

# REVIEWS

## Don Shebib's **Heartaches**

When Don Shebib emerged with *Goin' Down the Road* in 1970, little did he realize that his \$85,000 film would go on to become a landmark of Canadian cinema. It proved to be a tough act to follow. With one stroke *Goin' Down the Road* marked him out as a director to watch, a man who was capable of placing us on the international map, and someone who had his hand on the pulse of the marketplace. Shebib became the great white hope of English-Canadian cinema. Commercially he has not repeated the success of his first effort (*Goin' Down the Road* grossed approximately ten times its budget). Artistically he has continued to mature. *Between Friends* is arguably one of the finest films to emerge from this country. However, it was his second commercial failure in a row, and it would be three years before he would get the opportunity to make another feature.

His work subsequent to *Between Friends* has been consistently different in a number of ways. Both *Second Wind* and *Fish Hawk* saw Shebib moving into the commercial mainstream, using relatively high-profile American stars like Lindsay Wagner and Will Sampson. The tone of these films reflect these changes. They are far more optimistic and positive. No one can accuse these films of dealing with "losers". While *Heartaches* continues along these lines, it also sees Shebib returning to the territory of his earlier films, most particularly *Goin' Down the Road*.

*Heartaches* has much in common with Shebib's first feature, but also much that is different. While *Goin' Down the Road* detailed the trip two Maritimers, Pete and Joey, take to Toronto, the big city of their dreams, *Heartaches* sees two women join forces to survive together in the same city. Pete and Joey end up working in a bottle factory; Rita (Margot Kidder) and Bonnie (Annie Potts) find jobs in a mattress factory. Pregnancy features predominantly in both films, serving a similar function - disrupting uni-sexual relationships (that of Pete and Joey in the former, and Bonnie and Rita in the latter), while isolating one character in the triangle that emerges. We are given the same sense of the male as adolescent, playing games of bygone days, while the women wait patiently on the sidelines. Both films start with journeys of one sort - Pete and Joey leaving the Maritimes for Toronto, Bonnie abandoning her life with Stanley - and end with departures. Even classical music, Satie and Puccini, is used as more than mere decoration in both films. Moreover, their overall structure often takes on the form of a replica at times.

Rita, like Pete, is a dreamer whereas Bonnie, like Joey, is much more of a realist. Both people complement each other and their symbiotic relationships act as a kind of barrier against the vicissitudes of life. Rita sets her sights high. She shares this characteristic with Pete, who is continually attracted to women from another social class, who have bourgeois tastes, and they some-



● Staving off another heartache, Rita stands up to Stanley while a surprised Bonnie watches.

how represent the unattainable. Rita is also attracted to this type of person. Marcello (Winston Reckert) is cultured, he is a foreigner, an Italian who has studied design, and he introduces Rita to opera by buying her a record. He dresses fashionably, owns a sports car, and is the nephew of the owner of the mattress factory. Marcello is an emblem of a better life as well. Both Pete and Rita will see their fantasies destroyed in front of them.

Bonnie is involved in a different kind of relationship, one that indicates her pragmatic character, and which mirrors Joey and Betty in *Goin' Down the Road*. Her man, Stanley (Robert Carradine), shares her lifestyle, comes from her social class. There is nothing glamorous about him, indeed he takes her for granted. He has surrounded himself with his beer-drinking buddies and Bonnie must somehow make do. Stanley is still an adolescent, obsessed with *The Bullet*, the car that he and his friends race.

Despite the similarities, there are significant differences between the two films. Pete and Joey are destroyed by the big city, being innocent and naive "babes in the woods" when it comes to dealing with its hardships and its whims. There is a feeling of inevitability about the city's power to crush its more unsuspecting and weaker members. This is not the case in *Heartaches*. Rita knows what it takes to survive - moxy and bravado. On arriving in Toronto, Bonnie thinks she will stay the night at the YWCA (shades of Pete and Joey's first night at the Salvation Army hostel), but Rita chides her: "This is the big city. You've got to be smart, cool." The city liberates Bonnie and Rita, so that the fatalism that underscores *Goin' Down the Road* is absent from *Heartaches*. These characters remain in control of their destiny.

Pete and Joey's male bonding is finally seen as inhibiting as a return to the simple, uncomplicated friendship that precludes women. Ultimately it limits their growth and shows Pete as a character who stands in the way of other people living out their lives - he can't

accept Joey and Betty's marriage, and their forthcoming child. Bonnie and Rita's female bonding has the opposite effect. Bonnie has rejected Stanley - who thinks he is the father of the child she is carrying - because of his immaturity. She leaves because of "the car, the beer, the guys. There's no home, no parents, nothing." Bonnie contemplates getting an abortion, but Rita fights to save the child. She offers Bonnie an energy and a hope for her child that within the context of the film acts almost as a radical alternative.

Indeed, parts of *Heartaches* are predicated on women living their lives free from men. Rita, because she has screwed around so much, has had her tubes removed; she can never have a child. For her, Bonnie's baby will become the child she's always wanted. Both Rita and Bonnie are disillusioned with men. Drinking in the bar one night Rita laments: "Where are the real men?" Nevertheless, Rita still has fond memories of one of her past lovers, and when she comes to burn all the photographs of the men in her life, she cannot bring herself to destroy his.

The two men we see in *Heartaches* are very different. Marcello is perhaps one of the "real men" that Rita has been searching for, yet he ultimately proves to be the biggest disappointment. Rita is blinded by her infatuation and is easily seduced by his manners, charm and looks. When it materializes that he has a fiancé, and that Rita has been a final fling before tying the knot, Marcello is morally stripped before our eyes. But our Latin lover is not one-dimensional as a character. Rita for him is not simply a one night stand. She also has a freedom and vitality that his measured European sensibility responds to. Rita becomes someone to be valued for herself.

It is Stanley though who undergoes the most significant changes. He evolves from an insensitive adolescent into a caring adult, and his maturing is the most positive aspect of *Heartaches*. This maturation is marked by a series of renouncements. He sells his car, he moves out of his house, and by the end

of the film he has expelled his friends from his life, remnants of more carefree and irresponsible days.

At the beginning of the film Shebib links Bonnie to the duck that she keeps on a leash. She is as trapped and domesticated as the duck. At the mid-point of *Heartaches*, Stanley comes into Toronto to set the duck free. He has dressed up for the occasion, discarding his oily overalls for a sweater and trousers. It is a touching scene that communicates the essence of the film. Stanley is coming to terms with letting others find their freedom. Entrapment and coercion don't work. He is prepared to accept Bonnie, respect her space and care for her child, which he now realizes is not his own.

The fact that Bonnie and Rita's "radical experiment" appears to end in failure is not pessimistic within the context of *Heartaches*. Bonnie is reunited with a now caring, loving, more sensitive Stanley. Rita, disappointed by Marcello, signs up to sail on a steamer, rejoining Floyd, whose photograph she could not destroy. *Heartaches* ends on this note of departure, and our response to this final scene is quite complex. We can mourn the separation of two friends, but we can also celebrate in the reunion of another couple. Unlike *Goin' Down the Road*, the characters in *Heartaches* are all perceived as moving forward into the future, not regressing into old, restricting habits.

Despite the optimism of *Heartaches*, something has been lost from Shebib's earlier work. The film has a sentimentality that is absent from his best work. He may be a romantic but never has he been so eager to please and court his audience. This has removed the real pain from the film. Perhaps this is inevitable within the commercial framework he now finds himself in. When asked about the directors that he admires, he describes them as "gut" filmmakers, or as "tough sons-of-bitches". Some of the toughness has been lost in *Heartaches*. On the other hand Shebib himself may be renouncing parts of the macho world for which he has such an affinity.

Piers Handling ●