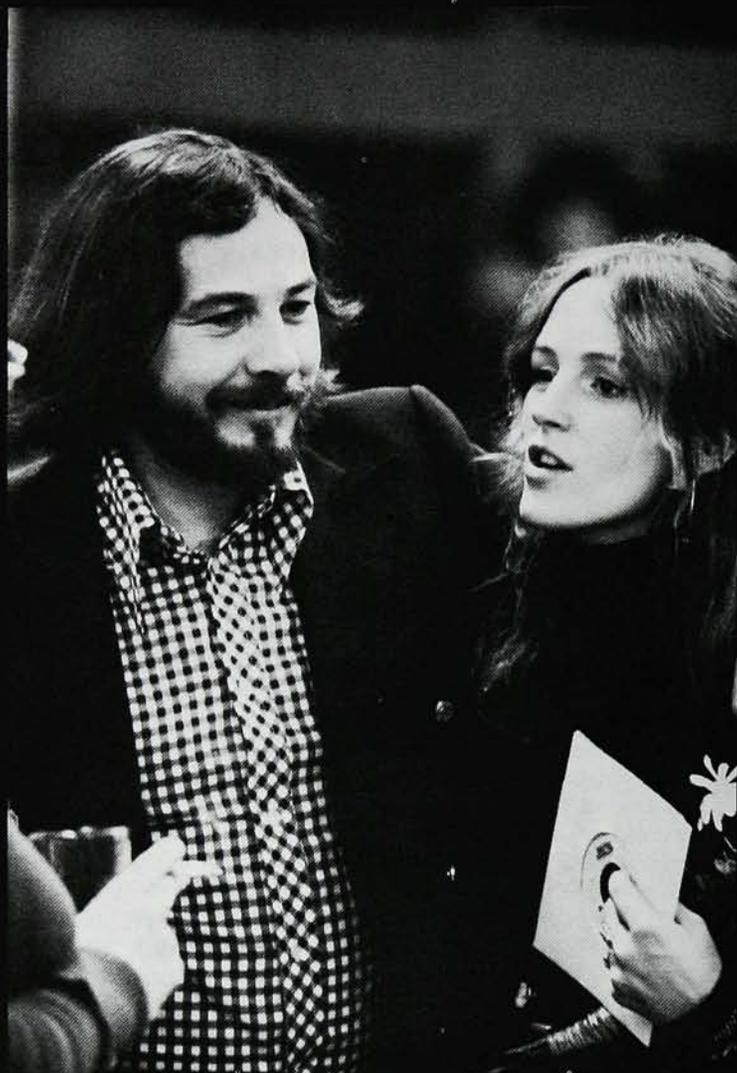
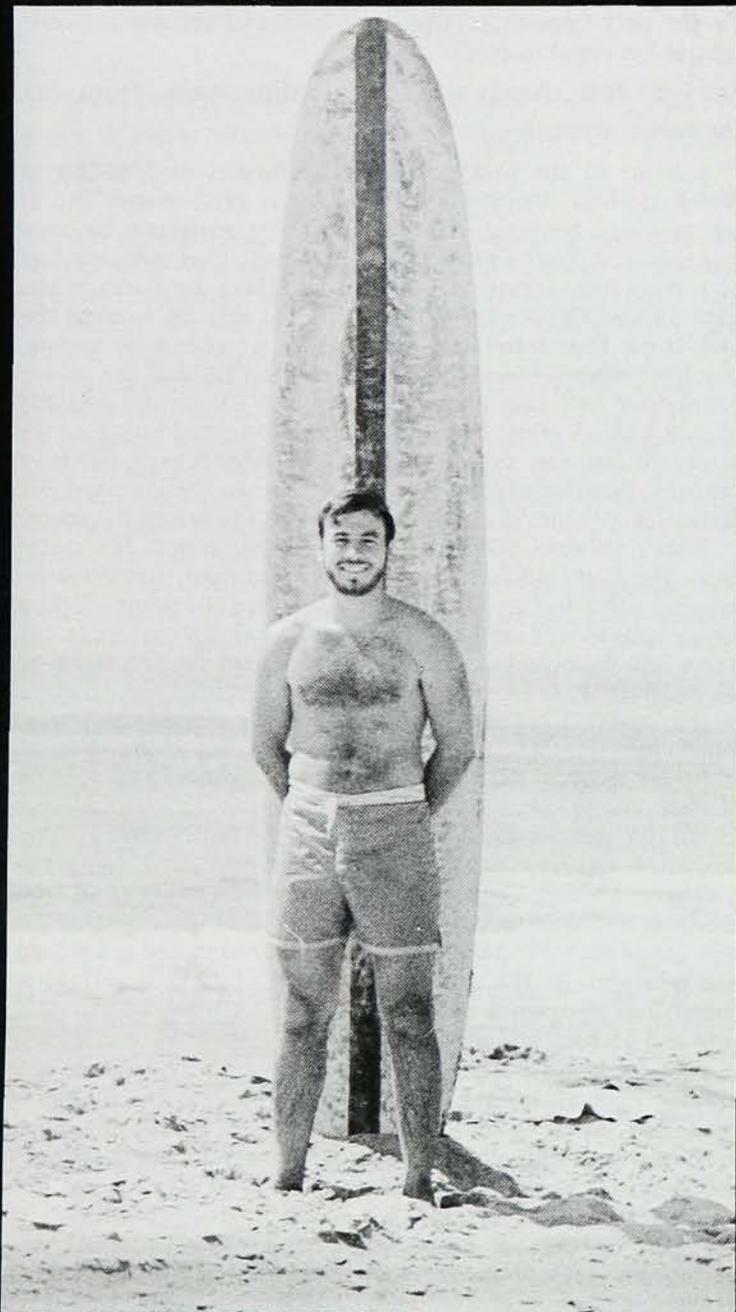


# just between friends:

## Don Shebib talks with Sandra Gathercole

*Surfer Shebib in California in the 1960's*



*Don Shebib and Bonnie Bedelia at the opening*



*On location at Allen Gardens*

## Introduction

— by Sandra Gathercole

This interview with Don Shebib took place prior to the opening of his new feature **Between Friends**, and prior to the parody of the Canadian Film Awards in Montreal. I had seen **Between Friends** before interviewing Don and thought it a masterpiece of its kind: a mature follow-up to **Goin' Down the Road** and the film which would confirm his stature and guarantee him full measure of the recognition and support which touched him with **Goin' Down the Road**. I saw it as being clearly the best film Don had done, perhaps the best film English Canada had produced, and certainly a cause for celebration and pride.

Since that time **Between Friends** has been entered in the Canadian Film Awards and sent home without the recognition of a single award. In Toronto it has opened at the Imperial 6 — probably the worst possible location because of the theatre's inability to attract audiences for any film, and its unsuitability for the potential audience of **Between Friends**. The poor box-office which resulted has forced the film into the Backstage at the Uptown — a better location but with a seating capacity (200) too low to permit good box office return.

Meanwhile, funding for a new Shebib feature has collapsed and that production is off.

With this as background, Don Shebib is understandably bitter. He is 35 years old. He has spent close to 15 years in film, beginning with a film degree at UCLA, followed by full apprenticeship at the NFB and the CBC (This Hour Has Seven Days). He has made several outstanding films: **Revival**, **Good Times**, **Bad Times**, **Goin' Down the Road** (1970 CFA winner as best film), **Rip-Off** and **Between Friends**. He has established a body of work which has made him a unique and recognizable film presence in and beyond this country. He is verging on international stature. **Between Friends** was Canada's official entry to this year's Berlin Film Festival, it was chosen to open Filmexpo in Ottawa, has been shown at the San Francisco Film Festival, will be shown at the London Film Festival, and had Rex Reed raving about it on network television in the United States after having seen it in Cannes.

These are the facts that led me to believe that he was, at last, 'established' and no longer subject to the demeaning vagaries which have, in fact, victimized him in the last month. Almost as though he had foreknowledge of what was to come, Don questioned the assumption that he was home free when I presented it to him during the interview.

Don Shebib is one of the few English Canadian filmmakers whose work illustrates what is meant by indigenous, rather than derivative, Canadian films — films with a character, integrity and identity that are the backbone of any hope we have for an autonomous Canadian industry. In unison, the long promise of the Canadian industry and Don Shebib seemed to be coming to fruition this year: Shebib had made the film which was the confirmation of all his earlier work; there were six strong feature entries in the Canadian Film Awards; the Awards were to be carried on network television; the films were booked to open across the country with full publicity — all firsts. But instead both had their heads bitten off.

Today, Don Shebib says he will never again enter a film in the Canadian Film Awards, that he needs a job and would take one in the U.S. in a minute. This is not sour grapes from someone who's inadequate. This is English Canada's best feature filmmaker reacting to the treatment of the best feature film he's ever made.

We may lose him and we can't afford that. If it happens — and even if it is the only tragic repercussion of the humiliating decisions made in Montreal last month — it will be sufficient onto itself as evidence that the mocking nightmare-come-true which was the 1973 Awards has damaged Canadian film above and beyond any benefit they have been to it in the past.

*Between Friends* — directed by Don Shebib; screenplay by Claude Harz; cinematography by Richard Leiterman; editing by Tony Lower and Don Shebib; music by Matthew McCauley; art direction by Claude Bonnière. Executive producer G. Chalmers Adams, a Clearwater Films

*Production and Release. Cast: Michael Parks, Bonnie Bedelia, Chuck Shamata, Henry Beckman, Hugh Webster.*

**"I don't consider myself an intellectual because I don't talk like one. . . ."**

— edited by Ibrányi-Kiss

There's an anomaly in your life. Your work, friends, but especially your films deny the blunt "I'm a jock" image that I think you project.

I'm sort of schizophrenic that way. I've always been that way.

What is Don Shebib like? That's what I'm asking. That's something a lot of people ask.

Nobody ever says that!

People say that all the time!

You say that about Woody Allen or Johnny Carson, but not about me. Don't be silly. Who said that?

A lot of people. Because there is no concise idea of what you're about. People see your work and there's a delicacy there, a humanism, an incredible perception, a very fine thing . . .

I'm getting embarrassed . . .

You have a recurring message in your films. Are you in any way consciously posing socially-loaded questions?

Partially, yeah. **Rip-Off** was one case where it was stronger. It didn't work because the vehicle I used wasn't right. **Revival** is the heaviest of all. That was the first film I did that had that sense to it . . . No, the second. The surfing film I did had a lot of that. I didn't think too much about it one way or another. I really tried to present people who were just average people. In **Between Friends**, the robbery was almost an afterthought — it had nothing to do with the central plot. The robbery in **Goin' Down the Road** was far more legitimate in that respect. It was absolutely a perfect textbook case of what they would do. It was a real truth rather than a movie truth.

But basically, you have a strong tendency not to make moral judgements.

I have no belief in moral right or wrong. That's evident in all my films. That is the basis of my philosophy. Things are good if they're efficient and bad if they're inefficient. Why is murder wrong? Because it's inefficient. Every law is based on that. The Jews have dietary laws because they lived in the desert. The same thing with Arabs — laws about pork and milk and dairy products. It has nothing to do with their religion. Really — what's wrong with killing people?

It's called moral compromise. I don't kill you because I don't want you to kill me.

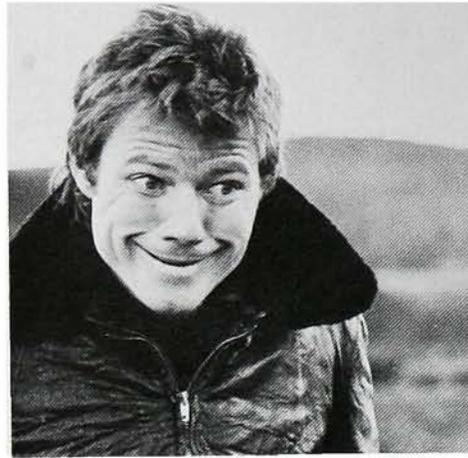
Right. That's what I call efficiency or expediency. In the animal kingdom there is nothing moral or immoral about killing another animal. We are all animals, and that's another part of my basic belief. I mean, my thing about women's lib . . .

You've managed to alienate a lot of people with that!

My feeling has always been that women will never be able to achieve a lot of the things men can, because they don't have a cock. It comes down to the sexual drive of the hunt and kill. I really believe that there's a stronger and more definitive drive in man. Men are the great creators, and I think creativity is a function of sexual drive. Men and women are different for justifiable reasons to begin with. Many women in the women's lib movement are confusing the inherent differences and those we are conditioned to. I don't know. No one can say right now what women will be like in 30 or 40 years, but in terms of



Chuck Shamata as Chino



Michael Parks in a playful mood as Toby



Football player Shebib

sexual drive, men are far more aggressive.

**You're going right back to the animal kingdom . . .**

Right back to the bucks fighting it out for the leadership of the pack. I think it all goes back to that. I've squashed a lot of women's libbers by throwing that kind of argument at them. Once you start throwing that in — they don't quite know where to go. All of this is a Darwinian way of looking at things. I'm not saying that I know whether the argument is true or not. I'm saying I suspect it's true, and until it is proven otherwise, I will go by that argument. Which is that women can do many more things than they've been led to believe they can do, but to try and condition women to think they can do everything that men can and to be brought up on a unisex level is ridiculous. That's a lot of bullshit, really.

I see the whole world as being a series of insane beliefs that are totally against common sense and that people accept every day as being perfect sense! Look at all the educational theories that are thrown out every ten years as being insane! So much educational nonsense goes on today in the name of freedom, and what you do is you destroy the child's freedom. He ends up 20 years old and all he's ever done is things he'd wanted to do. He's never opened himself up enough so that he would have freedom of choice. A lot of that women's lib thing is leaning in that direction. On the other side of it there are all these male chauvinists. I may be considered a male chauvinist but in a different sense than most of the other ones are. The one principle that should govern the world is the principle of comparative advantage. Whatever you can do best, you do. If you can't do it as well as somebody else — let them do it and pay for it. That's the law of economics.

So I go right back to the tribe and from the tribe to the herd. I'm convinced to the deepest part of my bones that we are descendants of animals. That's why people don't kill each other: expediency. What makes something wrong is when the goals aren't reached.

**But then it comes down to setting the right goals.**

Expediency again. Give me an idea of what's a wrong goal. Put it this way — there's no such thing as right or wrong. There's smart and stupid. It's stupid to kill because you'll get killed. It's stupid to pollute the atmosphere because eventually it will come back on you and your descendants. I approach history the way a shrink approaches someone who's got a problem. If, let's say, you like to masturbate in telephone booths, he'll say as long as it isn't hurting your relationship with your family or whatever — you're all right.

You seem to have this Eastern mysticism which says, "It is. Therefore it will be." You don't seem to have that bleeding heart liberal messiah complex of, "I must change that. I must help" . . .

Oh, no. That's not true. I hate bleeding heart liberals and I

consider myself very much a liberal. I don't consider myself an intellectual because I don't talk like one. I'm not anti-intellectual — I'm anti-bullshit. And a lot of bleeding heart liberalism is bullshit. You're equating my reaction to someone on a personal level to a problem on a national level — which is a totally different thing altogether. I'm not a laissez-faire person — accepting things that should be changed. No, no. I'm just lazy, that's all.

**Are you sure that's all it is?**

Oh, yeah. I'm not saying don't try and change the world. I'm saying have a darned good time and change the world. As far as bleeding heart liberals go — there are so many examples where people worry about the smallest . . . I'm talking about people who can't see the forest for the trees. I walk a very thin line in most of my opinions, and that line to me is like 100 yards wide! Most people see it as a razor edge and I think they're fools.

**You once said in an interview that you were a socialist and also that you'd like to make \$100,000 a year. I'd like to see you manoeuvre 100 yards to explain that to me!**

I don't see any complication in that. Where is the complication? That's like saying you can't be a catholic and a communist. I believe in the control of economy, but I don't think I said I was a socialist. I couldn't have said that.

**But you did!**

I said I may have socialist leftist leanings, but I don't believe in Marxism. Marxism is just another form of Roman Catholicism dogma. Another form of bullshit. I don't think capitalists are any better than socialists, I see people as human beings no matter what they do. I don't consider a man who was a Nazi a morally evil person. I never would consider Hitler an evil person. Hitler would make a fascinating film. He's an incredible, marvelous, strange, twisted, mixed up, sick man and he's got as much of everyman in him as anybody else has. That's man! That's man on the screen and people could sit there and say, "That is a human being, and I can relate to that no matter what he's done." What happened in Germany was that people were thrust into a boiling cauldron. That's like the formation of a planet — that kind of terrible, terrifying thing. I am interested in Nazis. I find Nazis and fascism fascinating. A motorcycle gang is a fascist organization and that goes back to tribalism. Who can tell me the difference between a fascist and a communist? Fascism is state capitalism. It's another form of communism, pure communism. Everybody works for the state. All those youth camps the Nazis had where they had collective farms. . . . Israel has kibbutzes which are the same kind of thing the Nazis had.

**But surely you can't equate the two?**

What I've been trying to say in all my films is just that there is no moral right and no moral wrong. Accept people for what I put forth on the screen. And usually, the kinkier they are, the



Tender scene in "Between Friends"

more interesting they are.

But you always try to explain why people do things. You said that "Good Times Bad Times" turned people's heads around by explaining the other point of view . . .

Right. That's really what it's all about. That's what people who saw *Goin' Down the Road* said, "Gee. I'd never make fun of Newfies anymore" because they saw the other point of view. That's been true of a lot of my films. If I was to make a film about Nazi Germany it would be about being an SS man and it would all take place before the war started. You would get the feeling and the tremendous drive of enthusiasm that Germany was clutched up in at that time. They had a bloodless revolution but the dust never had time to settle because the war came along and that got into things . . . But far more people were killed in Russia after that revolution than in Germany in concentration camps!

There's a scene in a Frank Capra film called *Why We Fight* and I believe this may have been taken from *Triumph of the Will* — where this classic SS man is giving a speech, "When I hear the word 'culture' I reach for my revolver!" That's what I subscribe to. When I hear the word 'freedom' I reach for my revolver — or when I hear the word 'creativity'. Creativity is the bane of modern man — everybody wants to be creative! Well, they *can't*. I'm certain that in every society there is a constant percentage of people who are do-ers and who have creative instincts. The level of intelligence certainly breaks down to about 1 per cent genius, 5 per cent extremely intelligent, 10 per cent very intelligent, then a big mass of 60 per cent and then 20 per cent dumb and 4 per cent morons . . . or whatever it is. But I'm certain that percentage hasn't changed since day one.

But creativity isn't a direct function of intelligence.

It is a direct function of intelligence. I do know that obviously being intelligent means nothing in terms of creativity. What I'm saying is that people are being led down the garden path. Not everybody is 6'5" and 270 lbs. and can play tackle in the NFL — but when it comes to things being creative — you've got to have the shit kicked out of you a hundred times before you ever smarten up. And that's what's happening to a lot of people. . . .

How did you first realize that you were a creative person?

Oh, over a long period. I never really thought about it in those terms for a long time. When I went into filmmaking I had no idea what I could do at all. Thinking back, I don't know what crazy idea possessed me.

You said once that you'd wanted to make a film of "The Merry Widow" and to do that you had to learn how to make films. Was that being facetious?

No, I wasn't being facetious. I always wanted to do that. That was just one of my dreams, it wasn't a definitive drive. I didn't look beyond my nose in those days because I was scared to. If

I had — I would never have gotten into it. The same thing with *Goin' Down the Road* — I've got a way of putting on blinkers so that I don't even think about how good or bad a thing is going to turn out. I must have been out of my mind to start it when I started . . . I wouldn't do that anymore . . . I guess I would. Sure, I would.

Well, you don't have to do that anymore.

Oh, I wouldn't be so sure of that!

What do you mean?

Just what I said. I don't feel myself in any better position than I was 10 years ago or 5 years ago. What really pisses me off is that no-one has ever approached me with a project — a real legitimate offer — except for Alexis Kanner. Grant him that. I've never heard a word from Larry Dane, never heard anything from John Bassett other than his once saying, "Do you want to make a football film?" or something, and nothing ever came of that. Never heard anything from David Perlmutter, or from Cinépix, never heard anything from Pierre Lamy or from Shouten or Potterton, never heard anything from Maxine Samuels. I've never heard anything from any of these people!

What do you make of that?

I haven't got the foggiest fucking idea. I could have made John Bassett a million dollars on *Face-Off*. I know it! I didn't know anything about it until the film was almost done, but I would have liked to have made it. I could have made a good film out of that! I don't understand why I've never heard from any of these people.

How did you get the script for "Between Friends"?

Don Scardino read it, Claude had written it. It was a totally different script then . . . I liked part of it, so Claude and I got together and we started rewriting it.

Who is Claude?

Claude Harz. He's American.

Is he living here?

He was then. He was ghost writing for *Jalna*. He wrote *Homer*, and he's written the film we're doing now.

When I read the script last summer, Ellie and Chino were different from the characters who emerge in the film. Ellie came out a strong, intelligent, sensitive person in the film . . .

They haven't really changed very much. It is partially Bonnie (Bedelia) but also, Claude writes very good women. Bill Fruet writes dreadful women. In *Goin' Down the Road* they were supposed to be, but in *Rip-Off* I had to fight with Bill to make the part Sue Helen Petrie played a little bit more sensitive. But I think *Wedding in White* was a great piece of writing!

One of my favorite scenes in "Between Friends" is when Ellie drives off and pulls the car off the road only to turn around and go back . . .

Well, that couldn't be written in the script the way it was shot. No one could write that . . . that's one of the nicest moments in the film. And that whole scene where she's playing the piano and Michael (Parks) makes that phone call to his kid — that's the best scene in the film.

You had another scene which terrified me — the song at the grave. You went out on a limb with that and by God! it really worked.

There's one thing wrong with that — there's not enough of the old man in there. Not enough of Coker, to cement his relationship with Will. I had them in the script and I didn't do them because of logistics, and I made a mistake there. There was another little scene with Coker and Will that was necessary and I blew it and lost it. I think that's missing. There wasn't enough parallel between Toby and Chino and Will and Coker as there should have been.

**Are there other things you're not happy with? Can you expand on that?**

No. I won't. So there! There's lots of reasons why **Between Friends** didn't come out the way I wanted it to. I don't want to get into that.

**Are you happy with it?**

Yes and no. Relatively, yes. I'm only happy if it makes money – money means people are going to see it. I'd like some popular successes. I don't care whether they pay \$2.50 or 3¢ – which would of course never make any money – but at least then I'd know people would be seeing it. It's very hard for a film to make its money back . . .

**Do you think that's what happened with "Goin' Down the Road"? A 3¢ problem?**

All its money came from Canada. That film brought in net rental of about \$190,000 before the distributor took his cut. To bring in \$190,000 it made 3 to 5 times that in the box office. If it's three times as much, then it did \$450,000 – if it's five times as much it means \$700,000. That's about what it did. This is 1973, and **Goin' Down the Road** wouldn't be a success now. Canadian films are so much better. Don't forget in 1970 there was no box-office for Canadian films.

**It did a lot to create it . . .**

Probably more than any other film. And the success of **Wedding In White** and **Fortune in Men's Eyes** and things like that is directly attributable to **Goin' Down the Road**. **Wedding** . . . created part of that too. Everybody builds on everybody else. I'll bet the market is 3 times as large as it was then.

**Do you think Rex Reed will be "Between Friends" fairy godfather the way Judith Crist was for "Goin' Down the Road"?**

An apt description of Rex Reed. We need one, you know. Judith Crist did a lot for **Goin' Down the Road** – she saw it and started pushing it. One of the bad things about film critics is that they've got their egos to put on the line, too. Critics are parasites. They don't have creativity of their own – they have to leech off others. But critics love to find unknown pictures and push them, especially when they're powerful – to be the first one to find it! Everyone likes to turn people on to things.

**Whom do you consider to be Canada's outstanding filmmakers?**

I don't know too much about Quebec . . . Obviously, Denys Arcand and Jutra and Gilles Carle are good filmmakers. In English Canada, I don't know. Whatever happened to Colin Low?

**He's in the NFB's administration now . . .**

That's right . . . He was a brilliant filmmaker, and Tom Daly was a very important film person, and Don Owen and myself. I don't know what situation Ron Kelly is in . . . I haven't seen Daryl Duke's **Payday** but he's been functioning as an American so long I have hardly considered him Canadian for many years, and he's not coming back. . . . I've never seen Clark Mackey's film. Every time it's been shown I've been out of town.

**All two times?**

Both times I was out of town . . . (laughter)

**What do you feel about the prevalent theory that all Canadian films are about losers?**

The fact is that if so many films appear to be down – that is the temper of the times! How many American films are escapist now? Wow! I don't see where all Canadian films are about losers!

**Your films are.**

That's me! I don't like the idea of suddenly being used as a model for Canada or something. Why take me – whatever my feelings are – and blame that on the Canadian people? What's that got to do with it? What about all those crazy sex films in Montreal? I think all those theories are intellectual masturbation. Are you trying to tell me that if I suddenly went to the United States I'd make happy films? I'll bet if all Canadian films were happy, those same people would turn around and say, "Canada makes films that are happy, but hollow happiness." So they're still trying to turn it into losers.

**But then you're saying that we are no different from the States, since that theme of losers tied our films together and separated them from all the American films. Are we no different from them?**

Oh, sure. Anyone would say that! I think to learn something about Canada you have to go to the States, then you learn what it is and what it isn't. But the more Canadians cry about American domination of their culture, the less they're likely to realize they have a culture to begin with. If you think of the United States and Canada as one country, then we have an extremely unique culture.

What else could you ever imagine this country being than what it is? How much different could Canada be? I think the problem with Canadian culture is that people don't recognize it when they see it. Here's what you're talking about: If this country was inhabited in 1867 by 5 million Swahilis, and now in 1973 we find people are looking like Americans – then you can say that somehow, in the last 100 years those Swahilis were changed into Americans. But in 1867 we were the same people! This is long before media! We really can't be too much different if we come from the same basic mixtures and same stocks and from the same continental climate.

I actually feel very Canadian and I feel very happy about being that, you know. I don't feel any identity crisis about it and I don't see any dragons in the United States after me.

**What's most important to you? What do you see as your ultimate goal in life?**

Oh, gee. I don't know. I don't think I could answer that – you couldn't answer that question either, could you? I don't know. I would like to make some really good films. Just a next movie . . . that's all.

**You're really operating day-to-day?**

Not much more than that . . . I just care about getting enjoyment out of doing things. I make films because it's fun. When it stops being fun I'll probably try something else – I don't know what else it could be . . . But I'm a long way from feeling fulfilled about making films.

**So there is still a challenge involved?**

Oh yeah! Jesus! Sure! I don't think one ever loses that. There are a very few instances historically of anyone starting to be a composer or a filmmaker and quitting halfway through saying, "Well, I've done it all. I'll do something else." Jim Brown did that, because after a while he was the best football player in the world and he had nowhere else to go.

**What if you become the best filmmaker?**

Well, I'm not going to be. I'm not going to be. . . .

**Do you have a passion for fame? Is that what you're after?**

Not particularly. No, I don't think so. I know people who are. I've never been ambitious in that respect. I've been very lazy and sloppy and one of the problems with my films is that they're very sloppy films, I think, for the most part. I'm not sloppy like some filmmakers, I'm sloppy in their execution. What I'm saying is, I think they can't see the forest for the trees. I've always got my eye on the forest. Never on the trees, you see?

Listen, I've got to leave in about a half hour or so. Got to see myself on television.

**What are you on?**

On this football game . . . Yeah, on cable. . . ●

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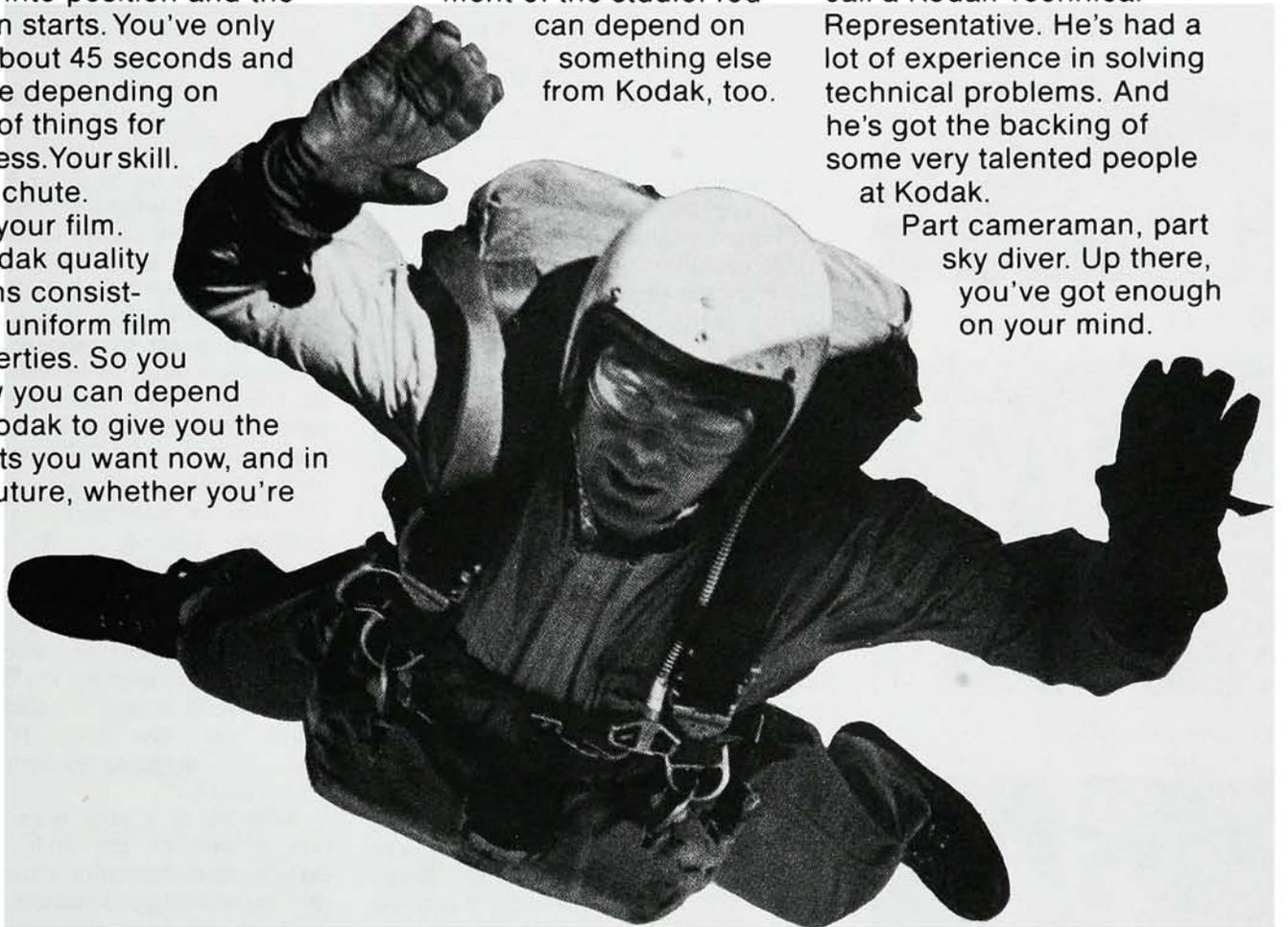
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