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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

FILMS, FIRES AND "UNFAIR" COMPETITION

DURING the war years the use in New Zealand of 16mm. (or "sub-standard") film has considerably increased. To a large extent this type of film has been used for instructional or entertainment purposes among the Armed Forces, but its popularity with the civilian public has also been steadily growing. Indeed it has grown to such an extent that members of the film trade (that is, the people who screen the standard 35mm. film in commercial theatres) are apparently becoming alarmed at what they regard as an encroachment on their own preserves.

At least, that is the inference I draw from a letter which the Chief Inspector of Films has recently sent out, suggesting that a conference be held in September to consider the question of applying the Cinematograph Films Act to 16mm. film. Since the full application of this Act to this type of film could have no other result, I think, than to curtail its use, the public has good reason to be interested in this impending conference. That is also my reason for drawing attention to it here. We shall, of course, not know exactly what lies behind this move until the conference has been held and its findings have been published, but in the meantime no jumping is necessary to reach certain conclusions.

THE letter I have mentioned (my copy, I should perhaps make clear, reached me from a non-official source) begins by stating that the general regulations under the Cinematograph Films Act have hitherto been applied to sub-standard film

only so far as was necessary to ensure that the film used was of the cellulose acetate (or non-inflammable) type, the reason being that until recently there has been a comparatively small quantity of this film in circulation, mostly of an advertising and educational nature. Nevertheless, most public screenings have been subject to licence under the Act. (The general regulations provide for the issue of a licence for the sum of 1/- to cover projection in not more than ten places of cinematograph film solely for advertising, educational, or religious purposes, or exhibitions for which no remuneration is received by the licensee.)

The letter continues:

Conditions in the use of this film appear to be altering. The 16mm. film in particular, and its projection equipment, is much cheaper, lighter, and more convenient for occasional screenings than the standard type. During the war years it has come into considerable use for both educational and entertainment purposes for the Armed Forces, and there now appears to be available a considerable quantity of purely entertainment film. The tendency to duplicate the regular entertainment films, both shorts and feature, on 16mm. stock, also appears to be increasing.

The question was recently discussed at a meeting of the Film Industry Board, and representations were made to the Department [of Internal Affairs] that this type of film was now being used in a manner making it competitive with the standard picture theatre entertainment. Instances were quoted of screenings in country towns on the same night as the regular picture show—usually for the purposes of raising funds for charitable or patriotic purposes, but also on occasion for clubs and other institutions not coming within this category. Attention was also directed to advertisements by trading concerns offering to supply both regular supplies of 16mm. film for public screenings, or to arrange screenings in private homes, or in a theatre.

It has been the desire of the Department not to interfere more than is necessary with the use of this "non-flam" sub-standard film

for private entertainment purposes. It would appear, however, that the question of regulating its use for public entertainment should now be considered. It is recognised that the "non-flam" film is much less hazardous than the standard nitrocellulose type, but the conditions of projection are the same and there is much the same risk of panic should a fire occur. There is therefore the same necessity for ensuring that public projection is only carried out in premises with adequate exit facilities. A licensing system appears to be the only means of ensuring this.

In view of the position set out above, the Department proposes to call a conference of all interests concerned in the exhibition of sub-standard films, including the owners of film libraries, advertising concerns, religious authorities, Education and Service Departments, together with the representatives of the regular film industry. It is desired to know whether you would be interested to attend such a conference, the purpose of which would be mainly to consider the following questions:—

- Whether, and to what extent, licensing is necessary to provide for the safety of the public in the exhibition of sub-standard "non-flam" film.
- Whether the distribution of sub-standard film is, or should be, subject to the Film Hire Tax legislation and whether, and to what extent, it should be regulated either in conjunction with the exhibition licensing, or to provide improved facilities for the distribution of educational film.
- Whether, and to what extent, the exhibition of "non-flam" film for various purposes should be regarded as competitive with the regular industry and therefore subject to the regulations limiting the number of licences issued.

MY inference is that the film trade has complained about the increased screening of 16mm. film, and that the Chief Inspector of Films, who is simply the authority through whom theatre licensing operates, as well as being the officer who deals with such matters as fire-risks and the storage of explosives, has convened this conference as the best means of coping with the situation.

It may turn out to be a fairly explosive situation, for there is likely to be strong opposition in several quarters to any attempt by "the trade" to limit the use of 16mm. film. There is, for example, the Education Department, which is making wide and increasing use of films in schools; there is the Public Works Department, which not only maintains a film lending library, but also operates a film production unit; there is the National Film Library at Miramar, handling a growing demand for this type of material. The Departments of Agriculture and Health are also likely to be concerned, for both use 16mm. films as a means of furthering their work. On the non-Governmental side there are organisations like the Shell Film Unit, Educational Sound Films, and others which exist to circulate this type of film. Then there are all the amateur film-makers and cinematograph clubs; the Community Centres in being and others still in embryo which look to the 16mm. film as an important part of their programme; the W.E.A. groups which use it; the school committees and church groups and clubs up and down the country which depend on 16mm. film screenings as an important source of revenue. And so on. Nor does this take account of that already large and expanding army

(continued on next page)

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