

TV: Curious Aspects of a Talk With a Mercenary

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Last Sunday, "60 Minutes," the CBS News "magazine" that is presented weekly at 7 P.M., presented an essay entitled "Hired Hand." Produced by Joe DeCola and reported by Dan Rather, the piece featured an interview with a mercenary—a self-described killer and terrorist for international hire. He went on to tell about an alleged effort by a Los Angeles member of the Jewish Defense League to purchase his services for \$250,000 to assassinate Yasir Arafat, head of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

This type of material obviously borders on the sensational. The issues are extremely serious. The participants are intriguing, to say the least. The content commands widespread attention and comment. Yet, after having watched the segment twice so far, I find that "Hired Hand" perhaps raises as many fundamental questions as it was supposedly designed to answer. And all of those questions are related

to the very peculiar nature of electronic journalism, to the basic processes of news gathering and selective exposure on the medium.

Unlike the printed press, television journalism cannot process its content through a typewriter and a battery of editors. Television needs, or, more precisely, wants a film. The film can be edited or chopped up to a certain extent, but it cannot be paraphrased or rewritten or extended for additional information. In print, the journalistic process takes place behind the page of the newspaper or magazine; on television, it frequently has to be included in the film itself, in the product that finally appears on screen. The difference leads to a number of crucial, sensitive and maybe insoluble problems for television.

"Hired Hand," for instance, began as a normal journalistic project. Mr. DeCola was doing research on the subject of mercenaries when certain stories from Angola be-

gan breaking in the news. In Tucson, Ariz., Tom Miller was writing a book on the same subject. Mr. DeCola says he got in touch with Mr. Miller and read a long essay of his that appeared in a recent edition of Rolling Stone magazine. Mr. DeCola was especially interested in a figure named John Dane, who was now working with white farmers in Rhodesia.

CBS News reached Mr. Dane, who said he had a tape recording of his conversation with the J.D.L. member. Mr. Dane agreed to go to Mexico for an interview, all expenses paid by CBS News. The network established to our own satisfaction, at least, that he is what he says he is, a card-carrying member of the international mercenary community," Mr. Rather explained to the television audience. The television production itself, though, assumed some curious aspects.

Intentionally or not, the portrait of Mr. Dane was disturbingly glamorized. Placed in the swank setting of a hotel and poolside leisure, he was allowed to ramble on easily with cool arrogance. Seen in target practice, he was complimented by Mr. Rather ("not bad shooting"). Mentioning a large sum of money, he received an off-camera whistle of seeming admiration. Here was an admitted killer and terrorist being treated as if he were representing the local Chamber of Commerce.

The J.D.L. member, on the other hand, was approached and handled quite differently. It was apparent that he did not know that he would be confronted on camera with Mr. Dane's tape recording. Reached in Los Angeles yesterday, Irv Rubin, West Coast coordinator for the Jewish Defense League, confirmed that "60 Minutes" had "never once" mentioned John Dane or the \$250,000 issue before interviewing him.

Mr. Rubin says he was told merely that "60 Minutes" was interested in the general activities of the J.D.L. He says he was interviewed for about a half hour on camera before the tape business was mentioned. Mr. Rubin admits meetings with Mr. Dane at least twice, but insists that Mr. Dane approached him, not the other way around.

Mr. Rubin says he thought the meetings a matter of curiosity. On the program he described them as "fantasizing." In any case, he says, the possibility of the J.D.L.'s having \$250,000 is ludicrous. And, furthermore, he says the J.D.L. would not go to a gentile mercenary for a job that would mean "honor for any Jewish fighter."

In fact, whatever the extent and nature of the contacts between Mr. Dane and Mr. Rubin, nothing came of the alleged negotiations. Mr. Dane says that they collapsed because he was arrested and spent five months in a United States jail for running guns to Mexico. Mr. Rubin says that it is because he was never serious in the first place and that "I would be willing to take a polygraph test on anything I said."

Mr. DeCola, the producer, says the point of the segment was not that anything did happen but that "my God, that could have happened." We live in an age of assassins, he adds, in which history can be determined not by governments, but by militant groups and lone assassins.

That point, of course, is valid. But it was partly lost, or at least dulled, in the seeming anxiety of "60 Minutes" to construct production values for a "hot" story. When the story can be obtained by treating one major participant as something of a cool celebrity and treating the other in a manner that verges on unfair entrapment, the process of television journalism demands careful re-examination.