

# a conversation

by Mark Irwin

I managed to interview Reginald Morris csc during his week off between two consecutive features, an uncommon but welcome condition in the Canadian film industry. He had just completed **Second Wind**, a six week shoot with Don Shebib, and was preparing to shoot Bert I. Gordon's science fiction feature **Food of the Gods** in Vancouver. He had shot a feature there in 1971, still unreleased, called **The Grove**, starring Robert Culp and Samantha Eggar. His most recent feature was Bob Clark's well received **Black Christmas**, shot in Toronto, in 1973.

After talking to Reg Morris, the most apparent element of his career seems to have been the structure, the well-defined progression from clapper/loader to first assistant cameraman (in charge of threading the camera, mounting lenses, pulling focus, etc.) to operator (in charge of executing the same moves take after take, usually on a geared head) until, as he says... "someone is prepared to risk you as a cameraman."

There is no doubt that if Reg Morris had stayed in England he'd be neck and neck with Ossie Morris, David Watkin, Douglas Slocombe, Geoffrey Unsworth and Billy Williams – all cameramen on big British and Hollywood features.

But he came to Canada, seeking employment in this land of opportunity, and got sidetracked: the Film Board, television series, commercials... all suitable work but not features, or at least not enough. He talked about his past, present and future in the film industry, in Britain, in Canada, and in Hollywood.

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*You've just finished **Second Wind** with Don Shebib. How did everything go?*

**Morris:** Well, it went remarkably well. I was quite thrilled because when we started there were a number of pictures already going and I was concerned whether we were going to get a good crew and in fact we did very well. Even Don Shebib, who let's say, is a bit sensitive about the unions (this was the first shoot he'd done with an IA crew) said at the end of the film he was quite delighted with the way the crew worked.

As regards budget, it was in the area of \$500,000—maybe a few bucks less. For what we did they really got their money's worth. There were no sets built; it was all shot in natural surroundings, in people's houses, in the stock exchange, in bars and so on – which is the way I love to shoot.

You can imagine having a set, and outside the window you have to burn it out, so it's not readable, or put up some phony backing or something; whereas if you're in a real situation you can have people outside the window, even conversing through the window; you can see traffic going by – things you can't do in film studios.

There are certain people who prefer sets, of course, but I happen to be one of the ones who doesn't.

I used to know a cameraman in England by the name of Desmond Dickinson who used to do pictures like **Hamlet** and so on. He used to *hate* going out on exteriors; he used

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*Mark Irwin, an associate member of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers graduated from York University in 1972. He has shot a number of documentaries, half hour dramas and a low budget feature **Never Look Back**. His company, Ovation Films, has produced numerous films for Sport Ontario and CBC.*

# on hand too

by Natalie Edwards

While Mr. Morris talked to Mr. Irwin, he periodically turned to me and explained some of the complexities of cinematography. Though I found some of the talk almost mystifying ("... if you can shoot at 2 or even 1.4 you find you don't really have to fill, but shooting at 4...") other bits were extremely helpful in understanding some of the complexities involved in cinematography.

For instance when Mr. Morris began to talk of the kitchen sequence in **Second Wind**, which he could "have virtually shot in natural light," he took the time to explain the difficulty of repeated takes under the shifting effects of the sun, the angles of sunlight and strength making match shots tricky, and the fear of the possible loss of the sun altogether, all of which conspire to make some cameramen more comfortable in studio situations. Mr. Morris however enjoys the challenge of natural light and the beautiful results that can be achieved.

The most fascinating parts of Reggie's conversation to me, of course, were anecdotal, when he sat back in his chair and reminisced.

He was on a shoot in B.C. for instance, for a film once titled **A Name for Evil**, later called **The Grove**, starring Robert Culp and Samantha Egger (still unreleased, incidentally).

Culp, who had money in the film and therefore some considerable say, liked the effect of vibrating reflected light on a bedroom wall in the old deserted mansion by the sea in which they were filming. That would be a perfect background for the rape scene, he felt, so an early call for the next morning assembled the crew and performers to shoot that scene. Everything and everyone was ready but the light. For reasons Reg had tried to explain, dealing with currents and tides and the sun, the desired light patterns were not there.

Did the director change the scene or shift his schedule? Not at all. He turned to Reggie: "Make 'em" he said.

Knowing that gells, (sheets of gelatin often taped outside windows to correct the light outside while shooting inside a room) if wiggled, caused flickering light patterns, Reggie managed to have some brutes (huge lights) placed by hydraulic lift so that gells held outside the second story windows of the mansion could be hand-wiggled by operators in order to create reflected eerie dancing light on the bedroom wall inside the room. It was quite an operation, but the resulting flickering shifting light effects were perfect.

"Don't you wish you had a copy of that bit?" said I.

"But I do," said Reggie. "I also have a copy of the sequence in **Black Christmas** in which we strapped a camera on the back of Bert Dunk, our operator, in such a way that we got a subjective effect of the house for the opening, with us being the 'someone' climbing up the vines and looking into the attic window. Had to strap it so that the lens was beside his eye, and since he couldn't see through it it was necessary to get someone to climb on his back and peer through to check the framing. Tricky but effective."

In talking of his older brother, Ossie, and his early days in England, Reggie reveals how embarrassed he was once to answer a union call and find himself on his brother's set. He stayed however, as operator with Freddie Francis (later of **Sons and Lovers**) and worked on **Moby Dick**.

He chuckles, telling us of the construction of the two model whales (at a scale of seven to one) and the loss of one of the whales while shooting, which he fancies might have caught the eye of some amorous real whale as it journeyed in its tiny perfect shape, out through the wide

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## a conversation

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to jokingly say "I never know what exposure to give it." In a studio he'd have to use so many footcandles – he had his own philosophy about things and his own system of lighting. He used to do things which I would never do but in those days I was his assistant cameraman – I didn't have any say in it.

*How did you begin as a cameraman?*

**Morris:** I did a little shooting in England, second unit stuff and what they call BP plates (Background projections) I didn't really start entirely as a cameraman until I'd been in Canada. I came here in 1955 and, what happened, I had my career interrupted by the war, which is always a bind. I'd worked on something like a hundred features before the war. Quite a large number of those were what we called 'B pictures' or 'Quota Quickies'. They were made under the quota laws. I worked for Fox British Pictures, which was a subsidiary of Twentieth Century Fox and they were solely for complying with the law. They used to make 15 pictures a year and they would be turned out in about two weeks. In a way, you know, people regard television as a complete new thing. Actually nothing could be further from the truth because I was brought up to quota pictures where you had to work like you do on TV now. You had to be fast, no wasted time, and pictures were made – I've worked on pictures that were made in a week. This is regarded as something new on TV series. I'd been doing that as a boy for years in England.

*How young were you when you started?*

**Morris:** I should have been sixteen, but I got permission to leave school a couple of months early because I had a chance at getting a job at one of the studios (This was 1934).

*Were you younger than your brother or older? (Ossie Morris, British cameraman. Oscar for **Fiddler on the Roof**.)*

**Morris:** He's older. Nearly three years older.

*Was he in the film business by then?*

**Morris:** Yes. He'd left school that much earlier.

*Was there anything in your family background that got you into photography?*

**Morris:** Well, my father actually was an engraver, not with one of those electric machines, with proper engraving tools. He'd been an amateur photographer and the sort of thing he would do, he'd go 'up to London' as we would say, and go to the patent office there and look up patents and diagrams of cameras and then go home and make them. We used to have all sorts of home-made cameras lying around our house and I can remember, later, he bought a projector which took film, in those days I think it was 28mm, it was some bastard size. You hand cranked it and it generated the electricity as well. So in his spare time, he used to go around and give film shows. I suppose photography sort of rubbed off on both of us.

*How and when did you get to Canada?*

**Morris:** Well, there was a sound man called Desmond Dew who used to be head of the sound department at Denham Studios, and he'd gone to Canada to shoot – well, they'd already done **49th Parallel** and they came back to try another one – but the picture didn't come off. Desmond Dew decided to stay on and after a bit of a struggle he became the sort of facilities manager at the Film Board; when they needed equipment or crew and they couldn't find it in Canada, they would send him places like England to look them up.

Anyway, I was working in the studio at Pinewood and suddenly he appeared, so I started asking him about Canada. I was an operator at the time, had done a certain amount of second unit shooting and he said "If you ever come to the Film Board, you'll be shooting. You'll be a cameraman right away."

Well, I started a certain amount of correspondence with the Film Board and also with Crawley Films, who wrote "...you must understand, we cannot pay your fare out here but we would be delighted to see you..." and so on.

So when I came out here, I went to see the Film Board and they said, "We don't know what our summer program is at the moment..."

*Same way they do now.*

**Morris:** Right, yeah. So anyway, they called about two weeks later and said, you know, "If you care to come in, we now know what our program is." So I got five month's work right off the top. I did a picture called **TransCanada Highway** which meant travelling all across Canada. When we got halfway across, the director Jack Olson (former picture editor for *Maclean's*) got a communication saying when we got to Vancouver, could we shoot a picture on salmon. So I'd only been in Canada a very short time and all of a sudden my wife is in Hull... and I'm in Vancouver shooting salmon.

*How long did you stay at the Film Board?*

**Morris:** I was there for eight years and I suppose I shot 90 to 100 films.

*Any dramatic work in that period?*

**Morris:** There was one very good film about the discovery of insulin, **The Quest**. Another one I did just before I left was really the first feature film the Film Board had ever done, called **The Drylanders**.

*So you spent eight years at the Film Board shooting documentaries. How was it going freelance and ending up where you are now, back in features?*

**Morris:** Well, Maxine Samuels was starting the Forest Ranger series, but there was a cameraman, named John Gunn, who left the Film Board a couple of months before



Reg Morris c.s.c. and director Gerry Potterton during the shoot of **Big Ride** at the National Film Board.

photo Wolf Keening

I did and he got the job as cameraman. Now I kept getting endless calls from them at the Film Board because they were having problems getting an operator – constant SOS calls, so I decided to leave the Film Board and I handed in a week's notice.

*How long were you on the Forest Rangers?*

**Morris:** I did two years of it; two series and then the third year, I went over to the Seaway series.

*So, until the feature film business got to where it is now, wherever that is, you worked primarily in TV series?*

**Morris:** Right. On the Seaway series, I was hoping to shoot the series but the producer made the statement that there was no one in Canada who could shoot her Seaway so they went to the States and brought up an American cameraman (Jack Priestley). So I was forced into the position of either operating on the Series or not working. I tried to make a deal that I could photograph *some* of them, and I did get a chance to shoot three of them.

Anyway, that meant we needed an operator and they sent one up from New York, a big guy with curly hair, and he came out to the location and stood behind for a while and when I had a moment – I was trying to light and operate at the same time which is very hard on a TV series – I chatted with him and said “Well, look, we’re almost done today. Why don’t you start fresh tomorrow?” He was with us two days and then he left us, he was going to start shooting his first feature. You know who that guy was?

*It had to be Gordon Willis, and his first feature was John Barth’s End of the Road, directed by Aram Avakiam.*

**Morris:** How did you know?

*Anything about Gordon Willis, I know.*

**Morris:** Anyway, when he shot **The Paper Chase** up in Kleinberg here, the first thing he did was phone me and say, “Look, I operated for you, how about you operating for me?”

*How did you feel about his style of shooting?*

**Morris:** Well, I often used bounce light the way that Willis had used it, so it wasn’t new to me. The only thing I learned from him was a few more ways of applying it.

I learned the art of walking into a room and lighting it with existing light. You’d put practicals in [*using the regular room lighting with bigger, also colour balanced, bulbs. Ed.*] put in a couple other lights, a bit of bounce light off the ceiling and the place is lit! And it looks beautiful! It looks real! And so although I’d used bounce light, I hadn’t used the practicals as extensively as he used them.

*What about your style of lighting?*

**Morris:** Well, for example, if I’ve got a lamp with an orange-coloured globe, a lot of people would say “we’ve got to get rid of that orange,” but when someone walks up to that lamp, I want them to be orange. A lot of people are scared of that. But since light is made up of all sorts of colours I don’t believe in corrupting everything and making it all the same colour.

*So you don’t worry a lot about mixed light, mixed temperature?*

**Morris:** Not at all. I’ve done a lot of commercials when I’ve used blue light (unbalanced daylight) coming through the windows, with pools of blue light on the floor while the rest is lit with tungsten. A lot of people say “Why don’t you correct the windows?” I don’t want to correct them, I like them blue.

*How close do you work with your lighting man?*

**Morris:** Well, I was used to working with Bobby Milligan, and unfortunately he died on this last shoot. A very great loss to us all, truly. He was very good at anticipating, and he would usually know what my plan of attack was and have the type of light ready, so I’d never have to look very far.

photo Wolf Koenig



Reg Morris lines up a shot on Mac Cuthbertson while producer Colin Low adjusts the distance (NFB days).

*What about the Canon high speed lenses you used on Second Wind?*

**Morris:** That all starts with the new negative 5247. Kodak just goes ahead and bangs out a new stock; they never ask us, the people who use it, the people who must get results, good results.

On the old stock, you had the facility of force processing. All the stuff I ever did, even the exteriors, I’d been in the habit of force processing... But not on the new stock, not at the moment. So the answer now, if I’m not to lose that extra stop (f stop) I gained by force processing, I have to look for other means and that other means is a fast lens.

The less light you use, like, if you can shoot at 2 or even 1.4 (f stops) you find that you don’t really have to fill anything because it fills itself. When you start shooting at 4 or even 8, in addition to your key light, you’ve got to lug in huge soft lights and things like that. When you shoot at 2 you might just have to put a little bit of light on a card or on the ceiling or on the wall – sometimes you don’t even need to do that.

*So the high speed lenses relate to the lack of force processing and to shooting with existing light.*

**Morris:** Right. Both, actually. There was a scene in a kitchen in **Second Wind** that I shot virtually with existing light. The sun was shining through the kitchen window and it was hitting the floor and bouncing up and filling the whole room. I had seen it and hadn’t done much about it because I thought maybe the director doesn’t go for that sort of thing, but much to my surprise Don Shebib said “Wow, look at that!” So I did shoot it without any other light. I couldn’t have done it without high speed lenses.

*What do you see in your future as of now?*

**Morris:** Well, I’ve reached the point where I won’t be doing any operating. I have the problem that if I do operate, people come to know me as that, and it’s very hard to get back again. If I did that in England people would look down their noses at me.

Originally you worked your way up to operator and stayed there until someone was prepared to risk you as a cameraman. As an operator you'd shoot some BP plates, then they'd entrust you with some second unit shooting and eventually, finally, people would have enough confidence in you to hire you as a cameraman.

*When did it happen with you?*

**Morris:** I would say that really came with me at the Film Board, but I'd had a lot of miles behind me.

But even though I'd shot hundreds of documentaries, people would not recognize me as a cameraman. If a feature came up from the States they'd shudder and say, "Oh no, we'll bring in our own man." It took me quite a while just to get established.

If work were more continuous here it'd be easier but just as people get enough confidence in you, there's not another feature for, say, three years and you've got to start all over again.

I've been 'discovered' about every three years since I've been in Canada. Last time I was discovered was by the

commercial industry who suddenly realized there was a guy named Reg Morris in Toronto.

I shouldn't really knock commercials, they're the mainstay of the industry here. The fact that we've got six or seven features here now has got to be regarded as a flash in the pan. It's never happened before and it may never happen again.

With commercials, some are quite interesting, but underlying it all, from my point of view, is the knowledge that as it goes on the air, people are going to head for the toilet or the refrigerator. They're not the least bit interested in your work, whereas in features people are paying money at the box office; they're paying because they *want* to see the film. It's a much more satisfying feeling.

*You've come from England to Canada. Any plans to go on to Hollywood or New York?*

**Morris:** If I had the chance I would never turn it down. I would grab it with both hands. Let's say it isn't entirely out of reach. For the first time in my life, shall we say, I can see a glimmer on the horizon. If I live long enough I may someday shoot a film in Hollywood. □

## on hand too

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oceans. And while he talks of builders, and constructed oceans and model ships, of the huge head of the whale with its waterfilled tongue and mechanical jaws, and of the sinking of the Pequod, we are transported into the world of big-time filmmaking, massive budgets, huge crews, and the technological wonderland of ingenious constructions and inventions. Glamorous stuff.

For that sinking, for instance, and if you saw **Moby Dick** you'll recall the boat tipping and getting sucked down into a whirlpool of violent water, the entire tank in which filming was done was drained into a specially constructed holding lake outside, and roller coaster tracks were built to carry the mechanical whale on its diving course at the boat, while an inner tank was constructed with four hoses fixed to shoot water in at its sides while a central drain underneath sucked water out to simulate a whirlpool.

Thus in the refilled tank, as the whale came bounding toward the boat and rammed it, the boat, carefully located in the centre of the inner tank (though of course that couldn't be seen), was caught by the manufactured whirlpool and dramatically and horrifyingly whirled and sucked down into the briny deep.

More special effects will be created in the new film he'll be shooting out at Bowen Island, near Vancouver. It's called **Food of the Gods**, and is a re-working of an H.G. Wells story by Bert I. Gordon, whose company is making it. Reg seems almost disappointed that Mr. Gordon will have done some of the special effects already. "You see it involves these giant rats" says Reg, and he begins to enthusiastically describe the storyline.

Mr. Morris is also full of enthusiasm for many of the people he has worked with, and he chats of Bill Fraker, Gordon Willis, Urs Furrer (now dead) and then explains a little more about Willis' use of bounce light and practicals (a normal light fixture in a room, amplified with a stronger bulb), illuminating his conversation with brilliant examples like this: "... could put in a 250 watt bulb, not corrected for 3200 of course, and could put a variac on it and raise it to 140 instead of 110 to correct it..." which, I must confess, leaves me totally in the dark.

But I do understand his love for natural light and natural locations, and dislike of correcting all colours to one bland studio-like effect. In **Black Christmas** he was pleased with the wash of coloured light on the performers as they passed a coloured hall light in the film. I was pleased with that too, for it created an impression as the colour caught the performers of the atmosphere of that creepy place almost reaching out and enveloping the future victims.

Processing is another field of familiar problems and variables to the pro, which is almost incomprehensible to the average film viewer. As Reg talks to Mark about film baths ("Film House bath is slightly faster than Quinn and Kodak so since they would be processing I worked at 150 ASA") and the effects of the temperature of the various film development baths and the various colour 'edges' of certain processors, a whole new world of complex technical virtuosity is suggested. "Film House has a green edge," he says, "which, particularly in dull weather, makes the grass and trees a little more lush. Quinn has a more magenta edge in their stuff..."

Mark asks how closely Reg stays with his film when it is in the post production stage, and Reg replies that for **Black Christmas** he had to depend on Bob Clark's (the director) judgment as he viewed the rushes. That was fine apparently, since Reg was very much in sync with Bob Clark, as he also was with Don Shebib, and thus knew that the director looked at things generally the same way he did.

He enjoyed his recent six weeks on the Shebib shoot, despite having to shoot the climax of the film on their first day (Labour Day) at the regular race meet in London, Ontario.

"I had a good time with Don," said Reg "and got very fond of the guy."

As for making movies himself? By a lucky break, explains Reginald Morris, csc, he owns a BL Arriflex 16mm sound camera,\* one of the best in town in fact, but he seldom uses it. "I leave it with M. F. White and it is constantly out on rental," he admits.

He just doesn't feel like shooting movies when he gets home. □

\* Mr. Morris made two films with this camera, both of which won Bronze Awards at the New York Film Festival. Ed.