



WHAT'S THE NEWS? ISSUE 15

DECEMBER 2005

FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE INC
Founding Patrons: Gil Brealy, Bryan Brown, Anthony Buckley, Scott Hicks,
Patricia Lovell, Chris Noonan, Michael Pate, Fred Schepisi, Albie Thoms

**'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'** Margaret Mead

Hello Friends and welcome to our last newsletter for 2005. It has been a busy year but before it comes to an end here are a few news items to bring you up to date on the Friends and their activities.

RESPONSE FROM THE ARCHIVE TO OUR RECENT NEWSLETTERS

The Friends has received a long letter from Dr Paolo Cherchi Usai, Director of the National Film and Sound Archive, in response to our recent newsletters. Dr Cherchi Usai's letter is printed below in full, followed by a short extract from our earlier newsletter for those who need reminding of the content of our editorial.

We invite you to give us feedback on our editorial as well as on Dr Cherchi Usai's letter, but first, some clarification is necessary:

1. At no point has the Friends intended to express any concerns or reservations about the work being done by Dr Cherchi Usai at the National Film and Sound Archive. On the contrary, we are totally committed to supporting his work and we applaud his vision for the Archive and his management of it.
2. The concerns expressed in our recent editorials lie entirely with the way the Australian Film Commission is positioning the Archive and, in our perception, eroding its identity. The Australian Film Commission has yet to respond to our comments.
3. The long-term goal of the Friends – indeed our primary goal at this time - is to advocate independent status for the Archive, so that it can stand as a proud national cultural institution on a par with the National Museum, the National Gallery, the National Library and others. Both the Labor Party and the Greens are committed to independent status for the Archive but we do not want to wait until a new government is elected. Early in the new year, we will be launching papers that will present not only the reasons why we believe independence is crucial, but also detail how that might be achieved under the current Government.

Dr Paolo Cherchi Usai's letter follows in its entirety.

Dear Friends,

I have read with a great deal of attention the latest newsletter of the Friends of the Archive, and saw the item distributed worldwide by the FOA in the listserv of the Association of Moving Image Archivists. I can't conceal my disappointment in looking at statements about the National Film and Sound Archive which do not reflect my experience in the Australian Film Commission, thus maligning the organisation of which I am a part, shedding a negative light on our efforts to maintain and develop a healthy and productive culture at the NFSA, and in fact giving the impression that things have taken a downward turn since my arrival. Had I had a chance to comment on the contents of the newsletter before it was distributed, it would have given me at least the opportunity to make my case. In view of this, I would like to express my own opinions on a number of matters raised in the FOA's documents.

I assume I don't need to dwell any further on what you, the archival constituency and the NFSA already know: since my appointment as Director of the NFSA, I have formulated my vision for the future of the NFSA as a Division of the AFC. I have made it clear that I have not adopted the Directions II paper as the blueprint for my plan, nor have I rejected the document *per se*. It is more appropriate to say that I have read it in conjunction with all the submissions which followed it in order to formulate my own views and my own proposals. The conclusions I have reached, and the vision derived from them, have received the formal approval of the CEO and the Commissioners, as well as yours. My statement of intention has informed all my actions in the fourteen months I've been here, and I strongly believe I have not betrayed my commitment towards my staff, the AFC as a whole, and our cultural community.

To demonstrate this, please allow me to summarize our achievements of the past twelve months. First and foremost, we have made great strides in developing a curatorial framework for the NFSA in the Division's policies, management, and operations. Twelve months are only the beginning of a much longer process, but it ought to be acknowledged that a new curatorial structure is now in place, and is now being embodied in the appointment of skilled and well respected individuals in key positions. All staff, including the managers and the acting Senior Curators, have gone beyond my expectations in helping me during this complex and admittedly challenging process.

Meanwhile, a number of projects have been set in motion. In all likelihood, the NFSA will have an archival cinema worthy of its name. The mapping paper for a National Discography has just been completed, and those for the National Filmography and National Videography are at an advanced stage of preparation. The Manager of the Centre for Scholarly and Archival Research has recently commenced work. We have set the parameters for a National Registry of Audiovisual Collections, a first as far as Australia is concerned. We are about to present to the AFC a Recorded Sound Strategy, aimed at clarifying and contextualizing the role of recorded sound in our audiovisual and archival culture. These projects didn't exist before I arrived; they do exist now. Far from hampering their development, the AFC as a whole has encouraged me to give full expression to these ideas.

I have seen my colleagues at the AFC actively engaged in the long awaited realization of our dream to establish a Legal Deposit policy for audiovisual works in Australia: what once seemed to languish at the bottom of the pile in our Government's agenda is now gradually reaching the status of a priority. I have also been encouraged to develop my ideas on a curatorial approach to our collecting activities in a paper on curatorial values which has now been endorsed by the CEO and whose executive summary will be presented to the Commissioners. With your collaboration and after consultation with a very wide range of stakeholders, the NFSA is about to present a new Collection Policy Document we will be proud of. Its emphasis on Indigenous Cultures and on the international perspective has been encouraged not only at the AFC level, but also by stakeholders such as yourselves.

You also know that I am a staunch advocate of the equally important role played by a national audiovisual archive in relation to promoting the original audiovisual experience, and to fostering access through different technologies. It is now understood and agreed that the NFSA collection must be made available (insofar as possible) in its original media before they are accessed through other means. The NFSA notion of an Archive Digital Access network enabling students and researchers to access our holdings has been, again, not only accepted but actually embraced by the AFC within the scope of the Commission's digital strategy. For the first time in the NFSA history, we have a Chief Programmer who will not only design and curate a moving image program at the NFSA and hopefully in its new theatre, but has now a great degree of responsibility in the development of the National Cinémathèque.

While much of the above is still very much in its formative stages and much more will need to be done to implement them over the years, I feel entitled to ask the question, do you really think that all this is pointing towards what you call a diminishing status of the audiovisual heritage because the NFSA is part of the AFC? Do you really think I would have been able to introduce these projects in a hostile corporate environment? Finally, do you think these projects justify the claim of a disastrous morale at the NFSA?

No restructuring process is totally painless, and I know by experience that human beings often resist the very notion of change. However, I have not witnessed any *a priori* resistance to innovation at the NFSA. Our team is becoming acquainted with a stronger notion of performance and accountability, as demonstrated by the intense consultative process involved in the restructure of our Preservation and Technical Services. I believe in empowering our managers by delegating responsibilities, and I believe in the notion that greater responsibility means greater involvement. I never expected unanimity on this, and I'm ready to take the burden of proof (and the blame for my own mistakes) in such a demanding agenda.

However, while all this is happening, a new Certified Agreement has been signed, and it has been approved almost unanimously by the staff at the time of vote. I have seen over seventy NFSA staff members mingling with Commissioners and other AFC managers last week in the NFSA's courtyard during a late afternoon drink. I have seen no evidence that donors and depositors are giving less to the NFSA because we are part of the AFC. Three of our key events (the Longford Lyell Lecture, the Ken G. Hall Award, the Kodak/Atlab Project II) will be clearly branded as the outcome of the NFSA's efforts, and we will ensure that our depositors and donors are giving their precious holdings to the National Film and Sound Archive. The NFSA will have a discrete presence within the AFC website, and Canberra will not only remain its intellectual center, but it will become even more so in the future.

I am committed to make this work. I didn't move from another continent for the short haul, and I always felt that the FOA's plea to "work to further the aims of the NFSA" would result in the help I very much need from your group, from staff and from the AFC for the success of the vision you yourselves have initially encouraged me to achieve. After reading your newsletter and your message to AMIA, what will our colleagues worldwide think I'm doing here? Why do you want them to believe I am failing in this mission? Do you, as friends of the NFSA in the broadest sense of the term, truly believe this is helping me in affirming and promoting the specificity and the distinctive contribution of the NFSA to the work of the AFC?

I look forward to a greater engagement on your part in this kind of discussion. You know you will always find an open door at my end, as long the discussion is not tainted by destructive goals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. Chisholm". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Paolo Cherchi Usai

To provide context, we include this extract from our October Friends newsletter.

NFSA IDENTITY SUBSUMED BY AFC: MORE IRON-CLAD PROMISES BROKEN

In direct contradiction of its own and the Minister’s undertakings, the Australian Film Commission is steadily whittling away at the National Film and Sound Archive’s identity and making it more and more subservient to the AFC brand.

For several months now, all emails, publications and other communications have represented the Archive as: ‘National Film and Sound Archive—a division of the Australian Film Commission’. All invoices for NFSA services go out on AFC letterhead.

A short time ago, all email addresses were homogenised under the AFC’s name. Now, if you are emailing Joe Bloggs at the NFSA, the email address will read joe.bloggs@afc.gov.au. It will not longer be obvious whether the person you are contacting works for the AFC or the Archive.

But that’s not all. Business cards and stationery are about to get similar treatment. They are dominated by the Australian Government crest and the AFC lyrebird logo. The words ‘National Film and Sound Archive’ appear in small—in some cases almost microscopic—type. Anyone not actually looking for those words would miss them entirely.

The AFC explicitly promised that is would not do such things. On 17 February 2004, AFC CEO Kim Dalton told the Senate Estimates Committee: “*We consider it very important, as we have always said, that the archive has a distinct identity—an identity which is distinct from the Film Commission’s identity and one that can operate independently, so that the archive can have a presence which is independent of the AFC*”.

Are the AFC’s actions, above, consistent with this undertaking?

The AFC does not answer questions or participate in open debate. It has never responded to the resolutions and questions arising from the conference on the Future of the Archive, organised by the Friends and the Australian Society of Archivists in July 2004. It has similarly ignored questions publicly tabled by other stakeholder organisations. It has never responded to the 140-plus public submissions it said it was so eager to receive, and which flooded in during early 2004. It is regularly quizzed in Senate Estimates Committees but manages to stonewall questions, as the Hansard record shows.

The AFC does not, it seems, feel bound by its own promises or those of the Minister. Now donors will be unclear whether they are giving material to the NFSA or to the AFC. They may end up deciding they can’t take the risk and not deposit it at all.

HAILSTORM HITS MITCHELL VAULTS

To the Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive
From Paolo Cherchi Usai, Director, National Film and Sound Archive

Enclosed please find a communication (see media release below) about last Saturday's rescue operation at NFSA after the major hail storm that hit the Mitchell 1 vaults.

I only wish to add a word of heartfelt thanks to those who took part in the operation and helped save our precious collection items: Charlie Bigwither, Libby Bright, Rodney Butler, Sam Denino, Carey Garvie (whose conservation advice and support guided the rescue team throughout the night), Belinda Hunt, Red Jeffrey, Meg Labrum, Christine Law, Luke Marks, Kate McLoughlin, Lachlan Paine, Kerryn Poynter, Victoria Ramshaw, Judy Sheedy, Josie Tomas and David Watson. Peter Callow, David Russell and myself were in telephone contact with the team throughout the evening.

I also wish to gratefully acknowledge Ron Brent, former director of the NFSA, for his impromptu and very generous volunteering in the operation.

National Film and Sound Archive staff rescue 65,000 treasures from freak hail storm in Canberra

Tuesday 29 November 2005: Responding to an emergency alarm system, a team of 17 people saved more than 65,000 photographs and scripts from damage at the National Film and Sound Archive in the aftermath of a major hail storm in Canberra last Saturday, 26 November.

"Thanks to the prompt action of staff, no collection items were lost," said the NFSA's Director, Paolo Cherchi Usai. "Of the 2000 or so items needing attention from our conservators as a result of the storm, we estimate that only around 200 will require intensive conservation treatment to restore them to the collection."

The massive quantity of hail that fell over a very short period blocked the downpipes of an NFSA storage building in the suburb of Mitchell. With the gutters then unable to cope with the heavy rain, water ran back under the eaves of the warehouse into the facility. Most of the water penetration occurred in sections of the area housing documents and photographs.

The NFSA's Disaster Recovery Plan was immediately implemented. Within two hours, a rescue team had intervened to remove the boxes containing the collection items from the area affected by the storm and gave immediate treatment to the artefacts.

"The recovery team has done a fantastic job under very unusual and challenging circumstances", said Cherchi Usai. "Their dedication and effectiveness makes me feel confident about the integrity of the national audiovisual collection, and proud of working with such an expert team."

The National Film and Sound Archive has a collection of over 1.3 million items. Almost half of them are precious posters, scripts and photographs which document the history of moving image and recorded sound in Australia and abroad.

"In qualitative terms", said Cherchi Usai, "the storage facilities of the NFSA rate very highly in the archival and museum field. The fact that the alarm systems prompted staff to intervene immediately proves that our security procedures are quite effective even under the freakish circumstances of the hail storm that hit the Mitchell area of Canberra."

No structural damage was suffered by the Mitchell vaults because of the storm. While the NFSA conservation team is at work on the restoration of the affected items, operations in the storage facility are expected to return to normal within days.

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING NEWS AND NEW FRIENDS COMMITTEE

The Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive, Inc. was held at Electric Shadows Cinemas at 9.30 pm on Sunday 20 November 2005.

To begin, Dr Paola Cherchi Usai had asked for and was given the opportunity to speak to the Friends regarding issues raised in the Friends two most recent newsletters (#13 and #14). After his speech and the opportunity for those Friends present to ask questions, the 2004 AGM Minutes were summarised and confirmed.

Andrew Pike then delivered the Executive Report which was accepted by the meeting. He spoke about the Friends networking with the Archive Forum and the Archivists Association of Australia on various issues, including a detailed paper proposing a separation of the Archive from the AFC, to be issued early in 2006. Andrew announced that the Friends had recruited a new Administration Secretary, Andy Hayllar, who has been instrumental in getting the Friends website back up and running. He acknowledged the contribution of Chris Harrison and his project. Many of the documents belonging to the Friends are in the process of being lodged for posterity in the National Library of Australia.

In December 2004, the Friends welcomed the announcement of the return of the Archive's original name—The National Film and Sound Archive—marking an achievement of the one of our core objectives and, in March 2005, the Friends welcomed the Archive's restructure under curatorial rather than managerial lines. In the course of the year, the Friends issued a number of newsletters and press releases covering a variety of issues and renewed its membership in both South East Asia-Pacific Audio Visual Archive Association and the Australian Federation of Friends of Museums.

The Treasurer's Report was delivered by Andy Hayllar and accepted by the meeting. Friends' expenditure for 2004-05 totalled \$4329.23, leaving a balance of \$1793.89 on 30 June 2005. Including our computer and software, on 30 June 2005 Friends assets totalled \$2793.89 with no outstanding liabilities.

Nominations for the 2005-06 committee were received from Lucy Battersby, Shelley Clarke, Marlene Collinson, Adrian Cunningham, Ray Edmondson, Chris Harrison, Andy Hayllar, Peter Hislop, Andrew Pike, Cheryl Stevenson, Simon Weaving and Roger Westcombe. All were successfully elected. Congratulations to everyone. An especially warm welcome is extended to our new committee members, Marlene Collinson and Simon Weaving. We are looking forward to working with you.

Election of Committee Executive members followed with Andrew Pike elected President, Shelley Clarke elected Vice President, Andy Hayllar elected Secretary and Cheryl Stevenson elected Treasurer. To conclude, Andrew Pike briefly summarised the Friends 2006 activities plan. A copy is available on request.

ABOUT THE FRIENDS

The Friends is a group of advocates, working to further the aims of the Archive and to encourage links between the Archive, the film and sound communities and the general community. In essence, the Friends

want to promote excellence in film and sound culture, including: best practice in preservation, public programs and access; promoting high level appreciation of film and sound heritage and contemporary culture; creativity in the use of our Archive; a broad, outward looking focus that locates Australia in the South East Asia-Pacific region and globally; and restoration of the correct name for the Archive.

To achieve our ends, we rely on Friends to contribute energy and enthusiasm, and to participate in events that will provide the resources. You can never have too many friends. Please encourage your friends and colleagues to join us. And if you feel you would like to contribute by joining our committee, don't hesitate to contact us.

We hope you have enjoyed this newsletter and would love to hear from you on any Friends topic. You can contact us at archivefriends@gmail.com or ring 6248 0851.

WARM WISHES FOR A JOYFUL CHRISTMAS FROM YOUR COMMITTEE,

Lucy Battersby, Shelley Clarke, Marlene Collinson, Adrian Cunningham, Ray Edmondson, Andy Hayllar, Chris Harrison, Peter Hislop, Andrew Pike, Cheryl Stevenson, Simon Weaving and Roger Westcombe.

CONTACT DETAILS - Please note our new email address.

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