

ON THE AFRICAN MOVIE MENUS

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LESS than 100 picture theatres for some 30,000,000 people hardly suggests a population of film fans, but although the financial yield may not be "great Hollywood" must take credit, or responsibility, for a not inconsiderable influence on the social life of West Africa.

Wherever the African has access to the flickering screen—and the age of some of the films ensures plenty of flickering—he is as addicted to moviegoing as anybody, and so far he is undistracted by television or the live theatre for his entertainment. His tastes make this territory unlike any other, film-wise, and quite fascinating to the visiting observer, which I have been in the recent past.

They tell, in these parts, of a place in Sierra Leone where for the past five years they have shown "King Kong" three nights a week and "The Mark of Zorro" three nights a week; Saturday is gala night and then there is a big double feature attraction—"King Kong" and "The Mark of Zorro."

While eye-witness evidence of this is not available, the report has features which one recognizes as not implausible. The two films named are perfect examples of what the African likes. He has no objection to vintage films, and he has a preference for seeing the same film more than once or even twice. To advertise a film as new, unless it be a further installment of the familiar, like a new Tarzan adventure, is not to add to its attraction in the least.

Special Tastes

A Gold Coast exhibitor told me that he showed a version of "The Three Musketeers," confident of its audience appeal, but pulled it out after one showing, as the takings amounted to £12. A few months later, short of attractions, he put it on again and played to capacity. His explanation of this is that the African loves to describe to his family and friends a particular scene from a film he has seen, irrespective of whether he enjoyed the film as a whole. By the time the second showing came, there was a public which wanted to see the film for certain scenes (fights, almost certainly) they had heard about.

The current favorite stars with West African audiences are Rod Cameron and John Wayne in that order, and here lies a clue to local taste in general, which can be summarized in one word—action. The African wants to see the screen hero do something and not just

talk. There are no favorite women stars because the type of film the audiences really like do not tend to feature women. "Anne of the Indies" was showing while I was in Lagos and the early indications were that the public was prepared to make an exception in this case and approve a film with a feminine star.

It is ironic that while the origin of the word "drama" is "the thing done" the West African usage is almost exactly the opposite. The exhibitors hate what they call "dramas," i. e. serious films in which the characters attempt to concern themselves with something more than physical action and the simpler sentiments. Practically everybody speaks English—"pidgin English" at least, and indeed members of different tribes often have only English in common—but they are quickly out of their vocabular depth, and, as one Syrian showman put it, "When a man fires a gun you know without doubt what he is doing—when he just talks he isn't doing anything you can be sure to recognize."

Participating Audiences

Audience participation, incidentally, is vocal and volatile. If you have two open-air cinemas within earshot of your hotel (as often happens in the bigger towns) it is a fine point whether the stepped-up sound track of, say, Betty Hutton or an audience encouraging Rod Cameron to greater feats of action and gunplay comes closer to deafening.

All but one of the fifty-odd cinemas in the Gold Coast and Nigeria are open-air, ranging from well-built concrete amphitheatres with canvas chairs of the type favored by film directors on the set to a few square yards of sand, enclosed by a cane fence and holding half a dozen benches. The exceptional indoor theatre is the 2,000-seater Opera in Accra, which is also the only house with more than a once-nightly showing. The Opera has three shows a day, with three different films, and the programs are changed daily. The majority of patrons pay sixpence and there seems to be a small, hard-core audience which starts to collect outside in the baking sun by about ten o'clock every morning.

My principal showman informant has been in the business for fourteen years but is still frequently baffled by his customers' tastes. Most Westerns, but not all, are fairly safe bets. Sometimes he feels the incidence of shooting among Hollywood cowboys is falling away lamentably

and he would like them to be more careful about this integral part of the formula. War pictures, of course, are sometimes nearly as good as Westerns in terms of bang-bang content and taking the two categories together he recalls with relish the hearty local approval of such offerings as "Bataan," "Tomahawk" and "Mark of the Renegade." His biggest surprise hit was the Esther Williams swimmie "Neptune's Daughter," reasons for which he has so far failed to discover.

But of all departures from known canons of taste the case of "The Boy Kumasenu" is the most remarkable. This is a documentary about West African life made by a young English director, Sean Graham, brought out from England to form a Government-sponsored Gold Coast Film Unit. Although the film received a diploma at the Venice Film Festival there was no local enthusiasm to book it, on the reasoning that the African likes to see things far removed from his own daily life. The biggest operator made a contemptuously small offer which was refused. His nearest rival bought the film for about £500 and has since paid another £300 voluntarily, such has been the eagerness of the populace to see (and see again) themselves or their friends and their familiar surroundings and way of life on the screen. The showman's take to date is reputed to run into five sterling figures.

The Literary Approach

The bulk of the West African audience, as may have been gathered, is simple in its film tastes, but there is a small layer of an educated class whose approach is rather different. Having learned about the arts and about criticism in college, they apply surprising standards of appraisal. A friend of mine was in a party at an African home where after dinner a film show was given on the roof of the house. The audience sat quietly, even through the inevitable projector breakdown, and afterward, as the drinks were circulating, a discussion on distinctly formal lines began.

The consensus of opinion was that while the story they had seen was, in the beginning, well presented, observed the classic unities, and had well-constructed tensions, it fell away in the later stages. It lacked, said one serious-faced African "what James called 'the total gesture.'" My European friend, an articulate man normally, found himself speechless and unable to contribute to the debate. The film under discussion was a Tim McCoy Western.

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