When you see a German-'dubbed' film, you may neither understand the dialogue nor recognize the voice, but the chances are you'll discover

The Face is Familiar

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The Heads of Two Young Women, professional actresses selected to speak in the German version of the Italian movie, Vulcano, were silhouetted blackly against the screen. Half a dozen people occupied chairs along the walls.

Nothing was said. A scene from Vulcano flashed briefly across the screen, lasting perhaps 20 seconds. There was a pause, then it appeared again—the same scene, but with the Italian dialogue cut out. It reappeared with the dialogue tuned back in. It was repeated in the silent version, and this time the actresses could be heard whispering animatedly.

One of the men seated at the side of the darkened studio spoke. Once again the screen revealed the sisters in the Italian movie in a vivid word-exchange, but with a radical difference. They were speaking German—or, rather, their German "doubles" had spoken for them, addressing a regular studio microphone.

The "live" German voices, substituted for the recorded Italian, duplicated amazingly and almost flawlessly the tone and expression of the original.

One had the momentary impression that he had been tricked somehow, that he had actually witnessed an interchange of languages by two linguistically-talented Italian movie stars.

An absorbing moment in the German-language production of a foreign film, the studio incident served to highlight one of the most exacting tasks of the movie-synchronizer: "dubbing."

Making German Films out of movies produced in other countries has become an industry netting well over DM 6,000,000 ($1,428,000) annually in Berlin, Germany’s greatest contemporary synchronization capital. Translations of approximately 90 feature films are completed annually by Berlin’s five major "dubbers," with a handful more coming out of studios operated by a number of smaller organizations. Some 60 percent of all films translated are currently Hollywood products, while the remainder come from Italy, France, Spain, England and other countries.

Though not otherwise the subject of rejoicing among professional film people, Germany’s relative poverty of top-notch movie-producers puts bread in the mouths of the synchronizers, and incidentally of many an industrious actor and actress as well. Six of every 10 films making the rounds of West Berlin and West German theaters these days are synchronized foreign films.

The German translation of a script must naturally conform to accepted rules of grammar and the standards set by colloquial usage. In other words, it has to be couched in correct, up-to-date German. But the requirements do not end there. As the script is written expressly to permit vocal synchronization into German of a film which, presumably, contains action, expression and other essential ingredients of a modern movie, it has also to be written in such a way that it matches, as far as possible, the sound and syllabification of the spoken word in the original.

The translators of film scripts, a separate breed working on contract with the film-synchronization firms, run into a number of major headaches, but perhaps the most painful is making their German product match the original script in length. A German paragraph, they point out, ordinarily runs about one-third longer than a paragraph expressing the same ideas in English, the language most commonly confronting them.

European tongues, somewhat more verbose than English, are none the less more chary of words and more sparing of syllables than the German. Needless to relate, the final German script is a finely-drawn masterpiece to which professional script-writers and bilingual translators have devoted many long, painstaking hours.

Evitably Some Films, among them slang-filled American Westerns, lose flavor in the translation despite the best efforts of the language experts. There

Dubbing in German dialogue for a scene from the Italian film "Vulcano," two German actresses (silhouettes at right, foreground) keep pace with action on the screen.
is, in addition, no adequate means of expressing in German the essential vigor and color of distinctive dialects, some of which are inextricably based on unique vocal habits like the prairie drawl or the Bronx twang.

Conscientious in their trade, they feel a departure from the sense of an original statement or passage — no matter how necessary — more keenly than the spectacle of a cowboy speaking good, if somewhat drawly, Hanoverian German.

Once the script is — literally — hewn into shape, it is ready for the synchronizers. Their next task involves testing and selecting actors and actresses, one for each of the film’s speaking roles.

The files of Berlin’s synchronization firms are filled with the names of local German artists whose voices, in tonal quality, correspond with those of noted American, French, Italian and other actors and actresses, and in some cases no more is required than picking a name from the files, making a telephone call, and running a sound test. In other cases the problem is not so easily resolved. Among the world’s top performers are many, most of them men, whose range of expression enables them virtually to “change voices” from film to film.

THE SYNCHRONIZERS NAME Spencer Tracy as the possessor of one of the most “difficult” voices on the modern screen, noting that as many as four or five different German actors may be required effectively to register his voice-mood in an equal number of movies.

A couple of weeks generally pass after an original script has been given to the translators for rendition into German, and before the film moves into the studio. In the meantime the actors and actresses are chosen, a director is appointed, and the film is sliced finely into as many as 800 “takes,” or brief sequences lasting 20 to 30 seconds each. Directors are hired for synchronization on the basis of their experience and success with various types of the art-form; in other words, the director known to be expert in the production of flaming romances will be selected, normally, to direct dubbing of similar films, while the scientific master of drama-on-the-high-seas movies will find himself signing a contract to supervise studio synchronization of a film falling in that category.

In the studio the director supplants the synchronization firm, his employer, as boss of the show; and while not often a competitor of famous and colorful directors in the department of tempestuous studio behavior, the synchronization director is inevitably a man who has earned esteem in his calling.

ONE OF THE INDISPENSABLE prerequisites of the director’s job is infinite patience. For a period of several weeks he spends long days in the studio trying to extract from the artists working under him the optimum in voice performance. As the synchronization actor’s efforts depend entirely on his ability to imitate a foreigner’s speech, the director cannot demonstrate by suiting the act to the word.

Instead, he must personally be able to mimic, vocally, the actors of different foreign nations, or know at least how to direct by oral order. During dubbing-in of the epithets cast by the principals in a barroom brawl, he cannot leap up, tear off his shirt and slug it out—with either the air or a human opponent. Such a performance would only distract the attention of the studio group, and would put the director in open competition with the actors on the studio screen.

Further, the director works of necessity in a darkened studio, often enough with another language sounding to his unfamiliar ear like no more than a steady flow of clever animal noises. The result is that the quality of the dubbing depends to a large extent on the actor’s agility with his larynx and on the director’s patience and skill. In striving to elicit perfect duplication of the specific sample of voice action, the director works with one eye on the screen and an ear cocked to the fine tonal variations in his artists’ voices.

A single take is often recorded and re-recorded 10 or 20 times before the director is satisfied that he has one series of German sounds which adequately reproduces Checking as many as 20 recordings of a single scene, operator watches a short run to select the one which corresponds best to lip movements of the original film.
the sense, emotional content and pace of the original dialogue, and which also so matches the movie “take” that the untrained witness can be led to believe that he is watching performers who naturally speak German.

FROM THE STUDIO the “takes” and the corresponding voice recordings are transferred to a cutting room where, using a special machine, another technician selects the recordings which most perfectly match the lip-movements of the actors in each separate “take.” Recordings are then clipped and spliced to form a single, continuous German dialogue track. The cutter is actually an editor who hears, weighs, matches, sorts and connects tangled masses of sound-track and film celluloid to produce one movie with one German dialogue.

From that point the human element in the synchronization process fades out gradually as machines take over. The reels of film with their new — and still separate — German sound-track go into a projection room for an “audition” by director and synchronization firm officials, who view the product as it will appear in German moviehouses. If passed for further processing, black-and-white reels are re-exposed in an operation that simultaneously cuts in the new sound-track. The number of new prints depends on the film, though normally approximately 30 copies of the German version are made.

German-language prints of new Italian films, many of which have achieved enormous success in German theaters, have numbered as many as 60 in recent months. No better barometer of their popularity exists, excluding box-office proceeds; the dubbers bypass mediocre movies and total flops with equal facility when selecting films for synchronization, basing their final choice on the film’s reputation and on the estimated response it will awaken in Germany. They are seldom wrong.

With completion of developing, fixing, drying and some minor hand-processing, the dubbed black-and-white films are ready for issue to theater owners. Copies of color films are made by their producers, in the producers’ own laboratories. In this way the film companies protect their individual color formulas.

Music presents the synchronizers with a special problem, since it sometimes happens that the original music-track, for one reason or another, is unusable in the movie’s German version. Where this occurs, the synchronization firm hires an orchestra and records its own background noise, employing basically the method used in the dubbing-in of German voices.

A costly necessity, recording film music also ranks among the synchronizer’s worst temporal enemies. Scores must be obtained, generally by mail from the producer of the original movie, and the orchestra, like the German artists, must “perform” to a partially darkened studio, under the baton of a director who is simultaneously watching the movie for which the music was written.

Re-recording movie music lengthens the translation-synchronization process from six or eight weeks to as long as three or four months, and substantially raises the costs of production.

In the average case these costs run to approximately DM 40,000 ($9,520) or DM 50,000 ($11,900), a figure which includes the salaries of the 100 or more artists and technicians engaged in the synchronization of each film.

THOUGH DUBBING as an industry has lost some of its pristine financial pre-eminence as a result of official, quantitative limitations on importation of foreign films, it remains a thriving business pursuit. Its peak year was reached in 1948, when the industry brought DM 10,000,000 ($2,380,000) into Berlin.

Seventy percent of all foreign films synchronized into German are currently being processed in the former German capital — largely because of the intercession of HICOG Berlin Element’s Film Section. The city’s struggling economy is thereby receiving a solid fillip in the direction of normalcy.