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On: 14 September 2012, At: 15:56

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office:
Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Third Text

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctte20>

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Version of record first published: 07 Mar 2011.

To cite this article: Margaret Dickinson (2011): An Editor in Mozambique, *Third Text*, 25:1, 135-136

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2011.545623>

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An Editor in Mozambique

Margaret Dickinson

Last year Mozambique's national film service, the INC (Instituto Nacional de Cinema), launched a programme to train in less than twelve months virtually an entire production staff from cameramen to lab technicians. This may sound unrealistic but it is in keeping with other training and development projects in Mozambique. FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), the former liberation movement now reorganised as a vanguard party, is determined that Independence is going to have practical significance for Mozambique's ten million or so citizens. Given that the main legacy of Portuguese rule was a dependent and weak economy, an incompetent bureaucracy and a largely illiterate population this can only be done by pushing through a complete economic and social revolution.

It is not surprising, given the high rate of illiteracy that, as a means of disseminating information, cinema was considered an important priority, second only to radio. The INC, which started off as a handful of people working from a room in the Ministry of Information, was given the job of creating a Mozambican cinema. To begin with some outside help was called for and this is how members of the Association of Cinematograph and Television Technicians (ACTT) got involved. Simon Hartog had a hand in the first stage of the process during which distribution, formerly run from Portugal and South Africa, was effectively brought under INC control. Production facilities, such as they were, nationalised, premises built, new equipment ordered and plans laid for training staff in the various sectors. Since then growth has been so rapid that the new premises are bursting at the seams. Distribution already has a portfolio of about 400 films, has established Mozambique as an independent market and has even managed to take on the MPEA and emerge with a satisfactory agreement. Exhibition runs fifteen of the thirty-five daily cinemas; a mobile cinema service for the rural areas is expected to reach an audience of three million in the coming year. Production facilities include a black-and-white lab for sixteen millimetre and thirty-five millimetre and a small dubbing theatre; despite endless problems and delays, two feature-length documentaries and sixteen shorter films have already gone into circulation. What is more, both the mobile cinema and production have up to now been financed

entirely from distribution revenue. (Just think what we could do if we nationalised distribution!)

Production had very little to start from. Before Independence a few one-man-band companies worked for the colonial government making thirty-five-millimetre newsreels consisting of mute shots of official occasions with heavy commentary and some martial music slapped on top. Most of the technicians were Portuguese and only one or two stayed on to work for the INC. This is why the decision was made to import a number of foreign technicians to train a first generation of Mozambicans.

A few of the trainees had worked in photography or had some experience in the colonial newsreel companies, but most of them were school leavers with only one or two years of secondary school who had never seen a piece of film in their lives before and had not even watched many movies (as, under the colonial regime, blacks were effectively barred from most cinemas).

As one of four technicians initially called in to run courses, my own job was to train seven editors in nine months. It sounds like a recipe for chaos and certainly in my own department the first month was rather like a slapstick comedy on cutting-room accidents. Apart from the predictable crop of dropped centres, shots were joined upside down, back to front, out of rack, cans lay around unlabelled and trims turned up in odd places hopefully labelled 'trim'. Fortunately I did not have to watch what went on elsewhere, but the lab delivered us a few howlers – and as for the shooting crews, anguished comments on the track told their own story. Nevertheless after a while life began to feel a little more normal: cans began to acquire labels, rushes began appearing in sync, trims found their way into the right bundles and even reappeared when required. This was lucky since we could not afford too many mistakes. There were not the resources to keep the trainees busy doing exercises and all the productions they were learning on were destined for the public. Somehow these films were put into circulation and eventually the first short to be shot, recorded, edited, dubbed and graded entirely by trainees reached the cinemas. This does not mean that Mozambican cinema has taken off. Much of the direction is still done by foreigners and the trainees would be the first to admit that they have a lot to learn. Still, it looks like a reasonable start.

To anyone who has suffered what passes for cinema in some underdeveloped countries it would seem that the INC has achieved a great deal in three years. The Maputo public, however, can be a harsh critic. One of the snags of working for the INC is that one is subjected to a barrage of hostile questions: 'Why are the cinemas still full of Karate movies and Indian musicals?' – 'Well, a lot of people like them.' 'Why aren't there more political films?' – 'But last week you could see *Chilean Cantanta* and *Salt of the Earth* in the cinemas and the journalists' club projected a documentary on multinationals.' – 'Why aren't there more Mozambican films?' – 'They are being turned out about as fast as the lab can print them.' – 'Why doesn't the INC make comedies/dramas/films on how to grow tomatoes?' – 'Well the Brazilian director Ruy Guerra has half finished a drama film and, true, there's nothing on tomatoes but a documentary on how to raise rabbits is in the pipeline.' One thing at least is clear, whatever happens to Mozambican cinema in the next few years INC workers are not likely to suffer from the delusion that they have satisfied their public.