

WIDE-ANGLE

Should we climb aboard the Escalator?

Steve Barr looks into perceptions of the new NZFC funding scheme, and how it might work out for crew.

I've been speaking with quite a few techos recently, and often the conversation comes around to the Film Commission's Escalator scheme. Opinions are quite diverse and can be rather passionate.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should mention that I'm benefiting from the Escalator scheme. I'm co-writing one of the four inaugural projects, so – clearly – I'm not unbiased. With that said, I don't think it's perfect, and I won't hold back from criticisms of the scheme.

Like this for example: "I think the Escalator scheme is an absolute load of guano."

This was said by **Waka Attewell**. Neatly summing up the opinions of a sizeable portion of our industry's crew. He went on continued, "They've got a budget cap of \$250k, they're getting first-time directors, first-time DOPs, first-time 'everybodies'. I fear we belittle the craft when we actually rush people forward [in their careers]. Genius comes out of the fact that you've done your apprenticeship for ten years, fifteen years, twenty years."

He added "there is some merit in the scheme but it does seem to weigh heavily on the infrastructure of the NZ industry subsidizing it."

Another experienced technician said to me, "It's being taken for granted that we'll work for pennies a day, and hire out our equipment for next to nothing. I want to help, but we have to be able to pay our bills."

Added to that is the idea that, if the film is a success, the Escalator producers and directors will walk away with hefty paycheques while the crew who worked at cut rates will get nothing more than their discounted fees.

But as it turns out, that last complaint is a misconception.

"Escalator teams receive 100% of the first NZ\$250,000 of net proceeds from the film. Of this share, at least 50% must be allocated to cast and crew outside of the core team," said **Bonnie Slater**, the Professional Development Executive who is the Commission's point person for Escalator. "It's very important to recognise that the cast and crew are an integral part of the team on these projects, which is reflected in the requirement of the teams to allocate 50% of the backend to the crew/cast."

Several of the techos I've spoken with had no idea that the cast and crew become profit participants in the film. In other words, rather than asking us to donate our time, we're being asked to invest our time.

Of course, not every investment returns a profit. Many low-budget films never sell. But given that the Commission doesn't get any share of sales revenue until after the project has netted \$250,000,



that means that the cast and crew are in first position to receive compensation.

But what about the previous point, about newcomers being given a helping hand while experienced filmmakers are passed over?

I posed this question to **Bonnie Slater**, who said "Escalator is not specifically about 'newbies.'" The recent boot camp attendees varied from very experienced personnel to less experienced filmmakers. Escalator is specifically designed to support directors who are ready to step up to their first feature film – regardless of their age or experience to date."

I asked **Bonnie** if the selection process takes into account the professional experience of the team members. She said the decision isn't made based on experience levels, but rather on the strength of the ideas.

"The initial selection process revolves solely around the three one-page ideas that teams (of two or more) submit to the NZFC along with a short statement on methodology (how they intend to achieve the idea). A group of readers, made up of the NZFC development team along with independent industry members, shortlist their favourites and this [initial] shortlist gets whittled down to a final twelve. Overall it is about recognising fresh talent and fresh ideas, backed by compelling production methodologies."

However, experienced crew can use Escalator to benefit their own careers. "We are a small filmmaking community and Escalator aims to provide new opportunities to people who may not have had the opportunity to 'step up' on a feature film before. It's a great chance for everyone, including crew, to get involved and potentially get that important on-set experience in a new role or department, eg. 2nd AD to 1st AD or LX assist to Gaffer, etc. It's a great opportunity if you want experience on a feature film," said **Bonnie**.

Several of the crew of the Escalator project I'm working on are in the Techos' Guild. When I asked **Jules Lovelock** [Production, Guild

Executive] why she chose to crew up on an Escalator project, she said "I came on board for the opportunity to 1st AD a feature. The return on my investment is the experience, and I agree with the nurturing philosophy of the scheme."

However, she's conflicted when she sees the sacrifices everyone is making. "I agree with some of the other feedback. I don't think it's right that people have to work for nothing, or equipment gets hired at drastically reduced rates so these projects get made. That belittles the professionalism of the industry." She thinks the scheme should continue, but suggests the ability for production to pay everyone a reasonable wage should be part of the criteria before it's greenlit. She suggests funding two movies a year at \$500k or three movies at \$330k might be more realistic than four movies at \$250k.

Ultimately, the final decisions will come down to us as individuals. As professionals, we should be paid fairly for our work. As members of the New Zealand filmmaking community, it's in our best interest to cross-train and upskill each other as much as possible.

Every time I've raised questions or concerns with the Film Commission, they've seemed eager to address them. They realize the scheme has growing pains, and they're eager to hear the ideas of the filmmaking community.

It's important to remember that Escalator didn't replace any other funding schemes. It came from a windfall from the Lotteries Commission, which only funds Escalator for three years. The Film Commission continues to fund films at budgets which allow the crew to be paid their normal rates; the Escalator projects are in addition to those larger-budgeted projects, not replacing them.

With that said, the process could definitely be improved, to better utilize the skills and talents of experienced filmmakers as well as trying to find diamonds in the rough.

What do you think? We welcome your feedback on how Escalator can benefit the industry as a whole.

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