

A DUTCHMAN MAKES UP HIS MIND

Plan to Produce Documentaries in N.Z.

BETWEEN 4.30 p.m. on Wednesday, July 24, and 2.30 p.m. on Thursday, July 25, something happened which may have an effect on film production in New Zealand. Between those times a Dutchman named Max De Haas decided, almost at the last moment, to take his bags off the ship in Wellington which would have carried him and his wife back to Holland, and to stay on here instead, with a view to making documentary films.

When I first met Mr. De Haas on the Wednesday afternoon I didn't know much about him, though I had heard there was a notable Dutch film director staying in Dunedin, following his release from a Japanese internment camp in the East Indies. We had an interesting but fairly brief talk then and Mr. De Haas said he was sorry that the meeting hadn't come about until he was on the point of leaving, but if I wanted an interview for *The Listener* I could have it, because he hoped to come back to New Zealand some day to make films, and an interview might help people to remember him. He seemed really cast down at the prospect of leaving this country.

What happened between that afternoon and the next to make Mr. De Haas decide to let the ship go without him, I don't know. I am sure it wasn't anything I had said, though I had expressed the view that there should be plenty of scope in this country for his kind of film-making. Anyway, when he came in next day he cheerfully announced that he wasn't going after all. He had thought things over carefully and had come to the conclusion that the opportunity was too good to let slip. "I have been so much struck during my stay by the unusual beauty of this country, and the possibilities of making worthwhile films, that I am now going ahead to try to put some of my ideas into effect," he said. "I intend to bring equipment from the Netherlands—I have a partner there—and set up a production company to make films here. There's no intention of competing with the existing National Film Unit; after all, there's comparatively so little film production here, and so few real film craftsmen, that no reason for competition exists. I have connections throughout Europe, and have no doubt that I can arrange for the films which I make here to be shown in European theatres. I think it may be a revelation to the people of Europe to see such interpretations of your life and your country."

SO much for the ambitions and plans of Mr. De Haas. As for Mr. De Haas himself, he carries credentials from the Netherlands Government, the leader of the Dutch Labour Party, and others, which speak of him as one of the foremost film-makers of Holland. He told me that in eight years between 1932 and 1940 he made about 100 documentary and propaganda films, and was the only man in Holland who specialised in that type of picture.

Nineteen years ago, at the age of 24, he was editing a film paper in Holland. Writing and reading about films aroused

his interest in them so much that he joined a Dutch film company, but fairly soon decided to go his own way. In 1932 he formed his own production unit and ran it until 1940, when the Nazis attacked Holland.

He escaped to England and stayed there a short time and then, at the request of the Netherlands Government went to Java to make films warning the people of Indonesia against the Japanese threat. He made three such films, and one of them, *Aggressors Look at You* (an attack on Hitler, Tojo, and the rest) was screening in the theatres at the moment the Japanese arrived in Batavia. Fortunately all copies were destroyed just in time, otherwise (as Mr. De Haas succinctly put it) he wouldn't be here now.

"In Java the night before capitulation I was talking to Dr. van Mook and he wanted me to get away to Australia and to go on making films there for the Dutch Government against the Japanese. But at the last moment I couldn't get on a plane. For three years my wife and I were in an internment camp and every time my name was called for me to go to the office I said good-bye to my friends. I thought the Japanese must have found one of those films I'd made and knew who I was and that it was the end of me. But somehow they didn't find out."

Since he came to New Zealand Mr. De Haas has been mostly in Dunedin. But in the past five months he has travelled a good deal round the South Island admiring our scenery. And he has also spent a lot of time in the library reading about us. What he has seen and read is already reflected in several draft film scripts which he has written. It is also reflected, of course, in his decision to stay here and, if all goes as he hopes, to turn the scripts into celluloid.

APPARENTLY the Dutch became aware earlier than some other nations of the value of the film as a medium of direct propaganda and publicity. A good many of the short films which Mr. De Haas made between 1932 and 1940 were sponsored and produced to order to sell some particular product or idea, or to create goodwill for some organisation, in much the same way as commercial radio programmes are produced. The film with which Mr. De Haas launched his producing career in 1932 was made on behalf of a teetotalers' association. It was called *Fakkelfgang* ("Torchlight Procession") and was a difficult assignment.

Real Life is Best

"But even that first picture gave me the chance to develop my special line," said Mr. De Haas. "There aren't any professional film actors in Holland as there are in America, England, or France. So I decided to use laymen; that is, ordinary men and women. The results were surprising. For that anti-drink film I went and rounded up a collection of drunkards—the scum of the streets, you might say. The police gave me addresses. Once I had got them together and explained what I wanted of them, and made them feel at ease, it

was remarkable how quickly these people understood. The highlight of the film was a murder; and the man and woman involved simply played their own lives, more impressively than any stage players could have done, I'm sure. In fact, they were so real, they so far forgot themselves, it's a wonder there wasn't a real murder."

Mr. De Haas suspended his account of the films he has made to elaborate his philosophy of film-making. "My theory is that nobody can better portray a peasant or a schoolboy than a peasant or a schoolboy. But you must first train them to lose their shyness of the camera. That first film of mine gave me the conviction that I was on the right lines and my ideas were always subsequently confirmed. So in my pictures I always used the raw human material, not professional casts."

"But if the ordinary person is persuaded to lose his shyness of the camera, doesn't that in itself tend to make him artificial?" I asked.

"Not if you use the right methods. But I admit that the less cultivated or educated a person is, the less difficulty you have. I have had no trouble with children, simple people, and natives; I found that out about natives in Indonesia. As for children, it is amazing how soon they forget the cameras and take the studio as a matter of course. You have much more difficulty when you are using doctors, writers, diplomats and so on, though I have got good results even there. Yes, I am convinced, as most other documentary film-makers are, that the best actors come from real life. When I come to make films in New Zealand I hope to use the man on the street, and the woman on the street, as my artists."

Mr. De Haas resumed the account of film productions which he has to his credit. They include *The Netherlands*, a film made in 1934 to give publicity to Holland abroad; and one in 1939 to mark the 100th anniversary of Dutch railways. But the documentary in which he takes greatest pride is *De Ballade Van Den Hoogen Hoed* ("The Ballad of a Top Hat"). This was made in 1936; made for pleasure, says Mr. De Haas, not to order, and it won a prize at the Brussels International Exhibition. He thinks a print survived the war and that he will be able to bring it here, and show it to us. The story of a top hat, which starts on the head of a diplomat and ends in the gutter, it made a great use of symbolism. For instance, in one scene where diplomats were shown at a conference, though the players were speaking the sound-track carried the noise of machine-guns instead of their voices ("They were talking of peace but thinking about wars.") Similarly, a glimpse of pens standing up in holders on the conference-table dissolved into a picture of gun-barrels pointing in the same direction.

Indeed, from what Mr. De Haas told me I gathered that he very strongly favours the technique of symbolism and contrast in nearly all his productions, and he went on to tell me how he had used this technique in a film advocating cremation which he once produced for a group in Holland.



Spencer Digby photograph

MAX DE HAAS
The aggressors overlooked him

This led to a question about the extent to which such films were employed in Holland. He said that the use of films for publicity was very highly developed. There were films sponsored by anti-vivisectionists and films on behalf of travel and sports agencies; the radio stations had their own screen propaganda and so did the trades unions, the dairy farmers, the tea companies, the "nature-lovers," and so on.

"Once the films were made, how did they get shown to the public?"

"Often the sponsor would have his own propagandist travelling through the country giving performances. They would be sound films, mostly in 35mm. but sometimes 16mm., and a hall or theatre would be rented for the evening. It wasn't hard to get an audience. But some propaganda shorts were shown on the ordinary theatre programmes. In most such cases the sponsor would, of course, have to pay the theatre, but not always, if the film was a good and important one. In fact, I have had several exhibitors bidding for some of my films; on those occasions I didn't have to pay them to get the films shown, they had to pay me."

The Hollywood Influence

Before the war there were about ten companies making pictures of various kinds in the Netherlands. Altogether only about 30 full-length feature pictures had been made in the Dutch language, and with some exceptions, said Mr. De Haas, they were not of a very high level. Up to 1933, the influence of the German film in Western Europe, and especially in Holland, had been very strong, but when the Nazis came to power the Dutch immediately reacted against them and against their films. The result was that the Hollywood influence had prevailed; the great mass of Dutch picturegoers favoured the typical American film (with dialogue in English but sub-titles in Dutch).

Mr. De Haas is not enthusiastic about Hollywood, though he admits that he is by no means as bitter on the subject as he was in his youth. He thinks that although Hollywood has made no con-

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