

BEHIND THE SCREEN

with the Film Censor

MENTION the Film Censor and many people will imagine a saturnine fellow who spends his life writing out stacks of restrictive certificates—a spoilsport who stops us seeing films we feel we have every right to see. *The Listener* paid a visit to the Censor's new offices shortly after they were opened and found that this sombre picture rapidly faded. Here in an atmosphere of light and colour, presided over by the New Zealand Film Censor, Gordon Mirams, it was impossible to think of censoring as a dismal business.

The first surprise to the layman was to see the great variety of films that pour into the office. Besides ordinary feature films and cartoons, newsreels and shorts, there are religious films, and long Chinese and Indian epics for our minority communities. And each one has to be seen by the Censor or his assistant, D. C. McIntosh, before it can be officially certificated. In dealing with the foreign films an interpreter may have to be called, but usually, *The Listener* learned, these films are quite straightforward to handle.

To see the censoring process at work we were taken into the larger of the two office cinemas. This had a wide screen able to make Cinemascope and Vistavision, and was equipped with stereophonic sound. At the back was the Censor's desk fitted with a shaded light and a small buzzer. We settled into our chairs as the lights dimmed and a Vistavision musical began to reel itself to an audience of three.

"Usually only one of us watches a film," Mr. Mirams explained. "If it's likely to be controversial—and we generally know in advance—we see it to-

gether. We can discuss the film and if necessary get outside advice." When something controversial does appear the Censor presses the buzzer beside him and makes a note in his journal. This is a signal to the operator to put a slip of paper in the reel. The whole film is run through and afterwards the tagged parts are closely examined in a machine called a Film Editor.

At this point we asked the inevitable "How do you know when to cut?"—

wondering if there was a list of prohibited words and forbidden topics.

"No," Mr. Mirams explained, "there is no list at all. We find our ideas are continually changing. Even swearwords can become respectable. There are, of course, some words we would always delete; each country seems to have its own peculiarities in this respect. As for the topics, no subject is specifically banned. It all depends on the way it is presented. Not so long ago the birth

other reasons combined, including blasphemy."

The reels on the machine whirled backwards and forwards as the operator familiarised himself with the sequence. (His skill explains why you seldom notice cuts on the screen, since he takes pains to disturb the continuity of the film as little as possible.)

Before the actual cutting gets under way the sponsoring Film Company can

RIGHT: Examining the publicity which accompanies a film is also one of the tasks of censorship. Here Mr. Mirams and Mr. McIntosh are examining billboard material



LEFT: The N.Z. Film Censor, Gordon Mirams (seated), and his assistant, D. C. McIntosh, at work in their miniature theatre

of a baby was shown on the screen—twenty years ago this would have been thought impossible."

The decisions of his predecessors and the verdicts of the special Appeal Board help the Censor to decide. He tries to keep abreast of public opinion, and to be sensitive to the values of the society he lives in. Altogether he finds cutting is often a highly-complicated process.

Curious to see how the cutting was done we moved out to the Editing machine where a Cinemascope Western was being run through.

"This film is having some of its fight scenes toned down," said Mr. Mirams. "You'll find that nearly all the cuts we make are on the score of brutality—last year it was 85 per cent. This includes sadistic actions and gruesome incidents. Sex accounts for 13 per cent of cuts—here we mean situations where sex is vulgarised or made unduly suggestive. That leaves 2 per cent for