

The Daily Gleaner

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CANDIDLY YOURS...

...THOMAS WRIGHT

Dark Of The Sun

Some time last year M.G.M. sent to Jamaica producer George Englund and director Jack Cardiff, with a team of stars including Rod Taylor, Yvette Mimieux and Jim Brown, to make a film about the Congo under the provisional name of "Dark of the Sun." The name didn't stick. It's now called "The Mercenaries," and will open in Jamaica some time in April.

The film would never have been made in Jamaica at all had it not been for one of those round-about and unlikely series of events which seem to control so many things. M.G.M. needed a certain kind of railway, essential to the plot. The engine had to be an old-fashioned wood-burner and the track itself had to be in a tropical country. In consequence, M.G.M. had been making a search all over the world.

Engine No. 54

IT SO HAPPENS that there is a Jamaica Railway Society, and this Society had preserved Engine No. 54, the last of our ancient steam engines, which had stopped operating in 1964. Railway technical adviser, Dr. Carl Stratmann, the chairman of the Society, got to hear about M.G.M.'s search, and wrote to them telling them about Engine No. 54. True, No. 54 was an oil-burner, but it could be made up to look like a wood-burner — and what more beautiful tropical setting than Jamaica?

It was Engine No. 54 that clinched it, as far as making the picture here was concerned, and down they came. Eric Coverley was appointed Location Manager in Jamaica, and another Jamaican, Bernard Rickman, was appointed Assistant Local Director. Our own Sagwa Bennett played the part of the engine driver (complete with cigar) but the actual driving of the engine was done by J.R.C. engine driver Basil Martin. Roy Hall created the smoke effects, and Alexander Spicer and Horace Kelly were the guard and brakesman respectively.

A lot of local people also took part. The Defence Force co-operated enthusiastically, and a number of our soldiers, made up in various guises, are seen in the film. Some of the local people I recognised in the finished film include Monique Lucas, Alex Gradussov, Bertha Issa, Harry Milner, Sally Lopez, Clare Lawrence and Howard Vassall. The palace of the dictator was played by Abe Issa's private house off Seymour Avenue, and very splendid it looks too!

A splendid film

"THE MERCENARIES" is a splendid film — one of the best of its kind I've seen, but the high point is the photography. I've never seen Jamaica look more breathtakingly beautiful, or better photographed. When it has its premiere in April it will be sponsored by the Lions Club and the Jamaica Railway Society to raise funds for open heart surgery in Jamaica. This is a deserving cause — but you must go not only because of that, but because it is an outstandingly good film.

An unfortunate thing

BUT THERE IS ONE most unfortunate thing about this film, which I find hard to understand, and makes me very cross. Nowhere at all, in any of the credits, is there a single mention of Jamaica, or of any of the Jamaican institutions — the Railway, the local forces, the Police, — who made the film possible. Not a single solitary word.

Now this is not only unfortunate, but is downright bad manners. "The Mercenaries" is going to be a smash hit all over the world, and the fantastically beautiful photography of Jamaica, running through the entire film, would have been splendid publicity for us, and for the tourist trade.

Mean-minded

I CANNOT UNDERSTAND the reason for mean-mindedness of this nature. I am told that M.G.M. got peeved about Jamaica because a number of local people tried, with our usual penchant for "trying on," to swindle them, and that they found unsatisfactory the equipment of Cinema City, which they were forced to rent because the government has given it a local monopoly.

Well, it is certainly true that certain local people did give them a hard time, and that the Cinema City equipment was constantly breaking down. But Cinema City is an American concern, not Jamaican. As to the behaviour of some of the local shopkeepers and so on, M.G.M. could set this off against that the splendid help they got from others.

I happen to know George Englund, the extremely talented producer of this film, and I'm going to write him about this most unfortunate omission. But what he can now do, or what effect my letter will have, I simply cannot tell. It would be much more effective, I'm sure, if our government wrote M.G.M. officially, but tactfully. Perhaps somebody in the government will read this, and act accordingly. I think, too, that Mr. Russell Graham could also act effectively by himself writing M.G.M.