

The Film Industry, Press And Publicity

By JITHUBHAI MEHTA



HARKING back to films in the good old days, I am reminded of the Gujarati play about a woman who was dumb for many years. Her power of speech was restored by means of a surgical operation and then the woman spoke endlessly, as if to make up for lost time.

Like the woman in the play, our films lived without speech for many years. But when sound came, they spoke volubly and are still doing so.

Before the advent of sound, studios worked by daylight. Large reflectors were used to catch the rays of the sun.

I can recall a scene at the old Sagar Movie-tone opposite Chowpatty beach...

I am at the studio early in the morning. The director shouts: "The skies are clear! There's the sun! We can shoot today!"

Mirrors and reflectors are raised and lowered. Orders are shouted on the set. I see a slim figure flash past. There are reflections of her in the mirrors. It is the popular Zubeida Banu.

Then comes Yakub singing a "Ghazal" in his light-hearted manner. There is the handsome Jal Merchant.

Then Chimanlal Desai, proprietor of Sagar, is on the scene to tell me: "You were with us when we discussed the story. You take over the publicity."

Film advertising was not very well organised in those days, but relations between producers and the press were always cordial. Every important film company had a publicity department. There were no film reviews as we know them today. Publicity was confined to advertising in a few important dailies. The English language papers like "The Times of India" gave publicity to only the foreign films.

Thirty years ago the industry depended mainly on street publicity. There was no provision on theatre fronts for the "banner" display so popular today. Huge cut-outs of the stars were used. They went over in a big way with the public.

One striking contrast between methods then and now is that the exhibitors of those days themselves took a keen interest in the publicity for the pictures. They spent money on handbills, posters and other materials, distributing them at their own cost.

With the coming of sound, the production of films underwent a change. There were also new methods of publicity.

Film makers who used to think in terms of thousands of rupees began to talk in terms of lakhs. Lighting equipment found its place in the studios. They no more depended on daylight. There was also night work.

About this time daily paper film journalism was born. "The Times of India" began to give space in its columns to Indian films. This was such a startling development that if "The Times of India" said something in four lines about an Indian picture, producers talked about it for as many days!

Newspapermen began to visit the sets. They were invited by the producers. Good will bet-

ween the industry and the film press grew. Feature articles and write-ups of the stars began to appear. The actors and actresses became conscious of the value of publicity and vied with one another in securing as much of it as they could.

Film advertising carried illustrations. Displays were the order of the day. Copy-writers even used photographs of national leaders to boost the pictures.

Every morning handbills were distributed throughout the city. I made a study of their distribution and brought about a change-over to the afternoons, when workers were returning to the mills and factories after their lunch. I believed that a full stomach allows the mind to dwell on pleasant things and the method showed a difference at the box-office.

I also used different methods suited to different localities in the city. For example, at Bhuleswar lines from the Puranas or a mythological twist given to the publicity was effective. In the Nepean Sea Road area and Gamdevi I used illustrations of beautiful women with tapering fingers.

The copy-writers were brief, depending for "punch" on the photographs of prominent stars like Motilal, Maya Banerjee and Surendra, which always had a lot of white space round them.

Until 1936, Indian language newspapers were the favoured medium for advertising Indian films. But when Sagar's film "Jagirdar" was released we took a bold step. We had a half-page advertisement in "The Times of India." I still remember the caption. It read: "MAYA BANERJEE, THE KISSABLE MIS-CHIEF OF 1936." It brought to the Roxy Cinema patrons who had never before seen an Indian film.

Shortly afterwards, "The Times of India" introduced a film page. It was published every fortnight, and producers thenceforth began to advertise in the English language papers.

Film publicity was on a better footing now, but it still had its problems. I remember how the editor of an Urdu daily paid me a visit at the Sagar Studios to canvass an advertisement.

He had a great deal to say for his paper. "Let me have today's copy," I said. "I'll go through it and decide about the advertisement." Said the editor, "The paper has not come out today."

"Yours is a daily paper and today is a weekday," I reminded him.

My visitor looked sheepish. He said, "I was short of advertising and couldn't bring my paper out today. Give me an advertisement and I'll come out with it."

On another occasion, a few days before the release of "Kokila," the story of which was written by Mr. Kanhaiyalal Munshi, a man called on me.

"I have a publicity idea for your film," he announced. "Look at me. Don't I look like Mr. Munshi? If you pay me five rupees a day I shall place myself in the lobby of the theatre the day the picture is released and every day after that. People seeing me will believe I am

Mr. Munshi. You will draw a crowd every day."

I looked at the man. He did look like Mr. Munshi. But I had to turn down his proposal. "Your idea is excellent," I said. "But there's one snag. Mr. Munshi himself is going to attend the premiere. There is every possibility that the public may neglect him in favour of you."

Yes, film publicity was a happy-go-lucky business and everybody brought fresh ideas to it—from the man who visualised the campaign down to the humble fellow who wheeled posters through the streets. Frequently, the latter's enthusiasm produced amusing results. Let me tell you about one.

We had just made the film "Meri Jaan" and a batch of men was sent out with the wheeled poster display. Their leader was one Charlie, who thought of giving the proceedings a musical touch. The procession halted in front of a house and all began to sing the song, "Meri Jaan," Charlie dominating the chorus.

Charlie, however, did not know that they had stopped in front of Mr. Chimanlal Desai's house.

The next morning Mr. Desai sent for me. "Tell Charlie to take his publicity anywhere he likes, but not in front of my house," he said.

When Pancholi's Hindi picture "Khazanchi" was released at the Krishna Cinema, the house was not an encouraging one and people began to say that the picture was a flop. On the fourth day of its run, my colleagues and I attended all the shows at the theatre to study the reaction of the audience. We noted everybody enjoyed the music.

So we at once made posters showing a gharrywallah singing the first line of the song, "Sawan ke nazare hain," and his horse doing the refrain "Ha ha! Ha ha!" For Nag Panchami our cartoonist depicted a snake-charmer singing the first line with the snake taking up the refrain.

The cartoon stimulated interest in the song and the film picked up well at the box-office. In fact, the songs all became hits and the picture did colossal business everywhere. In Bombay alone, it ran for nearly a year.

Film publicity is a dull routine today. It has lost the freshness it once had. Perhaps, this is the view of one who was in the field in the early days of the industry. But it also strikes me that the producer today is mentally exhausted when he completes his film. He spends fabulous sums of money, and once the picture is completed, he has no enthusiasm left to make him think of the best ways of exploiting it.

In those days, the film copy-writer's job was a specialised one. He knew to interpret films by means of the written word, to put the film across and "pre-sell" it. Today, much of this is done by the writers in film journalism.

Through the years the film industry and film journalism have grown up. They have also drawn closer together, and not only has this happened but they have also brought the public closer to our films.