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INTERNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS
for
"THE CINEMA and BLACK AFRICA"

A Brief Review of the Services provided
by the Overseas Film and Television Centre
for Film Units working in Africa.

by V. GOVER

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When, in 1954, my colleagues and I, all from the Colonial Film Unit, decided upon an attempt to continue the work of the Unit as a Commercial enterprise, we were not at all sure as to whether the Overseas Units would respond to our plan. However, there was one factor that could not be denied - ANY FILM UNIT WORKING IN AN OVERSEAS TERRITORY MUST BE SERVICED EFFICIENTLY BY A TECHNICAL AGENT WORKING FROM A MAIN CENTRE.

Such an agent must be situated in one of the world capitals where first-class film laboratory services can be obtained. London is particularly well served in that respect and, in addition, most of the equipment manufacturers have London offices and depots which can deal quickly with orders for equipment and repairs from abroad.

It was explained to the Overseas Units that working alone they would, separately, be comparatively "small voices" but as members of a Central organisation their existence and importance would be more easily recognised and, in consequence, their needs would be better served.

That was the basis on which the Overseas Film and Television Centre was started and the Film Unit of the Nigerian Federal Information Services boldly and quickly gave their support by appointing the Centre as their London Film Agents. Other territories followed, and it was not long before the Centre became recognised by the film industry in general as the focal point for all the London and European activities of the Government sponsored Film Units overseas.

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To-day, the official Film Units in Africa using the centre as their London Agents are as follows:-

The Federal Film Unit, Nigeria
The Western Region Film Unit, Nigeria
The Northern Region Film Unit, Nigeria
The Cinema Corporation of Nigeria at Enugu
The Sudan Government Film Unit
The Film Unit of the Government of Kenya
The Film Unit of the Government of Uganda
The Film Unit of the Government of Tanganyika

These are the larger film units in Africa which are members of the Centre, but although very much smaller in size and output, several other territories use our services when they need them.

To give some idea of what is required by Units working in Africa, here are some of the services provided by the Centre:-

To receive exposed film both 16 mm. and 35 mm., clear it through Customs, despatch it to the laboratory, and ensure that it is processed quickly. In most cases cabled reports on the quality are sent and the rush prints are despatched by air in the shortest possible time.

Negative film stock is ordered through the Centre who ensure that it is despatched in the shortest possible time, if possible within 24 hours of receipt of the cable order.

Spare parts urgently required for cameras and sound equipment are dealt with just as promptly.

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When shooting is completed, films are either edited in the territory concerned, or perhaps roughly assembled there and the editing put into the hands of the Overseas Film Centre. The final completion, that is recording, making and laying music and effects tracks, titling, negative cutting, preparing and laying optical effects and producing the first print, is carried out by the technical staff in London.

The Centre has its own film production unit which is available to cover filming in the United Kingdom or in Europe as may be required by the territories. When necessary cameramen and sound technicians are flown out to augment local film Units abroad which may be faced with a larger than normal task.

To deal with the completion of films made in the territories, a staff of five highly skilled film editors is permanently employed. A shipping section is responsible for handling the large volume of film material passing through the Centre. Exposed negative is forwarded quickly to the laboratories for processing, and after viewing, reporting by cable on the pictorial quality and content and returning the rush prints to the territories with all possible speed. Often the material coming in is of interesting news value and it is the duty of the Centre to edit a news story quickly and screen it to the News Reel and Television Companies for inclusion in the current news-reels. Stories suitable for inclusion in the C.O.I. compilation of "British News" are handled in the same way.

A monthly financial statement is forwarded to the producer in charge of each Overseas Unit and the statement provides details of expenditure incurred in the completion of all films and this is most helpful in checking budgeted expenditure.

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Information with regard to new technical developments is immediately forwarded to the producers overseas, and in this way they are kept in touch with all advancements in the film industry.

The Centre's one aim is to make the Overseas Film Units conscious that they are always in touch - the fact that they are thousands of miles away from London, can very often be most disconcerting, but a round-the-clock seven-days-a-week service, supported by competent air shipping agents, can completely remove any feelings or fears of remoteness.

The Centre works in very close co-operation with the British and Foreign Governments on such things as the selection of expatriate technical staff, and advice on the selection and purchase of film equipment and films required by Overseas Film Units.

Having witnessed the effectiveness and efficiency of the Overseas Film Centre, quite a number of private commercial film-makers have asked for their work to be undertaken by us in London, and we have been more than happy to help them. No matter what problem is posed from Overseas then we try to solve it. Some months ago a Swedish Unit working in Northern Nigeria experienced a serious breakdown with their camera equipment. A cable was received in London on Sunday asking if we could find a 'helical gear wheel for a pre-war Arriflex camera'. By Monday morning that gear wheel had been found and by Monday evening it was on a 'plane flying to Kano. A cable to Nigeria gave the flight number and a member of the Swedish Unit was at Kano Airport on Tuesday morning to pick up the spare part - He received it quite safely and filming continued with less than three days lost time.

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One of the greatest occasions which had to be faced by an African Film Unit was the visit to Nigeria, by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of England and her husband Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. The Nigerian Federal Film Unit were instructed to make a film in Eastmancolour which would be acceptable both in Nigeria and throughout the world. The standard had, of necessity, to be first-class and the staff of the Overseas Film Centre were privileged to contribute to the making of this important historic film. Time of completion was the vital factor and when preliminary arrangements were made an almost split-second time-table was arranged between Lagos and London which would ensure the film, lasting one hour, being ready for release in Nigeria and the United Kingdom within three weeks of the departure of the Queen. All resources of the Centre were mustered. The staff were agreed upon night and day work until the job was completed. The laboratory chosen for the work gave their full co-operation. The filming of the departure from London Airport was carried out by the production unit of the Overseas Film Centre, and all was ready for a really concentrated effort on completion. Our job was to edit the film, write the commentary, record the narration using three different voices and the music and effects, cut the negative, make the optical effects and produce a top-grade Eastmancolour answer print. Despite unavoidable airways delays, the film was completed and ready for screening in the laboratory theatre at the precise time given in the original completion schedule - exactly three weeks, as planned. That picture was filmed by the Nigerian Film Unit without augmentation from London and I hope during the screened programmes of this Congress you will be able to see the film for yourselves. When you do, remember that this film was made possible by the work and resources of the Overseas Film Centre - and we had three weeks in which to do everything - but it was done.

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It has become obvious to the various Units overseas, and particularly in Africa, that the future of film-making lies eventually with African technicians. Ex-patriates have done, and are doing a wonderful pioneer work in building up interest and demonstrating the value of films in National advancement.

Already many African technicians, especially cameramen, are working alongside ex-patriate technicians, but many more are needed. Film-making is not just a matter of a quickly-learned technical training, but good training plus experience, and yet more experience, finally produces a film-maker. A start has, however, been made and in response to many requests the Overseas Film Centre decided to organise a six-months film training course for approved technicians from the Overseas Film Units whom the Governments considered suitable for training.

On March 20th this year, the first course commenced under the direction of Mr. George Pearson, O.B.E., whose reputation as a film teacher and practical technician is unsurpassed. You will be hearing from him during the course of this Congress on the subject of training technicians for Africa, and I do not propose to enlarge upon this activity but I must emphasize that no matter how good the course and training may be, it will not produce African film-makers overnight. There is a long process of experience-gathering ahead before the Units can be manned by people of the country concerned, but it can, and will, happen some time ahead. When it does we hope that the Centre will be there backing up the technicians and ready to give them service and advice.

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I have been speaking of the past and, to a degree, of the present, but at least it has given you some idea of the background of this Organisation - the Overseas Film and Television Centre.

The word "Television" is, as you will notice, included in our title and for a very good reason. The television screen will probably at some future date replace the travelling cinema van as the projection medium and films will be shown on the T.V. screen. New techniques for tele-cine film are now making their appearance and the Centre will be fully prepared to further the new knowledge in Africa and elsewhere as and when it becomes available. No member of the Centre is ever able to say he is lagging behind on up-to-date methods, and we find that our Information Service is highly appreciated.

This then has given you a brief insight into the work of the Overseas Film and Television Centre - our task is not confined to any one part of the world - our activities are worldwide and we will always welcome enquiries from any Film Unit working overseas.

Finally, I must make it clear to all that the Centre is not subsidized by any Government department, institution or philanthropic fund. We rely, for our existence, upon the revenue resulting from our work, and our aim is to provide a good service at a reasonable cost.
