

Then As Now, Now As Then: Tim Southam's *The Bay of Love and Sorrows*

By Tom McSorley

It's a long way from Newcastle, New Brunswick, to Altamont, California. Or is it? If we accept the conventional pop-culture historical narrative, the peace, love and understanding *Zeitgeist* of the late 1960s (see Woodstock, Haight Ashbury, et al.) began to come apart in the violent maelstrom that was the Rolling Stones free concert at the now infamous speedway outside San Francisco in 1969. The rock 'n' roll generation—metaphorically at least, with the murder of a fan and the inability of the Stones to control their own hired security force (the Hell's Angels!)—had failed to realize and make credible its dreams of social altruism and communal utopia.

Altamont is a historical moment that, for many, presaged the arrival of a new decade of deceit, disillusionment and danger: the 1970s. Claims for fastidious historical accuracy aside, there appeared to be, if nothing else, a palpable tonal shift from the idealism of the previous decade to a more pronounced cynicism in the decade of Watergate, Nixon, those final atrocious U.S. foreign policy spasms in Vietnam and the deep freeze of the Cold War. Up here, in the North, we wrestled with the October Crisis, the War Measures Act and widespread Canadian regional tensions during the Energy Crisis. (Remember that uplifting Alberta bumper sticker?: "Let the Eastern Bastards Freeze In the Dark.") All this, and BTO, too. Gimme Shelter indeed.

That was then. Or was it? These days the 1970s are seemingly everywhere, conjured in contemporary pop culture as a slightly imbecilic, harmlessly indulgent, sartorially embarrassing shaggy dog decade that good taste forgot. Who cares about the absence of political and philosophical idealism? Just look at those haircuts! This version of the 1970s turns up

like so much retro debris in disco revivals: wide-leg jeans walking the planet again; Quentin Tarantino movie soundtracks; rock band revival tours; and, most cringe-inducing of all, on television in such puerile fodder as *That '70s Show* (a show produced, of course, by those who grew up in the 1970s and are now remembering it more fondly as their arteries harden and their mutual funds mature). Maybe the past, as Harold Pinter once wrote, really *is* a foreign country.

Thankfully, not everywhere are the memories of the 1970s so vapid and domesticated. In director Tim Southam's new feature film, *The Bay of Love and Sorrows*, based on the eponymous 1998 novel by award-winning New Brunswick author, David Adams Richards, the 1970s—that is, the Canadian 1970s—undergo a much more serious, searching and unsettling dramatic reassessment. Located in and around Newcastle, geographically far from Altamont but undergoing the same seismic cultural shifts as the rest of North America, the film stares failed idealism straight in the face. Through its intense and intelligent drama about the sometimes catastrophic collisions of ideas and experience, it also confronts our own notions of what then was and what now is.

Set in 1973 on a bay along the Miramichi River near Newcastle, *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* is the story of Michael Skid (Jonathan Scarfe), the son of a local judge who returns home for the summer. He has travelled, been to university, and he's returned to the Miramichi to smoke pot, hang out on his father's yacht, party and take photographs for a coffee-table book about life on the river. He is having a relationship with a tough-minded and wary young working-class matriarch, Madonna Brassard (Joanne Kelly), and is friends with her

Christopher Jacot and Joanne Kelly.



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troubled, pill-popping brother, Silver (Christopher Jacot). One night at a party, Michael shows some of his slides of India and talks excitedly about how everyone should share their wealth in a quasi-communal utopian society. Michael's lifelong friend and now local farmer Tom Donnerel (Zachary Bennett), is skeptical of Michael's hippified ideals, ideals—he reminds Michael—embraced very easily by someone from a privileged background. Tom works the farm, tends to his mentally challenged brother, Vincent (Torquil Campbell), and is planning to marry Carrie Matchett (Elaine Cassidy), a young woman whose parents own a small gas bar. Carrie, meanwhile, dreams of travelling to Spain and soon becomes infatuated with Michael.

Into this cluster of agendas, appetites and inertias arrives Everette Hutch (Peter Outerbridge in his most concentrated, compelling performance to date), a cunning, opportunistic ex-con who has returned home after doing time. He seizes upon Michael's idea of sharing the wealth and proposes they all set up a communal money jar at his place. Everette then uses the money to finance a drug deal that will implicate everyone, especially Michael, when he plans to ferry the drugs to Prince Edward Island on Michael's father's yacht.

With dreams of big money for everyone, and in spite of Madonna's warnings, the wheels are set in motion for disaster. The various intersecting lines of action, unintended consequences of best intentions and interpersonal manipulations lead to Carrie's murder and subsequent actions that, in the final 20 minutes of the film, push *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* into positively Shakespearean tragic territory. The multi-levelled, devastating denouement of this film is as rich in suggestion and as dense in contradiction, tragic irony and fate as anything in Canadian cinema, past or present.

The momentum for a film version of *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* began when producer Anna Stratton of Toronto-based Triptych Media gave the pre-publication galleys of the novel to filmmaker Tim Southam. Southam's award-winning and diverse work includes *Dober Man* (1992), *Satie and Suzanne* (1994), the feature documentary *Drowning in Dreams* (1997) and a visually inventive adaptation of Quebec playwright Michel-Marc Bouchard's fairy-tale story of lost innocence, *The Tale of Teeka* (1998). Southam says he was attracted immediately to the book's sense of place. "I've always had an attraction to the 'atmospherics' of rural stories. My imagination twigs to the kind of power and resonance landscapes create." Being raised in small town Aylmer, Quebec, across the river from Ottawa, also made him acutely aware of small-town perceptions and expressions of class, race and power contained in Richards' novel.

Southam says he was attracted to the dilettantish figure of Michael Skid, as he is "a dreamer, not unlike Fred Broennle, who was the subject of *Drowning in Dreams*." He explains, "Fred sacrifices his family, his business, everything to find a

sunken ship supposedly laden with treasure at the bottom of Lake Superior. He's obsessed, in a way, and that obsession seriously affects the lives of those around him. His idea and its repercussions take their toll on others. Michael, too, is an attractive, complicated character whose ideas draw people to him. But is he just trying to be liked by others? If so, what is his commitment to the ideas he espouses? How is he compromised by his desire to be liked? All these questions swirl around in Michael. This high level of character complexity and unique naturalism of Richards's fictional universe—an incredibly rich and brave universe—were very attractive to me."

The film was shot on location in Cocagne, New Brunswick, in 24 days with a budget, Southam notes, "of well under three million." He says the aesthetic strategy was to foreground character and atmosphere. "For me, it was really a case of how to become a secret director, to put all of the techniques of filmmaking at the service of the characters. We wanted to bury the arsenal of filmmaking to emphasize the characters. There are really five points of view in the film, so we wanted to show, rather than tell—to produce a subjective space. We decided to limit the use of sounds to create a sense of the characters' enclosure within their landscape, and music would not be used in a decorative fashion in either loving or violent moments."

Within the restrained yet evocative visual and aural aesthetics of the film, Southam says that what *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* attempts to examine is the dramatic potential, constructive and destructive, of "people who do not mean what they say. To explore that notion in the context of the turbulent 1970s is relevant to reflecting on that question today. It's also, I think, an examination of that slippery and obscure Canadian class system. As a society, we've been successful at avoiding the terrible class prejudices of European societies, so it's a little more subtle process to get at the class issue in Canada. But the penetrating vision of Richards's work—especially in characters like Michael and Everette—does expose some of the more predatory and resentful aspects of class-consciousness. Nothing is deterministic, though. These are not stupid characters by any means."

Born and raised in Newcastle, the Governor General Award- and Giller Prize-winning David Adams Richards has always been interested in cinema. His father managed the Uptown Theatre, Newcastle's only movie house, and young David spent many hours watching films. Since becoming a full-fledged author after his first novel was published in 1974, Richards has applied his award-winning writing talents to the screen. To date, five of his screenplays have been produced: *Tuesday Wednesday* (1987), *Small Gifts* (1994), *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down* (1996), *Nights below Station Street* (1997) and *The Bay of Love and Sorrows*. In *Bay*, he even makes a cameo appearance, attending the opening of Michael's photography exhibition. As he says, "I like to write screenplays.

Writing novels is lonely. In the screenwriting process it's great to bounce ideas off other people. Sometimes it's a pain in the ass, but most of the time I find it very enjoyable. With *Bay*, Tim and I became co-writers on the script, and that worked very well. There was a meeting of the minds about the material. So that was rewarding. Sometimes I'd be writing scenes over the phone, as we worked out the challenges involved in the various parts of the film."

Many of Richards's novels are set in the 1970s, and deal with notion of power and how it is exercised personally, economically, politically and socially. As he points out, "I was born in 1950, so the 1970s were really the time when I became fully adult. I came out of the 1960s to witness the 1960s ideals becoming institutionalized. The utopias advanced might have worked in a classroom, but that's about it. Part of Michael's dilemma is that he doesn't understand that his ideas about an altruistic society are all well and good, but they can be taken and exploited by others like Hutch and cause some serious damage. His naïveté is dangerous. Everybody has an agenda, the rich and the poor. There are always power games, manipulations underway. You can't assume you know what's best for people, even if you've got all this idealism in your head. This gets back to a question that fascinates me and informs all my work: 'Why are things being done?'"

In this sense, while set in 1973 and certainly an unflinching assessment of the failed social utopian ideals of the 1960s, *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* is more generally a potent examination of the limitations of idealized doctrines of social improvement: then, communal living; now, technologically driven individualism. It's also, as Southam observes, an affirmation of the simple but infinitely complex idea that people are important to each other, for better and for worse. "The things you say and do *do* matter; Michael's words and deeds have extraordinary consequences." Part of Richards's genius as a writer is that he reminds us that we are not atomized, anonymous beings in modern life; we affect others in all kinds of ways, all the time. "That is a central principle in the tragedy that unfolds in our film. The action may be historically displaced to the 1970s, but it's a film about right now," says Southam

Indeed, far from the so-called centres of power, outside the prevailing wisdom of contemporary technological and economic progress, New Brunswickers in particular and Canadians in general are struggling, today as they did in the 1970s, to live meaningfully. Within the mature, unsparing yet compassionate vision of David Adams Richards, cinematically rendered in this impressive collaboration with Tim Southam, there is powerful drama to be found in lives lived—then as now—in confusion, dignity, anger, energy, fear, intelligence, and in love and sorrow.