On the march: Elizabeth Coldicott films the 1950 May Day parade in Melbourne.

Banners high: New Theatre marches in Melbourne in 1946, filmed by Realist Film Unit.

Left springs out of a suitcase

■ **FILM**

Simon Plant

I T LAY inside a battered attache case, tightly coiled and smelling of vinegar. But when documentary maker John Hughes took a closer look at the dusty celluloid in the 1980s, he realised he was peering at hidden history.

In his hands he had trims and off-cuts from long-forgotten Left-wing films made in post-war Melbourne.

''It was an exciting moment. I'd been continually looking for this kind of footage for years and, suddenly, here it was,'' he recalls.

Decades after the case came into his hands, Hughes has wound the fragmentary films into a compelling documentary called *The Archive Project.*

In it, he documents the rise and fall of the Realist Film Unit — a company of film enthusiasts with Communist Party affiliations who made 13 films between 1946 and 1952.

The unit, led by film-makers Ken Coldicutt and Bob Mathews, believed motion pictures with a conscience could advance peace and prosperity. So Realist cameras — under their direction — sought out everyday events and addressed burning social issues.

These Are Our Children tackled juvenile delinquency. *Prices and the People* looked at rent controls. And *A Place to Live* zeroed in on poverty-row housing.

''People in Fitzroy and Collingwood threw stones at them, thinking they were representatives of the landlord, but the film-makers went back to those streets and showed their films,'' Hughes says.

The Realist Film Association in the city ran a bookshop, held film theory courses, and drew big crowds to movie screenings — so big that conservative politicians, anxious about communist infiltration, moved to restrict their exhibition.

As the Cold War intensified, security agencies also cracked down on what they called a subversive organisation.

The Archive Project fuses remarkable ASIO surveillance footage with grainy images of May Day parades.

''Anyone politically active in the late 1940s came under suspicion,'' Hughes says.

History encased: the suitcase in which the Left film offcuts were found.

''I know some people who were actually prevented from working on *The Queen in Australia* because they were 'adversely known'.''

The Queen in Australia, a record of Elizabeth II's royal progress in 1954, was our first colour, feature-length documentary.

Viewed half a century later, it presents Australia as a wide Anglo-Saxon land populated by resourceful blokes and happy housewives.

''There's a nostalgic image of the 1950s as a time of plenty. But it wasn't that way for everyone. In fact, the period had a savage undertone,'' Hughes says.

Just how savage was made plain to Coldicutt and Mathews when they tried to get work after the Realist push faded.

''It was a tragedy that neither of them was able to continue to develop their work as film-makers,'' Hughes says.

Nothing, however, could quench their passion for diverse cinema. The Melbourne and Sydney Film Festivals owe their start to these politically active men.

Hughes, whose films include *What I Have Written* (1995) and *After Mabo* (1997) and who is now commissioning director for SBS Independent, felt obliged to tell the duo's story.

''I wanted to make sure future histories of independent Australian film acknowledged their contribution,'' he says.

Screening *The Archive Project* in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games, Hughes hopes his film will inspire younger artists, especially those with ''dissenting voices in these security-conscious times''.

''It reminds film-makers today that there is an important tradition of Australian film culture that is interested in the social and political conditions of the moment.''

■ **THE ARCHIVE PROJECT**

The Archive Project and *The Queen in Australia* are part of *Real Life on Film: Documentaries from Kenya to Coburg* at ACMI (February 11-21)

Hughes will also give a masterclass at the Australian International Documentary Conference on Tuesday, Feb 14

Details: www.aidc.com.au