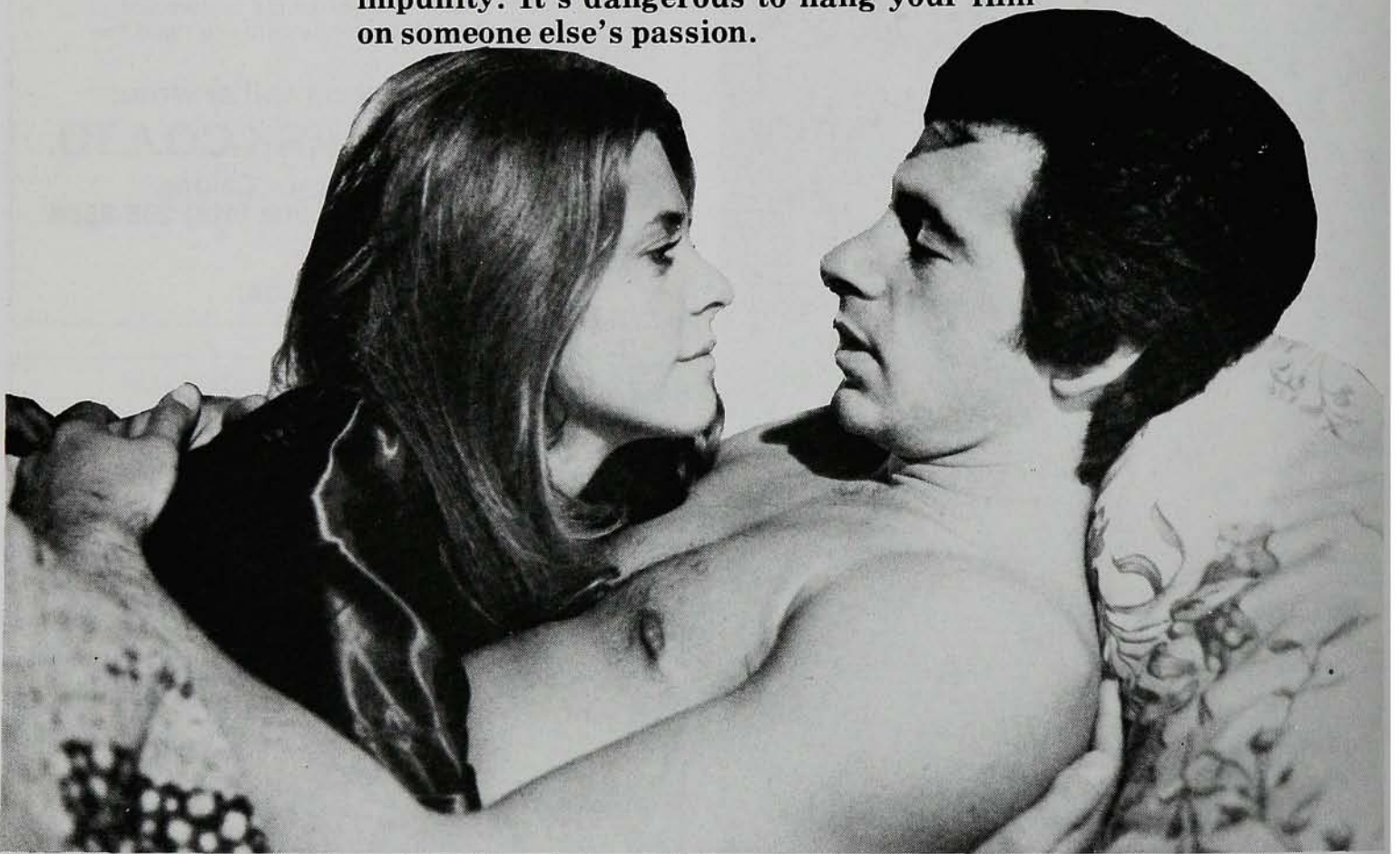


second wind the soap opera route

by John Reeves

Who should do the critique of *Second Wind*, a film about running, if not a runner? John Reeves' perceptive and critical analysis reminds us once again that film directors don't approach specialized subjects with impunity. It's dangerous to hang your film on someone else's passion.



Lindsay Wagner and James Naughton as the Mathiesons in *Second Wind*

Second Wind, by Don Shebib, is a film about vocation: the call to excellence. It tries to show what happens to a man's life when he answers that call. Vocation comes in many forms: religion, art, sport. But all forms have this in common: that once a man is called, everything else in his life becomes of secondary importance; Francis of Assisi, Beethoven, Paavo Nurmi all spoke the same language.

In this case, the hero is a stockbroker, aged thirty, who has all the trappings of Success: a top job, good money, an attractive wife and son, a smart house — and a profound sense of spiritual emptiness. For reasons which he does not clearly understand, almost on impulse seemingly, he takes

up jogging; in a matter of weeks he graduates to running proper; then helplessly, because this is a vocation not an avocation, he becomes a genuine athlete. The result, inevitably, is the breakdown of his marriage: one sympathizes with the wife; it would not have been comfortable to be married to St. Paul at the time of his conversion.

Conversion? Yes, the film intends itself to be taken seriously at that level of meaning. Hal Ackerman, who wrote the script, opens up with a quotation from Thomas Merton, who gave up helling around in his mid-twenties to become a Trappist monk; who knew, the moment he entered the monastery, that he was home for the first time of his life — and a born

runner will feel the same the moment he steps on a track. Since, then, the script addresses that moment and its consequences, one has to ask if it has dealt with the story's implications accurately and fully and honestly.

Before I go into that, let me say that I refer, deliberately, to the script: to the content of the story. Most of the actors are convincing most of the time, and the principals are excellent. The direction is straightforward and (as it should be in a film like this) self-effacing. All hands, you might say, did well. Was the script worth their trouble?

Accuracy. There's a lot to be said for getting your facts right before you build a story on them. Facts are multitudinously wrong in this film. The new world record for the mile is quoted as 3:53, which sets the story in 1965: jogging did not become a fad till 1967; and anyway the setting is present-day. Zátopek did not win two gold medals when he was 34: the allusion is to the Helsinki Olympics; he won three gold medals, and he was 29. A miler does speedwork in his shorts. No beginner could run 4:35 in a few weeks (he'd be lucky to break 5:35) or get down to 4:19 in his first season. Promising novices seldom work out on their own: group training pays better dividends; and the program is repeat quarter-miles, not jolly jaunts in the park. World-famous coaches do not have to go looking for new talent, the talent comes to them: and if they want to look further, they know where to look; and they don't carry instant training programs in their pockets – what's right for one athlete is all wrong for another. Road running does not include, as one of its incidental attractions, being picked up by gorgeous young ladies in sports cars: motorists either ignore you or, if they're fat and feel guilty, give you a raspberry. In thousands of miles run on the road, I've only once hooked up with the opposite sex and that was on a holiday in Britain when three middle-aged charwomen on one-speed bicycles tried to outpace me – none of them, believe me, looked in the least like Tedde Moore.

These inaccuracies will be at once noticed by anyone who knows track. But, to me, they would not matter very much if the core of the story were valid: a few slip-ups in research would be forgivable if the script really did illuminate the human problem it deals with, and came to grips with it. Unfortunately, it does not. Instead, it takes the easy soap-opera route. Thus: husband gets hooked on running; wife resents playing second fiddle to a pair of track shoes; husband plays hooky to get in extra training; wife leaves him; family friend counsels husband to give up his obsession, since he'll never be a world-beater, and mend his marriage; reconciliation made difficult because husband has to get one important race out of his system; wife comes to race, sees him win, thinks he's wonderful; glad reunion, and husband drops track shoes in garbage.

If that were all, the film would not be worth reviewing. But the maddening thing about it is that it keeps on almost succeeding. Flashes of honest insight occur, and time and time again the performers make their scenes convincing by their own eloquence – especially the two ladies, who both have pitifully little to work with. So that one's constantly muttering "If only he'd grasped that nettle there..." The root mistake lies in the writer's approach to the hero: much time is spent on his predicament, his bewilderment at his new role, his hurt over his marital troubles; that is, the writer goes to considerable pains to fill out his character, to make him sympathetic. This is time ill spent. A man with a vocation is not sympathetic: we have to accept him the way he is, as a fact of life (like death or taxes), but he is not sympathetic. He says, "I am going to ride up Mount



Mathieson in his final, winning race

Everest on a motorbike, and my family can starve while I do so." The predicament is not his; it is his family's. And what we needed here was more recognition of this. Poor Lindsay Wagner! She had so little to go on in the role of the wife, yet it was *her* expectations which were profoundly betrayed; *she* should have been the focus of the writer's interest. But that would have asked a much more difficult question: what does a woman do whose life centres around her marriage, when she finds out she's married to a monster? For that's how it must seem. An obsessive athlete's sex life suffers, not because he's tired from training (actually he's in better shape for sex than non-athletes), but for the harsh reason that he's preoccupied with something more important to him than love. And he ceases to share his inner life with his wife, because the truths of track can no more be shared than can the making of a poem. He has, in a word, become a solitary. And because we are a gregarious species, that makes him, in the proper sense, a monster.

We accept this in a Mozart: the result gives public pleasure. We accept it in a star athlete, for the same reason. We accept it, even, in some seemingly useless realm of scholarship: one day it may lead to a better mousetrap. But we only accept it in those who reach the top of the heap. Few of us can accept that someone may have a vocation without great talent: that an undistinguished club-runner may have as deep a commitment to track as the Olympic champion. The hero of **Second Wind**, if it had been honestly made, would not end up throwing his track shoes in the garbage; he'd be working on a 4:18 next time out, maybe one day a 4:05. And his wife might, at one stage, be pleased for his sake to see him win a race, not knowing it was against mediocrities. But, over the long haul, could she come to terms with the vocation of an athlete who would never make it into the top thousand? Should she? And what about the child?

Full marks to the cast. And thank you, Don Shebib, for trying. But next time around, please, let's have a script for adults. □

John Reeves: by avocation a long-distance runner and former holder of all Canadian veterans' records from the half-mile to the ten-mile; by profession a broadcaster and writer, winner of the Italia Prize for Radio Drama in 1959. Publications: three plays in print, one LP of verse.

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