Behind the film festivals

By EDMUND ALLISON

Film festivals, says this correspondent, have made the public more aware of the role of films today.

In recent years the number of film festivals has increased and few countries are without their annual tribute to today's most popular entertainment medium. Despite the impact of television, the cinema is attracting larger audiences, and this is reflected in the new festivals that mushroom each year.

The original purpose of the older festivals at Cannes and Venice was to present the best of each year's films and to make awards for direction, acting, etc. Many fine films thus received an acclaim that drew large audiences when they were screened outside the festival. The film trade in America, France, Italy and England quickly moved in and festivals often degenerated into a ballyhoo promotional stunt. This caused concern to some festival organisers. The director of the Venice Film Festival decided to clean it up. Starlets and their publicity stunts were banished from the fashionable beaches. Each film was selected by the committee and judged on its merits.

The festivals at Karlovy Vary (Czechoslovakia) and Moscow are more serious affairs. The aim there is to draw attention to outstanding films which through their form and content and in the spirit of the festival motto "For humanism in art, for peace and friendship among peoples," have contributed to the development of cinematography.

In Australia a different type of festival has developed. We have no film industry that can use a festival as a show case for its productions, and our government is not interested. In 1953 and 1954, groups of people in Melbourne and Sydney who wished to foster an appreciation of good film organised film festivals in their cities. Since then similar festivals have been established in Perth, Adelaide, Hobart and Brisbane. Most of them are held between May and June and
many of the entries are exchanged. Subscribers can purchase tickets and these are limited to 2,000, except in Melbourne which has 4,000. The films are screened over a period of two weeks or so. This year the Sydney festival offered 30 programmes of feature films, shorts and cartoons. As soon as the festival is over, the committee organises for the following year.

Film festivals are now an important part of our cultural life, and it is worth considering their influence and future development. Within the various festival committees there are differing opinions and subscribers have their views as well. Also, the film trade is very conscious of the influence that film festivals have on the box office, favorably and otherwise. This year the question of censorship was raised forcibly, especially in Sydney. It can be seen that film festivals are no longer a pleasant weekend or two where groups of devotees watch and discuss “art films.” The 1966 festivals in Sydney and Melbourne were filled by subscribers months before opening, and many thousands were unable to buy tickets. A new festival, the N.S.W. Film Festival, will open at the University of N.S.W. in August and subscriptions are pouring in.

The success of any film festival depends on the selection of the programmes. Each festival has a programme committee that chooses and views films. Selection is sometimes influenced by the films shown at overseas festivals. It is natural that new films successful at Cannes, Venice, Moscow, Berlin and elsewhere receive priority. Often they are not available as commercial distributors have bought the rights, although these distributors sometimes agree to screening them at festivals. Embassies, especially those of the socialist countries, assist with programmes. Occasionally a famous silent or sound classic not previously shown here is screened. Some films are selected because they reflect the personal preferences of members of the festival committee. Generally speaking, though, the programmes are of a high quality.

The difference between Australian and overseas festivals is further emphasised by the difficulty in obtaining many films purchased by local distributors. These productions have already received publicity at Cannes, Venice and elsewhere and distributors regard local festivals as a threat to box office returns. The total subscribers in all states could reach 10,000. This audience in commercial cinemas is worth $10,000
or so to the distributor. Festivals in Perth, Adelaide, Hobart and Brisbane sometimes pay film hire, perhaps $200 to $300, but the more affluent Sydney and Melbourne Festivals want the films without payment, and the major distributors of foreign films have virtually boycotted them.

Festival committees and subscribers are divided on the matter of showing films purchased for commercial screening and some feel that festivals should show only those unlikely to be seen in the local cinemas. An argument against this claims that a festival screening often assists the commercial prospects. This is a debatable point although at the moment at least four Sydney distributors and cinemas wish to buy the Czech film *Blonde In Love* which was shown at this year’s festival. A film from last year, *Woman In The Dunes* (Japan), has been bought by a Melbourne distributor.

It is interesting to examine the origins of feature films in the last three Sydney festivals. The various countries were represented as follows—Czechoslovakia 7, France 6, Japan 5, Poland 4, Italy 4, U.S.A. 4, Mexico 3, U.S.S.R. 3, East Germany 3, Hungary 3, India 3, Korea 2, Canada 2, Yugoslavia 2, Brazil 2, Holland 2, England 1, Australia 1, West Germany 1, China 1, Cuba 1, Rumania 1. In addition there were a number of old classics. The English-speaking films totalled 8. Twenty eight films came from the socialist countries, nearly half the total. This pattern is more or less the same at the other festivals.

The International Federation of Film Producers’ Associations (IFFP) gives its recognition to a small number of film festivals throughout the world. One of the terms is that subscribers are limited to 2,000. So far only Sydney has received recognition. Melbourne with 4,000 subscribers is out of favor and does not obtain any of the films held by members of IFFP. It seems that the organisers of the Australian festivals should get together and discuss the difficulties of obtaining suitable programmes and collectively reach agreement with IFFP and the local distributors and exhibitors. Sydney and Melbourne must be prepared to pay film hire for certain films. If a producer offered his film for a fixed fee, this could be shared by all of the festivals.

There is an agreement with the Customs Department that no duty is paid on films imported for screening provided they are screened at the festivals only. All films have to be viewed
by the film censor. Festival organisers claim that they should be shown at the festivals without cuts as censorship often destroys the meaning of a film. Adults only are admitted and they are people who are viewing the films with intelligence and understanding. The Sydney Film Festival has been campaigning against film censorship and this year, commendably, published a list of all cuts made. Their campaign needs to be widened to include abolition of the clauses that allow political censorship of films. We remember well the ban on the export of *Indonesia Calling* in 1947, the censorship of films from the U.S.S.R., China and East Germany and the recent doubts about Michael Charlton's film on Vietnam.

At the festivals, viewers can enjoy feature films from Europe, Asia and America and then reflect that there are none from Australia. Small countries like Cuba and Korea can send entries but we have just a few documentaries to offer. The question of an Australian film industry should greatly concern film festivals, with more emphasis laid on forums that promote a widespread discussion on the matter. When representatives of festivals are interviewed on the press, radio and television they might constantly criticise the lack of Australian feature films. We cannot be content to relish the films from abroad and do nothing about our own potential.

The Festivals have fostered an appreciation of films that otherwise would not have been shown. They have introduced the films of controversial directors such as Bunuel (Spain), Goddard (France), Rossi (Italy) and many of the new films from Czechoslovakia. A feature of recent festivals has been the fine productions from the Czech studios. There is now an audience here for Czech films and distributors are interested. The films from the Asian countries also have become popular because of festival screenings. India and Japan are the largest film-making countries in the world and several of their directors rank with the world's best. Satyapit Ray (India), and Ozu, Kurosawa and Ichikawa of Japan are now well known here as their productions are regularly seen at festivals.

Film makers in all countries are very much concerned with social problems and the best of their films have had a significant impact at the festivals. In the past two years films dealing with war and peace were outstanding. *The Russian Miracle, The Adventures Of Werner Holt*, (both from East Germany), *Thomas The Imposter* (France), *Fire On The Plains* (Japan), *Passengers* (Poland) and *Dr. Strangelove*
(U.S.A.) are excellent examples of such film making. At the Moscow and Karlovy Vary Film Festivals there is much discussion on problems and trends. Directors, writers, critics and the public are encouraged to express opinions. Our festivals could have similar forums and determine an attitude to the role of films as a medium that focuses attention on current social questions. Although our film industry is in the doldrums, films are the mainstay of television programmes and features such as Four Corners and Seven Days have a large audience. Film festivals have not concerned themselves much with television films but here is a field that could stimulate local film production and it should be included in festival programmes.

The success of film festivals in Australia in the past 14 years has resulted in a wider appreciation of the role that films have in our life. The standard of film-making in all countries has risen considerably. Undoubtedly festivals with their competitive awards have contributed to this. Here in Australia public taste is being moulded. Alongside the annual events in the capital cities we could have special festivals of Asian, Soviet, French films and the like. People are festival-minded and their tastes can be satisfied with a wide variety of film fare.