

Eleven Years of the Malayan Film Unit

A Record of Solid Achievement

by Tom Hodge*

AT THE end of World War II a complete set of film equipment belonging to the Army was put up for sale at Command Headquarters in Ceylon. To this happy accident, and the opportunism of the then Director of Public Relations in Malaya, the Malayan Film Unit owes its existence.

Having persuaded his Government to purchase the entire lot, he began to build "from scratch" an organization which has now gained the special distinction of being known throughout the English-speaking film world by its initials alone.

Personnel Problems

The beginning was not easy. Personnel, gathered together from Malaya and elsewhere, had to be trained to work as a team. Some of them, indeed, had to be trained in the fundamentals of film-making, of which they had no previous experience whatsoever. Some were fresh from school, others were "still" cameramen, while a few came over from the former Crown Film Unit, which had been making a film on Malaya just after the war. Working quarters were found for them in thatch-covered huts which had been used by the Japanese forces.

By the end of 1947 four films were completed which foreshadowed in miniature the variety of output which

was to follow increasingly in the next decade. They were: "Face of Malaya—No. 1," designed to "introduce Malaya to its people," the first two issues of "Malayan Gazette," a cine-magazine series and the "The Royal Gift," Malaya's own record of the wedding of Princess Elizabeth. These films inaugurated the Unit's routine work of information and education among a mixed population of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Singhalese, Eurasians and others who comprise the Malayan nation.

Current Output

Today the Unit's current statistics for production and distribution speak for themselves. It finishes about 60 films annually, its own laboratories furnishing nearly 6,000 prints in both 35 mm and 16 mm. It provides for the diversity of the country's scattered population by circulating 123 projection vans throughout the rural areas, showing its films with Malay, Chinese, Tamil or English commentaries.

Thirty-seven of its productions have been shown in 54 countries. In both East and West it has garnered an impressive list of awards from international film festivals, and — what may seem stranger still — has been earning a significant annual revenue (amounting to over 500,000 Malayan dollars in the last complete financial year).

During the first nine years of its life, the Unit had a number of Europeans on its staff serving as Director-Instructors. At intervals, other directors were invited from overseas to work for a spell with the Unit, thus maintaining its contact with the latest in documentary thought and practice and giving its members the stimulation of a fresh personal approach. In 1952 the Foreign Office in London seconded me to guide the Unit's progress as Film Adviser, an appointment which, as it happened, was to cover the

years in which M. F. U. secured its international reputation.

When I lived for a while with its special problems of film-making, they seemed to crystallize into two simple questions which were seen firmly planted in the "communal mind" of its members: "What do you want to convey?" and "what do you want people to feel?" How well the Unit developed the habit of appraisal can be judged from the details of its festival awards and revenue from 1952 to 1957.

International Awards

Since 1954, of the dozen major awards in the documentary category available at the four Asian Film Festivals which have taken place, eight have gone to M. F. U. It has taken the Golden Harvest Award for the Best Film of the Year, and other Golden Harvest Awards for Best Planning and Best Photography. At the 1955 Cambodian Film Festival the colorful historical reminiscence of pageantry and architecture in "Malacca - Then and Now" brought it the Best Asian Tourist Film award.

European film festivals have become familiar with the M. F. U. credit-titles. In 1956 "Timeless Temiar," which observed the daily life of a tribe of Malayan aborigines, scored Diplomas of Merit at Edinburgh and Venice. A Silver Harp at this year's Cork Festival went to "Wayang Kulit," a description of the visit of a "shadow play" company to a rural settlement.

All of these films were routine productions, in the sense that they were made in fulfillment of the purely domestic requirements of the Malayan Government; they were intended as vehicles of information and teaching aids for the people of Malaya. None was planned in the context of film festivals or distribution in other countries. Their success in the one

**)Many audio-visual people in the United States will remember Tom Hodge, who served as Director of the British Information Service Films Division in this country from September 1942 until January 1950, when he was assigned to the post of Film Adviser to the United Kingdom Commissioner-General in South-East Asia, with headquarters at Singapore. During World War II Mr. Hodge took a leading part in fostering the distribution and use of public informational films dealing with the Allied war effort, co-operating closely with representatives of our Office of War Information.*

and their wide currency in the other have been, like the inception of the Unit itself, entirely unforeseen.

Service to Industry

Many of the M. F. U. productions circulating abroad are earning income through commercial exhibition in cinemas or on television but this is by no means the major source of the Unit's revenue. There is at present no film production whatsoever in the Federation of Malaya apart from that undertaken by the Unit. M. F. U. is therefore the only local organization equipped to accept commissions for sponsored work, which in Britain, for example, would be shared by a large number of film companies serving the needs of industry, both to sell its goods and services and to reinforce its public relations.

The Unit has been able to take on such work without detriment to its normal production program for the Government Information Services. But some of the films produced for the special purposes of client bodies contribute incidentally to the fund of informational films available on Malaya. "Doing Nicely, Thank You," made for the National Union of Plantation Workers, shows the right and wrong way to conduct trade union matters, and thereby put trade union movements of other countries in closer touch with their opposite numbers in the Federation.

Four other sponsored films combine to give an impression of Malaya as a virile commercial unit — "Tin From Malaya" (made for the Tin Advisory Board), "Rubber From Malaya" (for

the combined rubber industry), Malaya's Iron Mountain" (Eastern Mining and Metals Company), and "The Golden Queen," the story of the young and growing pineapple industry (Malayan Pineapple Board).

Ten Historical Years

To look through the chronological film list in the M. F. U. catalogue is to review Malaya's history of the past ten years, grave and gay, in the space of a few minutes. In fact, the Unit can fairly claim to have played a part in that history.

Recording every stage in Malaya's march towards independence, it has been a significant factor in establishing that unity and harmony among Malaya's many races which alone make independence a workable aim. It has helped to train the people in the methods and standards of elections and census taking, and to encourage a sense of responsible citizenship. It has given basic education in hygiene and health, improved methods of farming and fishing, and acted as a clearing-house for news (films have been made about various topical matters prominent in the national life, and the "New Malayan Gazettes" — renamed, but carrying on the traditions of the series begun in 1947 — bring news of the day and stories on progress in industrial and community development).

The Unit has also kept Malaya's achievements in the eyes of the world by maintaining a constant flow of news items for newsreels and television stations in other countries. M. F. U. films have even made their con-



Peter Amovasi, a Malayan Film Unit camera-director, in action, has had five years' service with the Unit.

tribution to the improvement and development of world resources, having been used by UNESCO and by the Colombo Plan authorities.

Truly Malayan

When I left the Unit in June this year, a Chinese (Ow Kheng Law) remained as Head, and a Malay (Md. Zain Hussain, who directed most of the prize-winning films) as Associate Producer and Deputy Head. The three Film Directors are respectively Malay, Chinese and Indian, and the Chief Editor is Eurasian. Only one European remains, temporarily on the staff (in the Script Department, until enough suitable writers from among Malayan nationals have been found and trained). The Unit now lives up proudly to that first word of its title, reflecting the nation in its own composition as in the films which leave its laboratories.

A symbol of the new Malaya, M.F.U. is shortly to be affected by an equally symbolic event. For a long time visitors have contrasted the quality and size of its output with the primitive conditions in which it has had to work. Now there is a prospect of a new laboratory and buildings. The Unit will leave its Japanese thatched huts at last. But, after working so closely for five years with those in whose hands its future now lies, I know that with it will go the same enthusiasm and team spirit which have taken it so far since that July day in 1946 when an idea and some film equipment happened to come together.

(The Malayan film, like all other BIF films, is now distributed in this country by Contemporary Films, Inc., 13 East 37th Street, New York 16, N. Y.)



A young Malayan audience watches a mobile film show.