

# **‘Our place’: women at the cinema in rural Australia**

Karina Aveyard, Griffith University

## Introduction

My paper today is about women as film audiences in rural Australia, and is focused on the experiences of women who attend a small single-screen commercial cinema in the town of Sawtell, located on the New South Wales’ mid north coast (population 12,000, ABS 2006). This research is part of a larger three-year study of rural cinema which is funded by a Linkage Grant from the Australian Research Council. It is also supported by two industry partners - Screen Australia and the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) – who are the national screen agencies in Australia. The paper begins with some brief background about the town of Sawtell and its cinema, and how women use their local film venue as both a cultural and social space. The discussion will include a focus on the efforts of a particular group of women who rallied together in an attempt to help save the cinema in early 2009 when it was under threat of permanent closure.

## Sawtell – geographic contexts

The town of Sawtell is located on the east coast of Australia. It is part of mid north coast region of New South Wales, roughly half way between the capital cities of Brisbane and Sydney which are around approximately 500 kilometres north and south respectively. Sawtell is quite a picturesque village. It has an attractive divided main street which features a garden in the centre and several large fig trees. Just a block back from the main street is a long stretch of beach that features white sand and an unspoilt dune area. Not surprisingly the town itself is a popular tourist destination. Due to the relatively temperate climate the tourist season last from around October through to May, although the peak time is over December and January during the Australian summer.



Figure 1: Sawtell main street



Figure 2: Sawtell beach

Sawtell is also very popular with retirees, particularly people from the major cities looking for a peaceful life in a warm climate. The influx of these new residents has brought in significant numbers of people who are relatively affluent. However, the majority of people living in the town exist on fairly low incomes and unemployment runs above the national average. Based on the results from the last national census (conducted in 2006) Sawtell was classified as an area of marked social and economic disadvantage.

In terms of its immediate geographic context, Sawtell is located approximately 20 minutes' drive from the town of Coffs Harbour, which has a population of around 50,000. In Australian terms this is considered a sizeable regional centre. The proximity to Coffs Harbour is beneficial to local residents on a number of levels. It provides additional employment opportunities and access to range of services and facilities that are not available in Sawtell such as hospital, large retail shops, government administration and support services, high school and TAFE college. Coffs Harbour also has a five-screen multiplex cinema operated by one of Australia's largest exhibition chains, Birch Carroll and Coyle (BCC). This cinema has many of the same features as metropolitan-based multiplexes including a well-stocked candy bar, 3D options, online ticketing and immediate access to latest releases.

### Social life for women in Sawtell

I want to briefly discuss what kind of social life exists for women living in Sawtell. I have lived in the town for the past eighteen months, during most of the time I've been conducting my rural cinema research. From an analytical perspective my views would, therefore, be best described as those of a participant observer.

The economic divide that runs through the community has a noticeable impact on local social scene, which is often delineated along economic but also gender lines. In terms of places to 'go out' Sawtell has several options. First there is the Sawtell Hotel, which is a licensed hotel serving drinks and meals. The large main bar of the hotel is a very masculine environment. It is often a fairly confronting space because there is often strong language and drunkenness, and a general atmosphere that is off-putting to a lot of women. The pub also has a restaurant and a garden bar area where local women do socialise, but their outings there tend to be less regular than the men in the main bar a number of whom would be drinking at the pub 3-4 times per week or more. Second, just across the road is an RSL Club which again is a licensed premises. It serves cheap drinks and cheap food, which are subsidised by gambling

in the form of poker machines and to a lesser extent bingo. Due to its lower prices and the older demographic that tends to be attracted to poker, it is very much the 'grey-rinse set' who frequent the club. The vast majority of RSL Club patrons are over 55 and many are over 65. Providing a third option are a number of cafes and a couple of restaurants in the main street. Although these tend to be sustained by business generated by tourists rather than locals. The restaurants, in particular, are expensive in comparison with the pub and RSL club, although during the day the local cafes do tend to be popular with local women and some families.

Away from these venues, the other important social hub centres around sport in several forms, principally surf life saving (taking place around the local beach), football and cricket. Here women often play support roles - as mothers, spouses, friends - rather than actually participating in the sporting activities. Once their children are grown many older women gravitate towards social groups centred on activities such as charities, baking and art and craft. Traditionally groups like the Country Womens' Association (CWA) have been the centre of these kinds of pursuits. They also have a reputation for being social and politically conservative.

### First Avenue Cinema, Sawtell

The cinema in Sawtell falls somewhere in the middle. The local theatre, is known as the First Avenue Cinema named after the main street. It was built in the mid 1950s as a single-screen venue and has been owned and operated by the one family ever since. It is a fairly simple design but has some attractive art deco-style glass and decorative features. It also has a lovely organ in the cinema auditorium. Adding to its character are features like the outside toilets and the seats, many of which are original and as you can imagine are getting a bit worn out. The projector and sound systems are also becoming a bit dated. The cinema is listed with the National Trust in Australia so there are restrictions on what can be done with it, but its condition also reflects the fairly low profit margins the owners make from the business – and their limited capacity to fund capital improvements.



Figure 3: First Avenue Cinema, Sawtell

Despite the cinema's flaws its audience tends to be very loyal and dedicated to the venue. Quite a lot of the patrons who have participated in interviews have expressed their disdain for the multiplex at Coffs Harbour and claim never to go there. Some women feel strongly about refusing to support it, because it undermines their local venue. One local female patron went as far as vowing that if Sawtell cinema ever closed she would stop going to the movies altogether.

The Sawtell cinema caters to two main audience groups - children under 14 and their families, and women aged 35 and over. The majority in the latter category would be in fact be more like 55 years plus. The cinema's film program reflects the interests of these groups. Kids films dominate during school holiday periods - *Ice Age*, *The Princess and The Frog*, *Up*). During the rest of the year the program is organised around the older audiences - films like *Young Victoria*, *The Last Station*, *Julie and Julia*, *Harry Brown* and so on. The cinema also takes on some foreign language and what might be termed arthouse films, concentrating on titles that have won awards at international festivals and/or reasonably accessible content such as Japanese film *Departures*, and French title *Mic Macs*. The cinema also runs two self-programmed international film festivals throughout the year that features Australian and foreign films over a special week long program.

Tickets at Sawtell are almost half the price of those at the multiplex in Coffs Harbour so for local families as well as tourists it provides an affordable form of holiday entertainment. For older women the cinema provides a fairly unique social and cultural space – that is distinct from the atmosphere of pub and RSL Club and little more sophisticated and exciting perhaps than knitting and baking at the CWA. For this reason the cinema often has particular appeal for older women incomers who have often had quite a diverse range of life experiences before coming to the town.

## The Flood and the Friends

Sawtell is located in a semi-tropical area of Australia so it receives a high rainfall and is prone to some wild weather including the occasional cyclone. In March 2009 there was a period of massive rainfall which flooded large parts of the town including the main street. The bottom section of the cinema ended up under water, which destroyed the screen, curtains and the first 10-15 rows of seats and seriously damaged organ. The cinema was closed for eight weeks as a result. Its owners, who are well known in the local community, spoke openly about their feelings of uncertainty about continuing to operate the cinema – simply because the business was so marginal and often stressful for that reason. This sent a wave of alarm through some sections of the local community, particularly among the older women who were regular cinema-goers. They decided to rally together to something to support the owners and help ensure the cinema would reopen and stay open.

The group of women who assembled around this enterprise were a mixed bunch – some were close friends, others were connected through other local organisations such as walking clubs, tennis club or art group. Most were people already active in the community via volunteer organisations and most were retired meaning they had the time to devote to the group, which was named ‘Friends of the Sawtell Cinema’ (FOSC).

This original core group of women turned to their local social networks to recruit members and additional people with varied skills to executive roles, which is how I came to be a member of the FOSC committee. Within three months of its launch the group had nearly 100 members raising nearly \$5000 to put towards cinema support activities. These have included funding a series of television adverts over the summer holiday period for two years running, something the cinema had not been able to afford to do in the past. At the centre of the group’s activities are special monthly screenings at which an event is themed around a new film starting at the cinema. These events always involve some

food and drinks and the opportunity to chat beforehand, as well as often a guest speaker, live music or sometimes a dress up theme.

Some examples of events the group has organised include a special screening of *Samson and Delilah*, which was attended by a local Aboriginal elder gave a ‘welcome to country’, local Aboriginal actor who spoke about his career and a local Aboriginal musician who played the didgeridoo. More recently FOSC has hosted some dress-up events like the one held for *The King’s Speech* (see poster below). Audiences at these monthly screening events have ranged from around 60 up to about 160, but typically average around 80-100. The majority of those who come along are women over 50. They are the dominant demographic in the Friends group and films tend to be selected with their tastes in mind.



Figure 4: Poster for *The King's Speech* screening

## Attendance and Older Women

This final part of paper reflects on what attendance means to the older women who patronise the Sawtell cinema. And, in turn why many of them were motivated save it. The ways in which this group of patrons has articulated why this cinema is important to them can be summarised under five main headings – films, affordability, safety, nostalgia, and sense of belonging.

With regard to films these women enjoy what is on offer at the cinema, which are tailored more specifically to their age group than the multiplex in nearby Coffs Harbour. There is a perception that the films are more sophisticated, approaching the higher end of the cultural spectrum as opposed to the multiplex which most older women would consider to be a low cultural experience.

Under the second point affordability, the cinema provides a relatively low cost evening out. There are a significant number of widowed or single women in the town who say they are living on a limited budget so the financial accessibility of the cinema is important to them.

In terms of safety the cinema provides a social space that is secure and convenient to get to. Apart from loyalty another reason older women avoid the Coffs multiplex is the aversion they have to travelling longer distances especially at night. As one patron explained:

*I don't like driving to Coffs at night. The area around the cinema there can get a bit rough with all the young people there. Sawtell [cinema] is good because you can park nearby, sometimes directly out front, and there are more older people like myself there.*

(Sawtell resident, female, 65+ years)



On the fourth point nostalgia definitely plays a part in the cinema-going of older women – both in terms of memories at the Sawtell Cinema and for others not from the local area an opportunity to reconnect with events that took place elsewhere. As one life-long resident of Sawtell explained:

*I have been going to the [Sawtell] cinema for a long time. My husband and I went there on dates before we got married and my kids went there too. Now my grand-kids are the ones going along. I've a lot of memories there and I think that it is a real asset to the town that it is still going much like it always has after all this time.*

(Sawtell resident, female, early 70s)

The final factor, social belonging, older women frequently discuss the importance of the cinema in fostering local social interaction that is valued because it is highly personalised and has an intimacy and security that is not found elsewhere. As one patron explained:

*We are a community at Sawtell [cinema]. People are friendly and a lot of us know each other anyway so going to a film is a good chance to catch up, especially with people you might not have seen for a while.*

(Sawtell resident, female, 56-65 years)

Another explained:

*'I don't really like going to the Coffs cinema much. You feel anonymous there in a way you don't at Sawtell. You feel as if you go there just for the film and little else.'*

## Conclusion

It is to preserve and protect all of these things that the women in Sawtell were motivated into action to save the cinema and continue to support it by organising the monthly program of screenings. Their passion and drive underpins what is a dynamic organisation that has helped the cinema financially but has enriched the social experiences of its audiences who enjoy to the sense of attending a special event. As far as I'm aware it is the only group in Australia like this that supports a commercial enterprise – we have film societies and also community cinemas but their remit is quite different. For me the opportunity to have been involved with the group was personally very rewarding. It taught me a great deal about how these women use the cinema, their drive and capacity for innovation.

## References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), '2006 Census QuickStats By Location' [www document] <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/ABSNavigation/prenav/LocationSearch?producttype=QuickStats&subaction=-1&action=104&collection=Census&textversion=false&breadcrumb=PL&period=2006&navmapdisplayed=true&>. [accessed 24/07/10].