Hollywood Stars Speak German!

By BETH BURCHARD
Staff Writer, Information Bulletin

Apparently you "don't have to know the language" to be a movie star in Germany. Someone else can go through the gutturals while you get six bells at the box office and a whole nation full of new fans.

For instance, most of Hollywood's crop wouldn't claim a minute to know German. But drop into a west German theater some night and see for yourself what a little dubbing can do.

Everyone from Edward G. Robinson to Shirley Temple is doing love scenes all in Deutsch. It's all part of the program laid out by US movie companies to try their products on postwar Germany.

Net result? Bing Crosby is second at Berlin's box office, Mickey Mouse is enchanting the young set in Munich, and "The Song of Bernadette" continues to be the most popular film ever shown in a German postwar theater.

In 1945, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, then US commander in Germany, requested the Motion Picture Association of America to release some films to help fill the leisure time of Germans in cities newly conquered by American armies. There were a number of films already in the area, part of the troop entertainment program.

Selection boards were quickly set up by the Army and the MPEA. They worked on a double standard: to entertain the Germans and to give them the US-approved slant on what America — and democracy — were like. The movie companies made the first choices and the War Department said yes or no.

All distribution and dubbing of the films was under supervision of Military Government until the Motion Picture Export Association was formed in 1946. This organization was set up by 10 American companies — Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Twentieth Century-Fox, Paramount, RKO-Radio, United Artists, Allied Artists, Columbia, Warner Brothers, Universal and Republic — as an export association to handle distribution of US films...
to German theaters. By February 1948, though War Department screening of films continued, MPEA was in complete charge of distribution.

This organizational setup lasted almost two years. War Department screening of US films lasted until September 1949. The MPEA, which last year distributed 83 US movies, continued until Jan. 1, 1950, when it voluntarily dissolved itself.

Dissolution followed the formation of the German Federal Republic and the transfer of control to German authorities. Part of the basic policy announced by the United States at that time was to bolster a free and competitive market in all fields within Germany. The individual film companies simultaneously bowed out of MPEA and now work independently. Six of the original 10 maintain their own offices; the remaining four have German agents acting in their behalf. Independent film companies and producers have since stepped into the field — and films are slated to be shown soon under the auspices of David O. Selznick, Samuel Goldwyn, Walt Disney and other independents. As a result a great many more US films are entering Germany: 225 American films were available in April 1950 for distribution; during its whole four-year existence, MPEA released only 166.

All US film companies are located in Frankfurt, with branch offices in Munich, Duesseldorf, Hamburg and Berlin. All maintain their own publicity outlets, and in combination handle about 30 percent of all films shown in Germany.

Financially, MPEA was a cooperative. Films were selected for probable box office appeal and not according to who made them. Whatever revenue the films earned inside Germany was divided among the 10 companies in the same proportion as the companies profited from showings in the United States. This arrangement guaranteed that the German market wouldn’t be burdened with white elephants; it also made it possible for an individual film company to reap profit, even though its films were not shown to Germans. Nonetheless, this system continued until MPEA’s demise.

ONE MAN HAS been with MPEA since its inception and knows well the whole story of its ups and downs, successes, flops and idiosyncrasies. Marion F. Jordan served as manager of the organization until its end, now serves as liaison between the film companies and the German Federal Republic.

According to Jordan, selection was always a knotty problem. Commercially, the MPEA had few hints as to what would please German audiences. Prior to the war, each year from 1933 to 1940, approximately 30 US films of the shoot-'em-up variety had gotten past Nazi barriers into German theaters. But MPEA made its choices according to probable box office appeal, and left it to the War

20th Century-Fox location shots for "I Was A Male War Bride" were made in Germany with US Army cooperation and assistance. Cary Grant and Ann Sheridan are stars.
Department to nix selected films on grounds of immorality, irrelevance or misrepresentation.

Not only did the War Department turn down some MPEA films, it requested that others be added. There was an occasional tug-of-war between the two elements, but for the most part, says Jordan, their selections coincided. Those pictures which WD officials turned down may illustrate the unwritten code of selection.

"Gentlemen's Agreement" stayed out of Germany because its representation of American prejudice against Jews might have been used to whitewash German anti-Semitism. Gangster films in general were barred, as were any other films which seemed to misinterpret America. "Boomerang," a semi-documentary wherein politics interferes with justice, was likewise crossed off as a bad example. Even the mighty Tarzan couldn't crash German theaters in the beginning, because pictures about him seemed to the War Department totally irrelevant to re-orientation.

THE WAR DEPARTMENT conceived its screening mission in a strict sense; knowing there was but certain space and money available to display American films, these officials wanted each reel to count. They were adamant in striking from the rosters any movies which did not represent fairly the American scene — even "harmless" comedies, which ridiculed basic US institutions and laws, were rejected for German circulation.

Other films languished in Stateside vaults because MPEA-men bet on their failure before the German audiences. US movie-goers might rave over Abbott and Costello, or Laurel and Hardy, but it seemed to MPEA that German ticket-buyers would get along without them. (Abbott and Costello films have been shown in Germany since Jan. 1.)

For the same reason — that "US humor is US humor and only the US would laugh" — Bob Hope for a long while was completely unknown. But the box office pull of Bing Crosby (Germans chummily call him "Der Bingle") encouraged the movie men to hazard one of the famed "Road" pictures. It was a hit. From the "Road to Morocco," Bing and Bob took off on the "Road to Rio." Hope's stock is now secure enough to risk bringing in "The Paleface," with only Jane Russell's support.


MOST POPULAR OF ALL — and the most successful film ever shown in postwar Germany — was the film version of Franz Werfel's "Song of Bernadette." Eighty-two-year-old Catholic Cardinal Faulhaber attended the Munich premiere of the film, the first time in the history of the church a cardinal had attended a public performance. His radio talk afterward, urging Catholics to see the film, undoubtedly had a great deal to do with its ultimate record at the box office, particularly in Catholic Bavaria.

Berlin saved most of its laurels for "Ninotchka," a satire on Russian bureaucrats starring Greta Garbo. It wasn't shown in Berlin until three days after the city-wide elections, on Dec. 8, 1947. It ran 17 weeks in a first-run theater, and bagged hundreds of Russians in its audience. It was apparently bad policy for Russian sol-
Theaters to view the showings — movie-goers said they could count the Russians present by the number who arose one minute before the picture's end and slunk from the theater before the lights went on.

Despite its huge success in Germany, the MPEA had fears in the beginning about showing the Academy-Award-winning "Best Years of Our Lives." A group of journalists in Berlin, having been given and advance preview of the show, was skeptical at its representation of "lush American life," says Jordan. He faced a classroom-full of them to point out that there was nothing frivolous in the problems of a veteran who had lost both hands (portrayed by Harold Russell in the film). But to guarantee an understanding audience, the movie men staged a series of premieres for it, dedicating all proceeds to returning German prisoners of war.

Thereafter the press responded warmly, giving it wide attention and favorable criticism. Fifteen hundred Berliners attended the premiere of "Best Years" in the Titania Palast. A German journalist writing in March of this year said, "The warmhearted and homely atmosphere of 'Best Years' captivated the German audience."

Special groups found the movie story of Father Flanagan's "Boys' Town" of great interest, and besides regular showings, it traveled a circuit all its own among welfare and sociological audiences.

Disney's "Snow White" (Schneewittchen) managed that rarity in German movie-houses, a hold-over. In some cases, the normal three or four-day runs were extended to three and four weeks, and RKO received telegrams from Karlsruhe to Hamburg naming it the most popular film in the theaters' individual histories.

AUDIENCE REACTION to American films has been varied: opinion divides among Germans in the US Zone as to whether Hollywood movies give a true impression of how the average American lives. The largest group of those who say (from public opinion surveys) that the movies fail in this respect accuse Hollywood movies of portraying a world of unreality.

When asked what they thought to be the basis for selecting the US movies sent to Germany, people answered, "to familiarize Germans with the American way of life;" "for democratic indoctrination;" and "for their cultural value."

But in fact box-office has the greatest pull in selection of films. American companies are watching response closely, hoping to bring in more money-makers. "More and more customers are sick up to their noses of criminal films from any country," said one salesman. American films have to be somewhere in between the foolish and the problematical, he says — if they're foolish, Germans think them unreal; if they're problematical, Germans would rather see films about German problems.

"You don't hear much about the Wild West pictures, but the juveniles here eat them up, especially on the small-town circuits. Randolph Scott and John Wayne are big heroes. But sometimes there's too much shooting."

GETTING AMERICAN films into German movie-houses in the first place isn't a matter of just putting them on a ship. A lot of fastidious editing and dubbing must come first.

Only one print of each American film is released in its original English-language form. With sub-titles in German, these prints go into the so-called "class" theaters. For the rest of the prints (about 30), a translation is made and dubbed by German speaking actors and actresses.

Posters tell advent of MGM as independent firm in Germany.
First step for the synchronization is preparation of a rough translation, following exactly the original script. Then the film is divided into sequences, and the central thought of each is adapted with the translated script into a dialogue that is appropriate to the German mentality and that synchronizes well with the players' lip movements. Scripts are thereupon painstakingly checked.

One of the most exacting of the preparatory tasks is the selection of voices to take the American actors' parts. Clark Gable in a falsetto or Margaret O'Brien with a bass voice could undermine an otherwise flawless film, and the dubbing directors know it well. They make scrupulous selections from a pool of German talent; the dubbing directors have listings of hundreds of available actors and actresses.

Twelve pictures monthly are synchronized in Berlin; the same number in Munich, where theater activity is customarily greatest and the greatest variety of voices is thus available. Dubbing has given an appreciable lift to the movie activity in both cities. Dubbing directors have plenty of policy problems. What, one might ask, is Bing Crosby without his voice? Policy has been to allow a German actor to put words in Der Bingle's mouth until the music comes up, and from then on and for every musical number, the original English sound track is used.

But most of the time Germans do not hear the voices of American stars nor have they seen them in person. Few of filmland's glamorous girls and masculine idols have made visits to postwar Germany. Of the few that have been here, most have participated in film-making. Twentieth-Century-Fox has made "I Married a War Bride" with Ann Sheridan and Cary Grant, and "The Big Lift" (a story of the Berlin airlift) with Paul Douglas and Montgomery Clift. Paramount filmed "A Foreign Affair," starring Marlene Dietrich, Jean Arthur and John Lund. All location shots were made in Germany.

DEUTSCHE MARKS, not huge Hollywood fortunes, were used for German services in making these films. At present, most US movie revenue remains inside Germany in the form of D/Mark bank accounts. Limited convertibility contracts have been signed with ECA, but the amounts which may be changed into dollars represent, according to Jordan, just out-of-pocket dollar expenses.

Any rumors that American companies are hoarding huge fortunes in Germany were denied by Jordan. The 10 companies he represented have spent close to DM 10,000,000 in building up their staffs and headquarters within Germany. They now employ approximately 1,000 persons; in addition an average of 500 actors, dubbing directors and editors are employed each month for dubbing activities. "Fortunes" go fast on such programs.

A good portion of the MPEA's revenue likewise has gone into the German economy in the form of direct taxes — DM 2,000,000 was paid by MPEA during its final two years.

Germany's economy has been enriched from another movie source: since the war, approximately DM 85,000,000 has been turned over to government bodies from taxes on individual admission tickets.

Despite these advantages to the German government, American films have called forth a mounting chorus of worried comment from German movie-makers, newspapers and officialdom. One potent voice is that of chairman Rudolf Vogel of Bonn's parliamentary film committee, who recently said there is grave danger of western Germany's film industry being swamped by Hollywood.

Whatever the extent, it is certain that US films are more than holding their own at the box office. From 47 to 73 percent of the people in the American zone, Berlin and Bremen have seen one or more American films since war's end; 33 percent of Berliners believe American movies are superior to those of any other producing nation. Although slightly more than half of the moviegoers in these areas prefer German films, a sizable minority say they like German and American produced films about equally well.

IN A RECENT PUBLIC opinion survey taken in the American zone, people asked to name a film of the type they would like to see mentioned US-made films more often than those of any other nation, including Germany.

Hollywood film stars rank high on the popularity list: a sample poll in Berlin shows Berlin-born Marlene Dietrich, Sweden's Ingrid Bergman and Greta Garbo, third, fourth and fifth at the box office. Bing Crosby, James Stewart and Alan Ladd, also Berlin favorites, take second, fourth and sixth rank among the males.

Last year 150 foreign films, half of which were American, were shown in Germany. As of April 1950, almost 1,000 films — about three times the number the market can absorb — were being offered by 71 distributors to the 4,000 cinema owners in west Germany.

The breakdown was as follows:

Four hundred old German films (produced prior to 1945); 225 American films; 120 British films; 80 German films produced since 1945; 79 French films; 50 Austrian films; 14 Swedish films; and less than 10 films apiece from Italy, Switzerland, Denmark, Hungary, Spain, Mexico and Finland.

In effect, about eight percent of the films available were new German productions, 40 percent were old Ger-
man films, 51 percent were imports; and 22.5 percent were American films.

In face of this competition, Germany produced some 73 films last year, this year is off to a slow start. Bonn officials estimate the industry must turn out at least 60 films per year in order to survive.

THE US FILM industry is cognizant of Germany’s competitive plight, and has set up a marketing advisory unit in New York which lends its help to all foreign movie men who wish to exhibit their pictures in America. Aid is given the foreign companies by producers, distibutors, exhibitors and public relations men on the advisory board; a liaison man from each country works with the board. Although Germany has not yet joined the working group it is expected to do so soon. This project has ECA backing.

The home offices of MPEA members are similarly working to protect US films in Germany, as in all foreign lands. Careful screening of all scripts and completed films is made by an MPEA unit which criticizes them from the point of view of fairness to foreign elements and their probable reception by the overseas audience.

This unit sees to it that Germans are sympathetically represented and not all relegated to roles of uniformed Nazi “villains.” It is such attention that keeps US films acceptable to German audiences.

Jordan, however, says that the American industry still has a giant selling job ahead. The US movie future will depend to a great extent, he says, upon official German attitudes. There are presently two trends in the wind: the German government is naturally and properly trying to promote a home-grown film industry and has already initiated a program for placing all film imports on a reciprocal basis in line with the policy: “Don’t import anything for which you cannot pay in money or goods.”

And there is a natural but prevalent reaction to US films — the world around men and women believe that anything foreign is not as good as something homemade. (In the US, for example, a French, British or Italian film is considered something of a curiosity.) On an official, as well as consumer level, then, the German film is considered preferable to the American.

To boost American films, and to counteract rumors of falseness and fortunes, the MPEA representatives have in the works an information sheet. Slated for publication in April, the sheet was to go to the press, to government officials and German movie-makers, and will periodically tell the true story of American aims and operations in Germany.

Through this medium, through careful selection of films and careful marketing, the US film producers hope to maintain in Germany an expanding audience and a useful tool in the democratization of the German populace.

Democratization Program Praised in Senate

DEMOCRATIZATION ACTIVITIES in the city and county of Munich were called to the attention of members of the United States Senate recently in an address by US Senator Wayne L. Morse (Rep., Ore.), and a full account of the program under way there during the past year appears in the Congressional Record.

HICOG’s democratization program in Munich is directed by George H. Godfrey, senior resident officer, and Chester S. Wright, resident officer. Both officials have been in Germany since the close of the war and served with Military Government before transferring to the State Department last October.

Senator Morse, who visited Germany in 1946 and has taken a keen interest in developments here, obtained the information for his talk before the Senate from a news release issued in January by the Public Relations Branch of OLCB. The release described the town meeting program, the democratic attitude of Munich city officials, the full reorientation program, Munich Youth Forum, and various other projects under way in Munich. (For text of release with photographs, see “Democracy in Munich” in March issue of the Information Bulletin.)

“The statement shows, I think, very clearly,” he told the Senate, “that democratic processes can be put to work in Germany. I commend the statement to the reading of the Senate, and I commend the State Department resident officers in Munich for what I think is a fine example of American leadership.

“I think the town meeting program developed in Munich is a clear demonstration that the German people can be led to an understanding of the values of self-government.

“In the fall of 1946 I visited Munich, and I was satisfied then that the people of that area of Germany were anxious to put into practice the principles of democracy, if they received the instruction, information and leadership to lead them away from a Fascist type of government to a democratic one. The American resident officers are apparently doing a grand job. I am sure the same results can be obtained elsewhere in Germany.”

SENATOR MORSE asked and received the Senate’s “unanimous consent” to read into the Congressional Record the OLCB release which he explained, “deals with democratic processes being placed in operation in Munich.”

Clarence M. Boldt, the US state commissioner for Bavaria, said Senator Morse’s action in bringing Munich’s democratization efforts to the direct attention of the US Senate and, through the Congressional Record, to the American people, should give renewed hope and encouragement to Germany as a whole.

“It shows,” he declared, “that the sincere efforts by Germans to build a nation that will be respected and trusted by peoples everywhere are being closely watched. While the American people do not hesitate to criticize when necessary, they are the first to give praise when it’s due.”

MAY 1950