

Eyes and Ears of the World

Millions of people who do not understand foreign languages are able to appreciate films from France or Japan or from any country in the world, thanks to the skill of Mai Harris and others like her.

BEFORE the cinema learned to talk, when action was unable to speak louder than words, the words were transmitted to the audience by sub-titles. The coming of sound was not to do away with the sub-titler's art; for language barriers had to be overcome if the film was to be a truly international art. The subtitle became the most effective way of giving a good film its necessary passport to travel to foreign shores.

The majority of people who see French, Italian, German, Russian and other foreign films in Britain rely on the skill of the sub-titler for much of their enjoyment. The sub-titler can ruin a good film—or help its transition in such a way that very little of its original atmosphere is lost.

In spite of what is often very clever dubbing (as in the majority of the mammoth Italian spectacles and largely visual pictures like *M. Hulot's Holiday*), the use of English dialogue in a Continental film (as in *The Wages of Fear*), and the growing practice of making pictures in both English-speaking as well as native versions (like Clément's *Knave of Hearts* and Delannoy's *Marie Antoinette*), the market for good, subtitled pictures is expanding.

Universal Art

This is due partly to the increasing shortage of the more orthodox Hollywood product, but it is also due to the success many titled pictures have already had when distributed on a big scale in this country. It is a step nearer making the film the universal art form it was before the coming of sound.

Nearly all foreign films shown publicly in Britain are titled over here, the main exception being Japanese films which reach us via the United States. About eight out of every ten of them pass through the able and experienced hands of a short, hard-working, dynamic Englishwoman in her early 'forties—Mai Harris.

Miss Harris has a tiny eyrie of an office high above Wardour Street. Her cutting-room is always crowded with the never-ending flow of new pictures to title.

The first film she sub-titled was Max Ophüls' *Liebelei*, and that happened only by chance.

Continental Childhood

A Continental childhood, plus an inborn flair, gave her an ability in languages that even in these cosmopolitan days is enviable, embracing as it does nearly a dozen European tongues, including Danish, Russian, Greek and Spanish. Though the cinema had always attracted her, she had no thought of entering the industry. Her acceptance of the job of secretary to the managing director of the London Academy Cinema, was fateful. Quite by accident, the usual tiler being unavailable, she was given the Ophüls' film to do herself as it was wanted in a hurry. She looks back nostalgically on those days, when foreign films in England were the prerogative of a small clique linked to the Academy Cinema and the London Film Society, which often had to import themselves anything they wanted to show. Sub-titles could then be geared to the needs of those who

By **DAVID GUNSTON**

LEADER: Mai Harris, who began preparing sub-titles for foreign films when Ophüls' *Liebelei* reached Britain in the mid-thirties, now prepares eight out of ten foreign films reaching Britain. She has a knowledge of more than a dozen languages.

Photo: London Evening News



generally had some knowledge of languages—and then, all the films handled were artistically worthwhile.

The situation today is vastly different, with the crush of foreign distributors falling over one another to gain bookings for the latest "epic," frothy confection or sex-and-crime piece from the Continent. The present popularity of foreign language films, in spite of all the skill possible in dubbing, has enabled Mai Harris since 1953 to manage an independent sub-titling and editing unit, in which she employs four helpers (three girls, one man), and to produce British-release versions that have earned her unsolicited praise from sensitive directors as diverse as Renoir, Clair and Dreyer.

The sub-titler's craft is beset by many pitfalls. Titles on a film intended for a big circuit release must be easily intelligible to the everyday audience as well as easy to read swiftly. They must not be ambiguous or give any possible offence—and they must first be approved on paper by the British Board of Film Censors.

Screen Shapes

They must never contain the slightest errors of grammar or spelling, for these things look ghastly when greatly enlarged on a screen. And nowadays, with the top-and-tailing of the picture frame by the ubiquitous wide-screen, they must never be more than two lines long. There may be anything from 400 titles (for a largely visual picture like *Day of Wrath*) to 1,500 or more (for a wordy Pagnol offering).

The film to be subtitled is run through at a preview theatre for Miss Harris (and with dubious subjects, the Censor also) and it is then decided what style of dialogue will be used. After one or two showings on the large screen the film is run through on a movieola spool by spool and, dialogue script beside her, Miss Harris marks the beginning and end of sentences on the actual film with a wax crayon. With these guiding marks she can see how much time she has to run the sub-title on the screen, fully translating the dialogue being spoken. "Fully translating" does not mean necessarily word for word but rather, getting the full meaning of the sentence over to the audience without being verbose.

When the captions are written, they are sent to a printer and are mounted on white card. The printed cards are sent to the laboratory where a "control" band is made. The control band is a piece of film that is run at a slow speed next to the film to be titled. An operator has a cue sheet with each caption marked on it. As each caption comes up, she stops the film

and makes a punch mark on the control band. When it goes to the laboratory to be printed with its English sub-titles, the control band operates an optical printer. As each punch mark goes through, the printer automatically records the captions on the film.

With colour film there are two processes used to print the titles on the film. One is the "optical" black and white method described above which proves expensive if only a few prints are required. The other is a dye-stamping method. The caption is made into a printer's "block" and stamped on the film by hand, the impression being etched out with acid.

What It Costs

Miss Harris has to check each film by a final screening before it is returned for release to the always impatient distributors, the cost to whom is, in all, seldom less than £400 per feature.

Her work is full of compromise. The Censor she finds very helpful. There are a number of words that he will not permit on the screen. For example, "virgin" ends up in the sub-titled version as "innocent girl." The word "mistress" used to be taboo but is now accepted. Swear words, references to God and dialogue that refers in a distasteful way to sex are also out.

Banned Dialogue

Although this "banned" dialogue must not be translated, it is often allowed to stay in the film to avoid cutting the picture itself. If you know the language, you can cheat the Censor! In *Gervaise*, which deals with "low" life, the characters say what they mean without beating about the bush. The language, translated, would certainly not meet with the Censor's approval. The compromise on this occasion was: no translation but the sound track can remain.

Although she has personally titled many dozens of films from many lands, as well as fitted English and American films with foreign language titles for export or festival screenings, Mai Harris retains a deep love of the cinema, without which her work would be intolerable. She enjoys dramatic films on her unofficial visits to the cinema; but her choice is quite the opposite when it comes to working on foreign pictures. "It gives me a great thrill to hear an audience laughing at a comedy film for which I have done the English translation," she says. One of the series she has enjoyed doing most is the Don Camillo films.