

Beaten to the punch

Doctors want women's boxing banned but, **Claire Harvey** writes, some pugilists are ready for battle — even if it means going to jail

BOXER Holly Ferneley is having trouble finding a doctor to certify that she is a man. Ferneley wants to register as a professional boxer in NSW — and the application form requires the signature of a GP who has certified that the applicant is fit, healthy ... and male.

Boxing is still illegal for women in NSW, unlike all other states and territories in Australia.

"Actually NSW is the only place in the world where boxing is still illegal for women. It's absolutely ridiculous," Ferneley says — and to prove her point, she will deliberately flout the law this Wednesday in a demonstration fight with Victorian amateur boxer Mischa Merz.

Federal Health Minister Michael Woodridge and the Australian Medical Association would like the ban extended to the rest of Australia — and they want men barred from the ring as well.

AMA president Kerry Phelps has embarked on a personal crusade to persuade promoters to boycott women's boxing.

The NSW Government says its law is not sexist but is about protecting the health of women from a sport that is not designed for their bodies. That argument was bolstered last week by the case of Perth boxer Tricia Devellerez, who went into a coma after being knocked out in a New Zealand bout.

Israel and South Africa are among the latest nations to legalise women's boxing, while nearly 3000 women are registered boxers in Europe and the US. In February, India held its first national female championships in Madras, where 150 young women fought in 13 weight categories. On June 8 in New York, Laila Ali and Jacqui Frazier-Lyde — daughters of renowned boxers Mohammad Ali and Joe Frazier — will fight.

The AMA's Phelps says boxing has "no place in modern society. We don't throw people to the lions anymore; we should also be banning boxing."

Federal Sport Minister Jackie Kelly backs the AMA's stance that boxing is dangerous, but says there's simply no denying that it is popular.

"It's an international sport and we can't be hypocritical about our interest in sports like amateur boxing — the stands were full at the Olympics," says a spokesman for Kelly. "There are heaps of sports that lead to greater numbers of injuries and casualties than amateur boxing. It would be useful if the states delivered uniformity on this, but they're not going to do what we tell them to do."

Ferneley and Merz both say despite Devellerez's injuries, boxing is safe. Merz is also the author of *Bruising: A Journey through Gender*, which has just been short-listed for the annual Dobbie Literary Award for first-time authors, to be presented on May 10.

"The Government can't say on one hand that women are equal and then on the other have a law which discriminates," says Merz. "If it was anything else that was banned, there would be uproar. It sends a message that women aren't capable of fighting, that we are not physically strong, that we're too stupid to know what's good for us."

NSW Amateur Boxing Association secretary Arthur Tunstall says women are simply not strong and sturdy enough to take the physical punishment of boxing. Australia's most famous exponent of the sport, Jeff Fenech, says it's simply "not ladylike".

"Jeff Fenech doesn't realise how much harm he does to the whole sport by saying things like that," Ferneley says. "He's saying boxing is only for men — sexist men."

Newcastle University students association president Matthew Thompson,



'If it was anything else that was banned, there would be uproar. It sends a message that women aren't capable of fighting'

Mischa Merz
Victorian amateur boxer

who is organising Wednesday's "demonstration of defensive techniques", admits it is actually a fight.

"It's the last taboo," says Thompson. "I've come up against an awful lot of opposition from within the students association and the union [which administers university campus buildings]."

"It seems that women's boxing is a bit



too much for them, even though they had a marijuana smoke-in a few years ago and there have been hemp festivals on university property. Why should these women be told not to do something they want to do? Everyone in the ring wants to do it. No one's making anyone else box. The ironic thing is that if this had been a martial arts event, there would have been no problem."

Martial arts are legal in NSW but the NSW Boxing and Wrestling Control Act imposes penalties of up to \$22,000 — or six months' jail — for a woman participating in boxing or kickboxing bouts. For anyone caught promoting a bout or match without a licence, the penalty is \$44,000 or 12 months' imprisonment. The NSW Anti-Discrimination Act does not apply to sports — a provision designed to allow single-sex teams to exist.

David Moreland, executive officer of the NSW Boxing Control Authority, says there would be no hesitation in applying penalties. "The authority would advise the police department and it'd be a matter for the police whether to lay charges or whether we would proceed through the courts with a fine," Moreland says.

Ferneley and Merz are prepared to take the risk.

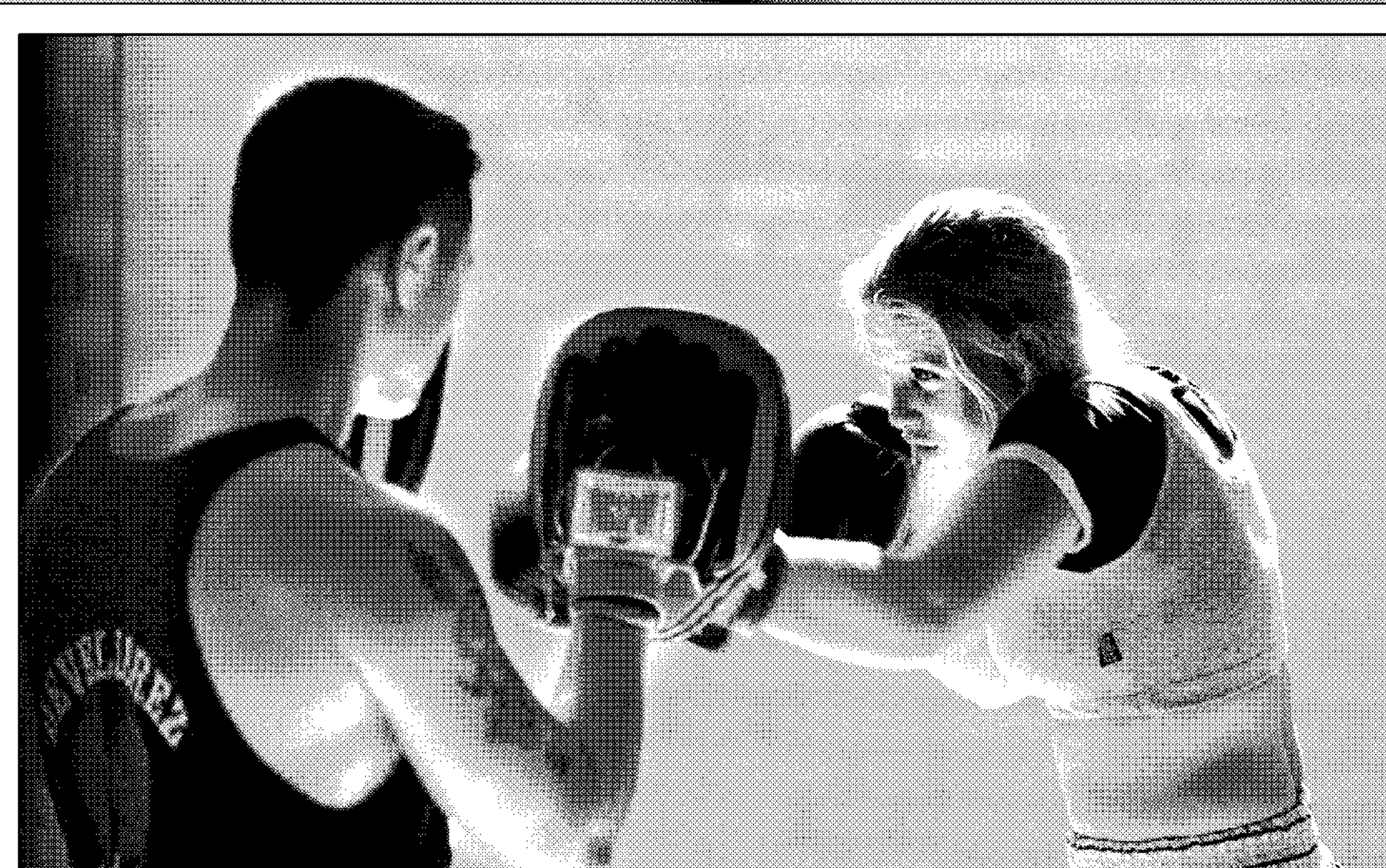
"It's an opportunity to bring attention to the fact that the law is so unequal," Merz says. "Because women can't have proper bouts in NSW, they have to resort to sparring — which can actually be more dangerous. Sparring can get out of hand and, because there's no official referee, the safety of it completely depends on the person supervising."

If Ferneley fails in her application to be a professional boxer, she is determined to pursue legal appeals.

"Anyone who is involved in this sport knows it is not dangerous," Ferneley says. "I'm not going to let this drop."

The Australian Amateur Boxing Association wants women's fights legalised in NSW, the association's secretary Grant Peters says.

"We're having the national amateur men's boxing titles in NSW this year, which is a problem — it means we have to find another location for the women's national title fight," he says. "It will be the first national titles for women, so it's a real shame it can't be in NSW. Some members of the community say that women shouldn't box but in today's



Gloves are off: Ferneley, above, is trying to register as a professional — male — boxer in NSW; Devellerez, who went into a coma after being knocked out in a New Zealand bout, in training with her husband Rocco in Perth, left; boxing's dynastic daughters Frazier-Lyde, below left, and Ali; Merz training, far left

Main picture: Chris Pavlich

society of equal opportunity, we see no reason why they can't."

In amateur boxing, women face much stricter rules than men. Female fights comprise three two-minute rounds, compared with four for men. Although men can be down for the count a maximum of three times in a round before the referee is required to stop the fighting, for women it is only two counts per round. In the entire match, women's bouts can involve a maximum of three counts, compared with four for men. Women wear headguards, mouthguards and groin protection, just like men, but they must also wear a breast guard and have a pregnancy test before each bout.

Ferneley's trainer and manager George Piellis has lodged a discrimination complaint against the NSW Government with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

"They want us to just go away quietly. It's purely freedom of choice that's being impeded here," Piellis says. "It's not actually illegal to demonstrate, it's only illegal to actually stage a bout. I train 10 girl competitors who fight interstate even though it's illegal here. It's very embarrassing for the state Government."



Tinseltown battens down for attack of writers bloc

Hollywood's screenwriters want a bigger slice of the action — and are poised to strike to get it, **Stephen Romei** reports

WHEN you watch *that scene* in *Basic Instinct*, there are some people who expect you to think not of Sharon Stone's flash of brilliance but of Joe Eszterhas. Joe who? Well, he's the bloke who wrote the screenplay. Although Eszterhas may be one of the best known writers in Tinseltown, he's hardly a household name.

Basic Instinct is one of the films highlighted in the Somebody Wrote That advertising campaign devised by Hollywood screenwriters to personalise their battle for higher wages.

After seven weeks of frequently acrimonious negotiations with the US film studios and television networks, the two sides remain about \$US100 million (almost \$200 million) apart.

The writers, represented by the Writers Guild of America, are threatening to strike if a deal is not reached by midnight on May 1, Los Angeles time.

Heavy-duty industrial action, such as the five-month writers strike of 1988, would have serious implications for everything from *The Late Show with David Letterman* to the next Ridley Scott blockbuster.

A study commissioned by Los Angeles

Mayor Richard Riordan estimates a prolonged strike would send LA into recession, costing the local economy \$US7 billion and 90,000 jobs.

The studios and networks have been working furiously to put product in the can ahead of the strike deadline. Film and TV production is up an estimated 60 per cent this year.

Of course, that means writers and actors, who would be expected to support a scribes strike, have been working madly, too. It's a bizarre industrial process possible only in Hollywood. Oscar winner Gwyneth Paltrow, for example, has finished four films this year. Actors are also granting rare on-set media interviews, on an embargoed basis, in case strike action prevents them promoting the film on its release.

If the screenwriters strike, actors would be expected to lend their support by not crossing picket lines and so on. There is also the possibility of a separate actors strike when the Screen Actors Guild contract with the studios and networks expires on June 30.

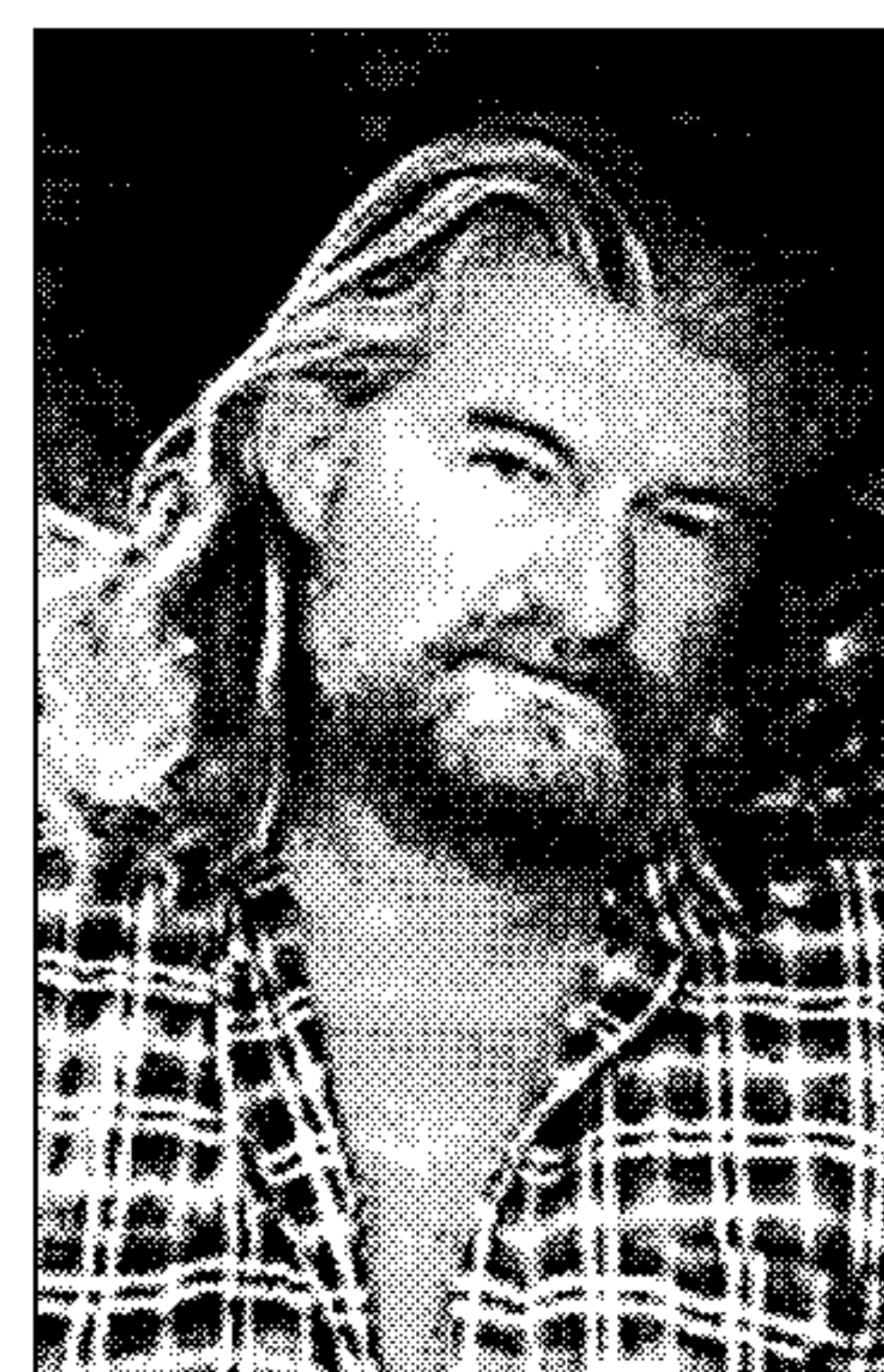
The strike threat and the frantic filmmaking designed to build a celluloid buffer zone have had wide and



intriguing ramifications throughout Hollywood.

That not even Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt or Matt Damon can make more than one film at a time has been a boon for an entire generation of second-level actors.

With studios unable to wait for Tom-Brad-Mat, lead roles have been handed



What's my line? *Basic Instinct* is better known for a revealing performance by Stone, left, than for the script by Eszterhas, above

to relatively unknown actors such as Jack Black, who has jumped from playing second fiddle to John Cusack in *High Fidelity* to starring opposite Paltrow in the Farrelly brothers' *Shallow Hal*.

Even more amazingly, Australian comedian turned actor Eric Bana landed the lead in the Jerry Bruckheimer-Ridley

Scott epic *Black Hawk Down*, a dramatisation of the US's disastrous military engagement in Somalia.

Although Bana dazzled US critics in *Chopper*, the film is playing in one cinema in New York and it is fair to say most American cinemagoers have not heard of him. Yet he's starring in a \$US100 million film usually reserved for the Ben Afflecks of this world.

"We wouldn't put him in the movie if we didn't think he was a movie star," director Scott told *New York* magazine. He did not add that many movie stars were unavailable at the time.

Australia is likely to benefit more broadly if Hollywood is shut down, as film producers will look to shoot outside the US. Australia's attraction has been demonstrated in films such as *The Matrix* and *Mission: Impossible II*.

Closer to Hollywood, another unlikely beneficiary is the pornographic film industry. LA-based Sin City Entertainment says it has been inundated by film technicians and "several B-grade actors and actresses looking for non-sexual roles".

Jimmy Flynt II, director of public relations at porn empire Hustler, which makes hundreds of skin flicks each year, confides: "People of very high calibre are interested in working for us."

So what happens if writers strike from next week? Initially, not much. The studios have their (northern) summer releases in the can and are working on

other films with completed scripts. The TV networks have completed a full season of top-rated programs such as *ER* and *Friends*. Talk shows such as *Letterman* are negotiating an exemption for their writers.

If a strike lasted beyond the summer, however, American TV would soon be dominated by reality TV, news programs and old movies — all of which have been hoarded by the networks through the course of this year.

It has been suggested that this Hollywood dispute is a battle between the rich and the mega-rich. The median wage for the 11,500 writers represented by the Writers Guild is, after all, \$US84,000 a year. Yet although the writers want more money — particularly for residual use of their work on cable TV, video, DVD and the Internet — they are also seeking greater respect, as the Somebody Wrote That campaign indicates.

Although it is not officially on the bargaining table, one development that angers writers is the increasing use of the credit "A film by ..." for big-name directors. Novelist and screenwriter John Gregory Dunne has observed that studio bosses always use the word writer in its plural form, as in "I can always get more writers."

It is a line that appears destined for a rewrite.

Stephen Romei is *The Australian's* New York correspondent