

# UP, down and UP again



## with HELEN SHAVER

by Margaret Smith

**Cinema Canada:** *When did you know you wanted to be an actress?*

**Helen Shaver:** I had no idea I wanted to be an actress, or that I was an actress. When I did the first play, in grade 11 at Parkside Collegiate Institute in St. Thomas, I didn't even want to audition. I was just urged to by J.J. Campbell, my homeroom teacher. The first performance was just terror, and then a fabulous time, which I don't remember. I won a best actress award and then it just continued from there. I ended up getting a scholarship to the Banff School of Fine Arts, because this play was in a competition. I quit acting for a year, from age 19 1/2 to my 21st birthday. It was basically what I considered my wedding gift to my first husband because I couldn't see the two things coexisting, which was a limitation on my own view, as opposed

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to his. On my 21st birthday I woke up and I knew that I couldn't *not* act. That's when I knew I was an actress.

**Cinema Canada:** *What self-image did you present in high school? What was your grade 11 teacher picking up on that said "Helen, you should audition for this"?*

**Helen Shaver:** I have no idea. I really don't. I know how I felt on the inside, which was pretty shy. I was smart. I would do track and field, and I played basketball with St. Jo's. But I had just moved. It was my first month at this new school, and this guy had never...he was just a homeroom teacher who taught English, and he had set up this drama club. I don't know what he saw. I never even asked him. But he was really, really persistent, because I didn't jump at the opportunity. I was resistant about it, and he convinced me.

**Cinema Canada:** *What was the play?*

**Helen Shaver:** A play called *Not*

*Enough Rope*, by Elaine May. It was a one-act play that went into competition. I kept winning best actress awards, and the play kept winning. Eventually it got to the provincial level. The play lost, but I won the scholarship.

**Cinema Canada:** *Did you have an active fantasy life as a child?*

**Helen Shaver:** Extremely. Some acting out, but a lot of it was very quiet. I caught on fire when I was four and that was the first time I was in the hospital. By the time I was five, I had rheumatic fever and I spent six months that year in the hospital. I spent Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, my birthday, and Easter in the hospital. So from the time I was four until I was 12, I was in the hospital, because this rheumatic fever would recur. I would have to lie still. I loved it. I would trip out and lie there.

I read a lot of books and dreamed a lot of dreams. None of them concrete. They were all very otherworldly kind of dreams. I think my fantasy life got very

developed during that time, and life was always a bit scary to me. In grade four it's not terribly cool if you've been sick. I remember some very embarrassing situations. Some teachers were better at helping me reintegrate than others. But I was also burdened by being reasonably intelligent so there were some of them that would do dumb teacher tricks like, "Well, I don't know why the rest of you all got Cs in this, because Helen, who's been in the hospital, has got an A." I think a lot of it was my protection, just because I did feel separate. It's a real dichotomy to me because I really liked, on one hand, the feeling of feeling different, and, on the other hand, it terrified me.

**Cinema Canada:** *Your mother is French-Canadian, your father English-Canadian. Can you look at yourself and say, "This is a definite French or English-Canadian trait"?*

**Helen Shaver:** Nah. Because I didn't grow up in French Canada, I don't break

it down that way. I definitely sometimes open my mouth and hear my mother come out. Sometimes I open my mouth and hear my father come out. They shared certain qualities, such as being opinionated, outspoken, and fairly definite human beings. Like everybody, there are certain areas that I relate to both of them. You go through the adolescent period of "I'm *not* going to be like my parents." If you go 180 degrees in the opposite direction you end up at the same place – being exactly like they are. A really good friend of mine whose father was an alcoholic determined he would never use alcohol, so he became a real full-blown drug addict. What's the difference?

I am as Canadian as it gets. My mother's people came over on Champlain's boat, and descend from Hébert, who planted the first cornfields or something. My father's people were Empire Loyalists; four brothers who were Pennsylvania Dutch. They came up 200 years ago, and settled Ancaster.

**Cinema Canada:** *I see in your acting an earthy quality many English-Canadian actors don't share.*

**Helen Shaver:** I think that from my mother's side comes a real tactile, emotional show of affection. Always kiss hello and goodbye. My mother says she learned from me to say, "I love you." I don't know where I learned that.

**Cinema Canada:** *Needing to hear it back?*

**Helen Shaver:** I have said in my personal life, "I love you," because I wanted to hear it back, certainly. I try not to do that anymore. That's one of the ones we hope we've grown through.

My father was a union man, and a real defender of people's rights – a very determined individual who would have made a great lawyer. He had been brought up in a very gentrified way. He had this very refined upbringing – the luxury of music lessons and all of those things. My mother, on the other hand, was the oldest daughter of 10 children, who grew up in Victoria Harbour, and moved to Hamilton when she was 5, during the Depression. I think she had a grade 10 education. Her older brother got to go to university. She got him to give her a reading list of books, so she's very self-educated, and quite a wonderful woman who really dedicated herself to being a wife and a homemaker. But she somehow never lost touch with also being her own woman. My father, due to circumstances, ended up not able to go to university, because he had to start supporting his mother and infant brother and eight-year-old sister.

They ended up meeting because my mother was working as a manager in some little corner market, and he was selling bread in the daytime, and playing in the big bands at night. They met and fell in love. She wouldn't marry him, and stopped seeing him for awhile because she was so passionately attracted to him that she didn't know whether she was

blinded by the passion, and worried that there might not be enough substance in the relationship otherwise to make a life together. Then after nine months, she realized every time she was on a street-car passing near where he might be, she was looking out the window to see if she saw him.

My father was terribly determined that even when there wasn't enough money we would have music lessons. My mother had a great love of books, so the priorities in the family were really well-balanced. There was this great love of learning, this great curiosity which we've all been endowed with, and it's been encouraged a lot. A lovely environment really, for having no money.

**Cinema Canada:** *How do you keep sight of the real Helen Shaver, so that you're not caught up in being Helen Shaver, Movie Star?*

**Helen Shaver:** You know, I try. There was a period in my life, I guess my mid-to-late-20s, when I had created some idea of who I thought I should be. It came from bad '50s movies, and from interpretations of what I found acceptable and not acceptable in myself. It came from a lack of acceptance with myself of who I am. The good and not-so-hot. And it came from a kind of running I was doing inside myself, which I think in a way I'd been doing for many years. I hit the wall with that. I don't think it has to do with me being an actress, or not being an actress. It's what I happen to be.

**Cinema Canada:** *Did hitting the wall have to do with turning 30? Was that a conscious crisis for you?*

**Helen Shaver:** No, turning 30 was not. Actually it happened when I was 29. I had just finished shooting **United States**. My husband, who I was very much in love with, threw me this big birthday party. I'd done a lot of work that year. I'd done **United States**, I'd done several films, and he had made this big birthday cake in the shape of a heart. On the top it said, "Happy Birthday, Helen – I love you," and around the sides it had the names of all these different characters I had played that year. At this birthday party there were some people that I knew quite well, there were some people I was acquainted with, and people that I'd worked with.

I had come to a point – all of which had happened unconsciously – where here I was at this party in my own home that was being thrown for me by somebody who loved me and whom I loved, and it was filled with people who went from intimate to just acquaintances. I felt I was so far away from myself, and so uncomfortable with myself that I felt like a stranger. I felt like I was the only person in the room I didn't recognize. It was a dreadfully uncomfortable evening for me. I knew that I didn't know what I was going to do about coming to acceptance and knowledge of self, but I knew that I was way off-track.

When I look in retrospect at my life, that was the turning point. I have that

AD/BC kind of feeling in my life. It began again. That was in February and by May, I was starting from scratch. I had created Helen Shaver, Professional Actress, which was some kind of idea of who I thought I should be. I was walking around presenting that as if it was me. I didn't know who I was, but I could no longer do that. So that began a journey which, at the beginning, felt like "Stranger in a Strange Land." I stopped using drugs and alcohol. I haven't used any since then.

**Cinema Canada:** *Have you gone through therapy to help you on the journey?*

**Helen Shaver:** In the last six and a half years there have been a couple of occasions when I've come up against, and recognized, a pattern in my life, and seen painfully clearly how it's run through my

Seasons, and I got a job there cocktail waitressing in these dumb short uniforms. That was really the only thing I knew how to do, besides act.

After about a month I got a call from Peter Bryant from the west coast saying, "You know that film **The Supreme Kid**? Well, we got the financing to make it and I want you to play the girl." Great. Great. "You'll have to fly yourself out." Well, okay. Pay for my ticket but take it off my salary. "There's no money for overtime." Okay, that's fine. Scale. Whatever. I quit that day and flew out there and found that the budget had been cut to \$87,000. One of the things they had cut was the make-up artist. So anyway, I talked myself into the make-up artist job as well. I completely deferred the payment. Everything was deferred in that movie. I guess we got paycheques, but I don't remember what. But it was fabulous be-



life as long as I remember. There's a woman who's a therapist in L.A. and there have been a couple of occasions where I've worked with her for a month or two specifically to get tools to be able to stop repeating certain patterns of behaviour. The rest of it has been very much talking with and sharing with people who have turned up in my life in various ways.

**Cinema Canada:** *When you first went to Los Angeles when you were 22, you didn't stay. Why did you come back at that time?*

**Helen Shaver:** I couldn't get working papers, so I moved to Toronto. Had \$11. Took my resumé, which was limited, around to a few agencies. Didn't get a job within the three days, ran out of the \$11. There was a bar called SRO at the Four

cause I don't think any of us had made a movie.

So we all made this movie together somehow. We finished it, amazingly enough. And it wasn't very good, except that we made it. Everybody else looked great. I had too much make-up on. I learned a healthy respect for crews. And Jim Henshaw and I got to be friends. Jim told me about his agent Michael Oscars. When we came back to Toronto, he introduced me to Michael. That was the first time I'd had an agent.

Michael began shaping my career. Because I was a hippie I had hair down to my ass, I never wore make-up. I thought anybody who would possibly expect me to wear a skirt to an audition was obviously someone who had no imagination. I would never do television and I didn't want to do commercials. So Michael let

me run out of money. Then he said, "There's a commercial audition you could go on," and I said "God, no, I'll cocktail-waitress." "Did you know you can get \$1,000 for a day's work doing a commercial?" Oh, well. Fine. And that began the change. I was here for five years. Ended up doing 30 commercials, bunch of TV things, 13 films, plays, radio-plays, voice-overs. And I was so lucky I didn't get that original job in Los Angeles. I've seen those early things. I think that there was a spark.

I just read a great article in the *New York Times Magazine* - The Creative Mind, an interview with Jack Nicholson on acting. He says it takes 20 years to make an actor. A full actor. By which time you'll have some idea of your instrument, you'll have some idea of what you want to say, and thereafter follows style and all those other things. It's real

cause of the time that it takes, and the fact that you work one area, and it all comes together.

Doing a play is much more the event. The flesh-and-blood experience of the performance is very much there. There's the rehearsal period, where you get to take it to enormous extremes. You have the luxury in rehearsing a play to create one character, throw it out, create another character, throw it out. Pull pieces from both and come very actively together with the director on the character that he sees and the character that you see, find one you both like and put it in the play.

**Cinema Canada:** *Is it difficult to keep the adrenalin running in a play over a long run?*

**Helen Shaver:** The longest run I've ever done is *Tamara*, and that was 100 performances. Three months. What's phenomenal about a play is that because you have the rehearsal process, eventually a groove is cut. I remember days with *Tamara* we would do five performances in a weekend. My character had to kill herself. This is climbing a mountain five times. Sunday afternoon would come around and you'd just - I don't want to do the show - Aah - I don't feel like it, I'm tired. I'm hot. I've got nothing to give. Who gives a damn. And it didn't matter how I felt, once I would start the journey. You do the preparation, you start to speak the line you remember what your job is. You're a storyteller. You begin to tell the story, and then the groove is there, and all of a sudden the play would do me.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you feel that you have to make personal sacrifices for your career?*

**Helen Shaver:** If I was doing something I didn't want to do, then I would see it in terms of sacrifice. You know, it's so much a point of view. When I was filming *Many Happy Returns* and we were opening *Desert Hearts* in New York, I wanted to publicize *Desert Hearts*, I wanted to do whatever I could to help it get the shot I think it deserves. And there were times I would work Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, get up real early Thursday morning, fly to New York, do interviews from nine in the morning until 7:30 at night, rush to the airport, get on the 8:30 plane, get back here, get up the next day, work all day long. When I get tired, my point of view sometimes gets a little muddled, and I'll start to feel victimized.

But that's one point of view which I don't like to live in.

All it takes is me catching myself there, and I can either choose to stay in that head, or I can move one tiny degree to the side and say I'm real fortunate, I'm working, and I have a movie opening. I can get on a plane and go "Oh God, I have to get a plane again," or I can get on a plane and I can realize that I am so fortunate. I get to live in a world community, I get to travel freely from one country to another, I get to work where work

calls me, and where I want to work. I get paid for my work. I get to meet an enormous cross-section of people, whether it be the person sitting in the airplane seat beside me, or the grip working on the film, or the actor playing opposite me. My world gets to merge with so many various worlds. I am incredibly rich in that.

**Cinema Canada:** *How do you find time for relationships - for love?*

**Helen Shaver:** I have a lot of love in me, and there's a lot of love in my life. I have very active, healthy relationships with my friends. I assume when the right person comes along and I have a love relationship, if I can have it with friends, I don't know why I couldn't possibly have it with a lover. I hope to be able to fit in lovers and children. There are people who do. I used to think it was either the art of the heart, but I think that's ridiculous. I think you can have both. I think it would be difficult for someone who is not as potent in his own life as I am in mine to be in a relationship with me.

**Cinema Canada:** *Is there a difference exposing yourself as an actress, as opposed to exposing yourself in an interview?*

**Helen Shaver:** There are certain experiences I've had in my life that I wouldn't talk about in an interview. I'll only talk about what I have gleaned in summation of them, and they are experiences that nobody knows about that are private. I will not go into the ins and outs of my intimate relationships with people. I'm happy to share, I try very much in an interview to talk about me instead of them, which has to do with me taking responsibility for my life. In my work those same areas might be very vigorously exposed in another context.

There were things that have happened in my personal life that were very applicable to *The Osterman Weekend*. I had very real physical/emotional experiences to draw on. Again, the same for *Desert Hearts*. One of the givens I had for Vivian was that she hadn't made love at all for a couple of years, and it happened in my life, there was about a 14-month period in which I didn't make love at all. I very much remember the first time I did after, and so I used that on an emotional level, and on a physical level. I remember my nerves shook when I started to make love. I chose to put that in the love scene, so that when my hand shakes, that was an absolute choice.

**Cinema Canada:** *I want to ask you about the process of acting, specifically in Desert Hearts. Your performance is so nicely nuanced, and well thought out. How do you go from intellectualizing a role to emoting it so that the spontaneity is there?*

**Helen Shaver:** Jesus. I'll talk about *Desert Hearts* sort of broadly. With something like *Desert Hearts*, where Vivian's character is such a specific character in terms of time and place and all of that, it's

a chicken/egg thing, so I'll talk about the outsides first and then I'll talk about the insides.

On the outside, there were given things that I knew about. It's 1959. She's a woman who is an academic. She's a woman from the east coast. I made the choice that she wasn't from a blueblood family. That she was an intelligent woman with a lot of determination to be a scholar, and probably done a lot of her university training on scholarships. Therefore I gave her a lot of drive, determination, and brains. Looking at all of that, I gathered information from old movies in a sense, from books, from impressions I had of that period, memories I had, from my older sisters. Just observation, because my elder sisters are a different generation. Just that kind of stuff.

Specifically, I went to New York to publicize *Best Defence* so Donna (Deitch, the director) turned me on to a woman named Catherine, who is about 55-60 years old and is a professor in an Ivy League university now, in the humanities. I sat with her for about three hours and asked her questions about what it would have been like then. I just really observed her body language, because now is a different time, I think that things like that echo over time. I observed a lot just by osmosis.

Take one thing, for example. How does a woman walk down the halls of an Ivy League university as a professor in a time when they are one out of 200 - simply by their sex? How do you walk into a room of predominantly male students and get taken seriously? Well you don't wiggle your hips. You don't. How do you dress? You dress down. You dress against your sex. But this would have evolved through her time as a student - of being taken seriously by professors, of moving up through her master's degree and her assistanceship, and working on her doctorate. She would get approval, not from a physical presence, but from her intelligence, and what she had to say. Plus she would have had to do twice as much research.

How does your body then become? If I sit and write for a long time, what happens to my shoulders? If I read then I end up wearing glasses. What part of my face is tension held in? So from her job, from the actual physical rigours of her job. There's those elements to be put into it. Where does she lead in terms of her body? What part of her body? She doesn't lead from her sex, she doesn't lead from her heart, it's all up here.

Over the years of becoming this person it's not a self-conscious thing of dressing down. She would choose a suit that she thought was attractive, but she just wouldn't see cashmere sweaters. It's not like she would walk into a store and even go look at the cashmere sweaters. She would walk into a store and go look at the suits. That's it. Period. And if there was a red suit and a grey suit, she wouldn't go. "Oh God no, I can't have a red suit," she would simply be attracted to the grey suit. That's it.

Then the emotional fact is that when



true, I think. In terms of that 20-year thing, I've been acting since I was 17, so 18 years have been put into acting. I've been doing film since I was 22, so that's 13 years of film.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you prefer film to theatre, or vice versa?*

**Helen Shaver:** No, actually. It's kind of apples and oranges. I love making movies. I really do. To me, making a movie is like an oil painting. It's an oil painting on a very collaborative level. It's also like an oil painting within an oil painting, where the director has the canvas. He is the master of the canvas, and you are a figure within that picture. But painting the picture of that figure is my canvas. And it's like an oil painting be-

she gets off that train, she knows she is stepping off into a no-return spot. And the four days she's sat on the train, she's known that either she gets off the train, or gets back on and goes back home. So she's experiencing for the first time a step-off into the unknown and an awareness that she's letting go of a good deal of what she has valued, or thought was going to make her happy. With that going on there has to be an emotional upheaval happening, but when there's an emotional upheaval, you've got one of two choices – you are either acting out the emotional upheaval or you are sitting on it. If I'm sitting on an emotional thing, and bracing myself, and so hence the shoulders and the movement, and how much can you let yourself smile, and if you're not letting yourself smile or cry, what's happening to your mouth. All of those choices get made.

To me the story, from my character's point of view, was a stripping away of her defences against her own feelings, and a stripping away of everything she is familiar with, to the moment where she says "I wouldn't know what to do." And at that moment I wanted a progression, so that's the absolute, bottom-line, unabashed truth. No more intellectual arguments. No nothing. The most naked we are ever going to see this woman is at that moment when she tells the absolute truth. After they have made love and she begins to take on this new emotional relationship, she is beginning to identify herself in another way. She is beginning to get wrapped up in another way, wrapped up in another relationship.

I wanted to tell the story visually as well, because it is moving pictures, and pictures *are* worth 1,000 words. So before I ever started shooting the film, I made choices in terms of working with the costume woman, working with the make-up artist, and the hairdresser, about how the colours would warm, and it's all justified by her being outside, outside those halls of academia, so the skin can go from that cool sort of sullen colour that is inside, to a warmer golden colour. You take the blues out of the lipstick and the eyeshadow and you go to peaches and golden colours. The hair that is completely caught back can begin to fall down little by little. I can relax her posture, which gets braced again when "oh fuck, it's going too fast"

I decided ahead of time where that stuff would happen. The first time she would smile where her teeth showed, where it's a relaxed, complete open smile. So I made all of those decisions. Once those decisions are made I deal with the scene very specifically, what is it my character wants in this scene, how does she want to affect the other person? How are they affecting her? What is the obstacle standing between me and getting what I want? The actual physical behaviour comes out of those things.

I stay fresh in a moment in acting through my concentration. It's like going through all the technical things of learning how to play a piece on the piano. When you sit down to play the

piece, you are not concentrating on thumb, second finger, fourth finger. It's about telling that story, the effect you're having on that other character. What you're playing off of is precisely what you are getting back from them.

**Cinema Canada:** *Were there any times during the shooting of Desert Hearts that you felt constrained by the budget?*

**Helen Shaver:** I know we all uniformly felt constrained by the budget. We never got the scene right for the walking, talking with the horses. The scene was never right in the writing and because we could not reschedule, because the scheduling was so tight, it had to be shot on the day it had to be shot. We went ahead and shot it with the writing not being right, and tried to play through the writing on an emotional level that we knew needed to be in the scene. Upon seeing that, we still knew it wasn't right and there was no way to go back and get it.

**Cinema Canada:** *I ask that because in the book there was so much more intellectual development, just conversationally, between the two characters.*

**Helen Shaver:** And that's where it should have happened, in that scene, and it didn't. Donna and I will sit beside each other watching the movie, and go "oh God" because it's an acknowledged problem in the film. The scene sucks, and it's unfortunate. It's really unfortunate. It stands out as a bad scene.

**Cinema Canada:** *When you filmed the love scene with Patricia Charbonneau in Desert Hearts, did you have any fears that you might really enjoy it?*

**Helen Shaver:** You know I didn't have that fear. I didn't. It's real interesting because I've played love scenes with men who are not particularly men I like. These are not people I would choose to spend my life with, or even an evening that I wasn't getting paid for, and who didn't give me any reason to believe that they liked me, but in playing the scene, I wasn't going blech, yuch, ptui, because the whole emotional predisposition, and the accepting of the imaginary circumstance is that I'm going to look into that person's eyes, I'm going to want to kiss them, I'm going to have to try to stop myself from kissing them, and then, I'm going to kiss them anyway.

I've kissed men who I've thought were fabulously attractive and found out that it was no great thrill. And this hasn't changed my life one way or another. In kissing Patricia – she was soft and sweet-tasting, and it was a pleasure to kiss her. Neither Patricia nor I have any desire outside of that circumstance to kiss each other in a passionate way. But within that context, that was what we were there to do, and I did not have fear. I'm sure there's still lots more for me to find out about my own sexuality. My sexuality is not something I have fears about one way or another. In any kind of context. It has to do with the moment, and the person, and everything else.

**Cinema Canada:** *Could this possibly expand your sexual horizons in a sense that suddenly now you would be...*

**Helen Shaver:** Consider having affairs with women?

**Cinema Canada:** *Not actively seek it...*

**Helen Shaver:** But be open to it? I don't think I was ever closed to it but in terms of my sexual preference...I examined a lot of things intellectually, and I looked at myself, and all kinds of stuff during this. Certainly I know a lot of women who are gay, and I have before, and certainly since, been approached by a gay woman. I have women who I love. My sexual preference to this date has been men. I'm quite sure it has nothing to do with taboos, because taboos have always rather attracted me. So it's not something I spend a lot of time thinking about or worrying about. I just assume that I'm

like a Bill Hurt who is already established as a major star to then play a gay man or transvestite. Now I can't say this didn't come up. Michael Oscars had a long talk with me. He said, "You have to realize there's an element of men who don't like women at all. They are not going to be pleased about this. There is an element of very straight, right-wing people who are not going to be pleased with this. There is an element of men who fantasize about two women being together, but they're not going to be interested in this because it's too real." I said, well we're assuming the film is going to be seen, which is assuming the film is going to be really good.

Now if the film is really good, and if I do my job really well, I totally believe that the bottom-line is going to be that people are going to be much more interested in the fact I did a good job, I'm



photo: Ben Mark Holzberg

• Lost!

heterosexual because that's the evidence of my life.

**Cinema Canada:** *But when you accepted this part you must have known people were going to say "Aha, Helen Shaver's gay. I knew it."*

**Helen Shaver:** So many people have said to me "You were so brave and courageous to do this thing," and when people started saying that to me, I'm going, oh yeah, right.

**Cinema Canada:** *Because of a possible ostracism?*

**Helen Shaver:** I suppose. I suppose. I suppose. I suppose it's safer for someone

a good actress, as opposed to what my sexual preference is.

**Cinema Canada:** *How do you feel knowing that there are women walking around in love with Vivian Bell, but you to them are Vivian Bell?*

**Helen Shaver:** I'm glad they're in love with Vivian. I think that's great. What would be horrible would be the opposite. If I'd done this character and they'd all gone "Hell no. No. This is wrong. This is not right. Fuck you. You've really not represented my fantasy, my image, who I am, me." That would be a drag.

**Cinema Canada:** *And this film is giving permission. It's saying to the audience*

• The Believers



Photo: Kerry Hayes

"This is alright."

**Helen Shaver:** And it's saying to the rest of the world "Now what do you see different about this? What's wrong with this? Understand that this is universal. This is love."

**Cinema Canada:** Did you consider the film in terms of a notoriety that could enhance your career?

**Helen Shaver:** No. I thought of it as – if I can pull this off, if I can carry a film, I have done something that will enhance my career. I was aware that if the film came out well, there would be an audience for it. All based on the fact of whether Donna Deitch could make this movie, and I could do the role, Patricia could do the role, and if it was cast well, and if there was enough money to get the damned thing finished, that, yes, there was a built-in audience. Our job would then have to be to see if we could appeal to a cross-over audience in order to make it a viable film. **United States** was as risky in its own way, and that's another piece of evidence in my life that if you do the work it may not – everybody said "Oh, you're on the cover of TV Guide. You're going to be famous when **United States** comes out." Well, I was wasn't famous when **United States** came out, but here we are six years later and **United States** is back again, and I think things eventually find their level, find their audience.

**Cinema Canada:** If Donna Deitch came to you and said "I've got three million dollars to do a sequel to **Desert Hearts**" would you do it?

**Helen Shaver:** Yes. If it's not a sequel, then I would like to work with Donna again anyway. I think she's a really good director.

**Cinema Canada:** Do you feel pressured now to make the right film choices, because you have a momentum in your career?

**Helen Shaver:** I think it's important what film I make next. I really don't want to get stuck in fear. I've turned down a couple of things this month that were nice projects that would have been appropriate for me to do a year ago, or two years ago. But now it's important to leave this time – as opposed to taking that job, just because there's some money attached to it – it's important to leave the time open to see if a project will come with an extraordinary director, or an extraordinary script.

It doesn't have to do with the amount of money I would get paid. I like to get paid for what I do. I work real hard, and if a budget can – I like to get paid. However, if I were to read **Desert Hearts** today, with all the elements the same, I would do **Desert Hearts** today as much as I would have done it two years ago. So it's important, but I don't think important enough to get completely tied up in the fear of what is the right and what is wrong. I have a kind of trust, and enough experience to know, I have experience on both sides. I did **Best Defense** which

by all accounts (Dudley Moore and Eddie Murphy were her co-stars) should have been a box-office smash. This movie was a major failure. But you know, what do I know?

**Cinema Canada:** I want to ask about **Lost?** What caused you to black out when you were filming the death scene?

**Helen Shaver:** I don't know. It scared the shit out of me. It was really weird. I guess what I did was hyperventilate. When I'm dying, the three-month-old baby inside her has died, and so I knew that causes toxemia, and then I figured that causes all your tissues to swell, and your windpipe closes down. She had to die, so I figured this was a good way to die. At the last rehearsal, the camera was at the end of the bunk, this plank that stuck out above the water, and Michael Hogan was standing to my right in the water. I'd been rehearsing this for a little while, so I figured, OK, all I have to do in this rehearsal is place the breaths in the correct spot. So that's all my concentration was on, not performance or anything like that, but in doing this laboured breathing. I knew from yoga that I could stop myself breathing by locking the throat. So I decided, once she can't breathe, I'll just lock that, and arch back.

Well, I stopped breathing, I locked, arched, and I black out, and I didn't know I'd blacked out. I didn't swoon, nothing like that. I didn't know I was going. I was just gone. Michael didn't know I had blacked out. Peter Rowe didn't know I'd blacked out. Apparently, Michael said she stopped because he thought it was so interesting, what I was doing, and it was a rehearsal, so he just stopped to watch. Then he got on with it, and called Kenny (Welch) in, and the next thing I'm aware of – you know when you black out, when you come back you are disoriented, you don't

know where you are or anything. Because my eyes are closed, all my awareness is in my mouth and on my mouth. My mouth is opened and there are these lips on my mouth, and there are these whiskers pricking into my skin.

The first thought I had was, "Who's making love to me?" And I open my eyes, I was so disoriented, and Kenny was there with his broken-down make-up on. I didn't have a clue who this guy was. Never seen him before in my life as far as I was concerned. So I sat up, because I didn't know who was making love to me. And there were all these people with cameras and microphones and everything, and I thought, what are these people doing in my bed? They were all looking at me very strangely and I didn't recognize any of them. And then I turned to Michael Hogan, who I recognized, and I remembered we were doing a scene where I die. The same thing happened again when we were filming, only this time when I came to, I quickly realized what was going on, and I got very frightened and said I can't do this anymore. But they had it.

**Cinema Canada:** Was it difficult working in a confined space?

**Helen Shaver:** The whole shoot was a very difficult shoot. You read a script, say, 'I like water,' etc. This was nothing to do with what it's like to be wet for 14 hours a day, six days a week, two of which were in Lake Ontario in September and October. You have no idea. None. None. You're wet, the crews are wet. There's not enough space to work. It's really very difficult. High tension. Thank God for Michael Hogan's humour, Kenny's good soul. And we all had a desire to tell the story. The film, I think, has a lot of good elements. It's unfortunate that there wasn't enough money to do the special effects better.

**Cinema Canada:** If you could only make one more film, and you had absolute control, who would you choose to direct, and who would choose as your co-star?

**Helen Shaver:** Wow. Martin Scorsese to direct, and Robert de Niro to co-star. I guess, I mean if I was to go that way. Or Bertolucci with Donald Sutherland.

**Cinema Canada:** What about a female co-star?

**Helen Shaver:** Jessica Lang.

**Cinema Canada:** Would you like to work with Altman?

**Helen Shaver:** Yeah. I would, actually. I like Altman. I want to work with Ed Harris. Actually Martin Scorsese, Ed Harris and myself. Blow the fucking screen apart. God. De Niro would be nice also. Ed Harris. I'd like to do something with John Schlesinger again. I'd like to do something with Woody Allen.

**Cinema Canada:** What are your impressions of China?

**Helen Shaver:** It's too big a place to sum up in a couple of words.

**Cinema Canada:** Is it difficult filming there?

**Helen Shaver:** Difficult, no. There are a lot of challenges. Any movie is difficult to make. **Bethune** is particularly challenging because we're dealing with a different language, different culture, different style of film-making and quite an enormously challenging script to begin with. An enormous project. Some wonderful, wonderful talents, so I don't think difficult is the right word. It's stimulating, challenging and expansive, and hopefully in the long run deeply rewarding.

**Cinema Canada:** *Why did you choose Bethune as your next project?*

**Helen Shaver:** It's interesting. I've turned down quite a number of films, or let them go by because I was waiting for, well I guess I was waiting for **Bethune**. I didn't know what it was going to be, but I knew that I wanted to – I knew that I'd know. Like when you hear the truth, you know it? I wanted to participate in another dream, someone's vision. In this case Donald Sutherland wanted to – it's been his passion to do **Bethune** for many years. Ted Allen wrote the script almost 40 years ago. Philip Borsos is a man with great vision. The character that I'm playing, Janet Dowd, really caught my imagination, so that's why I'm doing **Bethune**.

**Cinema Canada:** *Are you enjoying working with Donald Sutherland?*

**Helen Shaver:** I love it. Donald's fabulous. He's a great actor. I really like him.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you have a sense of the visual style of the film, considering Philip Borsos has such a beautiful eye?*

**Helen Shaver:** Philip does (have a sense of the visual style) and he's working with a different cinematographer this time. He's working with a man named Michael Malloy, and yes I do have – it's epic. It's beautiful. We haven't seen any dailies yet because they're being shipped to Vancouver to be processed, although we've been shooting for eight days. We'll see our first dailies tomorrow. But I've looked through the camera. Actually it's so beautiful what's being lit that one needn't look through the camera, you just need to look around. It's really beautiful.

**Cinema Canada:** *Where will you be filming in China?*

**Helen Shaver:** Since I've been here, we've been in Beijing. We leave in a week to go to Pingyao, which is a day's ride by train. We'll shoot in a very tiny village there for a week or two. Then the company moves to Yanan. Mao had done the 1,000-mile march which began in 1936. By 1938, when the film takes place, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung had formed an alliance called the National Front. Up until then Chiang Kai-shek felt that in choosing which enemy he was going to fight, he thought Communism was a greater enemy than the Japanese. The Japanese meanwhile were slaughtering Chinese. Basically Chiang Kai-shek was pushing Mao's army and using them as fodder for the Japanese. Yanan, a village of caves, is where Mao holed up. We shoot there, then we go to Wutai, to shoot in the mountains. We just scratch the surface. China is enormous. There are a billion and a quarter people here.

**Cinema Canada:** *What will you be working on after Bethune?*

**Helen Shaver:** I'm going to do **Tamara** in New York, opening the end of Sep-

tember. I also have three projects in development right now. In partnership with Gail Marantz and Marie Armstrong I'm developing the Elizabeth Smart material.

**Cinema Canada:** *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept?*

**Helen Shaver:** No I'm not going to do **By Grand Central**. I'm not going to dramatize the novel. I'm doing Elizabeth Smart's life. The novel is a fabulous prose poem, but I think the really truly fascinating story is the story of this woman's life. Her journals have chronicled it well, so hopefully by this time next year we'll have a wonderful script. I was in England meeting with her son Sebastian Barker, and he remarked any number of times on the similarities between her and I.

The other thing I have in development, in partnership with Primedia, is Margaret Atwood's book, **Life Before Man**.

**Cinema Canada:** *You seem to be developing Canadian material.*

**Helen Shaver:** The opportunity for me to do some projects I'd like to do is available to me in Canada. It happens that's a book I've always loved, and Elizabeth Smart fascinates me. Both of them, delightfully, live there.

**Cinema Canada:** *How would you sum up the experience of working in China?*

**Helen Shaver:** The missionaries came to China, somehow I believe, with the idea they were going to change China, and what happened was that China changed them because it's so big, and so powerful. I think the experience we're sharing here – any experience shapes and molds – I knew before I got on the plane that I'd come back – that I was taking a step into the unknown, and it's all true. It's a trip.

**Cinema Canada:** *Are you politicized? Do you actively seek parts with women directors or support women filmmakers?*

**Helen Shaver:** My politics have to do with wrapping the cheese up after you've had a piece so that the next person who goes to the frig has fresh cheese to cut. That's where I try to keep my politics. As an artist, I think that the independent film industry is something that is really worth supporting. I am a member of Women in Film. I make myself available when I can to the American Film Institute, where actors work for free for directors who are learning how to direct.

**Cinema Canada:** *What are your feelings, as a member of the world community, with regard to the nuclear arms race, and world politics in general?*

**Helen Shaver:** I think that you can look at the world two ways. You can look at the world and say the world is a really crazy place. It's all fucked up and we're going to die. Or, some nuclear place is



● In character as a missionary in **Bethune**

photo: Alan Markfield

going to blow up. There's a hole in the ozone, and we're all going to die of radiation poisoning. Or you can look at the world and say, we are definitely going through a time of maturation. It seems to me, as a body of man we have evolved to adolescence, with our intellect high enough to trick each other. We've got our borders terribly defined, and we've ante'd it right up, and we can in fact destroy ourselves slowly, or quickly. Now at that point, in terms of the development of an individual, if they're going to become an adult, they then have to start giving up or surrendering their boundaries. In order to have a loving relationship they have to discover what is the same between them and another human being. And that's maturation. They have to start learning how to give and take, and so on. In terms of the body of man, in our evolution and our maturation, I think we're at an adolescent stage. We can blow ourselves up, or we can break through that.

I do believe individuals can change. I've seen individuals change. I've changed enormously. I don't think it's a hopeless situation. I think that as an individual I can adopt kids overseas, I have hundreds of dollars to send to China, where for \$10 an operation can be done and somebody who is blind can see. I can do those things in the world and in my personal life. I can be loving. When I am wrong, promptly admit it, I can make mistakes, I can correct them. I can forgive other people for making mistakes. I

can grow as an individual and affect the lives around me as my life is affected by other people, and be part of a change that must be going on.

I don't know about politics. I don't know what's right. I don't know whether to march for Pro-Life or Pro-Abortion. Pro-Life is dealt with guilt and sentiment. Pro-Abortion is dealt with cold hard facts and a quick little simple procedure. I'm quite sure an abortion is all of that and neither of those things. It encompasses them all, and I think to polarize is to miss the whole point of the deal. I don't believe that there are absolutes in those things. I think by saying "this is right", you are immediately making something else wrong, and that everything holds within it both extremes.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you want to be a movie star, with all that entails, or are you content to be a respected actress?*

**Helen Shaver:** Before I was offered **Desert Hearts**, I had gone through a brief thing while I was in the Orient, and I said, can I be happy, am I still lovable, acceptable, and can I have a fulfilled life if I never get the opportunity to carry a film, if I never get to star in a movie? After a lot of futzing about with myself, I said yes. What I want is what I have, and I would love continuance and continuity in that. Which is that I get to work with really good people. I think the reward for solving a problem is another problem to solve. My ambition has never been to be a movie star in the old-fashioned way.