

Item 3.1

Vale David James Stratton AM

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

Australia's screen community is in mourning following the death of David James Stratton AM, cinephile and screen arts champion, on 14 August 2025.

Most Australians know David from his co-presenting (with Margaret Pomeranz) *The Movie Show on SBS* (1986-2004) and *At the Movies on ABC-TV* (2004-2014) and benefitting from his knowledge and insights. Many will also celebrate his impact on Australia's film culture as the Sydney Film Festival's longest serving Director and his subsequent work as critic, author and international film festival jurist.

Born in Wiltshire, England on 10 September 1939, David was introduced to cinema at an early age by the regular filmgoing grandmother he lived with while his father served during World War II. It was then that he began a lifelong practice of recording his impressions of every film he saw. After leaving school he became involved in local film societies while working in the family grocery business.

In 1963, he travelled to Australia intending to stay for only 2 years. Once in Sydney, he became involved in the Sydney Film Festival, initially as a volunteer usher. He soon joined its Film Subcommittee and later its Board.

By 1965, he was preparing to return to England to follow 5 generations of Strattons into the family business. Except David's passion was cinema rather than small goods. The Sydney Film Festival's first full-time paid director, Ian Klava, resigned. David successfully applied to fill the vacancy. He was then just 26.

He was the first festival director to travel overseas to source films to screen and build relationships with film producers, distributors and other film festivals. (When he attended the Moscow International Film Festival, ASIO created a file on him!) Leading filmmakers accepted his invitations to the Sydney Film Festival, among them Josef von Sternberg, Satyajit Ray, Michelangelo Antonioni, Rouben Mamoulian, and actors Jamie Lee Curtis and Warren Beatty.

David fought to ensure that film festival audiences would see the films as they were made. With the backing of the Festival's Board, he campaigned against censorship and for censors' decisions to be transparent. When the Festival screened *Hugs and Kisses* in 1967 the word "censored" appeared wherever it was cut. This campaign, joined by others, led to improvements in film classification, including the introduction of the "R" or restricted certificate, and relaxed rules for film festivals.

He also championed Australian films and filmmakers. In 1969, the Festival screened Tim Burstall's *2000 Weeks*, one of the first films of the Australian New Wave. Peter Weir's *The Cars that Ate Paris* had its Australian Premiere at the 1972 Festival and the 1974 Festival opened with Ken Hannam's *Sunday Too Far Away*.

David and the Board had already introduced a short film competition in 1970 to encourage Australian filmmaking. Several filmmakers who premiered their work in this competition subsequently had significant careers, among them Phil Noyce, Gillian Armstrong, Paul Cox, Jane Campion and Rolf de Heer.

In 1972, David included George Miller's and Byron Kennedy's *Violence in the Cinema Part 1* in the main Festival rather than the short film competition. A commercial cinema release followed which in turn led to Kennedy and Miller making the first Mad Max film.

In its early years, the Sydney Film Festival was based at Sydney University. In 1973, David secured the State Theatre as the Festival's principal venue, bringing it to the centre of the city. The following year David and Festival president Ross Tzannes began the Travelling Film Festival, taking the best films to regional centres. It now tours to 17 locations in the Northern Territory, Queensland and NSW.

David's commitment to film continued after he resigned as the Sydney Film Festival director in 1983. He wrote extensively on films for Australian and overseas publications and published several books, including significant works on Australian cinema. He served on the juries of several international film festivals and was president of the International Critics Juries in Cannes and Venice. His lectures on world film history at Sydney University were popular.

During his last years as Festival Director he also programmed films for the fledgling SBS, then began introducing them. His producer was Margaret Pomeranz. This led to David and Margaret co-hosting SBS's *The Movie Show* in 1986, and the beginning of an onscreen partnership that continued for the next 28 years. *The Movie Show* and later, *At the Movies* at the ABC became another platform to champion Australian films and filmmaking.

France recognised his contribution to cinema by making him a Commandeur of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2001, joining Salman Rushdie, Václav Havel, Dirk Bogarde and Meryl Streep and others. In the same year, he received the Longford Lyall Lifetime Achievement Award and 6 years later, the Chauvel Award at the Brisbane International Film Festival. In 2015, he became a Member of the Order of Australia. The documentary, *David Stratton: A Cinematic Life* followed in 2017 in which many leading figures, including Nicole Kidman, Sam Neill, Bryan Brown, Jackie Weaver, Judy Davis and George Miller spoke about his significant influence.

David's death was announced by his family in a statement which read in part:

"David's passion for film, commitment to Australian cinema, and generous spirit touched countless lives ... [We] invite everyone to celebrate David's remarkable life and legacy by watching their favourite movie, or David's favourite movie of all time – *Singin' in the Rain*."

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of David James Stratton AM and his significant contribution to Australian and international cinema and Sydney's and Australia's cultural life;
- (B) Council express its condolences to David's widow Susie Craig and family; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to convey Council's condolences to David's family.

THE RT. HON. CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor of Sydney