

BY Barry Keith Grant





Beautiful

# LOSERS

DON SHEBIB'S BETWEEN FRIENDS

Don Shebib's *Between Friends* (1973), about a group of beautiful losers who commit a robbery in northern Ontario with disastrous results, remains for me one of the great Canadian films despite changing critical fashion and paradigms of Canadian cinema. The film tells the story of Chino (Chuck Shamata), his girlfriend, Ellie (Bonnie Bedelia), her father Will (Henry Beckman), a professional thief, and Chino's American friend and former surfing buddy Toby (Michael Parks), who together—sort of—execute a clumsy heist that goes horribly wrong. This dour and downbeat story is, nevertheless, "a taut, serious dramatic study of loyalty, Canadian/U.S. relations and the limitations of male bonding," as Tom McSorley perceptively writes in *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film*.<sup>1</sup>

In so far as *Between Friends* focuses on Chino's desire to return to the leisurely life of surfing in California, it's thematically consistent with Shebib's two earlier films, *Goin' down the Road* (1970) and *Rip-Off* (1971), both of which explore youthful dreams shattered by harsh reality. Chino's battered Woody and broken surfboard serve as poignant metaphors of the unfulfilled dreams of youth to which he clings. The film's use of popular music also emphasizes Chino's arrested adolescence: he and Toby sidewalk surf through an obstacle course of beer cans to that paean of perpetual youth to "Fun Fun Fun" by The Beach Boys, who, despite the passage of time, never became The Beach Men. Chino confides his California dreamin' to Toby while listening to the Five Satins's "In the Still of the Night," a classic R&B ballad about romanticism and the arresting of time.

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DON SHEBIB'S *BETWEEN FRIENDS*

The film's popular music is decidedly American, and is one of the ways *Between Friends* explores the influence of U.S. culture on Canada. Chino's imagination, as Wim Wenders might say, has been colonized by American popular culture. Explaining his obsession with that warm California sun, Chino says to Toby, "You were born there, it was never any big deal for you." Shortly after arriving on the scene, Toby begins to seduce Ellie with his ersatz entertainment—imitating a "Brazilian mugwump"—while Chino is marginalized and feminized, a short-order cook with an apron flipping burgers behind the counter of a greasy spoon. In the drab kitchen of their small apartment Chino elaborates for Ellie his American Dream of a house by the ocean with a two-car garage. "We're gonna need it because we're gonna have two cars," he explains. But in 1973, even before the Canadian dollar slipped under par with its American counterpart, it is doubtful that \$50,000 could really buy Chino and Ellie two cars, a home on premium Pacific shoreline real estate and whatever else they might need to make this dream come true.

The naive Canadian depends on the American, not only to help with "the job," but to complete his identity. Parks's Toby, with his pouty method acting and cheap James Dean imitation, seduces and screws both Canadians, one literally and the other figuratively. Chino's offhand joke that Toby is "the biggest con artist you ever met" resonates with cultural significance. Unlike Shebib's marvellously observant camera, so rooted in the daily details of his characters' lives, Chino's dream house is a paper castle fantasy from the start. Shebib cuts from Chino rhapsodizing about watching the waves roll in to a close-up of a muddy puddle in the wintry backyard, where the Woody sits immobile on blocks. In the end, tellingly, the two Canadian men die while the American gets the girl and the loot.

While Chino buys into the glamour of American pop culture, *Between Friends* resists doing so by the way it plays off of the genre's conventions as developed in such earlier American caper films as John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956). Like other English-Canadian films of the tax-shelter era such as David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975) and *The Silent Partner* (1978), *Between Friends* distinguishes itself as Canadian in large part by playing off the conventions of American popular film genres. The film's most overt yet at the same time most elegant reference to American genre movies occurs at a funeral when Will sings "Shall We Gather at the River" in the cemetery. This song belongs to John Ford as surely as Monument Valley, and Shebib's use of it here is as powerfully ironic as Sam Peckinpah's more famous reference in the opening massacre in *The Wild Bunch* (1968). But where Peckinpah's view of civilization is acerbic and apocalyptic, Shebib's is fundamentally forlorn. While Will sings, in the back-

ground loom the mill's furnaces, hardly the epic grandeur of Monument Valley's buttes. These characters are not ennobled by nature, Shebib suggests, but enervated and alienated by economic imperatives.

The scene begins with a shot of the group, but as Will begins to sing, the priest and everyone else move away, isolating Will in the frame, a stark visual counterpoint to Ford's mythic community. The primary generic context of *Between Friends* is not the Western, however, but the heist or caper film. The heist genre's essential defining element is the plot, which is conventionally structured around the planning and commission of a single crime of great significance by a disparate group of characters, each with his or her own special skill and assigned task, who come together to work as a team to take down the house. The viewer's involvement centres on the question of whether or not the group will be able to pull off the crime for which we see them prepare, often elaborately, and in discovering which, if any of them, will get away with it. Even though the protagonists may be criminals, we typically root for them because they embody professionalism and the sense that the little guy, when cooperating with other little guys, can defeat corporate Goliaths with infinite resources at their command.

But in *Between Friends*, the group never comes together as a team, remaining instead isolated and never by their individual issues. In place of the genre's typical professionalism, Chino and Toby, although not complete amateurs—Toby, we learn, has "done time"—certainly do not display the cool competency of American movie hoods. Will reassures Toby that he's not an amateur, that he's "done this kind of thing before," but when Toby asks him why then isn't he rich, Will's reply—"I figure you can't lose all the time"—hardly inspires confidence in his abilities. These guys are small-time operators with no special skills. In the group's nascent plan, Toby is designated as the driver, as he is in the opening California robbery scene; but despite being almost as silent as Ryan O'Neal's wordless wheelman in Walter Hill's *The Driver* (1978), unlike O'Neal, he demonstrates no particular aptitude for driving (and he is easily replaced in that role by Ellie after Coker's death).

The troubled relationship between the characters is signalled by the rich ambiguities of the film's title. Does it mean something shared by friends, or something that becomes a wedge between them? Or does the title refer to the kind of personal matters that inevitably arise in friendships, or something alien to them? Does Ellie come between Toby and Chino, or Toby between the couple? However we understand



Chuck Shamata;  
previous page, Michael Parks.



the title, though, Shebib deftly expresses how these characters are alone together in the *mise en scène*. Peter Harcourt<sup>2</sup> has noted the way the characters are separated in the bar the night before the robbery, with Ellie plunking dolefully on the piano and a melancholy torpor infusing the scene like thick cigarette smoke. Also noteworthy is the scene in the cramped apartment with Chino, Ellie and Toby. Chino is positioned, appropriately, in the centre foreground sanding his surfboard, while Ellie works at her sewing machine in the mid-ground to the right and Toby watches television in the background to the left. The spatial tensions are accentuated by the competing sounds of the television, sewing machine and electric sander on the soundtrack. Finally, a fuse blows, anticipating the emotions that will spill over later after Ellie reveals her affair with Toby to Chino.

The robbery itself, usually the showcase scene of caper films, is treated more like an anticlimactic afterthought. The mournful strings that play on the soundtrack as Chino, Ellie and Toby first drive past the slag heaps into Coniston foreshadow the eventual outcome of the doomed heist and is in fact heard again during the robbery instead of more typically suspenseful music. In pointed contrast to the hyperkinetic, streamlined style toward which American crime films were already moving (*Bullitt* appeared in 1968, *The French Connection* in 1971), *Between Friends* eschews action for character exploration. Even when the enraged Chino, his dreams crushed because of Ellie and Toby's affair, stops hacking at his surfboard and turns toward Toby, axe in hand, there is only simmering rage, no physical violence.

Canadian critic John Hofsess has noted that "Even when people fail in American films, they do so spectacularly, and in terms that are larger than life so that they seem heroic in spite of death. Their failure has been glamorized, whereas in Canadian films, the characters are usually grubby and more than a little dumb."<sup>3</sup> It's true that in *Between Friends* the Canadians die unheroically. Will is unceremoniously plopped from the getaway car into the snow, and Chino rolls to a dead stop behind the wheel. But the film's characters are hardly dumb—indeed, Bedelia's Ellie is one of the most fully realized female characters in all of Canadian cinema. Rather, they're just plain folks, the kind of people who, like Chino, have photos of themselves framed in old toilet seats (a nice metaphor there). Shebib himself says his characters are not losers, but rather "average, but interesting people, who happen to fail." In the way it juxtaposes American action film conventions with mundane Canadian locations, Shebib's film, like *Paperback Hero* (also released in 1973), suggests the inappropriateness of American cultural myths to the Canadian context. For myth *Between Friends* substitutes the mundane, challenging the glamour of American popular culture that claims Chino as its victim.

On the most immediate level, *Between Friends* provides the kind of pleasure in its acute observation of life's minutiae. Look, for example, at the sleazy drug boss ("Cash or stash?") or Beckman's drunken jig at the party on payday before he collapses onto a chair rather than into it. The way Bedelia, as Ellie, has her coffee in the morning before going to work as a supermarket cashier speaks as eloquently about her character and the dullness of daily routine as the maid grinding the morning coffee in Vittorio de Sica's

neo-realist masterpiece *Umberto D* (1952). One gets the sense from the film's richly observed world that the story could go off in any direction. We even want to know more about Coker (Hugh Webster), the job's inside man who is dispatched early on by a heart attack with only the hint of a back story.

When *Between Friends* was released, Martin Knelman rightly noted that it could never be mistaken for an American movie.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this accounts for why the film failed at the box office. Shebib, certainly, blamed Famous Players for sacrificing it on the altar of the art film at the Imperial 6 Cinemas on Yonge Street in Toronto. But if mainstream American cinema buried *Between Friends*, there is a delicious irony in the scene where Toby visits Malibu one last time before heading north to Canada—a place "far away" as he explains to his son on the telephone. Shot in British Columbia, the scene is obviously too rocky for southern California, and there is a dull, grey overcast to the images that is more characteristic of the Canadian west coast. When a young surfer with long golden hair—an archetypal embodiment of the dream that has captured Chino—recognizes Toby, they talk, and when the surfer leaves to "catch some waves," he says to Toby, "See you around, eh?" revealing, whether intentionally or not, the scene's true national identity. Elsewhere the film includes some overt Canadian references (Casa Loma, Toronto Dominion Bank and "Scarbor," among them), but this moment on the beach in *Between Friends* is one glorious instance in the history of Canadian cinema in which it is able to co-opt American representations rather than vice versa. In presenting such a dreary, tarnished image of an American dream, this brief scene, again unlike Chino, resists the blandishments of American popular culture and wonderfully encapsulates the entire film. **TAKE ONE**

#### Notes:

1. *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film*. Edited by Wyndham Wise (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 20.
2. *Cinema Canada*, November 1976, p. 39.
3. John Hofsess, *Inner Views: Ten Canadian Film Makers* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975), p. 77.
4. Martin Knelman, *This Is Where We Came In: The Career and Character of Canadian Film* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 99.



Director Don Shebib with Bonnie Bedelia.