

Chief film censor Jack Day is not a scissor-happy moralist, but has more complex duties



Just to upset a few carefully preserved misconceptions, the Alberta Chief Censor is not a funny little man armed with a pair of scissors, and his office does not contain a picture of Queen Victoria. Jack Day is amiable, extremely cooperative, and willing to discuss his much disputed function.

In an interview last week, we ignored the useless debate on the pros and cons of censorship and got down to the factual workings of the department. He succeeded in upsetting a few other dearly beloved misconceptions about censorship in Alberta.

The Censor Board reviews everything that is shown in commercial cinema houses in Alberta—including the cartoons. But for anyone wishing to condemn censorship, Jack Day has provided an awesome record to be used as ammunition: out of the six hundred odd films seen in the eighteen month period in which he has been chairman of the board, only three films have been banned, and there has been only one important film cut.

"We're not in the business of cutting films, he explained. This is the biggest misapprehension the public has about the department."

But what are the terms which justify the banning of a movie? It is not totally a subjective decision. "We don't make the law, we only apply the law which is made by government, and government, I hope, in a democracy reflects the feelings of the people."

He and the board are guided in part by the Amusement Act which defines only a broad power of ac-

films are judged by artistic standards too

ceptance or rejection, but more explicit terms are expressed in the Stated Guiding Principles which find a film objectionable if it "offends against the recognized moral code by glorifying, excusing, or presenting as desirable, crime, violence, promiscuous sex relations, gross intemperance, or by holding up to ridicule recognized and religious ideals."

This still doesn't shed too much light on the subject, so we got down to a few specifics. Generally the three films were banned "not only because of low moral tone, but because the public would feel gyped. It's the sort of thing you would come away from feeling you had wasted your money."

Example—*Born Losers*. It is a "Hell's Angels on wheels" story with tremendous violence. "It show-

ed the police as being completely inept, but cowardly. It shows parents as being very much at fault for everything that goes wrong in the world."

Another loser was *Loving Couples*. "There was a little bit of nudity in it, but it was never erotic or titillating. It was an hour and forty minutes of utter boredom, totally immoral without ever coming across—it was a deceitful film. We felt it would offend a great many people."

A film is not banned merely be-

cause it does not appeal to Jack Day; he has personally disliked many of the films he has passed, such as *Warrendale* and *Night Games*. The films he has banned to date were described as having both a low moral quality in terms of the stated guiding principles under which he operates, and a low artistic quality. This would necessarily involve a degree of aesthetic interpretation of a film.

"We're much more inclined to cut out violence than sex. Sex is a very normal, healthy and beautiful thing, but I don't think it is normal, healthy, or beautiful to strike a man with a bicycle chain across the face."

But Jack Day has not laid down any hard and fast rules as to what is objectionable in a movie. "Each film must be viewed absolutely individually, as a separate entity. The word 'bastard' is out of place obviously in *Mary Poppins*, but not in a World War I movie where one fellow was drunk the last canteen of water belonging to all. It would be perfectly appropriate to the situation."

The use of a four letter colloquialism in *Warrendale* created considerable criticism of the department, but "this was important to the development of the film, and so it's appropriate."

"On the opening night I went up to the Varscona and sat in the audience to find out how right or wrong I had been in my judgement from their reactions." He especially watched for people walking out. After the picture he stopped twelve couples on the street and asked their opinion of whether or not it should have been banned—all said it wasn't entertaining but they didn't think that it should be banned. "If they feel they have got something from it, then certainly they are entitled to see it."

The whole problem of censorship is one of relativity, the general desires of the public, and it is this public the Censor Board is out to serve. "I don't determine what is right and what is wrong. I only try to keep in step with society—not too far ahead and not too far behind."

Blow-Up is the one film which has been cut by the department.

When it first arrived in Alberta, huge cuts were demanded by the Censor Board if it were to be shown. The film company requested its return. It arrived back in Alberta eight months later, a whole new film.

The film was seen by the Board a total of six times. Limited cuts were still made in Saskatchewan and Alberta. This involved the passion in the purple paper scene where David Hemming has a promiscuous sex relation with two small girls who come to his studio.

But Jack Day wasn't trapped yet. There is no objection when Vanes-

wishes of the company were followed.

This is the only cut the Censor Board has insisted on, but there have been other cuts. Often when a film is on the borderline between audience categories, usually between family and adult, the film companies would prefer to have minor cuts made to put the movie into the less restrictive category.

Such a film is *Tobruk*, a war epic which was borderline family-adult. The Board was willing to release it as an Adult film, but the company conceded to two minor cuts. There were two objections to it as a children's film. That ominous little word "bastard" had crept into the film in one spot. The other was a close-up sequence of a man emerging from a tank, being hit with a flame thrower and dramatically falling to the turf. One word and nine feet of film (six seconds running time) were cut, and the film was classified as family.

We ducked across the hall to have a look at the viewing room. There was the white screen the width of the room, and at the other, three comfortable arm chairs. Beside each is a little white button which is not (but should be) known as a panic button. This is pressed at any part of the picture which might be questionable, and a buzzer rings in the projection room just behind, where the projectionist marks the spot by placing a piece of paper in the reel at that point. If discussion comes up, the questionable parts of

The chairman of the board has the power to veto the other members. "I suppose I can," he said when asked about his power of veto, "because it's my head in the noose all the time."

If the film company considers that the classification is terribly out of line, there is provision for an appeal of the Board's decision. The people on this appeal board are appointed by the government, but are not affiliated with the government, and may be lawyers, university professors, and other such persons. The Board gives them a one paragraph reason for their decision, but does not enter into any conversation with them, and does not even know who these people are until the appeal decision has been given.

The film companies naturally don't like to have their movies rejected, but Jack Day describes them as "our biggest supporters."

"I won't impose my ideas on other people"

Alberta censorship does have certain advantages over the freer system used in the U.S.A. In the south, there are picket lines and protest marches, and in Tennessee, a sheriff seized Virginia Woolf when it was there and incarcerated the theater manager.

"When you don't have a censor board as we have here its up to the local law. Supposing we scrapped the Censor Board tomorrow—any kook can lay a complaint that a film is obscene."

But is censorship not a restriction of artistic expression? "The film exchanges are in the dollar business. They don't have the artistic integrity of the Board."

And what about the film societies who are more interested in films as an art rather than for the entertainment value alone? "I don't believe that my ideas are so good that I should impose them on other people. I believe we all have to make our own decisions individually, but I think we do have to pay a price for living in a society like the one we have structured for ourselves."

"You can't say we are going to make special laws for special groups. We have to set arbitrary rules, and it's unfortunate, but a few people have to suffer."

Generally, he feels that peace has finally been made with the film societies in that most of their movies are not being chopped up.

In the general public there are always the extremes. "We have the puritans who have passed motions at conventions asking us to eliminate cigarette smoking from moving pictures." On the other extreme are those who want to allow unbelievable barbarity. His duty is to draw a line between the two, serving the general wishes of the public in films.

The encouraging thing behind the Censor Board Chairman is his willingness, even enthusiasm to talk about his job. "Public relations is a two-way street." He is anxious to pick a fairly liberal route, but one which will best serve the wishes of the public.

"I love cinema. I am sorry to see what the industry is doing to itself. It is bringing out so much garbage."

While it may be a controversial job, and it has criticism leveled from both sides, it still comes out as "what the people want, the people get."

CENSORSHIP

board members can disagree over value

sa Redgrave does the same thing because the act is between two consenting adults. The two small girls were under the age limit of statutory rape. "If they had been

the film can be quickly reviewed.

The Board consists of three members, each appointed according to their qualifications for the job, which involves some knowledge of public communications and some interest in the community.

Jack Day is admirably suited for the position. He comes from Britain, where he once earned his living on the stage, for a time working with Laurence Olivier. He has written for the stage, and won top prize for one of his plays which was produced. He has five children, is involved in Home and School, Lions' Club, mental health, the Public Relations Society, and was once Public Information officer.

The other male member of the triumvirate is an ex-R.C.M.P. officer, J. W. Nicholson; the female in the group is Mary Nicolson (no relation), who is an artist in her spare time.

Each film is viewed by these three individuals, and very often there will be disagreement about the classification of a film. "To the public, it's one man, it's a dictatorship. They don't realize how thoroughly democratic it is in there because we'll argue and fight and even raise our voices on occasion."

five years older, I might have allowed it," he said.

There was another objection. "We couldn't leave it in under the terms of reference the government has given us." Regardless of the verity, any glorification of promiscuous sex relations is specifically banned by the stated guiding principles.

The Board suggested eliminating the whole scene in order to make a clean cut of the scene. The film company requested that as much of it be left in as the department would consider acceptable. Even the decision to cut a film is not a completely arbitrary one, and the

BY GORDON AUCK