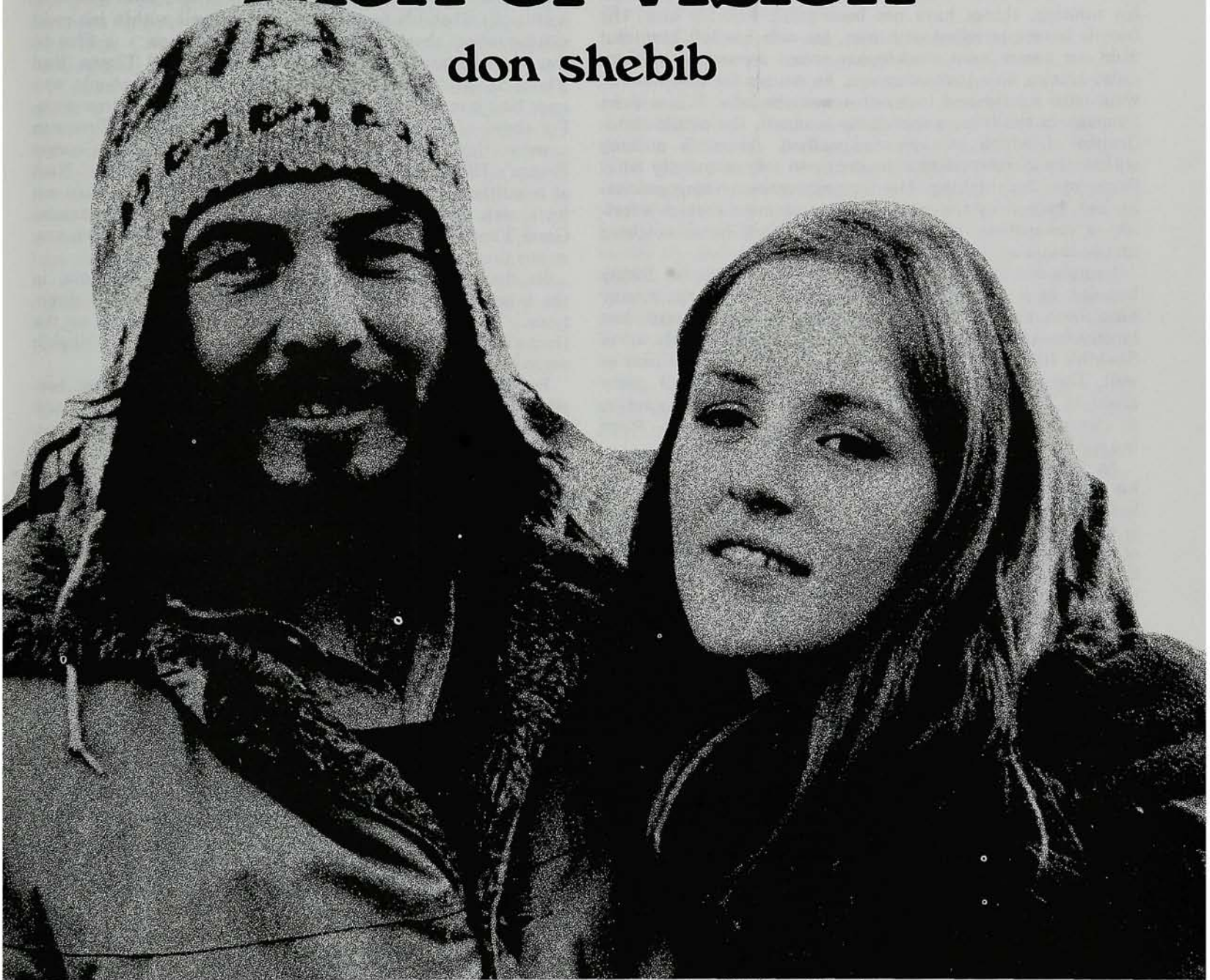


by Peter Harcourt

men of vision

don shebib



Don Shebib and Bonnie Bedelia during the production of **Between Friends**

It is ironic that the feeling of irrelevance which runs through Don Shebib's films should have made him one of Canada's best and most pertinent filmmakers. Peter Harcourt speaks of these films – both features and short films – and of Shebib's development.

"There are lots of films that I'd like to make in the States. I'd like to make a film there every couple of years. But basically, I'd really prefer to make films here. If I did leave, it would be like taking a fish out of water. I think that I seem to thrive on the water that I swim in, which is where I am, in Toronto."

— Don Shebib at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1975

Towards the end of **Second Wind** (1976), there is a tiny moment of some importance. Roger is out on one of his early morning runs, jogging along the Beaches. Apart from his running, things have not been going well for him. His friends have quarrelled with him, his wife has left him, and even his career as a stockbroker seems somewhat in jeopardy. During this particular run, he pauses for a minute to walk onto a jetty and look out across the lake. It is a quiet moment in the film, a speechless moment, the actual significance of which remains unspecified. There is nothing within the context of this sequence to tell us exactly what Roger may be thinking. His face expresses nothing precisely. Yet, helped by the music, such a moment creates a feeling of inwardness, of self-reflection — as if he is weighing up the values of his life.

I single out this moment for a number of reasons. Partly because, as it doesn't directly advance the narrative, it may have been scarcely noticed by a number of viewers; but largely because it relates to other moments in nearly all of Shebib's films, and also to a similar moment in this film as well. During the opening sequence of the cocktail party given in Roger's honor — a celebration of his promotion to vice president of the company he is working for — there is a similar moment of mute attentiveness.

As Roger seems ill at ease with the party, indeed with his own success, he goes off alone into the board room and looks out a window down onto the cityscape below. This too is a quiet moment, an introspective moment; but the context of the party encourages more precision in our speculations. Surely, there must be something more, Roger's face seems to be saying — something that is more difficult, something that will truly challenge him. Successful though he is, he seems aware of an absence, of something not there. He craves the risks of an actual challenge. He feels not fully stretched in the world as it is.

This feeling of emptiness, of restlessness, often of irrelevance, pervades the films of Don Shebib — not only his features but much of his other work as well. And this feeling is often conveyed without the help of words.

In **We've Come a Long Way Together**, a film on old people made for OECA in 1974, though stretched by his producers to twice the length that Shebib wanted it to be, there is much the same kind of feeling that we find in his features. For the most part, nowadays, old people are displaced persons. Society gives them no meaningful role to play. They have to be institutionalized, organized, "entertained" — not that much unlike Roger in his successful, middle-class life within the institutionalized routine of his middle-class job. The rules are all external. One tries to "have fun" within whatever conditions are offered.

In **We've Come a Long Way Together**, while these people do have fun — dancing to Guy Lombardo's "When I grow to old to dream..." or playing their small drums and toy trumpets in their own "spasm" band — Shebib counterbalances these scenes of organized activity with scenes of

inescapable loneliness. There is a quiet shot (again, not unlike that early shot of Roger) of an old man by himself looking out of a window; and there are repeated cuts to a shot of an old man walking towards us from a distance — almost like a warning.

These are the moments that give the film its predominant tone, that create the mood we take away with us — whatever apparently cheerful things the people manage to say. Old age leads to isolation and loneliness, to social irrelevance; and this is a fate that moves towards us all.

This feeling of irrelevance is perhaps *the* central feeling within all Shebib's features as it is as well within his most distinguished short, **Good Times, Bad Times** — a film on war veterans made for the CBC in 1969. **Good Times, Bad Times** is also about old people, but about old people who once had a most important role to play — winning our wars. For those of us privileged enough to be aware of European cinema, this film could usefully be compared with Georges Franju's **Hôtel des Invalides** (1951) or Alain Resnais' **Nuit et brouillard** (1955) — films which Shebib may or may not have seen. But whatever the upshot of such a comparison, **Good Times, Bad Times** is as distinguished in its own way as any film can be.

Its distinction resides in the balance of its structure, in the interweaving of elements that pull us in different directions. These elements, of course, are indigenous to the theme of the film as they are indigenous to war; but Shebib organizes them in a highly original way.

For most people, the experience of war is the most horrible that they can undergo. At the same time, for those who survive it, this shared horror creates an extraordinary



The boys get together in **Good Times, Bad Times**

sense of comradeship, of unquestionable purposefulness. As the voice of a veteran explains in the film: "The comradeship of soldiers is a kind of love," a love that comes about when "you've lived together, slept together, gone on leave together, died together."

Good Times, Bad Times intercuts interviews with veterans with "found" footage of both the world wars. Some of the footage is optically stretched — each frame double-printed to give it the ghostly effect of slow-motion, as if from some nightmare imperfectly remembered. Both through scenes of actual violence and through a sense of violence created in the editing, the found footage conveys to us the actual horrors of war. Meanwhile we have sequences of the veterans themselves — the survivors — sometimes in one of their clubs, drinking down beer to

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gether and singing the old war songs, reminding themselves of the "good times" of intense comradeship, of the days when they really felt useful and united as a group. They tend to forget the "bad times", as one of them explains, because of this sense of comradeship, because of the sense of dignity bestowed upon them by the war.

Just as the visuals intercut present-day footage with archival material, so the sound track draws upon bits of music (itself also sometimes "stretched") from Holst's *The Planets*, from Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, and from a rock group known as Iron Butterfly. This music contrasts sharply both with the veterans' own singing and with Bing Crosby singing that ultimately absurd song for a war against the Germans, "Auf wiedersehen, my dear!"

A more extended study of the films of Don Shebib could spend a lot of time on the intricacies of this film – not only on the intricacies of the way it has been put together but also on the intricacies of its ultimate meaning. For who, finally, won the war? Certainly not the people who fought it, who experienced the intense emotions of being at the front. At one point towards the end of the film, we see an end-of-war rally in Trafalgar Square in London and we hear the legendary sound of Big Ben. Then, as we see shots of soldiers marching away, as so often in this film the commentary draws upon some lines from an extended poem by Joyce Cary, *Marching Soldiers*, which he wrote just at the end of the Second World War:

March, march, soldiers, follow away.
We do not belong among these peaceful houses.
Our foreheads are marked with a sign, we have looked
 at death too long,
Within our eyes his picture sits. March, march, soldiers,
For those who fear that face will put their curse upon us,
Those whom we set free will pay us with hatred,
Because we are guilty of action, of war, of blood.

These lines are accompanied by the plaintive sounds of Barber's *Adagio*, creating a rich emotion difficult to describe – a fusion of exhilaration plus a sense of loss, a movement into accusation and uselessness.

As the film began with the playing of our (then) national anthem over shots of old coins and little statuettes of soldiers, so it ends with an old veteran singing in his cracked but proud voice, "God Save the Queen." But that is not all. In a way that speaks for this old man personally but which might also sum up the feelings of a good many soldiers, of people who recognize that they have served their purpose, he then says: "Thank you very much. I'm all tired out. Now you can put me to sleep."

* * *

All of Shebib's subsequent work might seem like a development of elements contained within this magnificent short film: the great value he places on male comradeship; his enormous skill as an editor; his intense feeling for the need of real challenges to give individuals a sense of their dignity; and finally (in spite of the "jock" sensibility he likes to put forward in his interviews) (1), his intimate feeling both for poetry and music. This is a feeling that he tries to put to one side, as if, as a Canadian, it wouldn't be "manly" to let it seem prominent. But it is there in the films nevertheless, both in direct and indirect ways.

When I first saw *Goin' Down the Road* when it came out in 1970, I was somewhat perplexed by the role that the music of Erik Satie played in the film. It seemed out of context and therefore pretentious. I now know I was wrong.

The context that justifies it is partly provided by the other films that Shebib has made but also by elements within the film itself.

As even most Canadians know by now, *Goin' Down the Road* tells the story of two lads from the Maritimes who set out for the big city, to cash in on the stylish life of the economic centre of this strangely disunited country we refer to as Canada. Of course, they don't make it. The entire enterprise ends in disaster, leaving them with less at the end than they had at the beginning. But there are moments of hope along the way.

Pete and Joey are pals, real comrades in the way that Shebib believes in; but they are also very different kinds of guys. While they are both typical members of the *lumpenproletariat* – unskilled workers with no sense of the political implications of the role that society has assigned to them – Pete has a more reflective quality. He tries to think about things. Clumsy though his articulations may be (for language, among other things, is really the property of the middle class), he is dumbly aware that life for other people offers something more, something that he wants access to. Sometimes this sense expresses itself simply in crude, "jock" ways, when he covets Nicole's resplendent "knockers" as she struts about the Wilson pop factory, tantalizing all the workers but available to none of them. Yet at other times, Pete's awareness expresses itself in more refined ways.

This is where the music of Satie comes in. One night, when the boys are out on the town, doing the Yonge Street strip, they stroll into Sam's to pick up some records – country & western (obviously), probably from the Maritimes – the kind of music that speaks to the culture they spring from. But Pete notices a well-dressed young woman walking upstairs. He follows her up there towards the classical section where she listens, for a moment, to one of Satie's *Gymnopédies*. While it is still the scent of sex that is driving him on, there is something in her style and in the style of the music that represents to Pete the world he is excluded from – the world of the cultivated, well-to-do, middle-class. This is the world that allows for contemplation, that provides the leisure for us to find the words to define our feelings – a help towards determining our place in the world. At another point in the film, while having a beer with Joey, Pete is pushed into some kind of articulate-ness about his feeling of uselessness, about his feeling of "alienation", of *Verdinglichung* (as Marx himself would say).

Pete's words all fumble, but his understanding is just. They are talking about salaries, and Pete begins to reckon up the number of cases of ginger ale they have stacked since they began work. "304,000 cases each," Pete finally works out. But there is nothing to show for it. Joey can't understand what he is talking about. He cannot think beyond the weekly pay package of \$80, which is more than they ever got in the Maritimes. But Pete wants something more. "I wanna do something that matters," as he finally puts it, "something that shows for myself, that says I was there. Peter McGraw was there." This is what his work, his life, his whole sensibility have conspired to deny him. And Pete is vaguely aware that this all has to do with a style of life that involves listening to music and reading books.

During another day, when Pete and Joey and their two girls are over at the island, the girls "yacking" on and with their hair up in curlers, Pete is struck by another middle-class lady absorbed in a book. "Reality" must be somewhere, this sequence seems to be saying, but not in what is happening at the moment. Yet Pete can find no way of effectively changing anything.

When everything has failed, after Joey has married his "knocked-up" Bets and they are now both out of work, Pete returns from his job at a bowling alley and puts on that Satie record, as if as a reminder of the world they are excluded from. This is the moment of greatest inwardness in the film, once we have come to realize just what that Satie means to Pete and to the world of culturally dispossessed people that Shebib has created for us. As the music plays, we cut from tired face to tired face, each one registering something personal yet nothing precisely. Like Roger's look out from that jetty in **Second Wind**, like many of the old veterans or the inhabitants of the old people's home, there is the sense here as so often in Shebib that what the characters are feeling lies too deep for words.



Setting off to find a new lifestyle in **Rip Off**

Since **Goin' Down the Road**, Shebib has failed to achieve quite the same degree of critical or commercial success, although I cannot understand why. If, on the level of narrative, both **Rip Off** (1971) and **Second Wind** seem comparatively slight films, **Between Friends** (1973) certainly is not. In any case, whatever individual reviewers might have decided are the "faults" of Shebib's various films, I would argue that they are all important – important both in helping us understand the particular qualities within the films of Don Shebib but also in understanding something about the world we live in, the world we live in as Canadians.

If **Goin' Down the Road** had as its subject (as Robert Fulford put it) "rootlessness, the sense of pointlessness, the sense that no job is worth doing and no relationship worth developing" (2), the same subject can be found in Shebib's next two films. If Pete and Joey's escape to the mythological promises of Upper Canada was a kind of pilgrimage that led nowhere, so the young kids in **Rip Off** also set out on a journey that leads to divisiveness and despair, interfering even with the "comradship" that had held them together.

The kids are quite well off – like so many North American kids. But there seems nothing *real* that they can do. "There isn't anything left to discover. What a bummer!" as one of them exclaims one day, while they are lying around in an old barn reading about the voyages of Captain Cook; and their efforts to achieve an identity within the high

school that encases them, whether through founding a rock band or by trying to make it with the girls, are either ridiculous or humiliating – generally both. But the accident of Michael's "inheritance" – a piece of land up north – and their decision to found a commune there finally gives them an identity – at least for a while. But this too comes to nothing and they return home in defeat.



The rootless protagonists of **Goin' Down the Road**

The penultimate scene involves a confrontation between Michael and his father – perhaps a bit implausible in terms of characterization but right, nevertheless, in terms of the emotional rhythm of the film. This is the first time that Michael actually sees his father as a person and gets some sense of the forces in life that have formed him. Furthermore, in a typically Shebibian way, Michael's response to his father's stories about the hardship of his own youth is more visual than verbal. This means that we, the audience, have to decide what Michael may be thinking. Does he partly envy his father for having had so few choices to make in life – rather like the veterans who had to fight in the war? Or is it more a frightening vision about what adult life might be – a lonely routine of unimaginative drudgery, just to earn a living, just to stay alive? What is fine about this film as about other films by Don Shebib is that we have to work at these questions by ourselves.

The film ends on a moment of romantic nostalgia. Most of the boys have graduated and, except for Steve (the "Joey" of this film) who accepts an early marriage and a life of common labor, they are going on to university – largely because there is nothing else to do. There is a great feeling of futurelessness, as a long lens and slow-motion photography idealizes the kids throwing about a football, as if in this way trying to prolong the carefree, if aimless, irresponsibility of their youth. And like so many Canadian films, this sense of futurelessness is consolidated technically by the final freeze-frame. Like Pete and Joey, these kids, while better off, still have no sense of where they are going.

In spite of a fine tribute from Robert Fulford (3), **Between Friends** has not enjoyed either the commercial or critical acclaim of Shebib's first feature. This is truly astonishing because, in many ways, it is his most complex

achievement. Skimming over his work in this way, I can only point to a few distinguished details; yet these details define the sensibility that informs the whole film.

In his public statements, Don Shebib is his own worst publicity agent. He is always complaining that his scripts are weak or that he has had difficulties with his actors – to my mind, a rather undergraduate thing to do. The obvious sense of superiority and detached indifference that, in **Between Friends**, Michael Parks brought to his role as Toby, while it may have caused Shebib some annoyance at the time of shooting, I believe contributes forcefully to his effectiveness in the film. Toby (a bit like Pete) is a kind of dreamer. He has had a life and lost it and he now drifts into things – whether into an ill-conceived robbery or into an affair with the wife of his former best friend.

In this way, Toby seems detached from the implications of his own actions. The only signs of true emotion are related to his past – either his prestigious past as super-surfer or his lost relationship with Michael, his young son. He seems to have been closer to that privileged world of “higher culture” which, in **Goin’ Down the Road**, Pete seemed to be longing for; yet he has given it up – for reasons we never fully understand. He is more intelligent and more sensitive than his crude friend, Chino. Yet he doesn’t seem to care. And this lack of caring, this sense that there is now nothing to live for, brings about (as much as Chino’s rage) the failure and separateness of the end – isolated figures within a snowy landscape, Ellie with her dead father, Toby with his dead friend.

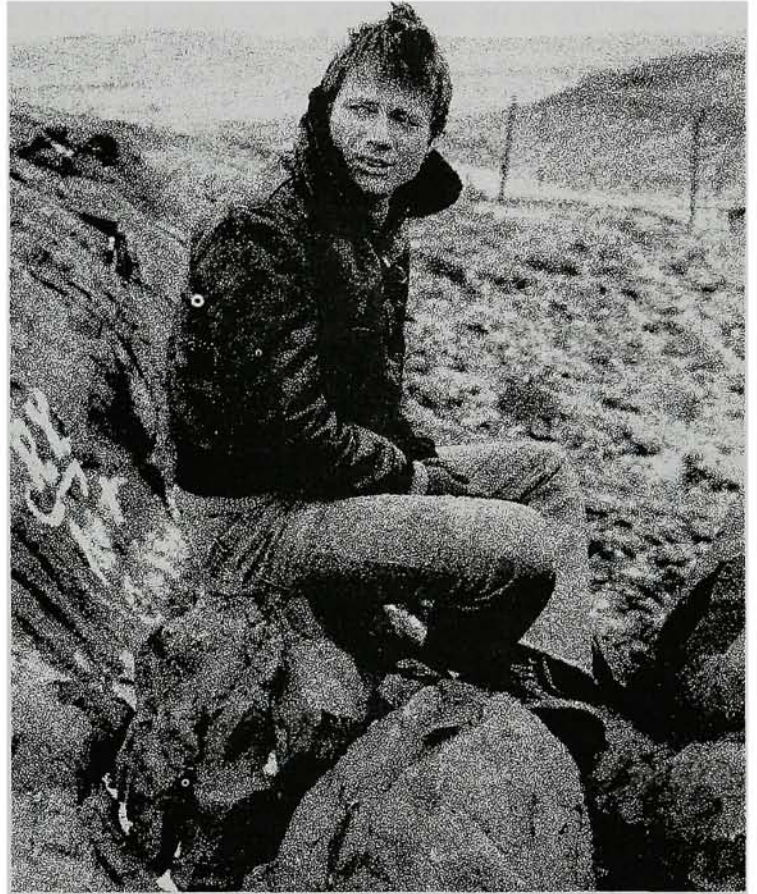
Like many Canadian films, all Shebib’s films are rich in their feeling for landscape; but none more so than **Between Friends**. If, in **Second Wind**, Toronto looks prosperous, beautiful, and suburbanly humane, in both **Goin’ Down the Road** and in **Between Friends**, it has a far more hostile atmosphere. Especially in **Between Friends**, Toronto seems a place of chilly piers where shady deals are arranged, of grubby little restaurants and impersonal supermarkets where both Chino and Ellie eke out their dreary, minimal-wage existences. And the scenes up around Sudbury where the robbery takes place (in Coniston, actually) are even more powerful in the wintry impersonality of their bleak expressiveness. Slag heaps and lonely chimneys dominate a number of the images, making the characters look small and inconsequential in comparison – mere items within an industrial superstructure within which they can play only mechanical roles. Unless they protest: stage a robbery: try to rip the system off. But even then, they fail.

Between Friends is a film of extraordinary tenderness, of intense compassion for all of its characters. Furthermore, with Bonnie Bedelia as Ellie, it offers the only sympathetically substantial female portrait that Shebib has so far given us. Yet even here, as in all Shebib’s films, her role is to interfere with the strong male companionship that might have existed without her; so in this way, she too contributes to the destructiveness of the end.

Generally in Shebib’s films, women are seen as objects – things you have sex with – whether the decorative housewife with her plants and suburban neighbors in **Second Wind** or the jaded flossies in **Between Friends** that Will (Ellie’s father) and Coker make use of in their “love life.” But Ellie is something more – more sensitive and more demanding. In this way, of course, within the Shebibian world, she is also more dangerous. She is more likely to disrupt the external projects of the men.

Yet the initial love-scene between Toby and Ellie is one of an exceptional tenderness. The men with their ladies are all downstairs, drinking and dancing and singing beery songs, when a sliver in Toby’s finger gives Ellie an excuse to invite him upstairs – to take it out with a needle. She

obviously feels apart from this drunken, raunchy fun; and her red maxi-dress, with the refined contours of her body detectable beneath it, lends a visual emphasis to this feeling of apartness, to our sense of her sensitivity. Once upstairs, for a while the rowdy singing is drowned out by a bit of opera on the radio – a section of Puccini’s **La Bohème**. Like the bits of Satie in **Goin’ Down the Road**, this classical music, along with Ellie’s elegant red dress, places this scene apart from the majority of other scenes in the movie, as if aware of other values. It is placed in parenthesis (so to speak), as indeed it proves to be only a parenthesis in the characters’ lives.



Toby, detached and separate, in **Between Friends**

Yet Shebib’s own sensibility (whether consciously or not) picks up on these elements and introduces them again at later moments in the film – most effectively in the café scene just before the heist. While supposedly they are all working together – Ellie, Will, Toby, and Chino – they are all sitting apart from one another through the sadness and tension caused partly by Coker’s death but largely by Chino’s knowledge of Toby and Ellie’s affair. Chino is delivering an angry monologue on the values of friendship – supposedly to the bartender, but actually in his self-pitying way to everyone else in the room. “It’s bullshit, that’s what it is,” he finally cries out. Meanwhile, Ellie is sitting at the rear of the room, plunking out some little classical piece on a piano, the red light to the side of her casting a red glow on her hair, in this way providing a visual echo of her initial moment of tenderness with Toby. Finally Toby, who throughout the film has seemed directed towards the past, is speaking to his son in California on the telephone. “Do you want to hang up first? Or should I hang up first?” He is trying, as if for the last time, to re-create those playful games of domestic intimacy which he himself has lost.

With repeated screenings, especially when seen in sequence, Don Shebib's films add up to an extraordinary achievement – a mixture of psychological uncertainty and artistic refinement, of boorishness and sensitivity, as indeed a lot of life is in Canada today. But at their centre, there is always the sense of something not there – some kind of challenge, some sense of cohesiveness, something never directly specified that might make life meaningful. This longing is scarcely present in the words his characters exchange: it is more in the way they look at one another or in the way they simply stare off into an empty space – especially the men. What are the qualities in life that hold people together, that might lead us collectively to a sense of identity or a feeling of purposefulness, a feeling of success? This is the question that, cumulatively, Shebib's films seem to ask.

In **Second Wind**, during that extended run with Pete in High Park where Roger is really beginning to discover his pace as a runner, Hagood Hardy's music gives to this moment something like the exhilaration of an American western (as when the settlers have beaten off the Indians and won their way through to the promised land). So too in **Between Friends**, Coker's funeral is rich in allusions to American culture. But it is an allusion to an absence.

In I don't know how many films by John Ford, we have seen a *community* of individuals singing together one of Ford's favorite songs, "We shall gather at the river" – the song helping to unite them as a group. At Coker's funeral, however, all the characters are isolated from one another, separated in extreme long-shot as we hear Will, at the top of his voice, *all by himself*, singing out that very same song:

We shall gather at the river,
That flows past the throne of God.

This is a moment of great power in the film, just as it is; but if we pick up on the allusion (probably unintended by Shebib himself), it becomes more powerful still, with referents valid not only within the film but within our whole culture as well.

There may be all kinds of "faults" in Don Shebib's films – psychological implausibilities or clumsy bits of dialogue that make too explicit moments that would be stronger left silent. Certainly, in terms of my own response, I feel this is true about Chino's suicidal attack on Toby during the very moment of the robbery in **Between Friends**, making too explicit his determination to bring about the destruction of them all. But I don't really care about these faults. There are all kinds of faults in Bergman and Antonioni films; but the films are important to us collectively because they add up to something more than any individual moment, be it strong or weak, in any particular film. Cumulatively, they speak to us as a whole.

This much I claim for Don Shebib; and I have only dealt with some of the films and have only begun to scratch the surface of the qualities that are there. Perhaps, as John Hofsess has asserted, Shebib is a Canadian who has outgrown Canada (4). Perhaps to develop, he will have to go elsewhere. Perhaps in **Second Wind** (as a friend of mine playfully suggested), Roger's lookout from that jetty really stands for Shebib himself, wondering if there is a place for him in the American industry! But whatever the ultimate answers to these speculations, Shebib's films are less about losers than they are about loners – like a good many Canadian films. And indeed, Canada is a country where there is very little sense of people working collectively together – especially in Toronto where everybody seems to be working against everybody else.

As I have argued elsewhere (5), perhaps too in such a culture, it is wrong for us to expect from our cinema the normative values of psychological realism and narrative tidiness – characteristics perhaps more germane to cultures that are more sure of themselves, where individual roles are more securely defined. If, at the present moment, the conditions of production and exhibition are unencouraging to the work of Don Shebib, it doesn't necessarily follow that it is *his* work that has to change. Perhaps we have to change these conditions that he works in, conditions which in any case are based on foreign models and controlled by foreign capital.

The films of Don Shebib add up to a statement about life that seems appropriate to us as Canadians. His characters, especially his men, all convey a vision of some better kind of life that might be possible elsewhere but *should* be possible here. Whether this is seen in class or cultural terms, this insight is real for us, for many of us, living here in Canada.

It is the search for this vision, however successful it may be in any particular film, that animates the work of Don Shebib as a filmmaker – whoever the writer and whoever the cameraman. And it is this sense of a search that unifies his work and gives it meaning – a meaning relevant to us as Canadians. □

1. For instance, see the section on Don Shebib in *Inner Views: Ten Canadian Film-Makers*, by John Hofsess (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975), pp. 67-79.
2. In *Marshall Delaney at the Movies*, by Robert Fulford (Toronto, Peter Martin, 1974), p. 41.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
4. "The End of the Road," by John Hofsess, in *Weekend Magazine* (Toronto) 28 Feb., 1976, pp. 16 ff.
5. See the Introduction to *Film Canadiana, 1975* (Ottawa, The Canadian Film Institute, 1976).

Acknowledgements

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Peter Harcourt

Don Shebib's Filmography

1961: **The Train** (UCLA-17m). 1962: **The Duel** (UCLA-10m), **Joey** (UCLA-27m). 1963: **Revival** (UCLA-10m), **Reparation** (UCLA-17m). 1964: **Surfin'** (CBC-25m), **Eddie** (UCLA-40m), **Autumpan** (UCLA-60m). 1965: **Satan's Choice** (NFB-28m). 1966: **Search For Learning** (NFB-16m), **Allan** (CBC-22m), **David Sector** (CTV-14m), **Olympic Rider** (CTV-15m). 1967: **Basketball** (CBC-24m), **Everdale Place** (CTV-27m), **San Francisco Summer** (CBC-60m). 1968: **Unknown Soldier** (CBC-7m), **Stanfield** (CBC-20m), **Graduation Day** (CBC-8m). 1969: **Good Times, Bad Times** (CBC-35m). 1970: **Goin' Down the Road** (Evdon Films Ltd.-90m). 1971: **Rip Off** (Phoenix Films-90m). 1972: **Born Hustler** (CBC-25m). 1973: **Between Friends** (Clearwater Films-90m). 1974: **Winning Is the Only Thing** (CBC-22m), **We've Come A Long Way Together** (ETV-60m), **Deedee** (CBC-50m), **Genaro** (CBC-50m). 1975: **The Canary** (CBC-50m), **Second Wind** (Olympic Films-90m).