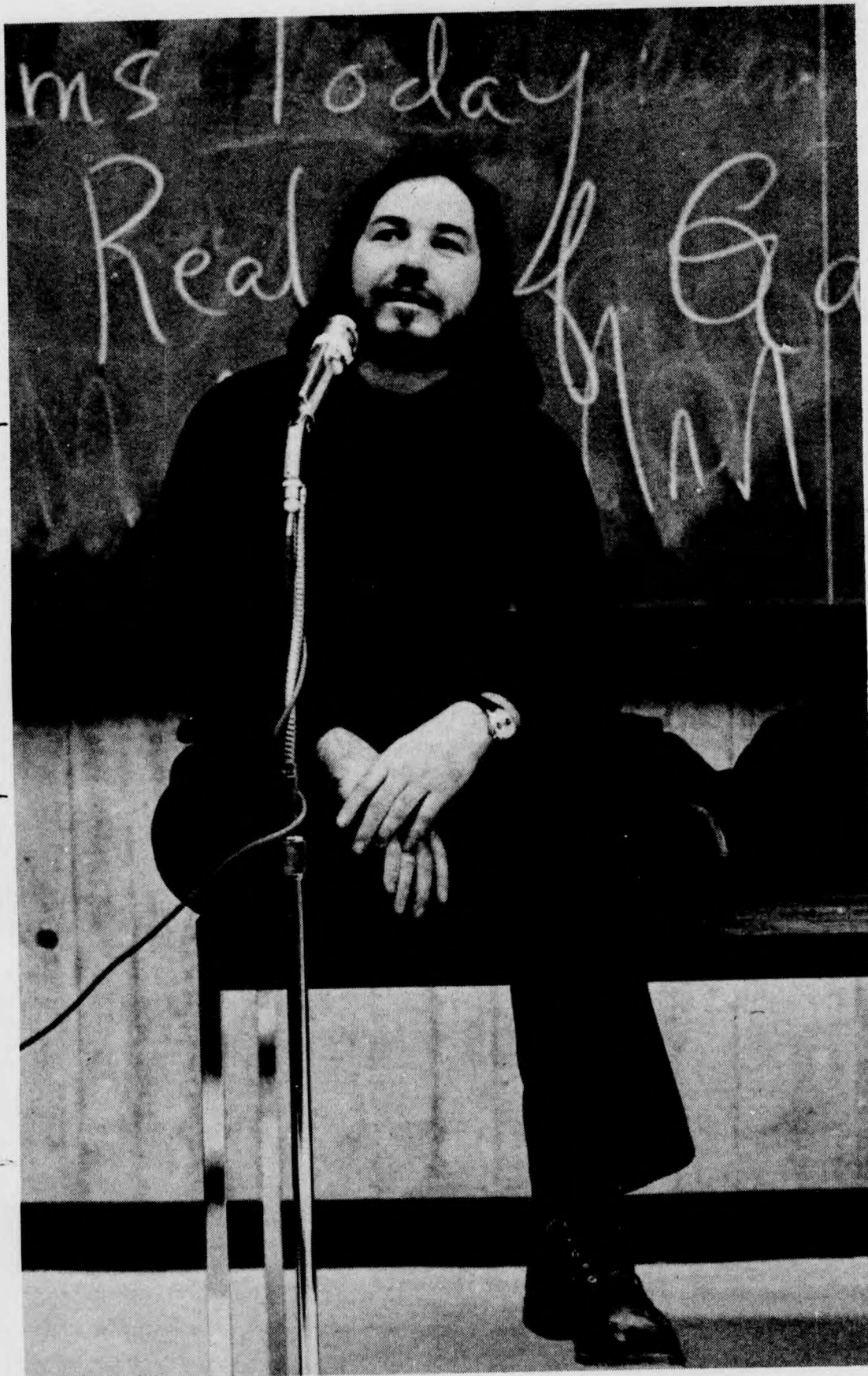


Filmmaker Don Shebib at York

The struggle to make a Canadian feature film



Filmmaker Don Shebib spoke at York two weeks ago. He is the director of *Goin' Down the Road* and *Rip-off*

By DAN JOHNSON

By selling his car and saving carefully, Canadian film maker Don Shebib managed to scrape up \$5,000 and with \$19,000 from the Ontario government, made the film that cinematically put Canada on the map.

Goin' Down the Road ended up costing \$87,000.

How could he make the film when he only had 28 per cent of the money it actually cost? — "You don't think about it. Just start spending money and when you run out, you run out. If I had approached it with a sound businessman's point of view, I never would have made the film."

In the last 11 years, Shebib has made 18 films, three of them feature length efforts. Shebib says raising money is always a problem. "You can't make a 35 mm film for less than \$500,000." Even with his success, Shebib still has to go out and hustle to get the money to fund a project.

The Canadian Film Development Corporation, a government agency, helped finance Shebib's three features. When he visited York recently, Shebib was asked

about the CFDC's role in Canada's emerging film industry: "Without the CFDC, there wouldn't be any Canadian features," he said.

What about American companies who get government money because they hire Canadian "go-fers"? Shebib felt it was their own business if they wanted to make their pictures here, but he doubted if the CFDC gave them money if they use Canadians only as hewers of wood and carriers of water.

"I just don't think that any money should be given to any director who hasn't got residence in this country — I don't care where they're from, and that includes Canadians working in Hollywood."

"The thing with Jan Kadar was pretty blatant. I guess it's a great coup for a man of that stature to make a film in Canada. But he lives in New York and he fired most of the Canadians and hired either Czechs or Americans."

Atkinson professor Bob Fothergill, a film maker himself, has a theory that the feature length English Canadian film depicts the males as "cowards, bullies or clowns". This can hinder the possibilities of self realization

for Canadians. When Fothergill asked Shebib if he had noticed in English Canadian features a recognizable set of styles, Shebib replied that he hadn't noticed any patterns yet. He felt that it would take some time before patterns become apparent. When Fothergill asked Shebib if he thought he would recognize a Canadian film if he saw it in Japan, Shebib took Jutra's film *Mon Oncle Antoine*, (a film felt by many to be definitely Canadian), and said that it was "the most Czech film I've ever seen." He also pointed out that Jutra is an admirer of Czech films.

GREAT CANADIAN MOVIE

When asked if Canadians have an aversion to Canadian movies — Shebib agreed but added: "I think that's changing every single day. It's a question of maturity — I don't think that artists develop on their own. I think they develop in conjunction with other artists, especially in film. The films of the Canadians are growing with each other, it's parasitic."

Shebib feels there's a strange mentality in Canada about films. When it comes out, each film is hailed as "the Greatest Canadian movie" and as soon as another comes out it becomes "the greatest Canadian movie".

"I hope that people don't get into that 'where is the great Canadian novel?' and all that shit, because that's really a pain in the ass." Remarking on this trend towards an easily deposed feature film Shebib remarked that Canadians have "a basic distrust in the accomplishments of their own society."

Politics determine Canadian film awards according to Shebib. When asked if there was any hope for them, he said "when the industry is strong enough that it won't have to be babied around anymore." He felt this would happen hopefully in the next five years.

Canadian film directors generally have a rougher time getting their projects executed than do their Hollywood counterparts. This is due to the financial pressure caused by the budgets. In the studio system (read Hollywood), the director directs the film. In Canada, the director often has to take on the tremendous responsibilities of keeping the film on schedule and within the budget. Money hassles are the biggest worry. Yet in a studio system, the film's artistic control is often not solely in the director's hands.

Fortunately Shebib doesn't have to relate stories of how some producer cut his picture for him, or how it was mutilated by the script department. Part of this is due to the embryonic state of the Canadian film industry and partly because "it's a different system".

The big trouble in making Canadian features is getting a tight script and raising the money to make the film; then getting the film made and afterwards selling it yet keeping the censors and distributors from mutilating it. Aside from those considerations it seems to be an easy thing to do.

Yet all that's only to get the film made and released. Once all that is achieved, the film maker has to worry about the critic. If he's off his feed at all then he might pan the film. If a film gets a really bad reception on opening, it may be permanently shelved.

LEARNING THE CRAFT

How does a film maker learn his craft? Shebib says film schools are a good route as they provide a cheap way to get films made, which is the only way to learn the process. However Shebib added: "To make films it takes integrity and it takes talent and you can't learn that and you can't buy it."

Shebib likes to see the personal touch of the film maker in a movie and he thinks the ideal film is one that could be viewed without seeing the credits and still being able to recognize the director from his style.

One school of thought says "films are made in the cutting room" the other says "write a tight script and stick to it — come hell or high water". Shebib compromises these two philosophies by using the freedom allowed by the former and the structure and security afforded by the latter.

Shebib and Bill Fruet wrote the script for *Goin' Down the Road* six months before

shooting. Only two scenes were improvised — a scene in the park and the scene in which the man from the Maritimers club threatens to throw them out — "he wasn't talking to the actor but to the whole crew — he was really going to throw us out." Despite a tight script the film took on a different personality during the shooting and then, ultimately, in the editing process.

"There were a lot of changes once the film was cast and during shooting." When asked when the rewriting was done Shebib replied "the night before."

"There was a basic disagreement between Bill and me about what the film was really about and so the film seems to be going in a couple of directions."

"Rip-Off" has never been properly distributed — it's sort of in a limbo state. It's supposed to be opening in New York in April, about a year and a half after it opened here so I don't know. It's out of my hands."

Shebib talked about improvisation in the drunk scene in the park for *Goin' Down the Road*.

"I was walking around downtown one Saturday afternoon when I saw these three obviously Newfy characters standing in the street drinking beer and playing their guitars. So I said — I'll give you 50 bucks if you meet me in the park at one o'clock. I went home and got the actors and crew and dragged them over to Allen Gardens and told them to play their guitars and start singing or something. And these drunks came along with absolutely no idea of what was going on — I don't think they ever knew there was a camera present. People ask how you get realism in cinema verite — there's nothing to it, when people get engrossed in something — it just happens."

Shebib's documentary background helped him in this film and others and it isn't solely because of his use of cinema verite. Shebib believes in getting a script together long before shooting starts but as the characters evolve in the making of the film the script often has to be totally rewritten.

NEW FILM PLANS

His ability to co-operate with his actors and his ability to choose actors who can naturally give him the characterization he wants pays off. Of the four characters in *Rip-Off*, two are non-professionals and one of them played his own character verbatim.

In his new film, tentatively called *Get Back*, Shebib is using two American stars; Michael Parks (Then Came Bronson) and Bonnie Bedeulia (They Shoot Horses Don't They?). When he was asked if he was motivated to use American stars to help get U.S. distribution he replied — "not in the least — they were the only people who could do the parts. I looked in Toronto for four months casting and I saw everybody — cab drivers who said 'hey man, I want to be in your flick'. If I didn't see a Toronto actor it was his fault. I'd look at anybody. You should have seen the shit that went through there. It was a difficult part to cast and I went to New York and I couldn't find anybody and I went to L.A. twice." He finally cast Parks against the advice of "every agent in L.A."

The film is the story of two friends in their early thirties and a girl. "A guy comes to Toronto and meets his old friend, they used to surf together 10 or 15 years ago and they're just sort of bums and the one guy gets involved with his friend's girlfriend. There are other things going on — there is a robbery — but in no way is it a cops and robbers, an action or a chase film. It's a study of the three personalities. It's not an easy film to describe in a nutshell."

Working with Michael Parks is "difficult" but Shebib is anything but antagonistic and so he let Parks develop the character without any incessant directorial hassling. "I got what I wanted in the end of the film without yelling or screaming at him at all." Shebib showed his co-operative nature when he said of the Parks character in *Get Back* — "if he wants to play it a certain way I'll rewrite the script — I don't care as long as it's real."