

WHILE most of us who are interested in freeing Britain from the twin evils of censorship and hypocrisy battle on at a not very 'respectable' level, others fight the good fight from a vantage point somewhere adjacent to, but opposite, that enjoyed by the puritan moralists like Mary Whitehouse and Lord Longford.

One group that has powerful backing – behind the scenes as well as up front – is NCROPA, the National Campaign for the Repeal of the Obscene Publications Acts. It numbers among its committee members Lord Norwich, Clement Freud MP, and Dr Brian Richards (one of Silk's medical panel).

Actor DAVID WEBB is the man who organises all this talent and influence to growing effect. He explains to SILK writer Beryl Grant why he does it, and what NCROPA means to him.



DAVID WEBB ... never heard of him? Not surprising, unless you're a careful watcher of the credits of such television programmes as *The Avengers*, and you've noticed his name in the cast list.

In his capacity as NCROPA organiser he receives very little publicity.

"Frankly I'm very puzzled by the attitude of the Press," he said. "They are always crying out against censorship, pleading the cause of freedom of speech and so forth, and yet at the same time there seems to be a conspiracy to keep the campaign's opinions out of the media. We are never given a fair hearing.

"The editor of *The Times*, who is no friend of ours, wrote an article saying that everyone has the right of reply in any dispute. Anyone can write a letter to *The Times* and they will receive a reply.

"I can't tell you how many letters I have written to *The Times*, and I am not illiterate. I can write a letter which is sensible, states a case and probably represents the view of that ever-silent majority. I have never received a reply to my letters – even less had one printed."

David Webb is a small, silver-haired, 46-year-old bachelor who lives in a tastefully furnished flat just off Sloane Square. He is deeply committed to the campaign against censorship, and equally committed to the acting profession. These two focal points of his life are,

# A man of many parts

in his opinion, inevitably connected.

"Colleagues in the theatre, films and television have over the years remarked on the ridiculousness of censorship through pressure groups – that very vociferous minority who deem themselves guardians of the nation's morals. I decided that there should be a campaign set up in opposition to these groups."

He spends long, often fruitless hours writing letters and preparing press statements which are never published.

"I wrote to the editor of *The Sun*, for example, condemning him for the leader he wrote on Sweden which was published on page 2, significantly opposite the page 3 girl. I finished the letter: 'Your leader concluded by saying that in Britain we have a glut of sex shops and blue films. According to my dictionary a glut means a superabundance or quantity too great for consumption. Once

again your contention is ridiculously emotive and factually inaccurate. If you really believe that sex is dirty and disgusting, why not, in the public interest, set an example yourself and refrain from publishing any more corrupting and depraving photographs of those naked ladies to which you have hitherto devoted so much of your space, irrespective of the effect, adverse or otherwise.'

"It's all pure hypocrisy," said Webb, "'Selling sex by condemnation', to quote blue film producer John Lindsay."

I told him that I had interviewed Lindsay for *Silk*. "Wasn't he quoted in the *News of the World* as saying: 'We are on a tide of sexual freedom which cannot be stemmed by politicians or anyone else?'"

David Webb shook his head. He couldn't agree. "In the short time Mervyn Rees has been in office as Home Secretary there have been pernicious trends in censorship, and yet when he

accepted his appointment he said that 'society was not so much permissive as civilised.' When I heard that I gave a silent cheer. Here was a Home Secretary, or so I thought, who was prepared to put his money where his mouth was. But he seems to have lost heart – perhaps because he has been so battered from all sides by the anti-porn groups."

A quietly spoken man, who edits a *Health Education Index* between acting roles and writing letters to the press, he does not wish to set himself up as a cult figure. "I am not important so far as the campaign goes," he said. "It is the principles behind it which are important.

"What right has Mary Whitehouse or anyone else to tell me what I should see or read? They are not entitled to force their opinions, religious or otherwise, on me.

"Some months ago there was a debate in the Cambridge Union on the motion that 'Por-

# The Silk Interview

nography is Decadence Exploited.' The union invited Jens Thorsen to debate against the motion, with Mary Whitehouse speaking for it. She refused, on the grounds that she might be breaking some ancient Blasphemy laws if she associated herself with Thorsen.

"The union backed down and withdrew the invitation to Thorsen. All this was widely quoted in the press, and I protested; as a result I was invited to speak in Thorsen's place.

"That woman is extraordinary! We were introduced at dinner in Magdalen College. 'Oh!' she said in a very patronising voice. 'You're the gentleman who wrote to me. Umh ... what MPs have you got with your lot? Your lot! Why should she think she has the right to patronise me?

"Of course we lost the motion. The religious groups of students were there in force, but afterwards when I was talking to some of the students they told me that if the debate had been merely on a question of censorship they would have voted differently.

"Anyway, the fundamental difference between Mary

Whitehouse and me is that I have a living to earn. She seems to be able to devote all her time to her position as Honorary Secretary of the Viewers' and Listeners' Association. I don't know whether she gets paid for it, but she seems to be very comfortably off for a retired teacher."

**H**E leaned forward confidentially. "Actually we've planted someone in her association so that we can find out a little more. They not only interfere in television and cinema, they interfere in everything, although their name suggests they don't. In other words, they're a real pro-censorship group. Now we're in on it."

He is a great admirer of Clement Freud, one of his committee. "When I first wrote to him he phoned the very next day, and I went along to see him. He really stands by his principles, even though he knows it's dangerous for anyone in politics to get involved in an area of this sort—especially with a slim majority such as he has in the Isle of Ely,

which is a strongly Methodist area."

I brought up the question of whether or not pornography is harmful. David Webb bristled.

"This suggestion makes me particularly annoyed," he said firmly. "No-one has ever proved that a particular piece of sexually-explicit material has caused a sex crime.

"When the Cambridge rape trial was on they brought up the fact that the man had a large collection of pornography, but it also came out that he had been a patient at a mental hospital, and subsequently an inmate at Broadmoor.

"You can't ban pornography on those grounds. It would be like saying that bread knives should be banned because in the hands of a homicidal maniac they are lethal weapons!

"Look at alcohol. Look at cigarette smoking. I'm always trying to bash this point home.

"The pro-censorship factions also argue that pornography is wrong because of the commercial exploitation. So what? There's nothing more commercially exploited than alcohol, and there is a growing number of alcoholics, but there isn't a growing number of sex maniacs.

"There's nothing that attracts more than prohibition, is there? I've used the analogy of censorship with the days of prohibition in America many times in the letters I have written. When anything is prohibited, it simply goes underground, and then you get organised crime moving in. The police porn squad corruption which recently came to light is a case in point. The same thing used to happen in betting before we had licensed betting shops."

He is optimistic about the future, when less inhibited generations will be in charge.

"It's nice that young people aren't all hung up about sex like my generation. They take their clothes off on stage because it is now just part of the job. But that doesn't mean that everyone of my age, or older, wants censorship.

"A member of my committee did a little survey in a very middle-class area of Buckinghamshire when Emmanuelle II was banned by the local watch committee. They refused the film a licence, and my committee member took a random sample of opinion in the streets about the ban. He found only two people out of

fifty who agreed that the film should not be shown. That was 96 per cent in favour of permitting it. You can't argue with figures like that, can you?"

Although he is very much a Royalist David Webb says it was quite wrong of the Queen to say anything about Jens Thorsen's plan to make the film of the love life of Jesus Christ (she called the Danish porn producer "obnoxious").

"I couldn't believe my eyes when I read that she'd made a statement claiming to speak for the majority of her subjects.

"I think she was very ill-advised by some equerry or private secretary. Look, what would happen if she started commenting on abortion or Northern Ireland? Parliament would be down on her like a ton of bricks, especially Willy Hamilton.

"If she was commenting as head of the Church of England ... well, she has the Archbishop of Canterbury to speak for her there, just as she has her Prime Minister to speak for her on political matters. As constitutional Head of State she has to subjugate her personal opinions, and just shut up."

**W**EBB thought it equally wrong that the Duke of Edinburgh should have spoken out in the *Sunday Mirror* with his famous statement that 'a visitor from another planet would think us preoccupied with copulation'.

He has involved himself very deeply in the Thorsen case, corresponding at length with the Home Secretary on the ethics of denying the Dane entry into the country.

"When Merlyn Rees first took over he said that action would only be taken against Thorsen if he came here in the commission of any criminal offence. I have that in writing in a personal letter from Rees to me. So what happens when the man does try to come? They won't let him in.

"The grounds, according to Rees, are that he might stir up riots or incite demonstrations. I'm surprised that Thorsen himself hasn't protested more strongly. Under Articles 9 and 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which concern conscience and religious beliefs, he has committed no crime.

"The campaign's committee



are going to take the matter before the European Commission. The whole world's gone mad - or rather, this country has. Thorsen has every right to work here, just as I have the right to work in Denmark if I so wished as a citizen of the EEC.

"The reporters were not given a reason for his refused entry. It was all very secret - under the cloak of the Official Secrets Act.

"The present law really is an ass. How can it reconcile the fact that a blue film club owner, David Waterfield, was jailed for 18 months for running a 'disorderly house' on the same day as a man was fined £100 for driving without due care and attention, during the course of which he ran into a group of ramblers and killed five of them?" I agreed that there seemed to be very imbalanced scales of justice for violent crime and pornography.

Webb believes he is an atheist, or rather he thinks he does, so he'll settle for agnostic. "I get very hot under the collar about the religious groups which are pressing for censorship. I was brought up in a family which gave me a religious upbringing. I was sent

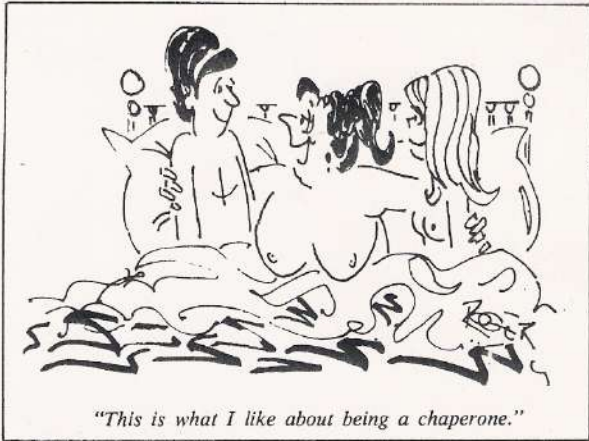
to church, confirmation classes and so forth. I had a religious phase and grew out of it. Now I find it totally unacceptable. I find it impossible to believe in the supernatural.

"But I won't have it said," he continued, "that a lack of religious belief must be equated with immorality." He went on to tell me about a strange gentleman who had stood for a Westminster Council by-election on the twin platform of 'anti-pornography' and 'gospel messages'.

"The opinion polls tell us with monotonous regularity that only 10 per cent of the population adhere in any way to the church. That means that the noisy pro-censorship factions are often representing a very small minority of the people."

I suggested that the majority of people - those who wish to read sexually explicit magazines like *Silk*, and see erotic films - usually keep quiet about it. How did he rally support for his Campaign?

"We have been given a little publicity in sex magazines, and we put out leaflets to cinema



clubs, labelling the box 'Please take one'. You know - fight the good fight and so on. I'm sure many more people would join, but they're afraid their wives will find out that they belong to these clubs.

"We desperately need more vociferous supporters, and more supporters who are willing to contribute funds. That's what we're short of - funds. I would have loved to have helped Arabella Melville and Colin Johnson in the *Libertine* case, and Arabella asked me to give evidence for the defence; but as I've said before, one has a living to earn - and I couldn't afford

to lose a few days earnings hanging around waiting to be called.

"Anyway, they won their case - but it would be lovely to have funds of about £100,000 to help in that sort of case.

"One gets very disheartened at times. Do you remember the banning of the programme *Sex in Our Time*? Jonathan Dimpleby had a petition signed by 49 people asking for the programme to be shown. I corresponded with him and sent a letter and one of our leaflets to every person on the list. Not a single reply. Talk about the silent majority!"

## NCROPA's manifesto

IF you believe in freedom, you will, doubtless, also believe that everyone should have the inalienable right to see, read and hear whatever they choose for themselves. This country's out-moded, puritanical and repressive laws on censorship deny us this right, and are an intolerable curtailment of individual liberty and the freedom of expression.

The highly organised, vociferous pro-censorship factions, in their role as self-appointed "guardians of the nation's morals", have for far too long succeeded in forcing their minority opinions on those of the opposing, liberal-minded majority, often using highly- emotive, factually-inaccurate propaganda to further the spread of their bigoted doctrines.

Parliament has hitherto paid them heed out of all proportion to the numbers they represent, and in consequence, has done absolutely nothing to bring the censorship laws up to date and in line with modern, twentieth-century thinking. In fact in many areas we appear to be returning to the viciously restrictive standards of the past.

We believe that such totally unacceptable standards are rigidly perpetuated largely by the ridiculous and unjust Obscene Publications Acts of 1959 and 1964. The only sensible and realistic solution is for the complete repeal of these Acts, except for certain provisions for the protection of children and of those who do not wish to be forcibly affronted by material offensive to them.

Certain amending legislation to a number of other Statutes would also be required, but it is by no means an impossible task, as some politicians would have us believe. Most of the countries of Western Europe have satisfactorily dispensed with censorship, as well as most of the United States.

The National Campaign for the Repeal of the Obscene Publications Acts (NCROPA) has been set up to fight for these changes in the law and to establish a really effective

platform for the forceful expression of views in opposition to the frenetic rantings and vehement intolerance of the "Puritan Brigade".

Like most organisations set up to alter the *status quo*, NCROPA needs money and funds. Membership costs at least £2. If you'd like to help, fill in the form below and post it off.

To: David Webb, Organiser, N.C.R.O.P.A., 15 Sloane Court West, Chelsea, London SW3 4TD.

I support the aims of the National Campaign for the Repeal of the Obscene Publications Acts and would like to be enrolled as a member. I enclose herewith my annual subscription of £2.00 (minimum amount, but larger donations will, of course, be greatly welcomed). Cheques and postal orders should be crossed and made payable to N.C.R.O.P.A.

Signature .....

Name (in block letters please) .....

Address .....

Telephone No. (if any) .....

**PLEASE NOTE:** The names, addresses and telephone numbers of members will be treated as strictly confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone without permission.