

DISTRIBUTION

Film distribution is the process which involves the booking and exhibition of the finished film. **Booking** means getting the venues and playdates for film exhibition ahead of time. **Exhibition** is the actual showing or presentation of the film to its audience. The theater owner, operator or manager is also called the **exhibitor** of the film.

Films were first exhibited in Manila during the last years of Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines. The earliest account was in a Spanish-language newspaper, announcing an exhibition titled *Espectaculo cientifico* (Scientific Spectacle), comprising seven titles, and shown in a converted warehouse on Escolta, Manila. The event, probably the first clear indication of a local film screening, was held on the first day of 1897, a little over a year since the first public showing of Cinematographe films by the Lumiere brothers in Paris.

Early accounts also point to a Frenchman named Rebarber who, with Eduardo Munarriz and Jose Hernandez as capitalists and Jose Martin as projectionist, took over an old warehouse at the back of Quiapo Church on Evangelista st and converted it into a cinema, Cine Orpheum, in 1904. Another warehouse on Ongpin Street near Misericordia st in Santa Cruz, Manila, was made into a moviehouse called Cine Cervantes. In 1907, a row of *accesorias* (apartments) along Legarda St in Sampaloc, Manila, owned by Dr Valentin Guidote (whose daughter, Raymunda Guidote, later appeared in a silent film, *Fate or Consequence*, 1926), was transformed into Cine Moderno. The next year, 1908, saw the erection of the Ideal Theater on Rizal Avenue.

The first Filipino feature films that were shown at the Grand Opera House and at the Empire and Majestic theaters were relatively short. Albert Yearsley's *Life of Doctor Jose Rizal*, 1912, had a screening time of only 20 minutes, while Edward Gross' *Dr Jose Rizal*, 1912, came as the standard four-reeler of approximately 5,000 feet with a screening time of almost one hour. (One reel of film took about 12 minutes to run in the silent movie projector.)

With the coming of talking pictures, feature films increased in length. The standard is now one-and-a-half to two hours of screening time. Films now come in 2,000 feet reels and are shuttled among nearby theaters during multiple first-run exhibitions in Metro Manila. The practice is called **lagare**, literally, "sawing." This practice guarantees the simultaneous exhibition of one film in several theaters using only one available print copy. While the lagare system is accepted in the city so as to cut on costs (producers

find it too expensive to provide each theater with its own print copy), the exhibition system in the provinces known as **bisikleta** (literally, "bicycle," used for transporting the film to a venue not contracted by the producer) is condemned by film distributors and film producers alike. Film checkers who are caught conspiring with unscrupulous exhibitors in the bisikleta system are heavily penalized if not fired outright, while erring theaters are boycotted and their supply of films cut off for a certain period by both the producers' associations (PMPPA and IMPIDAP) and the exhibitors' associations (GMTA and MMTA).

In the past, **block booking** required an exhibitor to take the full package of films or receive none of a studio's offerings. In order to buy a studio's products, the exhibitor was asked to purchase sight unseen a full year's program of film features. This resulted in a kind of assembly-line production of films because producers were forced to provide films to the exhibitor on time at all costs. Block booking thrives only in a setup where there is an assured supply of films for a corresponding circuit or chain of exhibitors. This practice was prevalent in the 1950s when the Big Four studios (Sampaguita, LVN, Premiere, Lebran) were bound by block booking arrangements made with the exhibitors of Life and Dalisay theaters.

The late Mayor Antonio Villegas, the acknowledged father of local film festivals, contributed to the breakthrough of Tagalog movies into the "English theaters" in downtown Manila, particularly Avenida Rizal. At that time, the only moviehouses showing Tagalog films on a regular first-run basis were the Life and Dalisay theaters and, occasionally, Center Theater in Quiapo. All other first-run theaters were then tied up to American film exhibition: the Ideal Theater for MGM, Universal for Udia Films; Avenue for Warner Bros.; Ever for 20th Century Fox; State for Columbia Pictures, and so on. Mayor Villegas initiated the holding of the first Manila Film Festival (MFF) in 1966 and the yearly film festivals that followed popularized Tagalog films, thus convincing theater owners that these were marketable and profitable. In 1975 the film-fest was expanded to include theaters and areas outside Manila and was renamed the Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF).

When Tagalog movies were able to penetrate the moviehouses showing only films in English, producers who made only a few good pictures a year made the best of the situation through **lock-out booking**. Under this system, a producer books a film for a certain period. For a motion picture with famous stars, a producer may be assured two weeks of continuous booking while an ordinary movie is given only one week or



FILM EXHIBITION.
Early Filipino films enjoyed first-run exhibition at the Savoy Theater, owned by Frank H. Goulette, an American who came to the country with the 33rd US Volunteers. He later established a string of theaters from Aparri to Jolo. (Nicanor G. Tiongson Collection)

less. Regardless of how the movie fares at the **box office** (an exhibition term derived from the box-shaped booth where moviegoers pay to get their tickets), the exhibition goes on uninterrupted.

The **hold-over system**, on the other hand, does not guarantee producers a definite period of showing for their films. Continued showing of a film is guaranteed for only as long as the film reaches the hold-over figure. This is the minimum amount of daily gross receipts set by the exhibitor as a "break-even" point. When the receipts fall below this figure, the film is withdrawn from exhibition.

Gross receipts at the box office are shared by exhibitor and producer after taxes are paid to the government. There are two ways of sharing the proceeds: through the **sliding scale system** or under the **fixed percentage system**. In the **sliding scale system**, a producer can share, net of tax, between 40% to 65% of the gross depending on the income at the box office—the bigger the receipts, the higher the rate for the producer. Under the **fixed percentage system**, theater owners and producers agree on a fixed ratio (50/50, 55/45, or 60/40) regardless of the amount received from the box office. A daily box-office report on the hourly income from ticket sales is filled out and signed by the **film checker** (representative of the film producer) and confirmed by the theater management. This report indicates how income is to be distributed between the film owner and the exhibitor, as well as the amount of taxes to be paid to the government.

Film exhibition in the Philippines follows a course, a series of events designed to draw the full patronage of particular groups of moviegoers. The exhibition of a

good film usually starts with a press preview, which has the two-fold purpose of marketing the film as well as testing the response of critics, evaluators, movie journalists, and other influential persons who are in a position to spread the good word about the film. Next is the premiere night, when the film officially debuts to a prominent paying public, usually at higher prices. Sometimes this is sponsored by entities such as the Red Cross or Catholic Women's League which are themselves the beneficiaries of tax proceeds from the film. This is followed by the first-run exhibition of the film, still at premium theaters, though not as large and elegant as the "film palaces" reserved for premieres. Tickets for regular first-run screenings are more affordable than premiere tickets. In recent years, the trend for first-run exhibition has shifted from the big theaters or moviehouses to the multicinema complexes in supermarket centers and shopping malls like the Quad in Makati Shopping Center, and the SM City or Mega-Mall multicinema complexes in North and South EDSA, Metro Manila. After some time has elapsed, the film is exhibited on its second-run engagement, this time in a larger number of theaters, accompanied by another picture as a double feature. Lastly, there are the provincial screenings, with the film prints circulating all over the country, from the cities to the towns and municipalities. Some of these provincial exhibitions are held simultaneously on a first-run basis with theater openings in Metro Manila. Occasionally, there are **roadshow** engagements which precede the first-run regular showings at prices higher than first-run.

Other more specialized forms of exhibition are the open-air screenings occasionally held at the Rizal Park

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in Manila and which in rural areas without theaters are usually done in line with product promotions or political campaigns; campus previews in university auditoriums which during the 1970s succeeded in promoting mainstream films regarded as artistic but "uncommercial"; the free-admission screenings of retrospectives, embassy films, and alternative (independent) cinema at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP); the school-based alternative and experimental film screenings at the UP Film Center, De La Salle University, and other venues which expose students and faculty to other possibilities in film expression and messages; the screenings at the Manila Film Center, formerly run by the defunct Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP), which in the 1980s sparked controversy because it was exempted from censorship and taxation; and the occasional carnival sideshows, featuring novelty presentations such as the 180-degree widescreen shows.

The problem of film distribution finally has to do with earnings and revenues. Producers and exhibitors alike bewail the fact that a large percentage of box office receipts go to the government as taxes. Government support in terms of less taxation and more incentives, they maintain, will lead to the production of better films. With the advent of video cassette technology, the problem has been compounded by film piracy. The advance or simultaneous showing of unauthorized or pirated Filipino films on the video cassette market has greatly reduced the local film audience. To counter the practice, the Anti-Film Piracy Board was established by exhibitors and producers in 1984. ● R. Matilac and J. David. With notes from P. de Castro III, B. Lumbera, N. G. Tiongson