

CANNES was treated to an unedifying depiction of ethics on a tabloid newspaper yesterday when the British film *Rag Tale* had its world premiere.

Described by its writer-director, Mary McGuckian, as "satiric" and "darkly comic", it charts a week in the life of a fictional tabloid, *The Rag*.

The plot concerns the efforts of the proprietor to sack the editor, who is having an affair with his deputy - the proprietor's wife - but among the highlights is an irreverent editorial meeting that begins with the editor asking: "Who shall we get this week?"

The US presidential election is dismissed as "boring", and *The Rag's* brash, Cockney fashion editor lets out uproarious one-liners such as: "Look like Sienna for a tenner!" and "Osama - he's got a lovely little face under that turban."

The film portrays an amoral world of faked pictures, exaggerated stories, cocaine snorting and sexual horseplay. *The Rag's* is the sort of office where if a couple

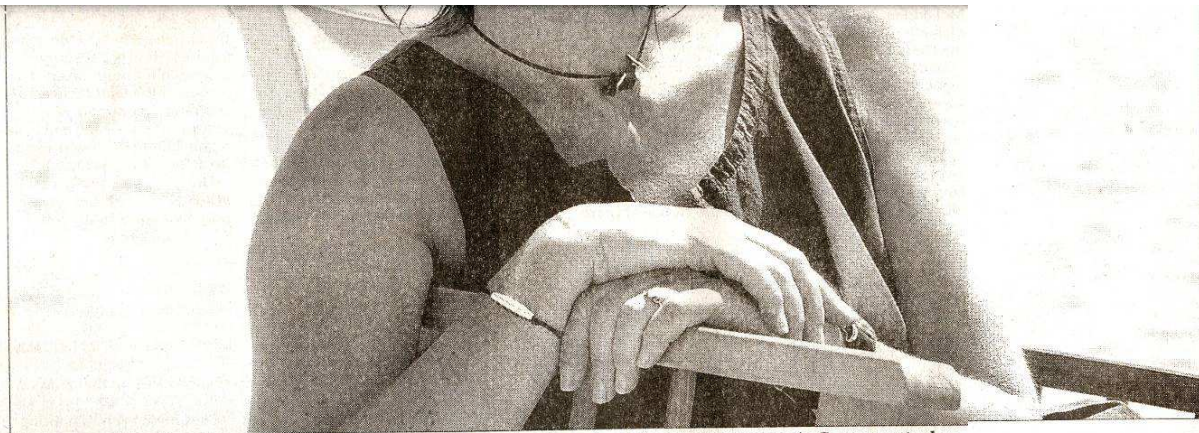
newsets, then transmit events to others via e-mail. Media pundits will point to real-life parallels with the film's characters.

The press baron, played by Malcolm McDowell, has familiar initials - RM - but is called Richard Morton. He longs for a peerage, while his glamorous younger wife MJ (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is an ambitious, shopaholic American journalist. And the editor, Eddy (Rupert Graves) a brash, jokey, youngish man with a talent for insults, gets fired for running a contentious Page One story.

McGuckian, 41, insisted: "It's genuinely fictional. But I can't help it if my actors are inspired by what goes on in real life. It's not about people, it's about the use and abuse of power in the media."

Rag Tale seems to be set in a fishbowl resembling a modern, high-rise glass office building in London. In fact, it was shot in Luxembourg over six weeks last year.

McGuckian sketched out a basic story, but her mostly British cast - also including



Her place in the sun: Mary McGuckian, writer-director of *Rag Tale*, takes a break from the screenings in Cannes yesterday

John Sessions, Bill Paterson, Lucy Davis (Dawn from *The Office*) and Kerry Fox - improvised their dialogue.

The Royal Family, too, comes in for a bashing. Eddy launches a *Rag* campaign to throw Buckingham Palace

completely open to the public and suggests converting it to a skating rink. But his republican stance enrages his pro-monarchist boss.

McGuckian asked her cast to find mentors in journalism, so they could act

authentically: "Lucy's was the PA to the editor of *The Sun*, who told her she'd be fired if she behaved as she did in the film."

Her previous film, soon to be released in America, is a big-budget epic shot in Spain

- *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, starring Robert de Niro and Harvey Keitel. But she conceived *Rag Tale* after making *Best*, her 2000 film about the football star George Best, played by her husband, the actor John Lynch. "I'd

never made a film that had such acres of coverage, so reading tabloids was new to me. I thought this would be a great world to make a film about," she said.

The couple, who divide their time between London

and the Riviera, "keep a low profile", she said, and so had avoided the tabloids' clutches. *Rag Tale* has a British distributor and should be released later this year. It is being screened in Cannes to attract foreign buyers.

THE mysterious death in a swimming pool of Brian Jones, a founder member of the Rolling Stones, is under scrutiny in another British film at Cannes.

Steve Woolley, the director of *Stoned*, hinted that his film arrived at new theories about how Jones met his end. Speculation has long been rife that he was murdered.

"Other members of the Stones have been supportive of the film," he said. "They appear in small roles in the film, but this is Brian's story." *Stoned*, excerpts of which were shown to the media, also details Jones's prodigious drug and alcohol use, which led to the group firing him.

Scientist's formula to rid Hollywood of mad professors and sci-fi errors

By ROGER HIGHFIELD
SCIENCE EDITOR

FED up with the dodgy portrayal of science in films, an Oxford University biochemist has set herself up as a consultant to Hollywood in her quest to do away with errors, misconceptions and nutty professors.

Dr Lizzie Burns, of the university's Department of Biochemistry, has launched Hollywood Math and Science Film Consulting with Prof Jonathan Farley, an award-winning mathematician at Harvard University. The

scientists in *Back to the Future* and *Honey I Shrank the Kids* were potty or clumsy nerds. In *ET* they were heartless monsters who wanted to dissect a cute alien, and in the *Terminator* films they helped develop smart robots that would run amok.

"It's annoying how many films will include a 'mad' scientist," she said. "The portrayal of scientists can be so negative and the science wrong. I'm interested in trying to get the science right and make scientists in films a bit more real."

Dr Burns, the Medical

Research Council's artist in residence, met Prof Farley while doing research at Oxford. They hope to capitalise on the success of films with a mathematical or

scientific undercoat by setting up the consultancy with the backing of Lennox Farrell, a Toronto businessman.

"We're not science geeks

How the blockbusters keep getting their facts wrong

Die Another Day Technology to make a car invisible is under development in a field called adaptive camouflage, but it would never work as perfectly as shown in the James Bond film.

Face/Off FBI agent Sean Archer (John Travolta) has a face

transplant, but research shows that the skull, which varies from person to person, plays a major role in shaping the face.

Star Wars Han Solo refers to parsecs, an astronomical measure of distance, as a unit of time.

Jurassic Park DNA does not

survive long enough to give a crazed molecular biologist any hope at all of resurrecting T rex. **U571** The Americans didn't break the German Enigma code or steal the Enigma machine, it was an achievement of the British, Poles and Czechs.

Enigma The character modelled complaining from the sidelines," Prof Farley said. "Film-makers ought to avoid situations that are ludicrously implausible. HMSFC is not just to cure films of bad science but to help film-makers get the culture of science right (or at least not laughably wrong)."

"There's a magic about movies that should not be

dulled by technical jargon," said Dr Burns, citing how the explanation for The Force in the *Star Wars* films (something to do with "medichlorians") "spoil the movie for me."

They were inspired by *A Beautiful Mind*, Russell Crowe's exploration of the tortured mind of Nobel-prize-winning game theorist John Nash. "We're the first company to provide consulting services for TV shows or films that have a math or science element," said Prof Farley.

The pair have already done

consultancy work for the hit US television drama *Numb3rs*, in which an FBI agent recruits his mathematical genius brother to help solve crimes. They visited the set, checked jargon, gave scriptwriters authentic gossip about mathematicians, and made sure the mathematical workings were plausible.

Theatre is also receptive, from Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* and Caryl Churchill's thought-provoking play on cloning, *A Number*, to David Auburn's *Proof*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow.