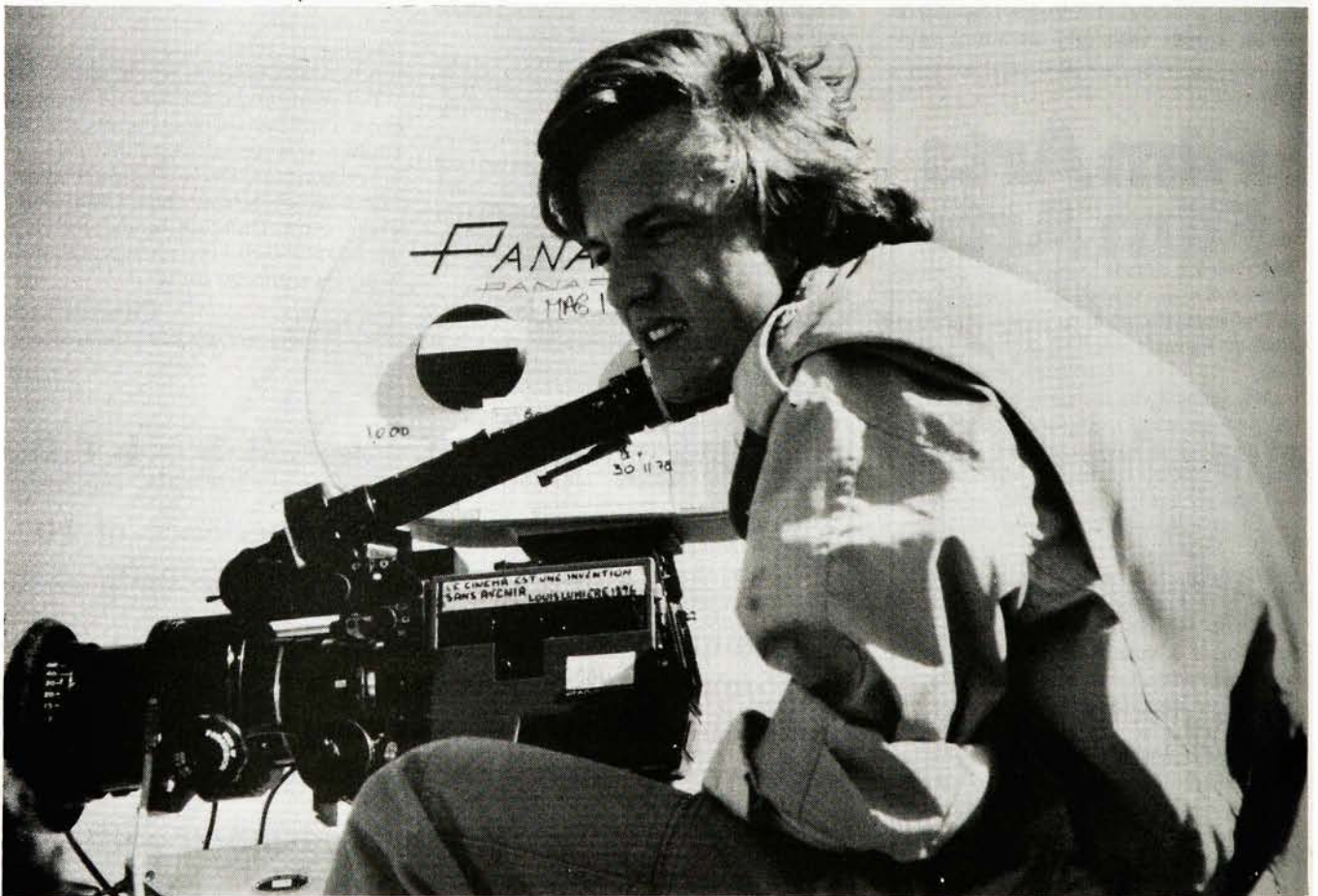

ciupka in control

by barbara samuels

The present film boom is creating a golden opportunity for talented young cinematographers to secure a foot-hold in the industry. For some, like Richard Ciupka, hard work and talent have paid off. Ciupka is hitting his stride.



Richard Ciupka and his view from the top

A visitor to the set of Filmplan International's **Dirty Tricks** squints into the glare of movie lights, then shades his eyes against them with one hand. With the other, he taps the shoulder of a production assistant standing nearby, and nods toward the film crew a few yards beyond.

"Where's the Director of Photography?"

The assistant obliges by pointing out an energetic little form with tousled blond hair that is pacing from one corner to another, stopping at intervals to take light readings from actors and objects. The visitor stares at his extraordinarily youthful face for a few seconds, and then turns back to the assistant. "No, the Director of Photography." At which point the assistant shrugs, smiles and strolls off.

The scene, in one form or another, has probably been repeated on the set of every film Richard Ciupka (pronounced "Choopka") has shot. At thirty-three, with some fourteen features to his credit, he remains at the mercy of an engaging baby face that belies both his age and his experience. And the looks have been anything, he feels, but a blessing; actors have become jittery at the sight of a DOP who appears to have his high school grad dance just a few years behind him. "I was the operator on **Angela**," he recalls wryly, "and the director brought me over to meet Sophia Loren. She took one look at me and cried 'Bambino!' But once she saw the rushes, she stopped worrying." He grimaces and shakes his head. "It's just a matter of getting them past that damned first impression."

For the Belgium-born French Pole, first impressions these days are more often based on the images he creates, than the ones he projects. One, of a handful of Canadian cameramen, who no longer harbours fears of the unemployment line, he has set an extraordinary track record in an amazing amount of time, and notes with some satisfaction that his work now serves as his best PR. "When a director's looking for a DOP," he points out, "he sits down in a screening room with some features, sees what appeals to him, stops the projector and asks 'Who did that?' You're chosen on the basis of your work, not your baby blue eyes."

The range and scope of that work are impressive; he can claim involvement in the last of the **Ilsa** series, **Tigers of Siberia**, at the beginning of his career, and hold up Claude Chabrol's **Violette Nozière** as an indication of more recent achievements. There is no inherent conflict in the combination, either: the twelve years Ciupka has passed behind the camera are a chart of dues paid and credits earned — that he brandishes angrily every time his relative youth is juxtaposed with his position in the industry.

Ciupka is the antithesis of the guy who 'somehow fell into movies'; without fully knowing why, he recalls deciding at the age of fourteen that motion picture camerawork was the only destiny he had. "My father brought home a television set one day, and turned it on. The old **Zorro** series was playing. I remember being absolutely thunderstruck, overwhelmed. I began to go to films all the time, determined to make a career of it."

*Barbara Samuels is a free-lance writer working out of Montreal. She has just finished working as a production assistant on location for **Dirty Tricks**, and plans to work on another feature film in the near future.*



Ciupka and Claude Chabrol as they share and compare perspectives during **Violette Nozière**

After moving to Montreal at fourteen, Ciupka pursued his objective by mixing school with refinery work. At sixteen he emerged with enough cash to buy a Bolex camera. His work was impressive enough to land him a job as assistant cameraman on some small productions. But his singularity of purpose urged him on. After two years, he became an operator on commercials. Three years later he decided it was time to start calling himself a cameraman. "There's a certain amount of bloody-mindedness involved," he reflects now. "It's a matter of gambling on yourself. When I made the last decision, I didn't work for a year, which is rough on you in both emotional and financial terms. But you can't be passive. The work eventually came, and that reinforced my instincts."

He functioned as an operator on small features in Italy and France, then returned to Canada to work on documentaries in Montreal and Toronto. A mixture of television and low-budget feature work followed. Then, a small baptism of fire took place when Ciupka found himself providing the only sense of camera continuity on **Angela**. Disagreements between the director, and three different DOPs, left the hapless operator scrambling to pull the images together. "That," he remembers ruefully, "is where I learned what the business is all about in terms of what it does to your nerves."

He was to learn a good deal more about the art when he went to work for Claude Chabrol on **Blood Relatives**. The critical failure of the picture did not harm the working relationship between the director and operator, and Chabrol called upon him again for **Violette Nozière**, the last two weeks of which saw Ciupka take over as DOP. The picture remains a point of extraordinary pride for him, and the basis upon which he has since formed many opinions about directors, approaches and work attitudes. He admits

a preference to working with the French: "I like their mentality and their approach to filmmaking. It's part of their lives, not just a 'job.' There's this communal sense on a French set, that this is a shared project." The practical aspects hold their appeal as well. "The daily schedules are better organized," he insists. "Noon to 7:30 in the evening. You're given time to live, and the end product is better as a result. The eagerness to cut total shooting time in Canada does incredible damage to the end product. There's greater efficiency here, but I'd sacrifice that efficiency for the calibre of film produced in France."

He also senses a sharp division along stylistic lines between the Europeans and Canadians. "We pay a lot of attention to 'getting the story told' in the traditional narrative film language, a stress on action and dialogue. They place more emphasis on a language of images, which obviously holds tremendous appeal for a cameraman. I'd like to see us change our approach a bit — switch into a different visual mentality."

Ciupka nevertheless finds different mentalities the least of his problems, and credits his Montreal base with his ability to adapt. "It's always the same three guys in Montreal who get the work, because we're all perfectly bilingual: we can move overnight from a Franco-Canadian co-production to an American movie. And because the Montreal mixture of cultures has given us this tremendous scope, I can switch without thinking. Chabrol is one approach, the Toronto Anglo-Saxon environment is another thing entirely, but I can adapt. The competition is also restricted here because we're all known for different

things." Ciupka's forte is the studio — an environment that truly tests a cameraman, he believes. He is particularly proud of the way he matched the burning sun of the Israeli desert, on exteriors for **It Rained All Night The Day I Left**, with the internal light of a Montreal studio. The scope of that Canadian/German/Israeli/French co-production was enormous, and the logistics of co-ordinating the camera-work on such a massive scale made the picture his biggest challenge to date. "They were shipping palm trees and goats into the middle of the Sinai because the story took place in Africa. The amount of people on that film, the size if it, and working in the desert... God!"

He suffered from more than just culture shock upon his return to Montreal in mid-winter to shoot **Yesterday**, a film he thinks is "very pretty to look at." It involved a staging of battle sequences as part of a Vietnam flashback, and the smoke, noise and odour of burning tires made the location "a real nightmare to shoot in." It was with some relief that Ciupka plunged into Eric Till's **A Christmas Carol**, a film shot in Toronto's Magder Studios. The advance word on this movie has created much of the excitement surrounding Ciupka's name in film circles these days. He relished the opportunity to exercise the kind of control over the images that he believes can only come in the studio situation.

"Location work is 100% compromise," he says. "Some people are better at compromise than others. Lights fall into place on location; you're restricted by where you are. There are no restrictions in the studio — it's the definition of total control. You can put lights wherever you want; you're creating from scratch. That's why I think there's no excuse for a cameraman to fail in the studio; he can either create images or he cannot."

Ciupka also admits an aversion to the current vogue of shooting with available light. "The idea of shooting with what you've got, of boosting to 400 ASA and shooting at 1.4 — you're not in control anymore. You're not creating an event, you're just recording it. Learning to bend light, to manipulate colour... that's what film is to me. You're searching to find out what's 'acceptable' to the eye. Night shooting, for instance... your eye adjusts to night situations — the camera and film don't. The old Hollywood tradition developed this blue light as a kind of 'code' for night exteriors, but it's only accurate to a certain extent: night is only really blue on winter nights with a full moon. So on **Yesterday** I did the reverse — made the nights 'warm', an orange-yellow colour. I haven't had an audience reaction yet. Maybe a slap in the face or an Oscar; you never know."

Having just finished the \$5.2 million **Dirty Tricks** which was shot on location in Montreal and Boston, Ciupka is about to embark upon the new Louis Malle film, **Bamboozle**. Excited at the prospect of teaming up with the French director, he is already full of ideas as to how he'll desaturate the vibrant colours of the Atlantic City location, and confident that he is again paired up with a man whose visual sense is as strong as his dramatic one. That key relationship between cameraman and director continues to concern him. He is keenly aware that however sympathetic two souls may be, they see with different sets of eyes.

"As cameramen," he reflects, "we are really the only

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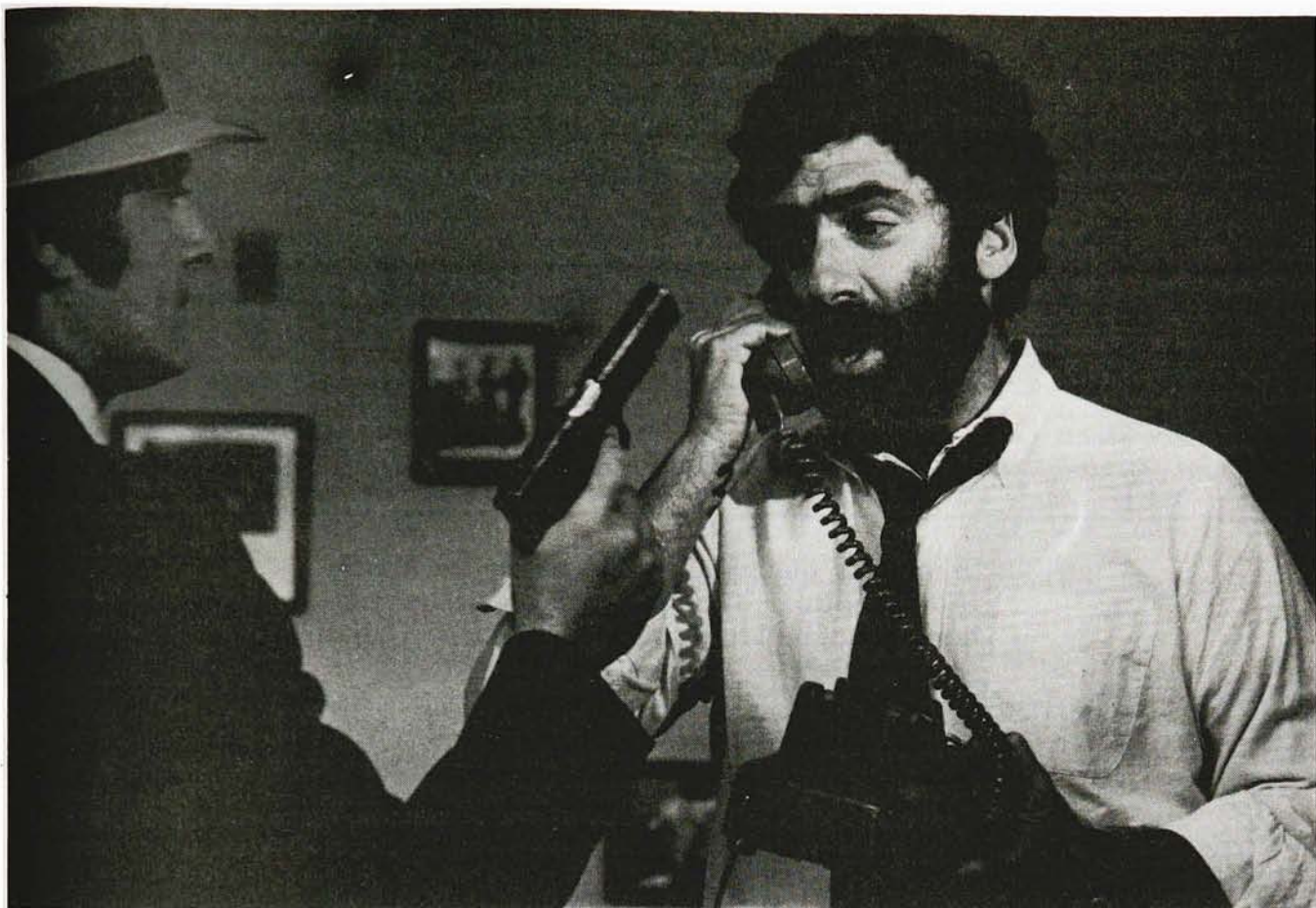
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"Can I call you back?" Hit man, (John Juliani) and Professor Chandler, (Elliott Gould) get ready for some **Dirty Tricks**

people on set who can't make mistakes. There's no immediate feedback, no assurance that what you've got down is what the people you're working for want. I can say I'm going to give the guy a 'Bertolucci' shot, and he says 'fine,' but he doesn't know what the hell he's got until he gets to the rushes. You have to be able to interpret directors' thoughts, and since no two people see the same way, it's hard." He stops to shake his head, smiling. "But that unknown aspect, that little risk factor — it's what I like. It's what keeps me on my toes."

So does his schedule. Ciupka's had two weeks between pictures, on the average. Sometimes he stops to wonder how he intends to survive the grind. But there is a sense of urgency about him, a drive to achieve something he can't articulate. He is sometimes overwhelmed by the amount of time that has passed since everything started, and therefore resentful of the people who wonder at his age and success. "I keep being told that things are really happening for me now, that it's all beginning. But I want to yell that I'm tired, that it hasn't happened overnight, and that it's been hard. I realize though, that this is a new plateau, a different phase. And I've got to gear myself up for it."

And about the face? He taps his head with a finger. "I came up with a good idea. I'm going to get myself an

operator with a big grey beard, and let everyone point him out as the DOP. Then maybe I can just get on with my job."

Filmography: Richard Ciupka

1974:

Beyond the Door (Italy) D.O.P.

Million Dollar Hockey Puck (Canada) D.O.P., d. Jean Lafleur

Frédérique (France) D.O.P., d. Robert Desrosiers

1976:

Cathy's Curse (Canada) D.O.P., d. Eddie Matalon

Angela (Canada-France) operator d. Boris Sagal.

1977:

Blood Relatives (Canada-France) operator, D.O.P. for last 2 weeks, d. Claude Chabrol.

1978:

It Rained All Night the Day I Left (Canada-France-Germany-Israel) D.O.P., d. Nicolas Gessner

Yesterday (Canada) D.O.P., d. Larry Kent.

1979:

A Christmas Carol (Canada), D.O.P., d. Eric Till

Dirty Tricks (Canada) D.O.P., d. Alvin Rakoff

Bamboozle (France-Canada) D.O.P., d. Louis Malle