

## Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa

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### *Introduction*

THE purpose of these articles is to assist those who, with little or no technical knowledge, may be called upon to supervise or operate equipment in Mobile Cinema Vans and Travelling Projection Units. A thorough understanding of the equipment will help greatly in avoiding unnecessary trouble, delay and interruptions when giving demonstrations. The various subjects treated in these articles are of vital importance to the performance and service which the equipment will give.

A very simple error on the part of the operator may cause some part of the equipment to fail at a time when its satisfactory operation is essential. For this reason it is strongly urged that copies of handbooks supplied should be kept with the mobile cinema so that they can be consulted in time of need.

The vans will be required to operate over long periods without skilled servicing. For this reason the responsibility of maintaining the equipment in good condition falls upon the operator. This is, perhaps, as it should be, because the operator will, it is hoped, recognize his responsibility and set up a regular routine which will enable the equipment to be maintained in good condition. In this way he will become familiar with the entire equipment and be able to replace or readjust minor parts without causing delay in an itinerary or the expense and miles of travel by a skilled mechanic or electrician. On the other hand, the operator should not proceed blindly. He must not attempt to change an adjustment until he has studied the instructions carefully and understands the construction.

The writer has experienced operating mobile cinemas over a period of almost four years, through wet and dry seasons, in all parts of Nigeria. During that time, film demonstrations, totalling over 1,000 hours, were given to over two million Africans. Itineraries covering tours as long as five months ahead were strictly adhered to and every demonstration arranged given without a single mechanical or electrical breakdown; not even a broken film. This is a compliment to the African staff who, without any previous training, assisted when on tour in maintaining the vehicle and equipment in serviceable condition.

Cinema vans are thoroughly tested before shipment and nothing more serious than slight teething troubles may be expected.

The temptation to give a public demonstration before the van is properly run in and before the staff is thoroughly trained should be

avoided. The complete programme for a demonstration should be rehearsed many times with the full equipment working. Every demonstration should be carried out with the utmost precision. In many respects it may be considered in the same light as a stage show where all concerned must know thoroughly the parts they are to play and carry them through to the best of their ability.

The success of film demonstrations depends on showmanship and stage-management. *This cannot be too strongly emphasized.* The officer in charge should combine the best qualities of the teacher, the orator and the showman. The most perfect apparatus and projection are useless if the audience is not fully engaged and kept on its toes by skilful presentation. Only practice can give the requisite degree of skill in this difficult art, but much can be done by intelligent approach to the work. Officers should realize from the outset that the success of their work will depend upon their own personal contribution, and should thus seek always to improve their technique of presentation.

#### *Staff for the Mobile Cinema*

The operator of the mobile cinema will usually also be the driver of the vehicle. Every operator should have a keen interest in the work. He must take a pride in caring for the equipment placed in his charge and see that it is always kept clean. He should be made responsible for seeing that the whole equipment is given the attention needed at regular intervals, such as greasing the chassis, oiling projector, changing of the oil in chassis engine and petrol engine of the alternator.

The assistant should work under instructions from the operator. He should be suitable for training as a second operator so that he could operate the van in emergency.

The duties of the interpreter are of the highest importance. He should be a permanent member of the staff of the cinema van, preferably able to speak the language most widely used and competent to take complete charge of the remainder of the staff. For this reason he must travel with the van and all instructions to the driver should be given through him. The interpreter should be made responsible for translating an adaptation of the model film commentaries.

He should memorize his translations so that he can speak them without reference to a script. Experience has shown the need for checking all translations before they are used in public.

Although the following information refers particularly to conditions in Nigeria, it is of general application and will be useful to those responsible for arranging propaganda demonstrations in any part of Africa.

It is desirable that the first few tours made by the mobile cinema should be closely supervised by a responsible officer, who would arrange

for and supervise all demonstrations. Later, when officials in various parts of the country become acquainted with the possibilities and technique of this rather specialized medium, and the African staff are well trained, it should not be necessary for an officer to tour with the unit.

After deciding upon which towns and villages to visit, the officer should plan an itinerary and obtain information regarding the most convenient routes to follow. The itinerary, with a covering letter, should be circulated to all concerned so that local arrangements for the visit may be made and announced well ahead.

Film demonstrations are not sufficient in themselves. They should be preceded by preparatory work carried out during the day. A good procedure is to arrange for a meeting round about 10 a.m. under the chairmanship of the Administrative Officer; all local influential people, including the local chief and his council, headmasters, teachers, court clerk, and other enlightened Africans are invited to attend. At those meetings the reason for the visit by the cinema unit is made clear and the fundamental theme connected with the evening film demonstrations thoroughly explained.

It is recommended that the audience should be invited to ask questions at suitable intervals during the talk. The subjects raised in the discussion are a valuable indication to important points of interest. Every effort should be made to ensure that influential people who attend the preliminary meetings clearly understand the reason for the visit; they are the people who will pass on all the necessary explanations to the local public once the unit has moved on. At these meetings the Administrative Officer should be asked to suggest a local person to speak over the microphone to the public at the evening demonstration in support of the subject of the visit. In arranging this it is as well to ascertain the views of the person invited and give him guidance when necessary. A tape recording of the speech can be made in the day-time and played back over the loud speakers in the evening. If the speaker chosen is the local chief, and the van is to visit other towns within his jurisdiction, a recording made by him would be very useful for including in the demonstration in these towns.

If school teachers attend these day-time demonstrations, arrangements may be made for them to return in the afternoon with their older scholars (say Standard III upwards) when the talk given in the morning can be repeated in class-room style. Should there be many schools in the district, ascertain the number of scholars from each who may be expected to attend, and, if there are too many for the accommodation provided, they should be divided up and times given for the different schools to return. Essays written by the scholars provide useful information and often bring to light interesting points.

When visiting a new district a suitable site for the evening demonstration should be chosen as soon as possible after arrival and the public informed of the place and time. The mobile cinema, by nature of its size and unusual appearance, will be found quite sufficient to start the people talking the moment it makes an appearance in a town or village. A few announcements here and there are all that is necessary as the news will travel round the town quickly.

On no account should an attempt be made to give a demonstration in a confined space unless the attendance can be very effectively controlled. The larger the open space the better. An ideal site is one where the rear of the van can face the direction of the town, on ground which very gradually slopes up from the van. The reason for facing the town is twofold:

- (a) the loud speakers are directional and will attract people from all over the town;
- (b) many people will continue to assemble after the demonstration has actually started, and, by approaching the van from the direction of the town, they will stop as soon as they can see the picture screen well enough; whereas if the van is placed the other way round, the crowd will pack close to the van and although in this position they cannot see the screen, nothing will convince them that the back of the crowd is the best place to see and hear. This is quite apart from the fact that it means interrupting the demonstration to try to persuade them to move and also avoids interfering with young people comfortably seated on the ground near the front of the van.

Undulating ground should be avoided as only the people standing on the ridges will be able to view the screen.

It is always advisable to take the mobile cinema to the proposed site during the day and point out to the operator the exact spot from which the demonstration will be given. If a doubtful culvert is encountered there is still time to arrange for another site.

The interpreter and operator should be instructed to have the van in position and prepare for a display half an hour before dusk.

#### *Seating, etc.*

Arrangements may be made for one or two chairs to be provided for such people as the Administration Officer and the local chief. These chairs should be placed roughly 30 yards from the screen. On no account should forms or benches be allowed because members of the audience are sure to stand on them and thus obscure the screen from the view of those behind.

With the arrival of the van at the site many small children will collect; they should be instructed to sit on the ground between the screen and the chairs (if any). See that the children are seated close together as many more will come along later. Adults should be requested to stand at the rear of the space occupied by the children.

### *Programme Balance*

In arranging a programme careful attention should be given to the balance between films and talks. The talks should be made short and crisp; they should be straight to the point and devoid of all padding.

Experience has shown the most effective length of a demonstration to be approximately 75 minutes.

*The following outline of a programme is given as a guide :*

(1) Music . . . . .	4 mins.
(2) Introductory talk . . . . .	3 "
(3) Film . . . . .	8 "
(4) Talk . . . . .	4 "
(5) Film . . . . .	20 "
(6) Talk by influential local . . . . .	5 "
(7) Film . . . . .	15 "
(8) Talk . . . . .	4 "
(9) Short entertainment film . . . . .	8 "
(10) God Save the King . . . . .	1 "
	72 mins.

### *Attracting the Audience*

Just before dusk instruct the operator to start up and play a rousing march on the amplifier. Recordings of such marches as "Empire Builders", "Under Freedom's Flag", or "Blaze Away" are popular with Africans as the rhythm is well marked. Other recordings which should be carried in the van are dance tunes known as "rumbas". Although recorded by English bands they have a story appeal to African audiences. All records used should be chosen with care, as many, and especially those including vocal efforts, are not always appreciated.

### *Presentation of Programme*

The crowd will grow very quickly once the music begins and the interpreter should be instructed when to begin the introductory talk. From this point the programme should continue *without a moment's pause*. Keep the audience interested and the background noise from the crowd will remain at a low level. If this background noise increases and becomes disturbing it is a good plan to ask the audience a question such as "Are you all well?" Repeat the question, requesting them to shout

their answer loud—ask them once again—louder still. The answer will come back with a roar. Allowing the audience to shout occasionally in this way greatly assists in keeping them quiet and attentive between times. This technique to reduce background noise is very effective with large audiences. It can, however, be used effectively with any type of audience, particularly at the end of a display when question after question based on the talks given may be put to the audience in quick succession. The interpreter in this case should gradually increase the volume of his voice with each question and the audience in turn will reply with greater vigour. \* There is more likelihood of any lesson getting home when the people themselves have actually voiced their acceptance of it.

African audiences voice their reactions to films in no uncertain manner and they do so at what, at first, may appear to be the most unexpected moments. For this reason, some difficulty may be experienced in the early stages in fitting in and timing a film commentary. Experience and careful observation will overcome this difficulty.

Remember that the audience may not be accustomed to having an idea presented to them visually and by the spoken word at the same time. It is therefore important to take particular care to time the film commentary so that it does not coincide with any exciting scene. Make the commentary crisp and to the point and do not include explanations of things which are fully explained in the visuals.

Whenever possible arrange for observers to be present in the audience to listen for any interesting remarks which might be made.

A point to remember in judging audience reaction is that illiterate people, unaccustomed to seeing pictures of any kind, do not focus their eyes on the screen in the same way as educated people. Educated people usually focus their eyes at a point a few feet from the screen and by doing so appreciate the entire scene at a glance. The illiterate, on the other hand, scans each scene and his eyes travel from one part of the picture to another. For this reason films for illiterate people contain scenes which are much longer than is usual in film making.

A crowd can be controlled more effectively if they are kept in a good humour and they will respond more readily to an announcement given through loud speakers than they will to instructions given by police and other individuals who are often self-appointed. It is only by giving careful attention to such details that good control can be maintained throughout a demonstration.

Much useful information can be obtained by going into a town or village the morning after a demonstration and questioning the people who attended the display. Replies with regard to details may be very disappointing and yet the main lesson may have got home. Constant checking in this way is necessary in perfecting a technique for giving successful demonstrations.

*(To be continued)*