

The Challenge Facing the American Film Producer

By HENRY USHIJIMA

The producers of both entertainment and commercial films are considered: the former must face the challenge of the home TV set and must create significant films for the motion-picture theater; and the commercial producer must make the client's problem his own problem and give to it not only his specialized abilities but also a lively and profound interest.

IN DISCUSSING the topic, one has to immediately answer the question, "What kind of film producer?"

If we are talking about the entertainment film -- the concept of the film we summarize in one word, *Hollywood* -- the challenge facing the film producer might be said to be a wooden or plastic box found in millions of living rooms. In that comparatively small box can be found all of Hollywood's magic -- plus the miracle of electronics. Looked at from this point of view, the producer of theatrical films has two clear choices, either to create some magic which cannot be found in the TV box, or to use the facilities and know-how of Hollywood to capture the new medium.

Obviously, Hollywood is embracing both these alternatives. In a sense, the situation today is only technically different from that of yesterday. Hollywood was always basically an industry. Like any other industry, it occupied itself with putting out a product with maximum sales possibilities. At the same time, a portion of Hollywood (or a portion of Hollywood's time) was devoted to putting out pictures of artistic merit pictures which justified speaking of the film as one of the Arts.

In essence, Hollywood is doing exactly the same thing today. The difference lies in the fact that the bulk of its product -- the routine result of routine work -- is not being exhibited in theaters, but on the TV screen. On the other hand, an even more clearly defined portion of Hollywood is concerned with creating pictures of significance; and these, instead of being exhibited on television, are seen in movie houses. In short, they have a magic which cannot be found in that box in the living room.

These comments are not made to minimize the dislocations and hardships which television has brought about in Hollywood. (In the first place, too many of our friends out there have suffered from them.) But we should make it clear that, in the long run, the crisis is temporary for Hollywood -- that is to say, for the film producer -- and permanent for

the exhibitor, for the operator of motion-picture theaters. Enough people will get out of their homes to see pictures as different as *Marty* and *The Ten Commandments* to make film producing profitable; but obviously film exhibition has to, and is, tailoring its investment to the size and character of the new audience.

With respect to the majority of Hollywood producers, then, we can say the challenge is twofold. There is the perennial challenge of trying to outguess the public on what it wants to see; and there is the new challenge of a vastly different marketing system to which they must tailor their product and their methods of production. With respect to those producers, largely independent, who continue to produce for theatrical exhibition, the challenge is immensely more difficult. In a word, what they have to do is to make good films -- and this, like writing a good book, or producing a good play, or painting a good picture, is not easily done. And in a world as complex and strife-torn as ours, it is a doubly difficult assignment.

Now a few words should be directed to a subject closer to home for most of us -- the challenge facing the producer of commercial films. Let us, to begin with, make a distinction between theatrical films and commercial films. Commercial films are almost invariably characterized by a limited, and usually quite specific, objective. We use many different forms and methods; but generally speaking, our objective can be put in a few words: show how this process works, show what this product will do, convince this group of people, get over that idea.

In short, the commercial film producer works in the closest relation with American Business. He simply brings his special talents to aid in the accomplishment of a task important to the given company or industry group. A commercial film producer, then, is one whose specialized abilities are used to help solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity. And I would say, with all the seriousness at my command, that the very first challenge facing a commercial producer is to be *interested* in the problem or opportunity. If one cannot develop a lively and profound interest in the problems which a client brings to a producer, one will be neither happy nor effective in his work.

I would go so far as to say that, assuming a professional knowledge and background in film-making, the basic qualification of a producer (and his organization) is this factor of interest. Let me expand that just enough to show how it leads to a second challenge. When a producer is genuinely interested in his client's business; when he has worked with, and comes to know, the people who are building that business; when he has wrestled with and analyzed the given problem in a cooperative effort with the people representing the client; then he finds that he has been facing a second challenge, the challenge of making the *client's* problem *his own* problem. Let me give an example.

A company came to me to have a film made. It was a small company, just beginning in its field. It had made a net profit the previous year of around \$60,000, and here it was, willing to spend \$15,000 on a film. To those of us who worked on the film, the realization that the company was spending a quarter of its annual profit on this single project represented a tremendous responsibility. Without attempting to assign credit, let me say that the film was highly successful. *Why?* I believe it was because we all shared the client's hopes; we shared his sense of urgency; in short, *His problem became our problem.*

One might feel that it is easier to develop interest in a situation of that sort, with a small company in which everything is quite personal, than with a large corporation. One might feel that when some industrial giant spends 50 or 75 or 100 thousand dollars on a film project, the sense of urgency is lacking; it is such a small percentage of the money they spend. But this is to forget the vital heart of the matter: that the producer works not just with the business, but with people. Somewhere in that giant corporation is a person or a group of people to whom the effectiveness of that film is a vital matter, because they are charged with the responsibility of having it made. If one's interest is in people, and in helping people accomplish their task, it doesn't matter what size the company is. The challenge is still the same: to work with someone else's problem with such an interest that its solution brings personal satisfaction, not only to the client, but to the producer.

It may seem strange that I have ignored so many important challenges to concentrate on this simple factor of interest. But I believe that interest, when coupled with know-how, is the foundation of successful commercial films -- and

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indeed, the foundation of a successful film-producing business. We are a service industry, and the value of our service depends upon how closely we identify ourselves with those for whom we perform

the service. And to the extent that our services are of real and tangible value, they will be sought. Which is another way of saying that the fundamental challenge to a producer of commercial films is to

think of himself, and make himself, a valuable partner to American industry. We exist and prosper to the extent that we serve American business and those who build it.

Producing the Sponsored Documentary Film

By HENRY USHIJIMA

There are some special requirements and techniques related to producing sponsored documentary films. The documentary is different from the story-film not only in preparation required but also in basic approach.

PROBABLY NO word in the motion-picture dictionary has been subjected to so much loose usage as documentary. There are company-history documentaries, product documentaries, sales-technique documentaries, and quite possibly on Madison Avenue they're even calling TV spots that tell how fast certain products get from the stomach to the bloodstream — medical documentaries. Of course, in Hollywood, documentary is, and always has been, a dirty word — dating back, perhaps, to the time when Robert Flaherty's *Moana of the South Seas* flopped at the boxoffice in no uncertain terms. The dictionary, having suffered no financial loss, manages to be both objective and specific: "a motion picture that records news events or shows social conditions without fictionalization." Let's accept that, as a starter.

In distinguishing between a "story-film" and documentaries, it is fairly obvious that the former is concerned with development of a plot, whereas the documentary's primary task is exposition of a theme. The two have very little in common in matters of approach, technique and production responsibilities. In the story-film, it is fair to say that the director is the key figure. In the documentary, and this may raise some eyebrows, it is the editor who exerts the determining influence on the shape of the film. Now, that is not to say that the term editor includes only the man at the cutting table. The documentary director, during shooting, should properly perform a combined director-editor function; and prior to that, the writer on the job should similarly anticipate end results and function dually as writer-editor. For a supporting opinion on that, the following is quoted from the book, *Documentary*, by Paul Rotha:

"Not until you come to cut do you realize the importance of correct analysis during camerawork and the essential need for preliminary observation. For unless your material has been understood from the inside, you cannot hope to bring it alive. No amount of cutting, short or otherwise, will give movement to shots in which movement does not already exist. No skill of cross-reference will add poetic imagery to your sequence if you have been unaware of your images during shooting. Your film is given life on the cutting bench, but you cannot create life unless the necessary raw stuff is to hand. Cutting is not confined to the cutting room alone. Cutting must be present all through the stages of production . . . script, photography and approach to natural material . . . finally to take concrete form as the sound is added."

Thus, ideally, the perfect documentary would be one in which the writer-director-editor functions are performed by a single person. Unfortunately there aren't many triple-threat geniuses around in the industry, probably because we have necessarily had to specialize. Even Flaherty didn't do his own editing — at least not in his later works. But the next best thing is a very close collaboration, from the very outset of production, among writer, director and editor. That, I submit, is one of the first ground rules of successful documentary production.

Now we come to a term that is usually associated with the chief opinion-maker of a daily newspaper — editorial honesty. It pertains to the documentary filmmaker, too. It is to the documentary what artistic integrity is to the story-film. Without editorial honesty, the newspaper editor descends to the lowly rank of propagandist — and so does the film-maker. And just as the former must resist dishonest advertiser bias, the film-maker must resist sponsor pressure if it is dishonestly motivated. The documentary stands or falls on the truth of what

it has to say. We should call this ground rule number two.

This is not to imply, of course, that the sponsor is not entitled to a voice in the project. He's paying for it, he's the customer, and without him the film probably wouldn't be made. In most cases it will be intended to serve some valid company purpose — or may, simply, be a goodwill gesture in the public interest. But, in any event, sponsor rights do not include wilful and deliberate falsification or distortion of facts.

It was stated earlier that the documentary has, as its primary task, exposition of a theme, which may be extended to say exposition and interpretation of a theme. And that adds another major responsibility. Most documentary subjects — whether an event, a project, a thing or a concept — largely dictate their own exposition. They write their own story, so to speak, as far as *what* happens is concerned. But the emphasis, both seen and heard, can be controlled by the filmmaker. His *interpretation* of the happenings will, in most cases, have a dominating influence on the film's audiences. And there is more than honesty involved here. Knowledge is required. He must know his subject well enough to qualify as an expert, or his interpretation will almost certainly be inept, incompetent and probably inadequate. So, "Be informed," is ground rule number three.

Now, to the uninitiated, it might seem that the documentary, and especially the documentary-report, is the easiest of all possible films to make. Not so! Oh, it's true that in most cases you start with a ready-made subject, whereas before there can be a *story-film*, the subject must be created, the story must be written. But once you have script in hand, production is a fairly orderly business. There is a sound basis for planning and scheduling — and you know exactly what you have to put in front of your cameras to effect the transfer of story from script to screen. But the documentarist — ah, he'd better know how to "shoot from the hip," or not pack a gun. His finest opportunities may be the impromptu happenings that can't be anticipated. You just pray, live

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