

NY Price Fighter KOs Big Fix

BY PATRICK COX

Just a glass of wine, that's all. A little Moselle with friends, some Cabernet Sauvignon with a steak, a glass of Moscato with dessert—it's the small things that make the difference. And government manages to have a hand in so many of the small things that the most stalwart soul can sometimes lose sight of all that's good about life on the planet. The 21st Amendment did *not* establish a free market in spirits, and bureaucrats seem to have taken particular pleasure in the regulation of alcohol. Nothing is sacred.

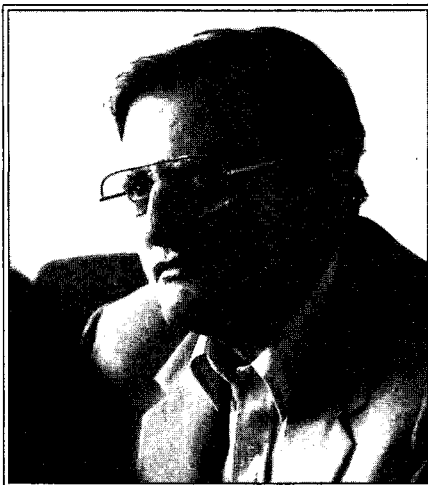
But there are satisfying moments, little victories that go a long way toward allaying the multitude of injustices perpetrated by prohibitionists of every sort. Because of the resistance of one man for over a decade, the State of New York was forced to let wine retailers sell the fruit of the vine for substantially less than previously mandated prices. In the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, Bill Mezzetti used civil disobedience to challenge the state's wine-pricing law. The final legal ruling was according to the Sherman Antitrust Law; New York was busted for price fixing in a victory as sweet as Tokaji Aszu.

Bill Mezzetti is the owner of Domenick's Choice Wines and Liquors in Astoria, Queens. The store opened for business in 1941, a mom-and-pop operation named after Bill's father. Later in that decade, New York passed a law about retail wine prices: they had to be set ("posted") by manufacturers—and stuck to by every retailer in the state.

Bill took over the family business in 1953. He could have gotten around the bizarre price fixing (posted prices represented markups ranging from 20 percent to 400 percent) like many others, selling below the legal price to regular customers and friends. But that is not Mezzetti's way. "I can live with blue laws," he says, "but when it comes to prices, this is where I get wrinkled."

Mezzetti decided to take on the State Liquor Authority (SLA). He broke the law. With a degree in marketing from Manhattan College, he did what he knew makes sense: he cut prices and went for a high-volume business.

The SLA fingered him the first time in 1967. After competitors complained to



BILL MEZZETTI

the SLA, a modern-day Eliot Ness skulked into his store in plain clothes and bought a case of wine at discount. Mezzetti was fined \$1,000. Another undercover agent collared Mezzetti in 1971 for giving him a deal on a couple gallons of Almaden. He paid another \$1,000 but did not reform. When he was caught a third time, the SLA levied another \$1,000 and ordered a devastating 30-day shut-down of his business. The charge this time: Mezzetti had undercharged 12 cents on a bottle of Gallo Burgundy.

Mezzetti appealed to the state supreme court and lost. He went to the state court of appeals and lost. He was also losing money, to lawyers. Mezzetti explains that he had to hire liquor lawyers, specialists in "a highly sophisticated and specialized portion of the law."

On the very day that he was supposed to close his doors, March 30, 1980, help came via California. Like the California wines that bedevil the Eastern wineries, a legal ruling came out of the West to shatter the New York monopolists' schemes. California wine retailers had won a US Supreme Court ruling overturning wine price fixing in that state. Armed with the fresh precedent, Mezzetti's lawyers won in the court of appeals, overthrowing the state's wine-pricing controls. It was a fine day for Bill Mezzetti and free enterprise.

Mezzetti does not "talk" politics. He says he is neither a conservative nor a liberal. His motives for taking on the

state come straight from the heart. He told REASON, "Frankly, I'm a very independent person. I came from grass roots and wasn't afraid of the State. I felt that they were wrong. . . . The State is you and I, and if you and I don't stand up and be counted, nothing ever happens. The unfortunate part of it is, it costs money." He admits that "there were many times I was ready to give in, but I just turned around and continued on. Sometimes you have to put the blinders on and just go forward. You're dealing against an authority, but because the authority says the law is right doesn't mean that it necessarily is. And I felt free enterprise was the answer."

Mezzetti was virtually alone in his struggle. The large business interests that have profited from the increase in volume did not support him while he took the heat and the risks, and competitors who liked the system just fine were often downright hostile. As he sees it, though, the exhilaration of writing "an honest receipt" for the first time makes up for a lot. And he likes charging less for wine. "Wine is a staple," he says, "not just an alcoholic beverage."

Liquor prices are still controlled in New York, but someone else is fighting that fight. "At this point," he reflects, "I'm not taking on any more. . . windmills." He's more interested in fishing, woodworking, and his children. His oldest son is in the family business; the younger, in college. His daughter was a communications major in college when Mezzetti was in the middle of his legal struggle. "She bit her teeth on my legal papers," he says proudly, "and changed from communications to prelaw." Today, she is an attorney.

Meanwhile, New Yorkers are paying millions of dollars less per year for more wine. Many New Yorkers retain European and Mediterranean culinary traditions, drinking wine regularly at meals, and more and more Americans are developing the practice. The next time you're sharing a bottle with friends and you run out of toasts, take heart, smile, remember Domenick Mezzetti's son, raise your glasses, and cheer for the small things that are good about life.

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arts & letters

MOVIES

Raggedy Man Chariots of Fire Cutter's Way

Reviewed by John Hospers

• The best films of the current season have been those dealing with some unambitious theme, some small segment of life, which, through compassionate and imaginative handling, is made to reverberate with larger implications than those specifically treated in the film itself. The latest example is **RAGGEDY MAN**. The background is World War II—which though it is never seen is never forgotten—from employees “frozen” in their jobs to the clothing and mores and music (“Rum and Coca Cola”) of the period. It’s a small, dull Texas town, and Sissy Spacek plays a divorced wife with two small children eking out a living as the lone operator of the town’s telephone switchboard. Local rednecks try to prey upon her loneliness, but she repulses their advances; then by accident comes a sailor (Eric Roberts) on a three-day leave, whose life briefly joins hers and makes her come alive again. Other plot elements are interwoven as well, with several startling developments when one least expects them—such as the one (which will not be revealed here) giving significance to the title of the film.

What makes this film eminently worth seeing is a happy mix of elements: finely drawn characterizations, a clear and engrossing story line, and an unerring sense of the time and place, as exhibited in small, telling details, which the usual run of film makers would not have thought to include and which evoke in the viewer a strong upbeat feeling even after leaving the theater. Through it all we learn not only what it was like to be a civilian in the boondocks in 1944, but what it is like anywhere, anytime to be a single parent with children, to be lonely, to be fearful, and to be in love.

• In his exhortation to “Young Men of a New Age” (preface to *Milton*), William Blake wrote, in one stanza, “Bring me my chariot of fire.” Much later Blake’s poem was set to music, and the song has become famous in Britain; so the significance of the title, never mentioned in the



Sissy Spacek in *Raggedy Man*

film, would not be lost on Englishmen but on almost everyone else.

English or not, however, almost anyone can expect a very enjoyable experience from seeing **CHARIOTS OF FIRE**. Yet an outline of the subject would hardly inspire most people to see it: a historical record of the Paris Olympic Games of 1924, with two British track champions, Harry Abrahams and Eric Liddell, as the chief protagonists. Abrahams, the son of Lithuanian Jewish parents, but English to the core, races in order to succeed in the face of a residual anti-Semitism present in English society; Liddell, the son of a Scottish missionary to China, races in order to serve God. (In real life, he returned to China as a missionary shortly after the races and was killed by the Chinese communists in 1949.) The background of each of them is developed in revealing touches, and we get to know them both well before their paths cross halfway through the film.

In some works of art the parts are greater than the whole, the parts not meshing together or being subordinated to the whole design; in this one, however, the whole is greater than the parts. Each part, by itself modest and unambitious, contributes unflinchingly to the whole effect and with never a hitch: “everything works.” The atmosphere of post-World War I is recreated in deft touches, such as the sight of battle-scarred faces and a lingering contempt for those who did not serve. The script is excellent throughout, incisive without being arty or self-conscious: Abrahams’s retort to the Cambridge headmasters when they accuse him of lacking team spirit is one of the picture’s many literary gems. The

characterizations too are faultless: there is Ben Cross as Abrahams—troubled, sensitive, articulate, determined, courageous; Ian Charleston as Liddell—devoutly religious, but never hypocritical or ostentatious, serene in his faith and the confidence it gives him, entering a race as a thank-offering to God; and Ian Holm as Abrahams’s trainer—in what other film could the simple act of pushing his hand through a straw hat in celebration of victory draw applause from an audience? At last Britain has again produced a film that lingers in the memory, and is worthy of a wide international audience.

• Completed some months ago under the title of the book, *Cutter and Bone*, the film found no ready release and has now appeared in various art theaters under the title **CUTTER’S WAY**. Touted as the most-imaginative and best-directed film of the year, it nevertheless requires considerable staying power to enjoy it throughout. From afar off, as it were, one can appreciate some brilliance of dialogue and an occasional stab at the jugular in characterization. But the characters—well enough acted by Jeff Bridges, Lisa Eichhorn, and John Heard—still emerge primarily as sociological case histories.

There is a murder-mystery plot that is so tenuous that for whole stretches of the film nothing whatever develops in it and it almost becomes forgotten. The main plot has to do with interactions of the characters, who are not all that easy to empathize with: if one is imbued with the work-ethic, one quickly concludes that they are all consumers rather than producers and are always feeling sorry for themselves because they can’t consume more. Perhaps the fact that one of them is a wounded war veteran is supposed to provide a justification for their lifestyles—at any rate, many people in the audience appear to side enthusiastically with them: when the veteran plows his uninsured car into a neighbor’s, demolishing it, and leaves the neighbor to pay the bill, cheers arise from the audience. But then, much of the audience appears to consist also of nonproducing consumers grasping at any suggested justification for their way of life.

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