



● The horror, the horror: Brent Carver as Robert Ross in *The Wars*

## Robin Phillips and Timothy Findley discuss

# The sound and fury of "The Wars"

by Carol Off

*The Wars* is the first feature film that theatre maverick Robin Phillips has ever made (though he has acted in such film productions as *The Forsythe Saga*, made for BBC television, and also in a film version of Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*).

His career with the stage, however, is broad and eclectic. In London, England, Phillips directed Albee's *Tiny Alice* and also *Two Gentlemen of Verona* for the Royal Shakespeare Company; *Caesar and Cleopatra*, starring John Gielgud; and *Richard Chamberlain in The Lady's Not For Burning*.

He came to Canada in 1973 to be the artistic director of the Stratford Festival Theatre, and though the appointment was much criticized by cultural

nationalists, Phillips did, nonetheless, raise the Stratford Festival to international standards. He also developed a pool of classically trained actors and technicians who are now working in theatre throughout Canada. This year Phillips is at the Grand Theatre in London, Ontario where he has been contracted to produce – in addition to a hefty playbill of nine main stage productions – three film versions of those plays and one additional feature film. The first of these, *Waiting for the Parade*, is now in post-production.

Combining film and theatre production, while using a stock or repertory company of actors for all the productions is a revolutionary concept, developed by Phillips for the Grand. It is a concept which is now being closely monitored by theatre companies all over North America. Phillips believes

Timothy Findley, who wrote to screenplay for *The Wars* from his novel of the same name, was raised in Toronto's Rosedale suburb. Following numerous childhood illnesses, he was advised to leave school, which he did, and took up a career in the theatre. Findley studied acting in Toronto and in London, England before settling down to his present career, as a fiction writer, in 1962.

The career was blighted for many years by discouraging editors and publishers. And even when "The Wars" won the governor-general's award for fiction, even when it was being sold in the United States, Britain, South America and throughout Europe, Findley was still one of Canada's best kept literary secrets.

In addition to "The Wars", Findley has written three other novels (most recently "Famous Last Words"), two plays, and television scripts (The

National Dream, co-written with William Whitehead), two episodes of *The Newcomers*, and *Other People's Children*.

Timothy Findley currently lives on a farm near Cannington, Ontario, with his long-time friend, William Whitehead, plus numerous cats and dogs.

**Cinema Canada:** I want to start with asking you about the story itself, and to talk about the attraction "The Wars" has for so many people – not just because of the great war, but all the wars in the book. What is in "The Wars" that appeals to so many people?

**Timothy Findley:** I think that the first thing that we have to dispense with is a misconception that many people have concerning the class system in "The Wars". They believe that these are the wars that are fought in Rosedale; that

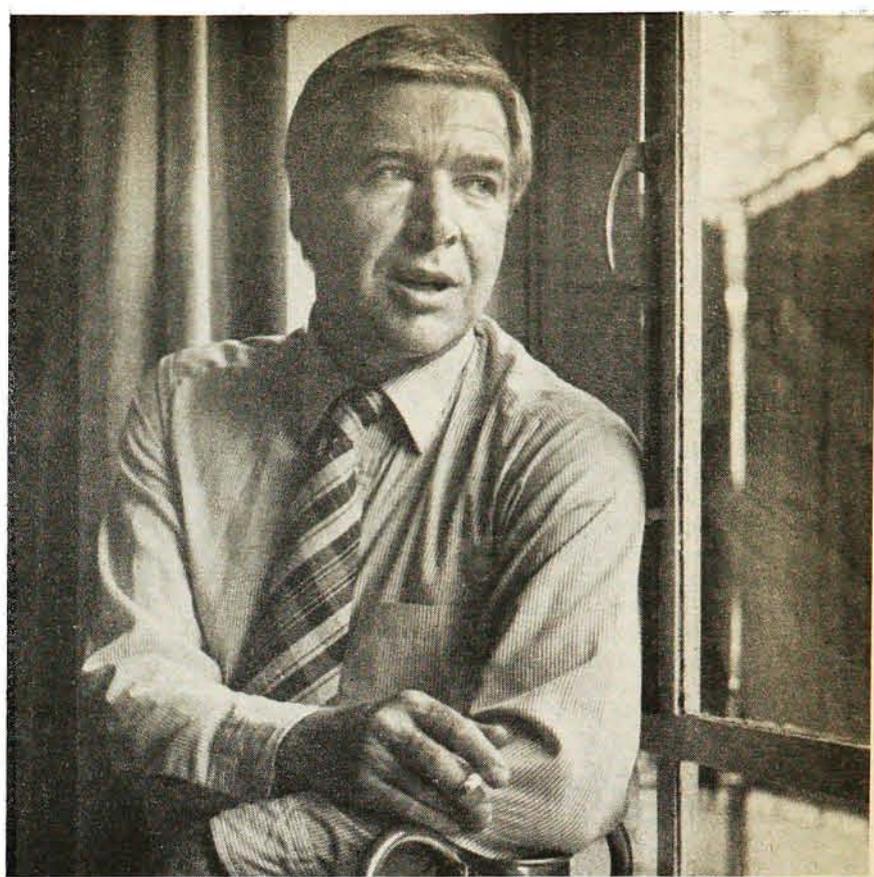
Carol Off is a freelance journalist and broadcaster in Toronto.

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● Robin Phillips: "The sound of people belching, breathing, farting"



● Timothy Findley: "The minute there is life, something is trying to kill it"

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that the films will eventually generate large profits, and that these profits will, in turn, subsidize his stage work, and finance the production of more films. In other words, his theatre and film production at the Grand Theatre would eventually become a self-sufficient operation. It's an ambitious plan, and not without its critics. But while many believe that Phillips has put himself out on a limb, his reputation in the theatre is, nonetheless, impeccable. Actors and technicians have come from all over Canada and the United States to work with Phillips on the strength of his reputation alone. They are drawn by the results of his process of binding the people in his company together – both psychologically and emotionally – and by the tremendous demands he makes on those people. And while the process is not above suspicion, the results are, at times, awesome.

The Wars is a \$4.5 million production that tells the story of an affluent family, living in the closed society of Toronto's posh Rosedale suburb in the early 1900's. The family's rebellious son, Robert Ross, joins the army to escape from a personal tragedy and, ultimately, to escape from the stifling environment of the Toronto establishment.

The film took two years to make, and more than a year to get into the cinemas. The problems and obstacles in making the film, and in distributing it, were legion; at times more absurd and complex than drama itself. The problems were aggravated by Robin Phillips' own inexperience at filmmaking combined with the inexperience of the film's producer, Dick Nielsen, who lived a real-life nightmare getting the film distributed in Canada.

There were, of course, problems raising the money. Producers range from Nielsen-Ferns International, to the National Film Board, to Polyphon Film-und-Fernseh GmbH (The Wars debuted on German television, in a

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## The war within "The Wars"

The National Film Board's contribution to *The Wars* has been the subject of considerable controversy in the press, mostly negative and initiated by the film's director, Robin Phillips, and writer Timothy Findley. To allow the other side its fair say, Cinema Canada asked *The Wars* executive producer Robert Verrall of the NFB's Studio B (English Production) for his viewpoint.

"I feel that the Board put out a lot for this project, but any technical problems – and there were some – were not unusual in the making of a feature. Given that it was a first feature for Phillips, a first feature for (producer Richard) Nielsen, and the first such large period piece for us in English production, I think it came off rather well.

"There were some technical problems with the production sound, a lot of re-voicing had to be done, 80% of it in fact had to be re-voiced, but I think too much has been made of that as a problem and I defy even professionals to detect what was re-voiced and what was not.

"The mix of the film was supervised by Dick Nielsen and his sound consultant. Subsequent to the first print, we discovered a technical flaw in the transfer from magnetic to optical and we offered to redo it – and we did. The first cut was not a success. Additional shooting had to be done. Phillips was all over the place, so we were working behind-the-scenes with Dick Nielsen. We had a go at the final cut, some of which improved the film, but it was quite agonizing.

"The original screenplay was long, very expensive and wonderful. It would have resulted in a three-hour film at twice the budget. Dick Nielsen

could not raise that last one million and that's why he came to the Board. In order to get the film made at all he had to trim it and alter the film quite drastically, and some of the problems are there. But none of that is extraordinary; it's even normal.

"Given the financial constraints, the film is as good we could make it. On balance I think the Board's performance was pretty damn good and the mistakes we made, and there were a few, we did our best to correct.

"Phillips certainly knows how to deal with actors. I watched him on the set in Montreal. The actors were very well-prepared and disciplined. There was no time lost in re-takes and getting ready. Phillips' problems were with the other dimensions of the production, and a lot had to do with difficulties of communication between the director and the crew.

"I think that Findley and Phillips have behaved (in all this) like a lot of film writers and directors do – impossibly. For all their talent they come across as insecure craftspeople and I think it was poor of them. And I don't know why we enjoy that kind of self-inflicted torture.

"But I wouldn't want to work with him again, at least not this year, maybe not even next year. He's burned a bridge for the time being at the Board, but I'm not saying that he shouldn't direct films. He'll find the producers that he needs in the medium. I can think of a dozen other directors the Board should be involved with before Phillips. As for *The Wars*, we learned a lot from it and can take a lot of credit for the fact that it looks as good as it does."

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these are the wars that are fought where there is money and power. But it's not true. "The Wars" applies to any situation. The minute you get out, you're at war. With life. The minute there is life there is something trying to kill it. You're at war, trying to sustain your life, and also your integrity because you come into a world where the system is already set up. You come in and say "Now you have to accept me into this system" and subsequently, every individual already in the system has to be moved around, in some way, as you move in. Then you have to wage war, and you have to either win the war, or capitulate and join the system.

**Cinema Canada:** There are two systems, operating in "The Wars", that Robert Ross has to fit into. One of them is the Rosedale society into which he is born, and the other is the trenches of W.W.I., and the whole army society, where he is to die. Does he wage war against both of those?

**Timothy Findley:** Yes, he does. People who do not capitulate in their private wars, end up fighting for all kinds of things. People who decide that trees should not be cut down, for example. They decide that they are going to try and draw the trees into what is accepted in the system. So that they will be protected. Robert fights for things both at home, where they may decide, "Well, we'll just cut one down. Then we'll have a lovely view." And then he wages war in the trenches where they have decided, "If we clear away that forest over there, and that other one over there, then we'll have a better view of the enemy."

**Cinema Canada:** Which war is more painful and difficult?

**Timothy Findley:** For me, they are equally painful. Because while it's so subtle what goes on in the Rosedale one, all that does erupt in the great war, and the consequences are overwhelming.

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subtitled edition according to the agreement with Polyphon.)

In production, there are said to have been more wars going on behind the scenes, not the least being those between the National Film Board and Robin Phillips, Dick Nielsen and many others. The NFB blames the inexperience of Phillips for the film's shortcomings, while Phillips blames the inadequacies of the film board's technicians (though both Robin Phillips and Timothy Findley refused to comment on these problems in the accompanying interviews). Ultimately, the sound-track of the film had to be re-done, causing one of numerous delays in getting the film into circulation. Dick Nielsen eventually abandoned his negotiations with big Hollywood distributors after several months of standing on tip-toes, and signed with a new distribution company - half-American and Canadian - called Spectrafilm. Finally, on Nov. 11, 1983 - Remembrance Day - The Wars opened to the public.

**Cinema Canada:** There are two settings for The Wars. One is Toronto's Rosedale suburb in the early 1900's, and the other is the front lines of the First World War. But the war itself only acts as a backdrop for both the Toronto scenes, and for the scenes in Europe. Why is there so little actual "war" in The Wars?

**Robin Phillips:** I think that the important thing about the war is to be found in the small details. You can become immunized to shooting people down and seeing the bodies drop on the evening news. There is a numbing effect. There are other details in *The Wars* that point out the horrors in much more shocking ways. The fact that Robert Ross had a handgun and the other soldiers didn't. That sounds so simple. But it's shocking that you had to buy your own hand-gun during the war: officers had guns because they were part of the upper classes and they had money. The others didn't. You also have a sense that strict codes were operating in the trenches all the time so that you did not lose your civilized sense of being. We see them crawling around in the mud. But we forget that it's not just mud... it's actually rivers of human waste, animal waste. It's crap. The smell must have been beyond imagining. As we show in the sequences on the dikes, it's mud made up of decomposing human bodies. That's the war side. There is something about that squalor, that smallness of detail... the fact that more horses died in the war than men. All of that means to me - in its small scale - something that awakens more than a holocaust.

**Cinema Canada:** But the actual war scenes are confined to the second half of the film. It's in the first half that we see Robert Ross at home in Toronto - in Toronto high society - where there are other kinds of social rules and strict codes operating, and other wars being fought. How do those wars - those Canadian society wars - inform the story?

**Robin Phillips:** The Canadian class system is incredibly important. We have to go back and look at its origins and to admit that it did exist then, so that we can admit that it exists now. The casual social masks that people wear here in Canada in no way hide the fact that there is an incredibly strict class structure throughout the whole of Canadian



● The faces of colonial Canada: Martha Henry and Jackie Burroughs in *The Wars*

society - then and now. It represents a particular Canadian struggle. I think Mrs. Ross represents a colonial hold and that Robert Ross is young Canada struggling to get out.

**Cinema Canada:** When Robert gets to the front lines, he seems to have some natural knowledge of how to deal with the men and with how to keep that civil code operating in the trenches. What is there in Robert's character that makes him such a suitable leader? What in his background prepares him for that?

**Robin Phillips:** I think, to a certain extent, 'Mother' (played by Martha Henry). Quite often it's believed that the best leaders are the best sportsmen, or the 'one-of-the-boys' types. But I think very often it's the lonely and the isolated that truly know how to lead. Very often, people are lonely because they understand more about human nature than most people do. Consequently, when they are forced into taking the lead, they do it with a very wide understanding of human beings.

Robert's had some remarkable relationships, where the relationships were very much ones of support and of service, such as with his sister, Rowena. That goes on to be true of Harris and so on. He gets that from his mother, but not by way of example. The way he was suppressed and controlled by her means that when it comes to the crunch, he stands, absolutely, by what he believes in, and says to hell with society and with the rest of the world. When he decides to save those horses, regardless of what his duty is to society, he is quite prepared to commit murder. At all costs he is going to save and defend those who are unable to defend themselves. Like Rowena. Anything that is truly innocent - and that is socially unwanted - he must champion. When he asks Rowena to marry him, he means it. It doesn't mean that he has fallen in love with his sister. I'm not sure that it's even sexual. It's a marriage of true minds. He is absolutely unswerving in his devotion.

**Cinema Canada:** One of the most striking differences between the book and the film is what has been left out. There were some major scenes and major themes omitted. The most remarkable deal with the homosexuality that is so important to the book: the whore-house scene, when Robert sees his model of a war hero having sex with another man, for example, and then there is the rape of Robert Ross, which is, in my opinion, one of the most overwhelming scenes in the book. How did you make the decisions as to what was to be left out, and why?

**Robin Phillips:** Well, all of those things that you mentioned should have been in the film. I think that the rape of Robert by his own men is the final - and perhaps most degrading - symbol of the novel. I regret those omissions. But the decisions were not mine.

**Cinema Canada:** Were they commercial decisions?

**Robin Phillips:** I don't know. They were left out of *Tif's* (Timothy Findley's) first draft. The whore-house scene is a shame. But you can only fight so much for the things you want, particularly in a first movie, and... well, I would hate for people to leave the movie feeling shocked for the wrong reasons. And so I think you have to give in to some of those commercial tastes. It's silly, of course, to say commercial, because it's not a commercial film even in its present state. But at the same time, the people who go could have been shocked for the wrong reasons had those particular scenes been left in. When you read "The Wars", and when you get to those scenes, you can do your own censoring. I would not have liked being censored by someone else on those scenes, or to think that I was censoring myself as I went along. That would have been different. But I don't think that leaving that stuff out was censorship. Those, I think, were artistic decisions. And I would rather that, than having to limit myself to scenes showing the people only from the waste up, or

having to remove a couple of set-ups to make it commercially more palatable. Then, I would have been upset.

**Cinema Canada:** The cast of the film is made up of people with whom you have worked, extensively, on the stage, both the Stratford Festival Theatre and at the Grand Theatre in London, Ontario. What were the advantages of working with that group?

**Robin Phillips:** I think the trust in each other. Nobody tried to upstage anyone else. It's important that there was such a degree of trust: that we were all, finally, looking through one pair of eyes. And not splintered and fragmented, and finally having to piece it all together as so often happens. Very often, there are too many people who have an idea of how it should all come together. And that's how it all breaks down, ultimately. This group allowed a much stronger commitment. But I think we will make even better films when we have a whole group like that - when we have the technicians and crews a part of that as well. So that there's an understanding, for example, about the mud and its texture, and the quality of the light, when all those areas are felt by everyone, we will make much better movies. There are lots of things - particularly soundwise - that I regret, that aren't there. Things that I couldn't do at the time, that I hoped to get in post-production. But then you don't get those things in post-production because someone else is in charge of something.

I wanted to hear the sound of life in the trenches, close up. I wanted to hear boom boom boom. The distant pounding of the guns. The sound of people belching, breathing, farting. Imagine! There's only sand bags, and all of those people herded together. People being sick, bowel movements, urine, people with dysentery, wounds, decay. The sound of that - constantly - must wear you out. And the smell. I think you would have got the smell had we had that constant audio backdrop. Camp life in the war is not all mouth organs in the

twilight, with a quiet cigarette, the smoke curling up after lights out, the last cup of cocoa before turning in. I wanted to see a sort of nightmare fantasy, with this hideous stench of decay. And with the stained-glass windows in the dug-out; these incredible pieces of glass catching the light through all that smoke. It would give you a sense of them struggling to hang on to something of beauty in the world. The fractured pieces of beauty and art, were disappearing in the rubble and the filth of war. For me, we don't have the stench because we don't have the sound. And also because I could not show much size – the vast chart of destruction, with acres and acres of nothing. All the blasted bits and pieces of trees.

**Cinema Canada:** *What were the major technical problems and the obstacles in trying to get the effect that you wanted?*

**Robin Phillips:** Well, the first one, of course, is in not having a big enough budget. I couldn't do any of the sequences in the war scenes large because I just didn't have the budget that would allow location shooting. The trench scenes were all done in the studio, and they all had to be close-up. You really need to shoot some place where you can see right into the distance and to see all that has been destroyed. We had one place in Terra Cotta where the grass was torn back and where all kinds of weed killer was put down so that it seemed blasted. But you can't do a long shot with that. As soon as you start to look out, three miles away, you could see these wonderful green trees. That sense of looking far into the distance, in every direction, and seeing nothing but destroyed earth – that just needed more money in the budget. It's a huge canvas. And the whole Edwardian period itself is incredibly expensive to create. Clothes, wigs, all of that was very hard.

**Cinema Canada:** *There were also problems with the National Film Board, were there not? And with the technicians that you worked with?*

**Robin Phillips:** The NFB scenic people were wonderful. We shot the boat sequences and the bathroom scene in the NFB studios in Montreal. The sets they built for us were wonderful.

I'm not the one to ask concerning the problems we had in other areas. You'll have to ask the experienced ones. They have a right to criticize, I don't.

**Cinema Canada:** *But you were frustrated, according to accounts, with working with the NFB, and particularly with the sound technicians.*

**Robin Phillips:** You'll have to ask them.

**Cinema Canada:** *What frustrations did you have with yourself, as a novice filmmaker?*

**Robin Phillips:** I'm trying to think of a frustration I didn't have with myself. I think the demands... When you are a new guy, you can't make demands of anyone. I can make demands in the theatre. A guy in a new technology can say: "What I need is, what I want, is this". But you are told by the experienced ones that it's not possible. In the theatre, I know – I don't have to be told by anyone – I know, that *anything* is possible. Of course, I know that about film as well. But I don't know it first hand. Very often, people want to do something good, and they think they know what is good, and that what you

are asking for is not going to be as good. The more you know, you can convince them that, in fact, what you are asking for is better. The less you know, you can't. I know what I like, and to a certain extent, I know how to get what I like.

**Cinema Canada:** *Your reputation is that you don't delegate responsibility, that you insist upon doing everything yourself.*

**Robin Phillips:** One always longs for people who can give you better than what you can do for yourself. Everything I do, if someone can do something better than me, then I love it. If they can't, then I'll do it myself. I won't accept less than my standards. People that give me more than my standards, then I worship them. If someone can do a wig for example, which is exactly in tune with the character and the temperature and the time of day, then I thrill to that. If they cannot give me better than I can do myself, then I'll dress the wig myself. You only fight when you believe that something better can be achieved.

**Cinema Canada:** *You have developed this pool of acting talent – bound them together – for work in the theatre. What do you want to do with this company Martha Henry, William Hutt, Brent Carver, etc. – in the film world? Are you trying – as has been suggested – to*

*develop a particular and unique cinema language?*

**Robin Phillips:** We have a voice in Canada. And I think we are going to reach more people with that voice through film. The theatre language is old and deep and complicated. It is remarkable for preparing and stretching our muscles. But finally, in our age, film is the language we will use. The complexity, however, has to be practiced on the stage. That's where the real stretch of the imagination, the depth, comes.

**Cinema Canada:** *You are going to be making more films at the Grand Theatre, according to the contract you have with the theatre's board of directors. Will you be making films independently as well? Dick Nielsen mentioned to me that he wants to make more films, using the same people as in The Wars, and also developing a whole team, with technicians and crews as well.*

**Robin Phillips:** That's what I would like, ideally. To develop the technicians. There were some wonderful ones in *The Wars*. I'd like to develop a pool of talent like they had at Ealing Studios, in England, like most of the good studios have. It's cheaper, ultimately. You develop a kind of shorthand. But most of all, you lose the crap of the prima donna. I quite often get the prima donna thing

from people who don't know me. It's true that I do get frantic in opposition, when I don't have the intellect to argue my way out. When all I have is my insight. I can get frantic and shrill in argument, because I can't find the intellectual justification for something I know is right. Finally, it all works out, and it's perfectly clear that the instinct was right. Of course, I knew all along that it was right. Not because I'm arrogant, just because I'm... right (laughter). That moment is so often misconstrued as prima donna.

**Cinema Canada:** *You worked under some very difficult conditions while making the film, particularly in the Kleinburg studios. Brent Carver described to me in another interview, the incredible heat in the studios during the summer you shot the trench scenes, and that it was exacerbated by wallowing around in all that mud, while wearing woolen uniforms. How did you keep everyone together and concentrating during those scenes?*

**Robin Phillips:** Yes, the conditions were awful. But I will not pamper them or treat them as prima donnas. I do, however, carry a chair with an actor's name on it, or a group of chairs. When we did *Waiting for the Parade*, all the girls had chairs with their names on them, for all sorts of practical reasons. It's not because they're supposed to feel like stars. It's because there has to be a place that they feel is theirs – wherever they are. Even if it's in the middle of the worst fucking field of cowshit and dung and flies. They must have a place where they can go, and nobody else has a right to that chair. A place where they can concentrate. And the second you are ready to do something, they are ready to give it to you. When people don't think about those sorts of things for actors, they are truly being naive if they think they can also get the best work out of them. It's nothing to do with pampering. It's only to say that they are immensely creative people. That they have huge complex canvases of emotions and thoughts to work on. And they have to be allowed the maximum privacy in which to prepare.

Another thing is having a car to travel in. The cars will arrive, you know, and they say, "Can we put four people into them?", and the answer is, "Yes, if you truly must. If you truly have to, we can put forty people into them to make sure that we all get there in half an hour for the last bit of sun-light or something. But when you don't have to – when you can possibly squeeze the money to actually let them travel by themselves – so that they can find the inner thing that they need to find..." That is not fey, it's not arty or precious. It's an absolute essential. Like lying quietly and doing your breathing exercises in preparation for giving birth. In the commercial world, that's so often ignored, or treated very badly. And the consequences are that you have artistic miscarriages.

**Cinema Canada:** *Where will you get your stories for your future films?*

**Robin Phillips:** They're here now, walking the street. I can't begin to tell you how many stories I want to do. Out of all of them, the most important thing for me to do next, is to do a comedy. Purely because it's harder. You can get away with a lot when it's drama. But you can't pretend with comedy in film. I want to do a sophisticated – but I don't think modern – story of our past. Back there. Where it all starts.



● Looking attractive under adverse circumstances: Brent Carver in *The Wars*

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**Cinema Canada:** I find the whole story rather subtle. Usually, with Canadian historical stories, we get a kind of "Gosh, golly" quality, a depiction of Canadians as simple folk, and hard-working pioneers. But in this case we see a more sophisticated interpretation - or re-interpretation - of those historical facts. Do you think we are going to see more of that in our films, this re-writing of the Canadian past as something far more sophisticated?

**Timothy Findley:** Yes, I do. And this is one of Robin Phillips' great strokes. And he does this without telling anyone, "This is what we are doing." Martha Henry, standing in the living room, with her hand pausing over the glass decanters of liquor; the light in the room; the way she goes and stands in the window; her clothes, the way her hair is done. Every single moment in the film speaks an enormously profound and sophisticated look at all we have denied that we had in the past. "They weren't really like that. They didn't really know those things." But they did.

**Cinema Canada:** There is a view of the hero that comes through in the film that radically contrasts with the traditional American hero. Robert doesn't save his men; he doesn't win any battles and the other men, finally, come to hate him. But one can hardly deny that Robert is a hero. How would you describe this kind of heroism?

**Timothy Findley:** One of the obligations of being a Canadian hero is to be totally unaware of the heroism. It is to be totally unwilling to commit yourself to the consequences of that heroism, once it has taken place. The heroic act is simply what one did, and then went on to the next act. That comes a lot from the British tradition.

**Cinema Canada:** What about the class system operating in "The Wars"? How is that uniquely Canadian?

**Timothy Findley:** It is my belief that in that era, just prior to the war, we had truly begun to become ourselves. In that period between 1900 and 1920 the railroads were moving, manufacturing and exports were burgeoning, and we had the Canadian navy; an identifiable navy that was ours. We were becoming a nation. But alas and alack, at that time we were right in the throes of colonial obedience to what is right and wrong. And we went to war for all the wrong reasons. All the people who were saying "Here we are at last! It's us!" All of them went over there and they didn't come back. And that is when we fell most profoundly under the American influence. We gave all of ourselves to the war and then we were weak and easily taken over. And the entrepreneurs moved in to help us get back on our feet. And we never got it back.

**Cinema Canada:** Robin Phillips also believes that era was pivotal for Canada. In fact, you have many of the same views on things, including a shared sense of irony. Do you realize that?

**Timothy Findley:** Oh, yes, very much. I have to say this very carefully and very quietly for fear he will go away. You always wait for... the other half of your voice to come along. I am a writer and I can exist alone, but I want to write plays so badly, and to make more films as well. I wasn't getting that chance before Robin. There simply wasn't the feeling from the others. As the collaboration



● Robin Phillips gives direction during a muddy scene in *The Wars*

started with Robin, I put everything on paper, because I didn't know how he would read it. Now, he says to me: "Don't put anything on paper except 'it'. No explanations. Don't tell them where to walk. Stop telling them when to do a close up. I know what you are doing. All you have to give me is the words." And that's wonderful for me. To have the confidence of knowing that this would be understood. And it was. The tones of voice, the distance that the camera was from things. The precision of that meeting that you're talking about could be quite alarming if you analyze it. But he has that with a lot of people. He has it with his actors, and God knows what other writers. He is just a godsend.

**Cinema Canada:** I have seen what you are describing in witnessing Phillips' theatre work. There is a complex process of binding that goes on with all the people who work there with him.

**Timothy Findley:** Exactly. And when you go into the Grand Theatre, as soon as you go into the lobby, there is a feeling that you are already in the play. The sense that everyone is part of the theatre, right down to the last usher and the person emptying the spittoons. It is one whole collective of people.

**Cinema Canada:** What was lost in the transition of your novel into the screen play?

**Timothy Findley:** Oh, I think a lot was lost. And most of what was lost was lost because of money. It's no one's fault. The producer, Dick Nielsen, had such a dreadful time raising the money, and he should not have had such a dreadful time raising the money for a project of that kind. The reticence was alarming. And... here we go, 'cliché time'... but I have to say it - the knowledge that we would not have had this problem funding a *Porky's*. But if you're doing *The Wars*, well, we've never had that experience before and until we do have it, no one is going to help you. Until we see how things work out. So the people who

did contribute - and that includes the National Film Board - must be commended for taking a chance.

**Cinema Canada:** So, tell me what was lost?

**Timothy Findley:** The overview from here and now. Having to cut the whole number with Juliet speaking from the present. Juliet should have been the narrative voice.

Money would have bought us time as well, time to do a mini-series as we had wished. The episodes could have been expanded. And in the context of the film itself, there are moment in the film which I find very jarring. For example, there is no transition from the point of Robert coming out of the crater, to Robert walking into chaos. It must be there, but it's not. And that scene is "Robert in context of the endangered horses". He's just lost his men. He's just killed a man for the first time. He's in a state of turmoil. You have to see him in context of not being able to do anything; not being able to save the horses. Then, when he goes to see his superior, and decides he's going to disobey every fucking order that's given from then on, we understand. But in the film, his change comes out of nowhere. You have to make it up. And the audience should not have to do that, make that transition. But there wasn't any money to shoot it with.

**Cinema Canada:** But other parts that are omitted from the film were deliberately left out, as I understand, from the first script. Can you tell me why you left those scenes out, particularly those crucial scenes involving the rape of Robert, and other scenes of homosexuality?

**Timothy Findley:** I want to be very careful how I answer this, and I'm not going to mention any names. It was felt that the film was falling into a... it was in danger of becoming a homosexual film. This was actually said. Which is just blatant nonsense. But this comment,

which developed into an argument, had to do with the fact that there were so many naked men in the story. The reactions I heard from people to the few scenes of male nakedness which are left in the film were that a lot of men were very upset about it. And I think that reaction is appalling and immature. But at any rate, the argument was that you would turn your audience away to put those scenes in. And I disagree with that violently. It was part of Robert's experience... and it's part of every man's experience, goddamn it, it's part of every man's experience to go through some element of that, to some degree. The other thing that is sad is that the scenes of Robert naked give you such a sense of the vulnerability. That there is nowhere to hide. That there is nothing but the body. And the water is cold. And the air is cold. And the bombs are dropping, and the blood is on me, and on my clothes, and that's what it's ALL about. But for some, it was nothing but homosexuality. It didn't help that Brent (Carver) looked so good. It would have been easier had he been a slob, but he really is very attractive in the midst of all those circumstances.

The decision not to have the rape of Robert came very early on, and I get the feeling that it was decided long before I was even brought into the picture: "We know what we will not have" was the attitude.

**Cinema Canada:** Seeing Martha Henry and Brent Carver playing those scenes that you had created, did they bring new insights into the characters for you? Did you notice things, or realize things, about the characters that you hadn't before?

**Timothy Findley:** Oh yes. That's got to happen if they are good people. And they are the best. The scene with Carver and Henry in the bathroom: I had put something on paper and they returned it to the gut. It's all one thing on paper, but it's devastating on the screen. My mother said to me during the bathroom

scene, when we were watching it together: "What a dreadful woman." But you can see by the end of the film, that what is going on with her is the rage. She is saying, "Take it all, while you're at it. You might just as well destroy the whole goddamn thing." She is the great tragic figure in the story. They're all going, and so she says finally, "If you're going, then really go. But stop all this bullshit."

**Cinema Canada:** Do you have plans to do any more films with Robin Phillips?

**Timothy Findley:** Well, I want to. In my heart, I'm working with Robin till the day I drop. I don't know how he feels about it. But I'm not going to get down on my knees and say 'Robin, please'. Because that would be ridiculous. It would make a fool out of him. But it is my wish that there will be a lot more. My greatest interest is to write for Robin and the stage.

**Cinema Canada:** What are the things holding filmmakers - and writers like yourself - back from making more films like *The Wars*?

**Timothy Findley:** Courage. There are too many bureaucracies in charge of what gets to happen. That is what is wrong with the CBC, the CFDC and the NFB. This is not to say that all three are not necessary. But they've got to learn how to work in a different way. When great things happen there, they happen in spite of, instead of because of, those people. Someone has got to fight through all of that bureaucratic stuff to get the thing on film and then to protect it from the corridor after corridor of willing - all too willing - editors, each of whom wants to have a little say in how the thing looks. And the bureaucratic, "Let's form a committee and all sit around the table and discuss how to write this scene." You cannot do that! You cannot make a film that way! It has to come out of a channel that is vibrating and alive with a single vision. And anything that is done to tamper with that vision is nothing but a sin.

Robin Phillips'

## The Wars

*The Wars* is a resonant drama about madness and war, an excellent screen adaptation of Timothy Findley's bleak, though brilliant, novel of the same title. In Findley's vision there is no strength through vulnerability, and love is inevitably twisted, on the rack of power and duty.

It is a film of great psychological depth which, although it isn't as well crafted as cinema, stands up to the inevitable comparison with the Australian anti-war tragedy, *Breaker Morant*. The problem with *The Wars* is that it's missing too much story; even without familiarity with the novel, one feels the holes where scenes from the script were dropped from the final film. It is evident that the structure which Findley and director Robin Phillips had in mind was severely compromised in the editing room.

Like the book, the film gives us concentrated images of the Great War as grotesque and absurd. There are no battle scenes, only the laboured advance of boots and wagon wheels over greenish pieces of corpses embedded in the mud of France. War is mud and mist, rotting flesh, aching wounds, waiting for rations and waiting for explosions. It is an obsession with scraps of civilization: a book, some stained glass, a menagerie of pets, a silver spoon. The "enemy" is virtually absent, and war is seen not in terms of the conflict of armies and nations but in terms of the destruction of frail individuals.

*The Wars* is as much about women as it is about men, and the women are stronger. By sustaining the tone of suffering between women and soldiers at a parallel pitch, Findley and Phillips have exposed the most profound psychological truth about war. That is, that militarism depends entirely upon the repression of feminine wisdom.

As Mrs. Ross, the queen mother of this

repressed state, Marthy Henry is magnificent. Addicted to "duty" and cushioned from her self-loathing by genteel alcoholism, she drives her only son Robert (played with total commitment by Brent Carver) to enlist in the army. With the finality of a curse she tells him, "I can give you birth but I cannot give you life", and he realizes in that moment that she never has been capable of the unselfish maternal love he craves. For Robert, the psychic violence of this realization precipitates a loss of both innocence and hope. The rest of his tale is informed by this fatalism.

Only animals can remain innocent, and even they must become victims of man's inhumanity. Horses are especially prominent symbols of noble innocence harnessed to the yoke of man's power complex. The young hero, Robert Ross, prefers animals to people, and shots of him riding a black mare in terror through orange mist are among the most vividly memorable visuals in the film.

There are a few powerful images, but the cinematography is generally quite pedestrian. At times it suffers from the self-consciousness common to filmed theatrical productions, where the viewer becomes painfully aware of camera position and changing focus. This is a problem not only of camera work but also of coverage; it is apparent in certain scenes that the editor just didn't have another shot to cut to.

The editing is inconsistent. Cross-cutting between Toronto and the trenches works very nicely - it was this cinematic aspect of the book which made one feel that it was written to be made into a movie. There are eloquent moments, as when we cut from a miasma of mustard gas creeping over Robert, face down in the mud, to tendrils of cigarette smoke curling across his mother's haggard, noble face in her Rosedale mansion. Many narrative links are missing, however, and this makes *The Wars* a very fragmented experience. To some extent, this works. It becomes an effective structural equivalent for the disintegration of heart and mind wrought by Edwardian morality and modern warfare.

All references to homosexuality, which are integral to the original story, have been written out of the film script. In Findley's novel, the links between the repressed feminine and the mysteries of male bonding, and further between militarism and violent homosexuality, are explored with great courage. In the film, all sexuality is either ambiguous or merely stunted. This is interesting, but shallower than the source material.

Robin Phillips is an immensely gifted dramatic director. The performances, from an ensemble of some of Canada's finest stage actors, are uniformly excellent, and the child actors are extraordinarily. Glenn Gould's music perfectly complements the film's delicate balance between elegiac reflection and immediate tragedy, giving *The Wars* an elegance which may make it, notwithstanding its flaws as cinema, a Canadian classic.

Christopher Lowry ●

**THE WARS** d. Robin Phillips exec. p. Robert Verrall p. Richard Nielsen sc. Timothy Findley, based on his novel "The Wars" mus. Glenn Gould d.o.p. John Coquillon, B.S.C. a.d. Tony Lucibello art d. Daphne Dare cost. des. Ann Curtis sp. efx. Colin Chilvers ed. Tony Lower assoc. p. Robert Linnell assoc. p. for Polyphone Christoph Mattner ed. const. Tom Daly sd. mix. Joseph Champagne make-up Shonagh Jabour hair James Keeler sup. sd. ed. Bernard Bordeleau post-p. sd. cons. Bruce Nyznik cast. Walken-Brown. Produced with the participation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation, and Famous Players Limited. p.c. Nielsen-Ferns International Limited, National Film Board of Canada, Polyphone Film-und-Fernseh GmbH. dist. International Spectrafilm Distributors Ltd. col. 35mm running time 120 min. lp. Brent Carver, Martha Henry, William Hutt, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Jackie Burroughs, Jean Leclerc, Domini Blythe, Alan Scarfe, Margaret Tyzack, Barbara Budd, Susan Wright, Richard Austin, Roger Barton, Paul Batten, Rod Beattie, Tom Bishop, Kirsten Bishopric, Richard Blackburn, Fred Booker, Dwayne Brenna, Michael Caruana, Shirley Cassedy, Clare Coulter, Richard Curnock, Shirley Douglas, David Dunbar, Rubert Frazer, Craig Gardner, Graeme Gibson, Maurice Good, Bobby Hannah, Paul Hubbard, Jeff Hyslop, Eleanor Kane, James Kidnie, Leo Leyden, Hardee T. Lineham, Robin McKenzie, Matthew Mackey, David Main, William M. Malmo, Jefferson Mappin, Marti Maraden, Anne McKay, Richard McMillan, David Robb, Stephen Russell, Abigail Seaton, Heather Summerhayes, Irene Sutcliffe, Simon Treves, Annette Vyge, Timothy Webber.

● Balanced between elegiac reflection and immediate tragedy, *The Wars* is a Canadian classic

