available?
- Has the film been shown recently in the local commercial cinemas?
- Is there a mix of international films suggested?
- What classic or “from the vault” films are included?

For our program, we choose to screen three films from the vault and the rest are recent releases. The short list is circulated to members in the October newsletter, and all members are asked to vote. The results from this voting survey produce the final selected films for the year, which are then put together into a screening program and sent to the publishers. Last year’s selection were the top films voted for by the members from the short list. Again, screening availability and local cinema programming may impact the final choice. The screening dates for each film are selected by the committee, and a program is prepared for the printers and for electronic publishing. These are available to the public, including the film community, before the December screening. This offers an opportunity to encourage new members to our film society, as well as provide an informed decision for current members to renew their membership at the December screening.

ALPINE FILM SOCIETY (50 members)

Alpine have planned in several different ways. We have had some years where we have acquired as many of the most recent films as possible. That is not an easy way to go because we had to wait for release dates and juggle dates of showing to accommodate the release dates. We also found that in some instances, using that method we had reduced numbers at our film nights. When we started the society we had no cinema within 100 km but now have Bright. This means our members can see the latest releases if they are keen and able. This year we are showing favourite oldies. Members were able to select their choices and from that we drew up a list of films for the year. *We took nine choices and left three months available for any new releases that appealed.* It has been our most successful year in many ways. We take choices and suggestions at our Christmas film night. That is always a fun film and members are in good spirits and enthused about new selections for next year.

BEECHWORTH FILM SOCIETY (50 members)

At Beechworth Film Society we start our film selection early in the new year by asking committee members to identify films that they have an interest in screening. We like to give members a diverse experience, so we try to select against a number of film ‘categories’:

- at least one documentary
- at least one animation
- a range of genres
- a range of eras

- a range of countries

We also look to ensure female directors get a reasonable showing - which is challenging given the absolute dominance of the industry by men for so many decades. We have an end of year screening with food and drinks, which is typically a Hollywood (occasionally Bollywood) classic. At our end-of-year screening we invite members to nominate films they would like to see and add that to the mix when we start setting up the films for the following year. Of course, screening rights are always a challenge, so we usually vet the committee and member nominated films for availability, which culls quite a lot of them. We then curate a final list with a few backups and kick off the year.

The screening order can change from the original order as we review the “flow” of films through the year. And occasionally if a great film that we couldn’t find screening rights for becomes available we will drop it in. It seems to work for us, with a steady membership. We survey every couple of years and have found that our members are “happy to go on the journey”. They don’t love every film, but they love the diversity.

MACEDON RANGES FILM SOCIETY – (80 members)

Clearly one of the most important functions of the committee is selecting the screening list for the coming season. This would normally take place around September/October for the following year. The Committee meets and each committee member can bring a list of films for consideration for the new program.

The guidelines for film selection are;

- Length of film - no more than 2 hours.
- Selection should cover a range of genres (e.g. foreign language, drama, comedy, classic, western, animation, documentary).
- For the first and last film of the year, the committee aims to choose a film which has broad audience appeal, i.e. upbeat/comedy.
- Consider shorter films for the winter months
- Make-up and preferences whilst not limiting the choices only to perceived ‘safe’ ones, at the expense of quality films that may ‘push the boundaries’ a little.

GOULBURN VALLEY FILM CLUB (160 members)

Committee Members attempt to view as many potential movies during the year. We believe it is important that at least one committee member views a film that will be included in the following year’s program. In September, we advise members that we are about to meet to decide the following year’s program and if they would like to nominate a film title to advise by email or list on an A4 sheet provided at a screening. We meet early in October to decide on the following year’s program. This normally takes around two hours. We take into account:

- Member suggestions
- Recommendations from committee members
- Star box results from other Film Societies

We choose approximately 15 titles from which we will later narrow down to a final 12. This is because we are not sure at this stage who owns the screening rights and whether the title will be available for screening. We try to choose a mixture of drama, comedy, foreign films

(usually six - seven) and an Australian title. We like to start the year with some better known titles and usually finish with a comedy.

EURAW FILM SOCIETY (now closed)

Is there a film you want to screen? Track down the distributors in Australia via IMDb. If there's none, contact the distributors/producers directly, explain what a film society does in Australia, offer a token amount for each screening, negotiate their rate until you meet half way, then get a contract in place. Most of our films are negotiated individually with each distributor. Rates are between zero to hundreds of Euros. The most we have paid for a film was 300 Euros (negotiated down from 1,000). Persistence pays off. *[Editor's note: The films that Euraw FS screen are almost all from Eastern Europe, and many are not distributed in Australia hence no-one in Australia has the rights. Also, if IMDb does not mention an Australian distributor, check the Classification index to see if it has approval for screening in Australia.]*

FERNTREE GULLY FILM SOCIETY- (100 members) Use DCP

In October, four of us get together to bring reviews, comments and recommendations about films seen or heard about. We aim for 11 films for the year and try to have six English language films and five foreign language ones. Also, the aim is a mix of drama, comedy or lighter subject matter films, films of other cultures as well as, if available, promoting good Australian cinema. This seems to take about two hours one evening in October. If a member recommends a film during the year we take that into account and find out what we can about it and its availability and whether we think it would suit our audience. Between us we seem to have a keen ear for what our audience will tolerate such as some swearing but they do not like any unnecessary violence in the unfolding of a plot. Know your audience and choose films accordingly and be prepared to push the envelope a little now and again.

We send a list to Village cinemas with dates and the films we choose and in most cases it works just perfectly. Although our cinema is not suited for use of the Star Box way of reviewing films, we get good feedback as people come out of the cinema and find its the films they are not sure about. *[Editor's note: Ferntree Gully FS screens in a commercial cinema, using DCP technology, so have to rely on the theatre operator to order and show the films, so their choice of films may be slightly different from societies limited to DVD technology].*

ARAPILES FILM SOCIETY (Palais de Pixel) (20 members)

Our programming is based on recommendations from our members, other film societies' star ratings/programming on ReelNews and anything else we might have come across on the internet, news etc. Committee members get together in summer to decide the films that make it to the program. We usually check reviews and watch trailers online, ensure we have a range of genres, balance of Australian/foreign/subtitled films. Difficulties with locating screening rights and/or DVDs then decide whether the film makes the final cut.

SOUTHERN FLEURIEU FILM SOCIETY (330 members)

The Southern Fleurieu Film Society has the committee select films for our program. We do ask for suggestions from members. The seven committee members source films from libraries, personal collections, members' collections, and sometimes we buy DVDs if we

can't get a free copy to watch. We also put forward suggestions from what we have seen on Netflix, SBS on demand, other on-line sources, and from what other film societies have programmed. We do not program a film unless the committee has watched it. We expect to spend a few hundred dollars on DVD's each year that may or may not make the program.

The committee watches all films put forward for consideration and we discuss them at committee meetings. We are conscious of what our membership likes and this does limit the films we can choose. We generally avoid films we think are too mainstream and are likely to have been seen by members. For example, *The Castle* was recently suggested by a member but we felt it was likely most people had seen it already. I put forward *La Grande Bouffe* as I feel it is a significant film but it is unlikely to get on the program because some other committee members think it will be too much of a shock for many members.

Ultimately the committee votes on each film and we go with the majority. We do not have any strict criteria to follow, in choosing films. Generally, we program about 50% foreign language films. Films that contain lots of violence do not appeal to most members. A bit of violence (in context) is usually okay. We consider one documentary enough each year. Westerns, Sci-Fi, war films, and horror films are never likely to get on the program (based on members' feedback). We try to get one Australian film on the program each year. The first film of the year is usually an uplifting comedy drama and the last film of the year a comedy.

WHITEHORSE FILM SOCIETY (130 members)

Everyone seems to do it a bit differently. At Whitehorse we initially seek suggestions from all members, but mainly the committee, and compile a "long list" of suggestions and possible titles. There may be as many as 200 in this list. We then do a quick check of all titles to see that we can purchase the DVD if chosen, and we determine the likely rights owners for each of them. This is relatively easy and preferred to waiting until a film has been selected before ruling it "out". If we fail on either count then we defer the suggestion to next year. Then in early August a subcommittee of 5-6 people gets together and discuss every suggested film, look at reviews or the trailer if we know nothing about it (trailers are available for most titles through IMDb or YouTube), and come up with a short list of around 80 titles. This list is then given to every member to tick their choices before being handed back for analysis by the sub-committee.

In late September the subcommittee compiles the results and determines the top 20 titles from the feedback received, but then modifies that list to include some "unknowns" that we want to include, and promoting some that "should have" scored better. We also ensure that we have a balanced programme considering genre, language, country, topic etc. Maybe one doco and one older film, but discarding any that upset the balance, even though possibly receiving many requests! We then have to decide when to screen the 20 films to be most useful for promoting and selling to our members as a "package". We usually start with the most popular or well known (based on requests) and end the year with a crowd pleaser." Remember that films screened at the Melbourne International Film Festival (or Sydney Film Festival) may not be available on DVD, or their screening rights may not be available for another 18 months after the festival.

CORANGAMITE FILM SOCIETY (55 members)

The Corangamite Film Society has been operating for about ten years. Over that time, it has experimented with different screening formats. These include:

- Thursday Pictures Monthly screenings from February to December
- Double headers Two films each Thursday monthly screening
- Short films Introductory original short films
- Sunday Classics Sunday afternoon screenings
- St Kilda Short Film Festival Annual Saturday night host screening
- Corangamite Film Festival Annual five-day screening program
- Mobile Cinema Community screenings at various locations.

The Sunday Classics and Double Header screenings fell by the wayside early on through lack of member interest as well as involving too much effort for the return. In the early years programming films was our most difficult and time-consuming task. Committee members would bring long lists of suggested titles, and we would struggle to narrow down the program to 10 or so films for the year. We also asked members for their suggestions, which was problematic as it added to the already long list and it was sometimes practically impossible to accept all suggestions.

We have experimented with taking direction from one individual on our committee, but this has generally not worked out well, so we now ensure that all of our committee members have some input into the film selection. We now have a Selection Committee which is a sub-committee of the Committee of our Association. Any member who wishes to participate is welcome to join the sub-committee. The sub-committee brings back a recommended program for consideration by the committee as a whole, having already checked that DVDs are available and the distributors are identified.

We have surveyed our members from time to time on all aspects of our operations and have found that this practice works for them. Some members have told us they generally don't appreciate excessive violence or profanity. We avoid major release 'Hollywood' and 'blockbuster' titles to give members the opportunity to experience films they might otherwise be unlikely to encounter. We understand that each film is someone's child, and it is impossible to choose between children. No formula can do the selection task for you. Nonetheless, a selection must be made, so we set out to offer our members a rich and varied cinema experience.

BALLARAT FILM SOCIETY- (120 members)

What I have learned over the years about getting a program up for the next season is this:

- Know your audience very well and at the end of a season have a reflective meeting with the committee to work out what worked and what may not have- it is actually an accumulated amount of knowledge and experience you acquire over the years
- I have also found that all the audience wants is a well curated program that has a balance; is persuaded by the value of coming out to see the films and they think that seeing a film on a bigger screen is worthwhile
- Get the program out at least 5 weeks prior to the first screening to get the program circulated. You need to bring in new members to keep the membership up!
- Celebrate different film festival months and NAIDOC week

- Depending on the size of the committee and their time restraints, you need a dedicated small selection committee – every AGM we ask for members to take up a place on the committee but have rarely got anyone to come onto it. It seems they just like a well curated and constantly interesting film selection with a good writeup!
- Every film has to fit into the overall balanced program: look at it like a curation of art works.

DOOKIE FILM GROUP (50 members)

At the end of our first, short season in 2015, I sent out an Excel spreadsheet with several film suggestions. I asked members for further suggestions and got a longish list. I put all suggestions on a second version, sent that out and asked people to tick those they liked. I ended up with such a long list it really wasn't all that helpful. The next year we had a small white-board at each screening, and members could write suggestions on that. Each year we have done this: in about September the committee began to plan.

During the year I read film reviews in newspapers and online. I also listen to what interested people say. I see a selection of films at Nova or Kino when I visit Melbourne. I again produced an Excel sheet with about 15 that I thought suitable. I included columns for genre, country, classification, director, if it had subtitles etc. I also include ratings on IMDb and ReelNews. This was sent to the committee. I asked for other suggestions. I usually get a few. I ask committee members to have a look online, at trailers. We have a committee meeting to select and consideration is given to suggestions from members. We think about variety of genres, not having too many subtitled ones, avoiding very violent or confronting films. I discourage having too many 'marshmallowy' ones, (ones that are too soft, lacking in any challenge), avoiding films you could easily see in Shepparton. We find ReelNews to be reeeeeely useful. We pay attention to the Film Groups who have scored certain films in high categories and look for those which might be a bit like us, as opposed to big city groups.

Federation of Victorian Film Societies

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