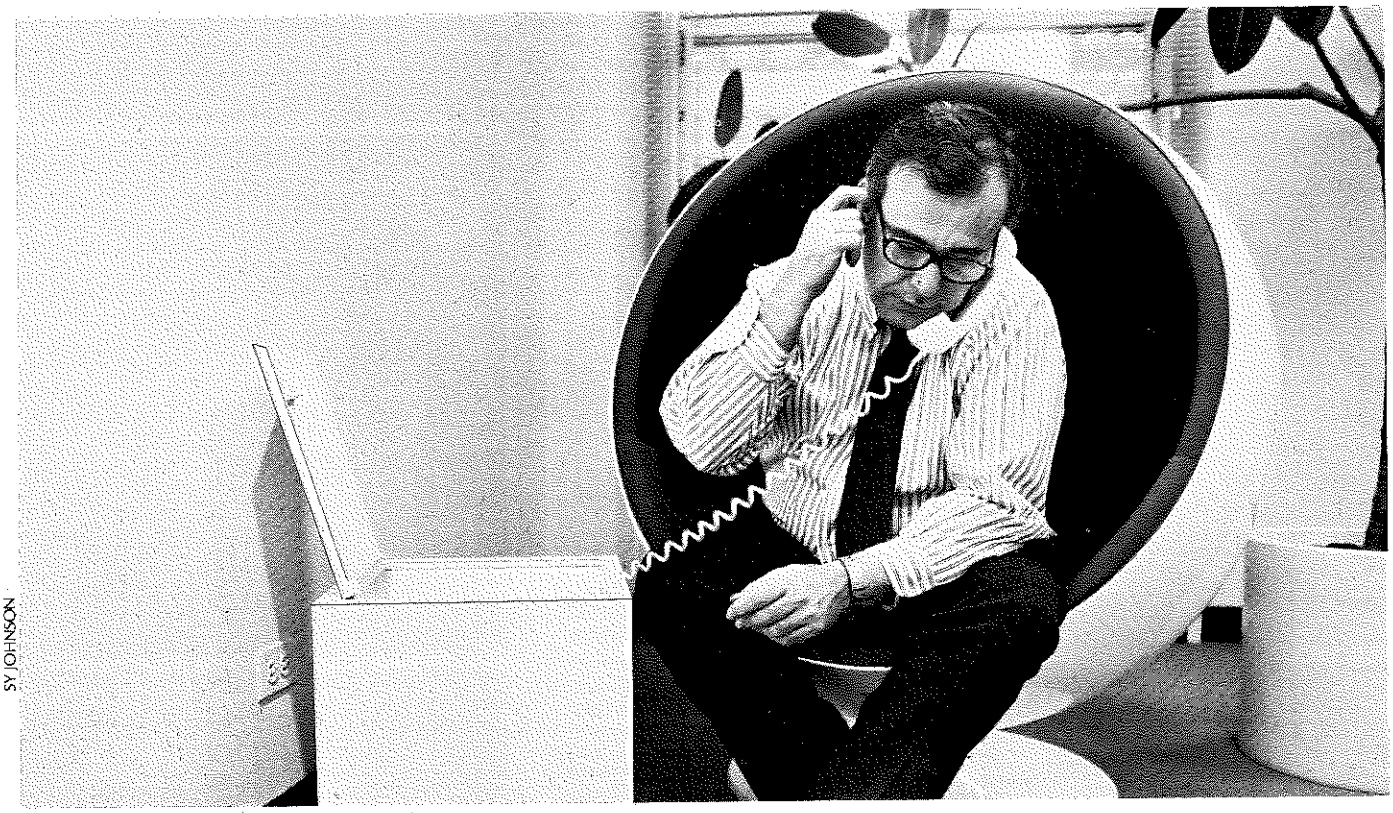
DON RUGOFF: BALLYHOO WITH A HARVARD EDUCATION

by Stuart Byron



SY JOHNSON

A Rugoff original: the Impossible Genius himself.

When Bob Dylan showed up after the flood to take his 1973-74 concert tour, the "return to the Sixties" planet waves that erupted were confined to ordinary fans and the popular press. To my friends in the music trade, it was at least as important that a second figure central to that still-mysterious decade was returning from the ashes: Bill Graham, the producer of the tour, who had been relatively retiring since the closings of the Fillmores West and East.

To each his own Sixties. If that decade *is* mysterious, it's become even more so during the current recession—for in retrospect it's obvious that the decade produced political, cultural, *and* industrial tornadoes. 1968, year of the Chicago riots and of the height of the opposition to the Vietnam war, also happens to be the year the Dow finally went over 1,000, the goingest of the "go-go years," the last time that any of us felt that we were living in an economic "boom." In the abstract, my own heroes and heroines of the Sixties are, certainly, artists. But in a visceral sense, there is no question that the person who most represents the decade to me is a businessman, one who would have to be placed on the right-hand side of that "art-industry" which is motion pictures: exhibitor and distributor Donald S. Rugoff.

This has to do, I'm sure, with my very particular geographical and vocational circumstances during the Sixties. Not yet a person with the credentials to call myself a critic (inasmuch as I was one, my heroes were Andrew Sarris and Robin Wood), I too placed myself post-hyphen in the art-industry. And no matter what I did within it, Rugoff was a commanding figure.

As it happens, the date of my own entry into the field—as a writer for the trade bi-weekly *The Independent Film Journal*—was 1963, the year when Rugoff, before that only an exhibitor, entered distribution; and if my recollection is correct, my first fancy press luncheon was at the "21," where Rugoff presented Larry Peerce, director of ONE POTATO, TWO POTATO, just the second release of Rugoff's new distribution company, Cinema 5. After that came a job as a flack for a small independent distributor of foreign pictures called Pathe Contemporary Films, most of whose releases had their New York engagements at Rugoff's theaters; many were the battles over advertising placement and design.

Even at Joseph E. Levine's Embassy Pictures, where I went after Pathe, Rugoff was important—because of his absence; Levine, so the story went, had opened his Festival and Lincoln Art Theatres (in Manhattan) partially because of fatigue over *his* Rugoff battles. And finally, and most importantly in terms of my acquaintance with the man, there was my 1967-69 term at *Variety*, where my beat included most of the independent distributors—of which Rugoff was clearly the most exciting, the most innovative, the most daring.

Had I lived through that decade's industry history in Hollywood, I no doubt would have come to focus on someone else as the most fascinating symbol of the Sixties: Ken Hyman or Bert Schneider or Robert Evans, or Blake Edwards or Peter Bogdanovich, or Roger Corman. But I was in New York, the business town of the business, where, despite all of the Lindsay administration's hoopla, the much-nostalgiacized increase in production

which took place was almost entirely a matter of Coast people finding in Gotham a more frequent location spot. Except, maybe, for the extraordinary "Dede Allen School" of film editors (Aram Avakian, Jerry Greenberg, Norman Gay), there was no *continuity* in New York production which stemmed from a central figure. There were only those mundane aspects of the film biz, distribution and exhibition. And once Joe Levine moved into Hollywood-based production to become no longer an "indie" but a "minor," my only object for impulsive fascination was mid-fortyish, potbellied, always-working, ever-harried showman Don Rugoff. The man who was always asking the opinion of anyone within a radius of ten yards on anything from a booking at one of his theaters to a proposed ad for one of his films—no matter if that person were an aide, the producer of some other movie, the shoeshine boy, a reporter. The man who admitted to me, when pressed for an explanation of why employees left him in droves: "I have one fault. I train good people and then I want to do their jobs for them."

But wait. Harvard-educated Don Rugoff. Positively *un*vulgar Don Rugoff—a man who never called film "product" and who was rarely known to utter a four-letter word. This was the man widely-acknowledged as the greatest New York film showman since Joe Levine? Yes—but with a difference. The *first* tycoon. The first to adapt his style to the new film business, taking what he could use from the old showmen and discarding the rest. In sum, an archetypal successful Sixties showman, one who excited creative people to such an extent that Bryan Forbes (even *after* his own stint as production head of British Lion had exposed him to all manner of "swinging London" executives) could exude: "The chutzpah of Don Rugoff is what this industry needs, what it needs to return to! I feel about him the way everybody else does. Impossible. *Im-pos-si-ble!* But, in the end, a genius, a *ge-ni-us!*"

As it happens, the Impossible Genius and I seem to have had a falling out, one I'd suspected existed for some time but which was only confirmed by the brusqueness with which he handled my recent inquiries for this article. I don't really know exactly why it happened. Perhaps it was because I inadvertently gave him some bum steers on publicity ideas for two of his movies of the early Seventies, and which, to his regret, he followed. Perhaps it was because, when I started four years ago to poke around with former employees in researching what turned out to be this piece, he easily figured out that *this* profile, whenever it appeared, would show him—as have none of the others—warts and all. Perhaps he was (justifiably) upset over an angry telegram I sent him when a competing weekly to mine in Boston seemed to be getting better treatment from his flacks there. Perhaps he's aware that the biggest controversy I managed to cause in the Hub of New England resulted from several scathing pans of STAGE OF SEIGE. Perhaps it's all of the above—or none of them. Actually, "falling out" is the wrong phrase, as we were never, in any usual sense, friends. Better to invoke filmdom's most famous advertising line of the Sixties: what we have here is a failure to communicate.

Thus, he might be surprised to hear that my heart leapt up when I saw SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE become a commercial phenomenon of this season—and not because Ingmar Bergman's movies, a decade after THE SILENCE, are once again earning seven-figure rental amounts in the U.S. market. (*That* renaissance, at any rate, had already been marked by New World Films' release of CRIES AND WHISPERS, which SCENES now seems destined to outdo at the box office.) No, what excited me was the triumphant return to prominence, following three years of much-publicized troubles, of Donald S. Rugoff, much as my friends in the music trade were glad to see Bill Graham on the top of the heap again.

Our new estrangement forfended any discussion of the period, but its outline is familiar to anyone who has followed Richard Albarino's excellent reporting in *Variety*: the *succès d'estime* of THE SORROW AND THE PITY, WR—MYSTERIES OF THE ORGANISM, MARJOE, STATE OF SEIGE, and A SENSE OF LOSS, the last three of these partially produced by Cinema 5, meaning that any sums lost far exceeded those that Rugoff ever would have paid for the U.S. rights to the films had they already been completed; the absolutely disastrous attempt to compete with the majors for the "commercial" market, including the expensive setting-up of sales offices all over the country, with such schlock as FROM THE MIXED-UP FILES OF MRS. BASIL E. FRANKWEILER and HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY . . . LOVE GEORGE; the sale by disgruntled stockholders of about twenty-five per cent of the company to West Coast exhibitor William Forman, who still pants outside the door thanks to various financial counter-moves by Rugoff and the success of SCENES; and, finally, the deal with Francis Ford Coppola, whose nine per cent buy-in of Cinema 5's stock as a Rugoff ally earned him a seat on the board and a contract to produce small-budget, CONVERSATION-like films by himself, George Lucas, and others. And so, if the Rugoff piece that I always had in me comes off now as something of a memoir, it at least finds Rugoff in much the same place as when I lived in New York and knew him—and more recent employees confirm that very few of the general conclusions I came to back then have lost their validity.

•

If they think of him at all, most laymen probably still think of Don Rugoff as the man who, more than any other, made Manhattan's Upper East Side rather than Times Square the prime area for motion picture exhibition in New York, substituted Colombian coffee for popcorn, and—to the chagrin of critics like Andrew Sarris and the delight of those like John Simon—turned "movies" into "films." Almost a decade ago, capped by the opening of the trendsetting Cinema I - Cinema II theater complex diagonally across from Bloomingdale's, he had become "the king of the art houses." He's still that, having largely kept up with a growing competition by adding to the chain theaters previously run by others. It now consists of fifteen houses, in eleven of which Cinema 5 has a direct financial interest, and three of which it operates for outside owners.

But despite the fact that the Goliaths of the industry—including the second, third, and fourth largest chains in the country—were forced to build theaters in "Dry Dock Country" in order to compete with this David, Rugoff has not constructed a new theater since the Cinemas I and II. In 1968 Cinema 5 went public, but in such a manner that Rugoff was left with only a bit more than one per cent of the company (he now owns nine per cent); but to the trade Cinema 5 is Rugoff and Rugoff is Cinema 5—and that's reflected in the company's operations as well. He is a man who would have to supervise such construction very personally, and he hasn't had time for that in recent years. Good times or bad times, all that interests Rugoff is being—or struggling to be again—the country's leading "indie," competing as an independent distributor with the companies whose films he has always played as an exhibitor.

For as long as there have been majors there have also been indies, men who release, for the "art" or "quality" (or, at the other end of the scale, "exploitation") audience, low-budget foreign and American films that the majors don't want or don't know how to handle, and who, every once in a while, come up with something that breaks through into that very "commercial" market controlled by the majors. If the word conjures up as much confusion in the minds of many film scholars and academics as it did when Richard Dreyfuss said "I'm an indie" to Randy Quaid on the drug-smuggling train trip in THE APRENTICESHIP OF DUDDY KRAVITZ, that's because an indie is defined more by size than by nature, i.e., it is not a "major."

Indies sometimes produce films (the early American International, which soon became large enough to be termed a "minor"), sometimes only acquire them during or after production (Burstyn-Mayer), sometimes do both (Roger Corman's New World, which produces drive-in fodder and acquires art house stuff by Fellini and Bergman, and distributes both). Whichever way it's done, it's a kind of work that requires a great deal of courage and ingenuity, which is why men like Ar-

thur L. Mayer and Joseph Burstyn (the pioneer indies), or Joe Levine or Roger Corman, have *had* to be great showman.

Which means, in part, being smart right at the beginning of the process—knowing what pictures to buy. Some of Rugoff's jealous competitors like to shrug off his success with words like "luck" or explanations like "He hires good people," but they finally concede, when the list of hits is reeled off, that "Yes, Don can pick 'em. He can pick 'em as well as anyone."

That he can. Not always pictures that I have personally cared very much for, but films that are risks—films that no one else wants, or films that no one else wants at the price asked, films that are offbeat or different, films that on the surface look as if they shouldn't make any money at all. Now that he's hit his stride again, there's no reason to doubt that he'll match his string of the Sixties—all of which grossed almost or over $2 million, sensational in relation to investment: Robert Downey's PUTNEY SWOPE, the satire about blacks taking over an advertising agency; Bruce Brown's THE ENDLESS SUMMER, the surfing documentary; Bo Widerberg's Swedish love story ELVIRA MADIGAN; David Wolper's bug documentary THE HELLSTROM CHRONICLE, and Vittorio de Sica's THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS (the last two released in 1971, and his last real biggies until SCENES). There was also the Warhol-Morrissey study of the East Village's lower depths, TRASH, whose $800,000 in earnings make it the GONE WITH THE WIND of underground movies. And of course, and most of all, Z.

•

Ah, Z! For years they'd been saying that Don Rugoff would one day have a big one. Not just with the classes, but with the masses—a *really* big one. Then, in 1969-70, it happened. It happened with Z.

A legend has developed around the political thriller about pre-junta Greece, a legend in some measure spawned by Rugoff himself. It is not quite true that it was turned down by all of the majors, although one vice-president of Universal is known to have walked out after a half hour, explaining that his company couldn't possibly distribute a "Communist film." What is certain, however, is that every other distributor, major and independent, rejected the film *at the price asked*—which was, by the beginning of 1969, $300,000 for U.S. rights (the film had cost $800,000 to make).

Rugoff at first was one of the nay-sayers. "I flew over to Paris to see it in February. As is usually true, they weren't interested in an outright sale, but an advance against a percentage of the American gross. And I was incensed," he once recalled to me. "Only one or two French films had ever gotten that kind of advance, and as it turned out neither had been worth the price. I flew back, but not before giving a nasty interview to a French trade paper on how their country's producers were going to lose the American market if they asked prices like that."

But he is, as Duncan McGregor, Jr., head of the French Film Office in New York, puts it, "a man who changes his mind like he changes his shirt." And he is, like all legendary showmen from Barnum to Levine, a gambler. To this day, key personnel throw a dollar into a kitty and predict the first week's gross on any new film opening at a Rugoff Theater. Until he gave up the practice a few years ago after a severe losing streak, he played with toy wheels and figured out "systems," and when he went to the Cannes Festival it was as much for the roulette at the Casino as it was for the films at the Palais.

A Rugoff smash: Charles Denner runs for his life in Costa-Gavras' Z.

And it was at Cannes, that May, where Z won a prize, that he saw it again. "The film had stayed with me. I couldn't get it out of my head. After the prize at Cannes, they wanted $400,000! I took another look, this time with English subtitles. And I paid them what they wanted."

Those subtitles might have had an effect on him, but Rugoff decided that they were inadequate for the public. He himself rewrote them, taking all summer to do it and enlisting the aid of Pierre Cottrell, the young Frenchman who was beginning to produce movies by Eric Rohmer and Robert Bresson. Cottrell, so it is said, thought he was being invited out to Rugoff's East Hampton summer home for a lot of sun and swimming, but instead found himself spending every weekend going over Z line by line.

Then, in September, came the *crise*. There is at least one per picture, as often as not Rugoff-manufactured. There might not be a theater for Z at Christmas! The best chain in town had an embarrassment of riches: EASY RIDER at the Beekman might go through Christmas; BOB & CAROL & TED & ALICE had opened at the Cinema I and was such a smash it would certainly play through Christmas; for more than a year the Sutton had been promised for JOHN AND MARY at Christmas; Cinema 5's own MORE was doing only so-so at the Plaza but by golly we're gonna try and pull it through Christmas! "Open it at someone else's house," it was urged. "No, no, they aren't good enough," snapped Rugoff. Then he got an idea: He would create a new theater for Z: The Z Theater! So off about half of the important Cinema 5 personnel went on a search throughout the Upper East Side, looking for empty stores, abandoned Masonic halls, condemned tenements. Best bet was a former supermarket; this produced an instant slogan: See Z at your A&P! Alas, or fortunately, depending on how you look at it, the slogan was never used. Several theaters became available, and Z was booked into the Beekman for early December.

For once, Rugoff did not experiment with a hundred variants of advertising art but chose to go with the original French campaign: a huge capital letter Z atop Yves Montand's corpse. But he employed it to create what is still the classic example of "wild posting," a device he pioneered and which New Yorkers cannot help but have noticed in recent years: the placement of posters on any free space available, usually at construction sites. Five Z posters in a row looked like the comic-strip word for snoring—ZZZZZ—and were remarkably effective. Otherwise, the $80,000 launching campaign (twice what was usually spent at the time) involved such items as full-page newspaper ads in which Sidney Poitier, Mike Nichols, and others urged readers to see Z—the result of an extensive celebrity screening program. These stars were, of course, eventually replaced by critics, as Z got sensational reviews and became the first movie to win both major press awards, being named *numero uno* of 1969 by the National Society of Film Critics and by the New York Film Critics.

With those prizes in hand, Rugoff tried his most audacious move of all: an attempt to have Z become the first foreign-language film since Jean Renoir's GRAND ILLUSION in 1938 to be nominated for the Oscar as Best Picture of the Year. This nomination is theoretically open to all comers but is almost always given to English-language

movies. (The foreign-language Oscar is a separate competition.) For this purpose Rugoff hired a veteran Hollywood press-agent, who had just been let go by Warner Bros. in a typical "hello-this-is-your-new-conglomerate-you're-fired" manner which had old studio hands angry. It was a decision of genius, because it meant that wanting a lowbudget movie filmed 6,000 miles away to be one of the five finalists for the top Oscar became, of all things, a vote of confidence in the Old Hollywood. The

THE APPRENTICESHIP OF DONALD RUGOFF

The earliest bibliographical reference to Rugoff in *The New York Times* Index, I once discovered, had to do with his leadership of a Harvard student group called Veterans Against MacArthur in 1948, which issued a statement in his name that can be seen as both logical to the man who would one day distribute z and a foretaste of later conflicts with employees: "MacArthur's actions have proven him autocratic, self-willed and unwilling to share responsibilities with others. These actions may have a merit in wartime; they lead to dictatorship in peace."

He had majored in English with intention of becoming a writer, but accepted the call to enter the family business, founded by his father and Herman Becker in 1921, at a time when it, like all of exhibition, was threatened with the arrival of television. By then, what was still called the Rugoff & Becker Theaters was disposing of the third-run houses in Brooklyn, Queens, and Nassau with which it had begun in order to concentrate on such areas as Manhattan's Upper East Side (the Sutton had opened during the war) and Greenwich Village (bohemians were already gazing at the work of local artists in the lobbies of the Art and the Eighth Street Playhouse). In 1952, a few months before his father's death, the Beekman was opened, and it is still the most comfortable house in Manhattan: a 540-seater that can hold 800, the only theater going with rows spaced so far apart that you don't have to get up to let someone pass by. Five years later, a few months before the death of Herman Becker, came the opening of the Cinema on the "Miracle Mile" in Manhasset, still Long Island's leading art house and Rugoff's first personal project.

Thrust into the presidency of the circuit at the brash age of thirty, Rugoff found himself in immediate conflict with older hands, and in 1960, a year after an old (non-Rugoff) fleapit was turned into the spanking new Murray Hill on 34th St., the chain's second-in-command, a man who'd been a faithful employee since the war, quit. (As the person in charge of booking the theaters, he has had, thus far, five successors.) The transition to youth was formalized soon afterwards when the help of Mrs. David Rockefeller was enlisted to buy out the heirs to one of the original founders, and the Rugoff & Becker Theaters became the Rugoff Theaters. Later, to begin the distribution setup, a loan was floated to a group headed by composer Richard Rodgers, who still sits on Cinema 5's board of directors. Rodgers' loyalty was crucial during William Forman's take-over attempt.

The event that climaxed this period in Rugoff's life—the opening of the Cinemas I and II in 1962—was a watershed happening not only in the history of the Rugoff circuit but in the history of American exhibition as well. Its influence on a troubled business was immediate and sustained. Across the country the construction of twin, triple, and on up to sextuple unit complexes has permitted, in any given community, multiple catering to the many small audiences which the motion picture audience has become.

In New York, the two theaters provided the greatest spur up to that time to the gradual shift to the Upper East Side as the prime area for the first-run exhibition of anything other than action and sex product. Fifteen years ago, ten years ago, a major company secured its Broadway booking for a new film, and then worried about other locations. By the end of the Sixties, however, it was the other way around—if, indeed, Broadway entered consideration at all. In 1966 Mike Nichols' WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? premiered on both sides of town; in 1971 his CARNAL KNOWLEDGE was at the Cinema I—exclusively. Stanley Kubrick, whose DR. STRANGELOVE had played two New York houses in 1964, nipped in the bud a suggestion that a Broadway theater join with the Cinema I at Christmas 1971 for A CLOCKWORK ORANGE. "Too many seats," he said, "and it will start the picture off with the wrong tone."

In a sense, distribution was a natural step for Rugoff. For many years, he had been creating his own ads for the pictures playing his houses, some ninety per cent of those submitted by the majors being adjudged unsuitable for classy East Side and Greenwich Village audiences. (The right to turn down the distributor's advertising—rare in a city where the distributor pays for all ad costs—is still included in every Rugoff contract.) But Cinema 5's first few years were enlivened only by the success of ONE POTATO, TWO POTATO; a whole rash of other films proved disappointments, including the black drama NOTHING BUT A MAN, Truffaut's THE SOFT SKIN, and a Boulting Brothers comedy, ROTTEN TO THE CORE, which Cinema 5 had partially financed in a pre-production deal. Rugoff later said of this era: "I was buying what I liked, not what I thought audiences would like." Audiences very much liked Karel Reisz' swinging-London farce MORGAN! in 1966, and it began a winning streak of hits not broken until Cinema 5's second bust period: that of 1973-74.

Not until 1969, with MORE and PUTNEY SWOPE, did Rugoff release a film with considerable X-rated content, and he once confirmed to me the prevailing industry impression that the presence of Mrs. Rockefeller in the Cinema 5 background prevented him from even bidding for pictures like DEAR JOHN and I AM CURIOUS (YELLOW). As were Rugoff himself and his mother, Mrs. Rockefeller was bought out of the company as part of the process of going public in 1969, and PUTNEY—with its ad campaign that went beyond vulgarity into wit—was his cry of freedom. When Wanda Hale gave the film no stars, called it "the most offensive picture I've ever seen," and advised her *Daily News* readers that "if intelligent people must see it, take along your retch bags," he ebulliently included her lines in the ads—ads that were refused by papers in Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. Rugoff declined to submit new designs, and as a result newspaper readers in those cities saw ads with a four-fingered fist and blank space where the black model had appeared.

STAGE OF SIEGE, with Yves Montand and Evangeline Peterson, Don Rugoff's wife (they are now separated).

incredible ploy worked: Z *did* become the first foreign-language film in thirty-one years to be nominated as Best Picture of the Year, and although it lost the top statuette to MIDNIGHT COWBOY, Z managed to win two others: Best Foreign-Language Picture and Best Editing.

While waiting for that fateful night in April, however, Rugoff was not idle. Having thrown out the subtitles provided by the French, he now threw out their dubbing job as well: "It was dreadful. A film with so many different characters, and you couldn't tell one voice from another." In preparation for an assault on the drive-ins and other popular outlets, some six months were given over to prepare a new English version, a project that eventually cost $260,000. It is difficult to describe to anyone not in the industry what spending that much to dub a movie means; most films come through sounding so dreadful because they take at most three weeks to dub and even now cost at most $40,000. Z, it could be said, was the CLEOPATRA of dubbing jobs.

Exhibitors in the sticks normally nix foreign pix, and Z initially was no exception: "At first they said it was a New York picture," Rugoff once said. "Then, when it broke records in Los Angeles, they said, well, it's a big-city picture. After Chicago, it was a big - city - and - east - of - the - Mississippi picture." In time Z was a smash north and south, east and west, in city and village, in drive-in and hardtop. Final U.S. gross: $6.7 million, until LAST TANGO IN PARIS a record for a French film, and exceeded in all foreign tongues only by TANGO and those other sexations of their eras, LA DOLCE VITA and I AM CURIOUS (YELLOW). Some two-thirds of that $6.7 million, says Rugoff, was earned by the dubbed version which consumed so much time and money to prepare. (And Z became only the second foreign-language film—there have since been two or three more—to be sold to network television.) "Every film," says Z director Costa-Gavras, "has an individual personality and demands special handling. The major companies don't seem to know or care about that, and would sooner discard a problem picture than give it the kind of nurturing that would bring out its potential."

And Rugoff, loathe to criticize for print the companies he still serves as an exhibitor, nevertheless told me this story: "Once a major had a whole group of low-budget British pictures, and they were getting some great reviews but doing no business, thanks to lousy ads and a lack of interest on the part of the distributor. So I went to the president of the company and I said, 'Let *us* handle them.' And do you know what he said? He put his arm around my shoulder and he said, 'My son, these pictures are unimportant. We're only using them to train talent for our big-budget productions.' And then the chairman of the board chimed in: 'Well, what are we doing wrong? Look at this ad: See, we took an ad in an underground newspaper.'

"*An* ad—in *one* paper! I couldn't believe it! We'd discovered the underground press *years* before."

•

What he discovered in a more general sense, it seems to me, was that the "Levine

RUGOFF ON HIS SIXTIES FLOPS

All distributors have more flops than hits, the common wisdom in the film business being that one hit pays for three failures and one smash for five. But Rugoff's flops of the Sixties were unusual. Not every critic liked every film, but each was well-reviewed on the whole, and so their fates reveal interesting factors in the educated audience's acceptance or rejection of a film. Here, from my notes, are his conversational analyses of his failures during that period.

NOTHING BUT A MAN (1964)—"A film totally about blacks made by white liberals, and you can see it in every frame. This didn't really become clear to me until pictures like SHAFT and SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSS SONG, directed by blacks, came along recently. PUTNEY SWOPE is somehow different, a film that uses blacks to comment on white society, and popular largely with whites. People have been suggesting that I release PUTNEY for the SHAFT audience, but I don't think it would work. At the end of PUTNEY the blacks are running the ad agency they've taken over exactly as the whites did, and that's not the kind of thing blacks want to hear nowadays. I don't blame them."

ACCIDENT (1967)—"Frankly I was surprised when THE GO-BETWEEN did as well in some out-of-town places as it did in New York, but very happy for Joe Losey. New York is a funny market. There are one-city pictures, and all of Losey's more serious films before GO-BETWEEN, including ACCIDENT, were perfect examples of them."

THE FIREMEN'S BALL (1968)—"It is commonly assumed that the audience for Hollywood movies is ruled by fads and fashions while that for foreign films is 'selective' and always responds to 'quality.' Anyone in the business knows that this simply isn't true. Four Japanese costume dramas were big hits in the middle Fifties, and then for years after that you couldn't give a Japanese picture away. The Czech phenomenon was even shorter—one year, 1967, when some of my competitors had THE SHOP ON MAIN STREET, THE LOVES OF A BLONDE, and CLOSELY WATCHED TRAINS, all of which did over $1 million. Then the bottom fell out. The man who had released TRAINS went broke in '68 with five Czech movies, some of which, like THE FIFTH HORSEMAN IS FEAR and A REPORT ON THE PARTY AND THE GUESTS, got terrific reviews. So did THE FIREMEN'S BALL, the only one I had, but the public had lost all interest in the Czech cinema."

(VERY HAPPY) ALEXANDER (1969)—"A really warm and wonderful picture about a middle aged Frenchman who liked to loaf. The reviews were great, and everyone who saw it loved it. So why then did it fail? Because of what I call the What's-It-About Factor. You go to a party. Someone says, 'I saw a great picture last night, ALEXANDER.' 'Good, I'll go and see it. What's it about?' 'A middle-aged man who doesn't go to work.' 'Ugh—I don't want to see *that*.' Sometimes ads can help you overcome a bad What's-It-About Factor, as with THE TWO OF US. But usually no amount of reviews, no amount of excellent word-of-mouth can get you out of that kind of situation."

MORE (1969)—"I was the first to find out that drugs as the main subject of a movie made for poor boxoffice, something Hollywood only discovered later. Drugs can form an important sub-element, as in TRASH, but not the whole picture. Besides, MORE had been made in Europe and the dialogue was two years out of date by the time it came here. The kids laughed at it."

ELDRIDGE CLEAVER (1970)—"I pulled a switch. Rather than putting on my usual big campaign, I opened this at the Cinema II with no ads until opening day and no advance press screenings. I really thought that people would be so interested in this topic that they'd run to see a picture with a title like that. I was wrong, although when I reduced prices to a dollar the number of admissions did go up. There are lots of political documentaries made, but almost all of them are not very commercial. Yet I feel that people today *are* interested in reality. There *has* to be a way to make a sensational picture about Attica!" (ELDRIDGE CLEAVER was quietly returned to its producer after an enterprising reporter, Addison Verrill, revealed in *Variety* that some weeks after acquiring the picture Rugoff had agreed—possibly, it was suggested, at gunpoint—to give a percentage of any profits to the Black Panthers. Did a Panther delegation march unannounced into his office? Was there a phone conversation with Huey Newton during which Rugoff said, "Look, if you want to make me a revolutionary, I'll have to make you a film distributor"? Rugoff wouldn't tell me.)

GIMME SHELTER (1970)—"Not technically a flop. It grossed $1.5 million and we made a slight profit, but in terms of investment and expectation clearly a disappointment. The kids didn't like the true image of themselves. They wanted to believe Woodstock, but they didn't want to believe Altamont."

formula"—which its originator had used mostly on beefcake epics and Italian sex comedies—could be applied to more sophisticated films as well. A major company usually spends on distribution costs an amount of money which will make a picture profitable if it earns two and a half times what it cost to make. Joe Levine, on the other hand, established his initial reputation as a showman some fifteen years ago with HERCULES, the American rights to which had cost only $100,000 but which he ballyhooed to the tune of $1.5 million (it made almost $6 million). Rugoff has never gone quite that far. But in the Sixties he rarely launched a new movie in New York for less than $100,000, and they were the kind of films normally launched at a quarter of that. Full-page ads in daily newspaper were *de rigeur*, and to complement them there was always some combination of subway posting, television commercials, radio "spots," wild posting, college and/or underground press advertising. He followed suit out of town.

Nothing used to more gladden my heart more than watching a Rugoff effort to save

NEW YORK FESTIVAL

A Rugoff flop: Milos Forman's THE FIREMEN'S BALL.

the career of a movie which had opened to disastrous boxoffice despite superb reviews and seemingly good word of mouth. Ah, therein lies a Rugoff specialty! Partly because of his own immense ego, partly because of what he describes as a commitment to creators, he never gives up on a film until everything conceivable has been mustered in an effort to bring it to public attention and start the cocktail party chatter flowing: "No director can ever say of me, as they often do of the majors, that I threw their picture away or didn't have faith in it. I don't buy it unless I have faith in it. To close a picture which has gotten good notices after a few bad days at the boxoffice seems to me the height of betrayal."

In this regard, industry people remember with greatest astonisment the campaign for Claude Berri's THE TWO OF US, a 1967 story of wartime France which may not become a film classic but whose career ranks as a business classic. A pen-and-ink design by Saul Bass (the film's third ad campaign following its opening) was festooned throughout the city's subway system and Rugoff eventually recouped his hefty costs on a movie which had seemed a lost cause a week after its premiere. But not even Saul Bass could save Milos Forman's Czech comedy THE FIREMEN'S BALL the following year, despite ads atop every bus, and despite—a typically impulsive and expensive Rugoff gesture—the purchase of the short subject ORATORIO FOR PRAGUE for an unheard-of $50,000 after *The New York Times'* Renata Adler said that feature and short together, as seen at the New York Film Festival, made for "the best show in town."

As a matter of course, everyone available is corralled to tout a new release. When ELVIRA MADIGAN had its first engagements out of town, its creators were all busy on new projects, so the mountain came to Mohammed: three critics from Boston and two from Chicago went on a whirlwind junket, flying to Stockholm on a Thursday, interviewing director and stars on Friday and Saturday, returning to the U.S. on Sunday. "And THE ENDLESS SUMMER was not just a matter of promoting that fabulous poster. We sent Bruce Brown to every city; he knew how to work them from his days on the lecture circuit, and the press coverage was fantastic." (In Canada, a market considered similar to the U.S., the surfing film was released by a major which chose not to utilize Brown's promotion skills, and flopped.)

But it is not only the quantity of his advertising and promotion which awes the industry, but also its quality. By common consent, he is conceded to have the best visual sense around, and several of his advertising designs, created with the help of his agency—the Diener/Hauser/Greenthal subsidiary of Ted Bates & Co.—have become classics, including the delicate line drawing of two faces for ELVIRA MADIGAN, barechested Joe Dallesandro for TRASH, and the clenched fist, with black model substituting for upraised middle finger, for PUTNEY SWOPE.

("The green-eyed monster in the HELLSTROM CHRONICLE ads was actually created by the producer, David Wolper," Rugoff once told me. "But I didn't change the campaign. That figure didn't look like an insect; it looked like something from outer space. And I told my publicity people: 'No stills of bugs! Release no stills of bugs!' This was to be sold as a head film, not an insect documentary.")

That same "class" has always been observable at the theaters, each of which has a distinct atmosphere (rather than the appearance of coming from the latest American Seating assembly line) and all of which feature witty three-dimensional "fronts" for each film (rather than standard posters): "We try to be the Bonwit's of exhibition." It is common knowledge that Rugoff pays the managers of his theaters more than anyone else in town but that they can be fired for as much as a blown-out lightbulb. In similar fashion he will not tolerate a single subtitle typo; and, well before Z, such critics as Bosley Crowther and Archer Winsten were saying that the dubbing of such films as ELVIRA MADIGAN was the best they'd ever seen. For the Rolling Stones concert film, GIMME SHELTER, theaters in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere were rewired for four-track stereophonic sound, in each case to the tune of at least $10,000. "Don's real uniqueness," says a colleague, "is a combination of showmanship and taste. The two used to be thought antithetical. But Don's ballyhoo is ballyhoo with a Harvard education."

•

As far as is known, Rugoff has no unique way to find new pictures, no inside track. He goes to Europe about five times a year to scout new films, and his assistants also make many Atlantic crossings. ELVIRA MADIGAN was seen at Cannes, and as with Z, he hesitated before deciding to take it on. Other films to undergo a yes-no-yes-no Rugoff treatment (sometimes lasting months) were THE FIREMEN'S BALL, GIMME SHELTER, and SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE. Producers submit at least twenty films a month to his ultra-modern, pop-art-decorated Madison Avenue office in New York; evenings and weekends are taken up with this activity—as well as with a course he is teaching this semester on film distribution at Manhattan's The New School—but then, as one of his assistants says, "Time means nothing to 'Charles Foster' Rugoff."

The reference, of course, is to CITIZEN KANE, and the comparison, if limited, is useful. Like Kane, Rugoff inherited wealth, achieved success young from a family base, and seems to have no idea of what it's like to work for someone else. Like Kane, he often gets so involved in his work that he ignores the human aspects of those under him. Most of all, perhaps, there is his Kane-like predilection for the large gesture. An employee leaving under strained circumstances will be presented with a $5,000 check. Another, leaving after seventeen years only in order to obtain some peace and quiet for the rest of his life, was offered, as inducement to stay on, part of an island in the West Indies which Rugoff was thinking of purchasing in partnership with others. (For weeks afterward, an expansive shout of "I will give you my island!" was enough to break up almost any gathering of New York film people.) Since the showing of WR at the New York Film Festival coincided with the birthday of its director, Dusan Makavejev, Rugoff provided a monstrous cake, color-coded to be cut into a thousand pieces for each and every viewer at the festival that night. Once, walking past a department store, someone whom Rugoff wanted to thank expressed casual admiration for something in the window; not knowing

just what was being referred to, Rugoff ordered the window's entire contents—clothes, furnishings, the lot.

If he has not studied CITIZEN KANE, he has certainly noted the style of film showmen of the Selznick-Zanuck school, and carefully orchestrates his effects. Such directors as Costa-Gavras and Barbet Schroeder have been left waiting an hour or more outside his office despite scheduled appointments. Bo Widerberg was once awakened at five a.m., Swedish time, to be confronted with a long-distance question on the Mozart music in ELVIRA MADIGAN. Bryan Forbes was given five minutes to reject or accept Rugoff's terms on LONG AGO, TOMORROW. But, also like the showmen of old, he can take it as well as dish it out, and respects this kind of gall *from* directors. Far from having lost a deal, Robert Downey was halfway home when he barred Rugoff, ten minutes late, from the first screening for potential distributors of the completed PUTNEY SWOPE.

Almost everyone who has worked for Rugoff uses a phrase like "twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week" to describe the experience; that's probably an exaggeration, but not an excessive one. By any standards which can be applied he is a "workaholic," and there is no family or sentimental event which he will not pass up when the pressure is on; two years ago, when his mother died, he came straight from the funeral to the office, rolled up his sleeves, and put in an afternoon of work. He expects no less from employees, and in the line of duty they have been asked to sacrifice honeymoons, their children's birthday parties, hospital visits to newborn sons and daughters, theater tickets scalped at $100 the pair, and that heavy date with the girl of their dreams. "If you're married he expects a little less, but if you're single, forget it!," says one toiler.

Rugoff was in Los Angeles during the minor earthquake of 1971, and when, that day, he was more than an hour late for a morning appointment, those waiting began to fear for his safety. "Oh, that's all right," he said when he finally arrived, "the noise got me up an hour early and I was able to get in some more work." That kind of mockery of himself is rare, however, and is not tolerated when it is directed at him by employees, most of whom complain even years afterward that their veracity was constantly questioned and that they felt "vampirized" and "emasculated." Some leave no question but that it has crossed their minds to arrange the kind of "accident" which befell Yves Montand in Z, though most would probably settle for standing in for Erland Josephson to Rugoff's Liv Ullmann in the divorce agreement-signing episode in SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE.

It is frequently impossible to determine whether someone quit or was fired from Cinema 5 because the disillusionment is often mutual, but in the days when I knew him Rugoff went through employees like a sinus sufferer goes through tissue paper. One year there were personal secretaries variously estimated from a dozen (Rugoff) to thirty (a disgruntled employee). In one two-year period the leavetakings included, at the top levels of a staff that was never over fifty, three treasurers, two chief bookers, three advertising directors, three executive assistants, four film salesmen.

Cinema 5 is the showcase account at Diener/Hauser, and the relationship has lasted for twenty-five years, but the only answers to be gotten from sources there as to how many account executives Rugoff has gone through range from "countless" to "all we've ever had." The demand for aesthetic perfection which wins awards for the agency is always present; an agent told me of being in Rugoff's office one day and watching in disbelief as he called Diener/Hauser to complain that the bottom borderline in a *Village Voice* ad was a quarter of an inch too low.

But all of that only holds true nowadays for sub-executive levels. If constant complaints from financial advisers weren't enough, the ever-present threat from William Forman is surely sufficient to convince Rugoff that a company traded on the American Stock Exchange is hardly being responsible to its investors when it lacks "management depth." There were times, and not so very long ago, when Cinema 5 had no officer save Rugoff—no vice-president, no secretary, no treasurer—no one to prevent Wall St. panic were Rugoff to suddenly die. That's all changed now; both vice-president Henry Guettel (Richard Rodgers' son-in-law) and treasurer James Hudsons have managed to survive several years.

Which doesn't mean that, as long as Rugoff is alive and well, these officers or any other employees are much more than executive lackeys. Sometimes Rugoff tries to assume the stance of the disinterested corporate man in what one imagines he thinks the approved Harvard Business School manner, and employs the first person plural. "We learned something from handling that film," he will say, or "We give a damn about our pictures." Coming from him, the "we" has as much bearing to reality as it did coming from de Gaulle, and there is really nothing to challenge *Variety's* assessment of Cinema 5 as an exclave of "one-man rule." B-school teachings have little place in a company where there is no distinction between policy and operations, and little between management and staff. Everyone at Cinema 5 is, more or less, an "assistant" to the top man.

Those are the conditions that obtain, and (despite occasional promises of and experiments with "autonomy" for department heads) have obtained for almost twenty years. Decisions that, at rival concerns, are considered too small to need presidential imprimatur require Rugoff's approval at Cinema 5, and employees complain of being paralyzed for three or four days awaiting an okay on some minor matter and then having to work through nights and weekends in order to catch up. There are those willing to accept these conditions, others whose devotion equals Rugoff's own, and very few who are really granted some autonomy; consequently it is possible to find some people whose tenure at Cinema 5 has been relatively long. But they make for a small number.

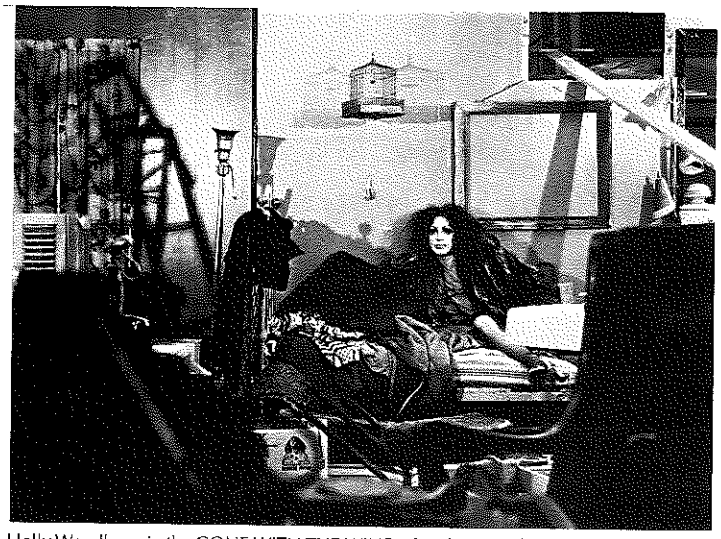
But at least that top man's devotion has been demonstrated *in extremis;* during that frightful year 1973, when Cinema 5 lost $1.8 million, Rugoff suspended his $100,000-a-year salary for several months. The contract calling for that emolument is one of the most airtight in the industry, however, specifying that he can be fired

RUGOFF AND HIS INFLUENCE

It's not only the money that his films earn that make Rugoff a figure of fascination in the industry. There's also the fact that his releases have proven time and again harbingers of the future. What succeeds for him in the limited "sophisticated" market succeeds for the majors in the wider "commercial" market a few years later.

Thus, his 1963 miscegenation hit ONE POTATO, TWO POTATO led, in 1965, to MGM's A PATCH OF BLUE and, two years after that, to Columbia's GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER. ELVIRA MADIGAN cued the return to romantic tragedy which resulted in blockbusters like ROMEO AND JULIET, RYAN'S DAUGHTER, and LOVE STORY. The unexpected returns for the all-black PUTNEY SWOPE meant that films like COTTON COMES TO HARLEM and SHAFT could be made, leading to a whole new genre in the film biz. And, as Pauline Kael pointed out at the time, THE FRENCH CONNECTION was really a depoliticized and Americanized Z.

THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS was one of three European films credited with bringing about Hollywood's present vogue for Thirties period realism—but it made more money in the U.S. than did THE CONFORMIST or THE DAMNED. As for SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE, the only thing that can be said at this point is that every exhibitor I know thinks that A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE—shot at the same time but released a few months later—would never have become a hit without the word-of-mouth characterization of it as being "like" the Bergman drama. As for the future, who knows? Hollywood adapts to any trend, and maybe we'll see Robert Redford and Ellen Burstyn shouting at each other for three close-up hours before the year is through.



Holly Woodlawn in the GONE WITH THE WIND of underground movies, Paul Morrissey's TRASH.

Bernie Hamilton and Barbara Barrie in Cinema V's first hit film, Larry Peerce's ONE POTATO, TWO POTATO.

only for "malfeasance, gross negligence, or illness, in certain cases." And why not? When things are good at the company they are very good indeed, and in 1970, the year of PUTNEY SWOPE and Z, stockholders were awarded a special dividend of thirty cents—this from a company which, on going public two years before, said it "does not have any present plans to pay any cash dividends in the forseeable future."

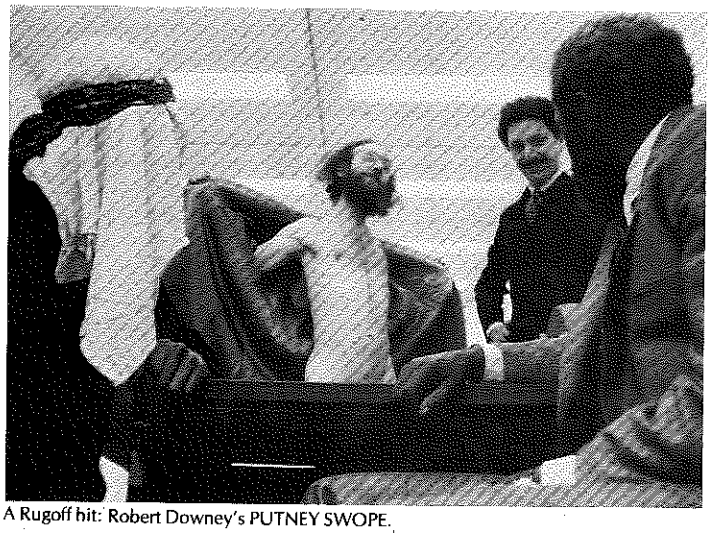
•

The late Noelle Gillmor, who supervised those much-praised dubbing jobs (and who got, as per personal fee, $100,000 of the $260,000 spent on Z), thought of Rugoff as "a businessman with an artistic temperament. I've been around people like that my whole life. But there other people, these *salesmen!* They're the type that not only can't understand someone like Don—they can never understand the nit-picking demands of anyone even officially 'creative,' like a director. Don makes me, at least, feel that a film is important—to him, to you, and to the history of cinema. He'll go to any lengths to get something right. If I need a few more weeks, another $5,000, I get it. If I'm having trouble subtitling a Tunisian movie, he'll find some professor of Arabic at Columbia and get him to me that afternoon."

And that's the strangest anomaly in the whole Rugoff story: his hands-off policy towards creative people. During the six months that she was dubbing Z, Gillmor heard from Rugoff "maybe once." Howard Smith reports that Rugoff didn't even ask to see daily rushes on MARJOE. Even though he has sometimes had the right, Rugoff has never cut or altered a film without the approval of the director—though considerable persuasion and pressure has sometimes been applied when he thought there should be changes.

The most recent example is also the most extreme: it was Rugoff who suggested that SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE go from its original 250-minute export length to its current 168 minutes, but Bergman who actually made the cuts. I knew that Rugoff was back in business when, recently, I read an angry interview with Roger Corman, who complained that when Bergman gave Corman first crack at SCENES (on the strength of the business in the U.S. done by CRIES AND WHISPERS), Corman had to pass on the picture because Bergman wouldn't hear of any further cutting. But there's a point that Corman missed, which is that Rugoff—the man often described as not so much a distributor but the distribution extension of the director—*first* bought SCENES FROM MARRIAGE and only *later* suggested cutting, perfectly willing to distribute the picture at its four-hour and ten-minute length should Bergman prove intransigeant.

Leave it to eighty-nine-year-old Arthur Mayer, the elder statesman of the film industry (and owner of a part interest in Manhattan's Gramercy Theatre, a Rugoff house), to give the balanced view. "Like many Americans, he is more than dominated by business—he is obsessed," Mayer once told me. "As a result, he doesn't push employees up, he pulls them down. He wants to do everything." But then Mayer paused, finally concluding: "I've seen them come and go, but I've never seen anyone to equal Don for enthusiasm or courage."



A Rugoff hit: Robert Downey's PUTNEY SWOPE.

JOHN SPRINGER ARCHIVE

Erland Josephson and Liv Ullmann in SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE.