

# cutting it for t.v.

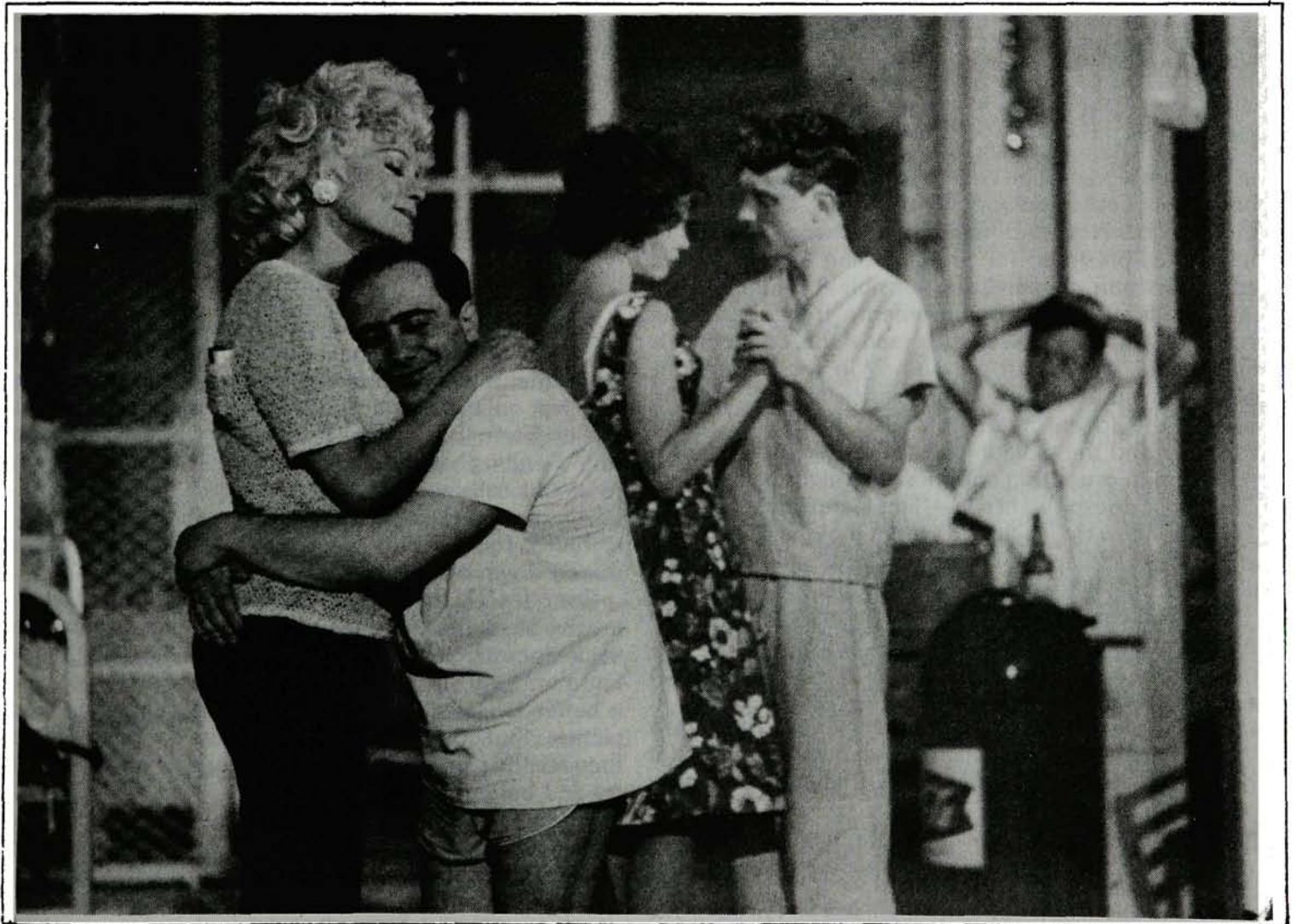
by david clarke

**There is a fine line between *editing* films for television and *censoring* them. In the end, the cuts must cater to the conflicting sensibilities of a mixed public, and the specific demands of the sponsors.**

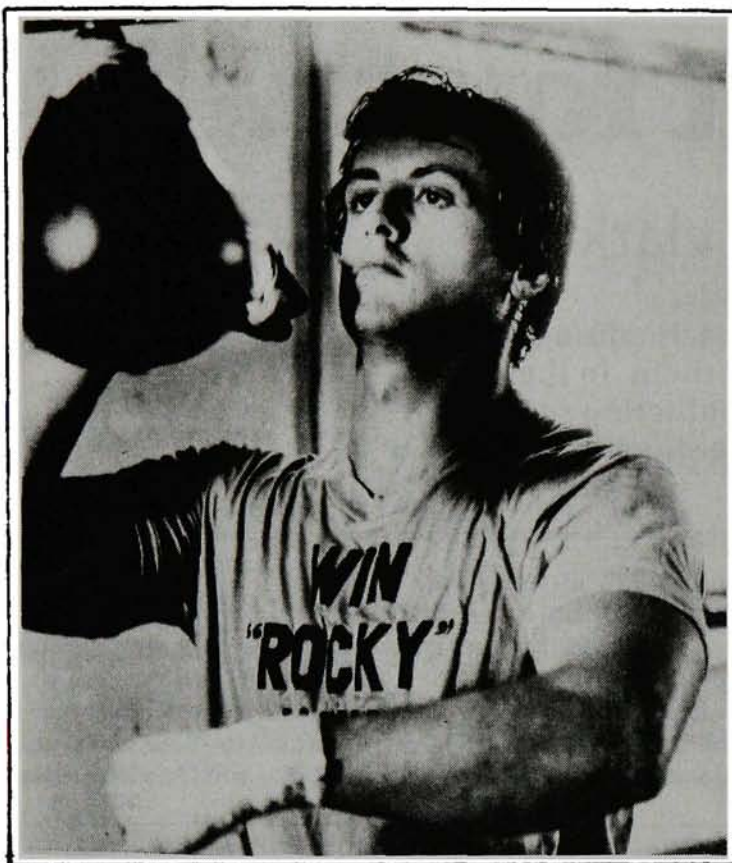
Editing films for television is, like embalming or raising funds for a political party, something that is meant to draw as little attention to itself as possible. The people who do it are trying to make sure viewers aren't offended by too much sex, or violence, or bad language; that they don't find the commercials annoyingly intrusive or feel that something is missing from the storyline. Their efforts are

sometimes in vain. Then watch out. When the public is moved by too much or too little editing of a feature it wanted to enjoy, it reacts with more heat than enlightenment. An editor can get burned.

Last year CTV, in a ploy designed to draw attention to the fact that it had nearly-new features to show, put on two blockbuster films back to back: **Rocky** and **One Flew Over**



A Cuckoo's Nest to be sure — but not without its harmonious moments



... And he does! Sylvester Stallone packing a mean punch in **Rocky**

**The Cuckoo's Nest.** The criteria for editing was the same in both cases, yet the network drew a lot of flack for fiddling with **Cuckoo's Nest** and none at all for what they did to **Rocky**. Vice-president for programming at CTV Phillip Wedge, the man ultimately responsible for editing decisions, recalls with some bemusement, "It was really the content of **Cuckoo's Nest** that made the commercials unpalatable." It was just a routine job for the editors, business as usual, yet here they were sweating under the spotlight, the focus of an unwanted controversy over censorship and the violating of the artistic integrity of a serious film in order that commercials might be inserted.

The public doesn't want some films to be touched, yet let the editors allow things on the screen that the public, or a part of it, doesn't want to see and the phone will ring off the wall. Mike Ring, who edits films for Global, describes how he deals with complaints. "We have people phoning in to complain about a certain movie, that there was nudity or something. In a lot of cases, you ask people, did you watch the whole movie? and they say yes. They had the option at the top of the movie to turn to another station. They knew it. We told them the movie might be offensive, yet they sat and watched the whole thing and then phoned in to complain about it."

Ring is very much the practical workman. He looks like one with his blue jeans, his Meathead mustache and

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wearied manner. He talks like one when he describes his editing decisions. "I'm looking for the filler material in a movie. I'm obviously not going to be taking out the main characters. You're looking for scenes that don't really add to the movie or move the story along. You're not going to put a commercial in the middle of a scene, so you're looking for some change in the scene. On top of that, you have guidelines to follow. On this particular network we like to put commercials on the 10, 20, 40 and 50-minute marks, and the hour. On a feature, we like to go through the hour and the half-hour in order not to lose the audience looking for a new show or something. It's a psychological thing to hold the audience through the show."

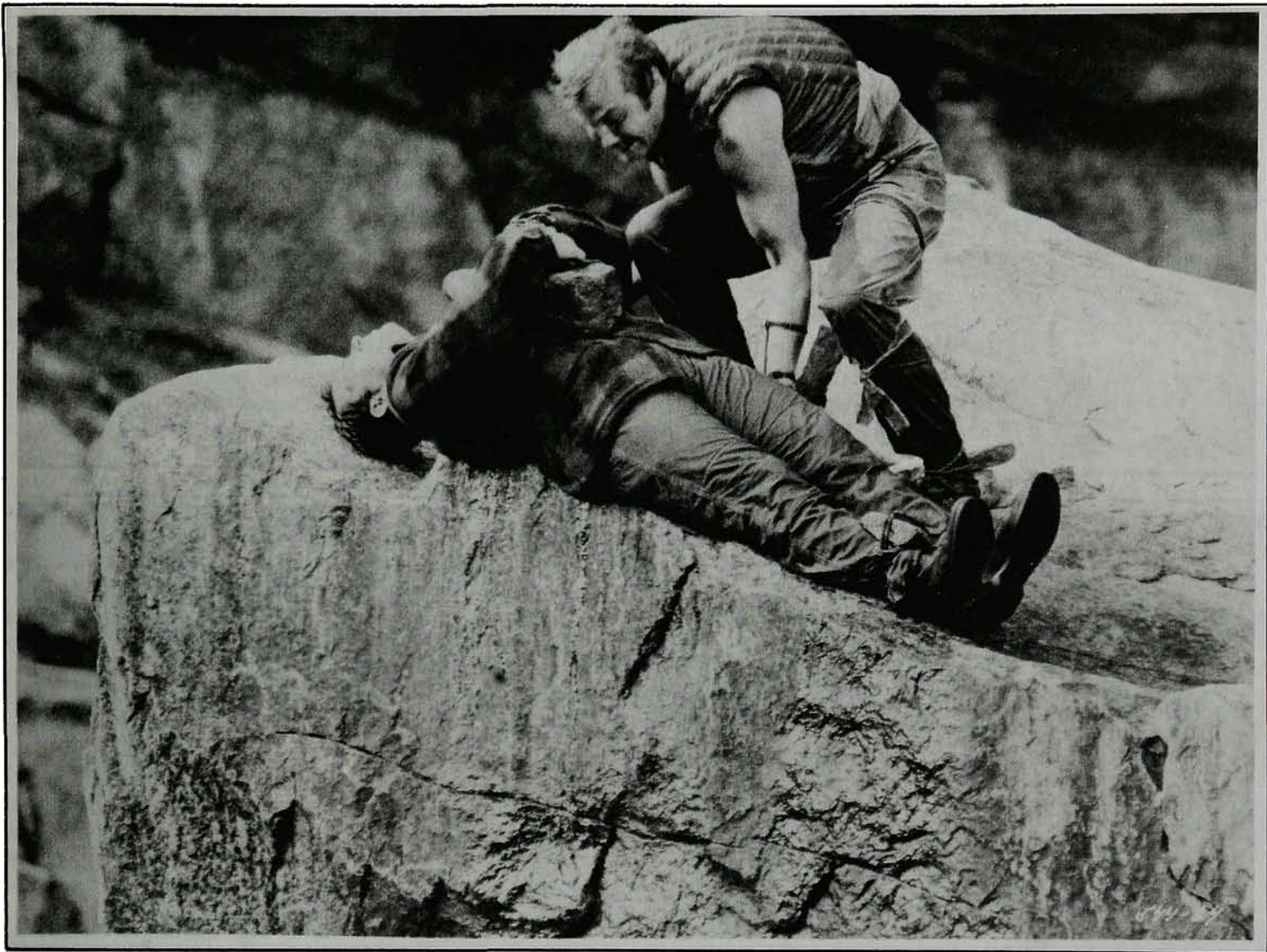
He isn't staying up nights worrying about, oh, violent movies corrupting the young. No, if anything keeps him up it is worrying about the sponsors. He puts it this way. "We're trying to sell their (the sponsors') product. Some stations think they can't sell it if they run what they consider garbage... We can't really be responsible for people's morals. The most common complaint is about kids watching. The parents come home and find the kids watching something. Well, it has to be the parents who control what a child watches on television."

Ring figures "My responsibility is to fit it into a particular time slot." That, for him, is about all there is to it. He doesn't go for creating little climaxes before the ads, to improve the product. "I'm not trying to use that kind of psychology on holding. I'm looking more for a change of scene where you can come back and not lose anything, because with a change of scene there is a change of time factor involved. But I've seen a lot of the kind of editing where they chop it just before the crucial point to hold the audience."

He is just too busy to play at censoring or reconstructing. He doesn't even always have the time to watch a film through before editing it. "The ideal way is to watch a film through before editing. But on television you very rarely have the time to do that. Some places have different departments that do different things. You have some guys that just sit there and screen. That is, just looking for quality. From there it goes to an editor who edits for a time slot." Sending back bad prints — prints that have gone the route of local stations that sloppily splice back their cuts — takes his time; so does worrying about the kind of technical foul-up that can result in a film being shown upside down or with the order of its reels askew.

Over at CTV there is a more expansive view of what is involved in cutting features, although Wedge began on the same commercial note played by Ring. "We don't make any attempt at all to change the pacing of a picture to make it better for television than the theatrical version. Good pictures that got the box office numbers got them because they are the pictures they are. We would never presume to try and better them."

Wedge went on to tell the story of what happened to **Deliverance** on route to the air, by way of illustrating the care and sensitivity his outfit displays in the matter of cutting difficult but classy films. At issue was the scene in which Jon Voight is sexually assaulted, or very nearly, by the man whom the vacationers then decide to kill. "Voight



No where to go but down! Jon Voight dumping the corpse in **Deliverance**

went along with it and agreed, then went along and buried the guy and didn't tell anybody about the guy they had killed. I felt the film ought to be edited for television. . . because the scenes were too raw. However, to have edited the thing would have taken away, in my opinion, Voight's motivation for behaving the way he did. . . There was a situation where it wasn't a simple matter of an edit on its own. . . That's really the big, basic standard that we apply in television — at CTV at any rate — in our approach to the editing of features. If there is a scene which, even in these enlightened days, we feel would not be broadly acceptable to the general audience. . . the question then is, does it affect the plot line, and to what degree?"

It wasn't until specifically asked that Wedge admitted that, unlike Jon Voight, he dodged making up his mind, and passed the film on to the affiliates for them to decide how to cut it.

Wedge expanded again to describe what went on before **The Last Picture Show** went on the air. "There is a scene in that, a fairly crucial scene, where she went to this club, and to be initiated she had to take her clothes off at the end of a diving board. She's getting nervous, she goes out to

the end of the board and she is taking her bra off, and she slips nervously, half falls in, then slips her clothes off and goes in in one motion. I thought it was important enough to the plot that she should be seen to do it as far as one could take it. On ABC she didn't get as far as taking her bra off. She started taking her bra off, then her foot slipped and the next thing you saw she was in the water. This is an example of where we were in terms of liberality; a little bit further than the American networks."

Wedge, peering like a troubled parson over the trembling girl on the board, pondering just how far to go, how much to show, his head full of little maxims like "Visual can always be a problem. Verbal depends on usage;" if that is liberalism, what is censorship?

The law by its silence puts power into the hands of television editors-censors. As Wedge put it "I could air **Pretty Baby** if I wanted to." Considering the problems **The Tin Drum** is giving the censors who are out front, it is no wonder the people who edit films for television are happy to share the background with the bagmen and the embalmers.