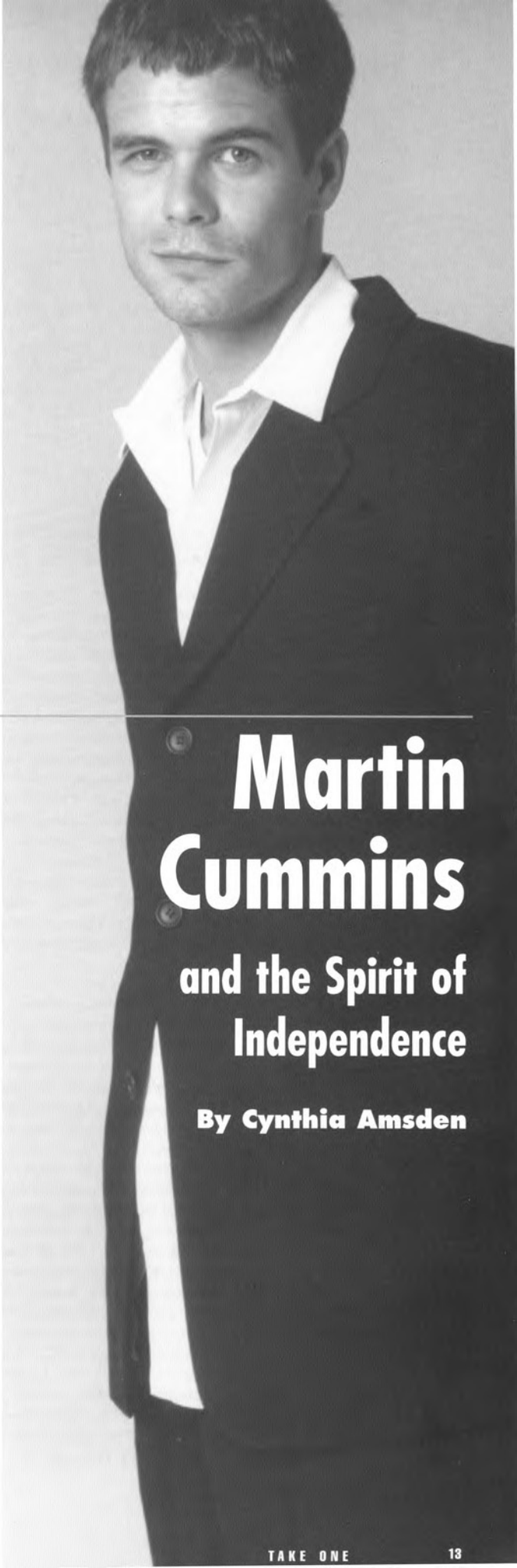


WE ALL FALL DOWN

Canada is a country where all films are independent productions and even if corporately nursed to life by Alliance Atlantis or Rhombus Media, they still bear the international mark of a non-studio act of cinematic defiance. That said, there are very few films that can be called truly independent. On one hand, this trend indicates a degree of market maturity for Canadian cinema; on the other, it abandons a gritty but honourable tradition of renegade filmmakers. One by one, they eventually all suckle on the financial tit of those who offer to pave the way to a green light.



Martin Cummins

and the Spirit of
Independence

By Cynthia Amsden

There is a suspicion that a filmmaker has to reside in the deep freeze of a Winnipeg winter (see Guy Maddin), or out where the cod no longer swim (see Bill MacGillivray), or hold the title of "god of fringe cinema" (see Mike Hoolboom) to retain the madness which makes a film independent.

The understanding is – in the words of one filmmaker who recently took the financially secure route to getting a film made – independent films have a festival shelf life but are theatrically invisible. It is reasonable for filmmakers to want more than 100 people to see their work. But where's the courage? Where's the cinematic brinksmanship? There is a suspicion that a filmmaker has to reside in the deep freeze of a Winnipeg winter (see Guy Maddin), or out where the cod no longer swim (see Bill MacGillivray), or hold the title of "god of fringe cinema" (see Mike Hoolboom) to retain the madness that makes a film independent. To pursue that line of thinking is to engage in the "film as art versus film as movies" debate, but it still doesn't answer the basic question: Where are the new grassroots filmmakers? The creator of *We All Fall Down* may be one.

Operating completely outside the grid, *We All Fall Down* is the product of a previously unknown, or at least, unhyped quantity, Martin Cummins. But a number of orbits have intersected and Cummins is no longer unknown. Winner of the Best Supporting Actor Genie for his role as the white brother in Clement Virgo's *Love Come Down*, he is also the director, producer, co-writer and lead actor in *We All Fall Down*, for which Helen Shaver won the Best Supporting Actress Genie for her performance as Sherry, the hooker. Based loosely on his own life experiences, *We All Fall Down* is set in Vancouver's downtown east side. The story follows Michael (Darcy Belsher), a young man struggling unsuccessfully to accept the death of his mother. Espousing the lifestyle of his close friend Kris (played by Cummins), an artist and a career junkie, Michael takes comfort in heroin's dulling of his psychic pain. Entangling herself into this toxic mix is Kris's girlfriend, Ryan (Françoise Robertson). But the person who becomes the pivotal figure in Michael's life is Sherry, a 45-year-old streetwalker who works her clientele to support her own drug habit. Through Sherry's bruised wisdom, Michael comes to see her as the embodiment of his dead mother, and in this transference he finds the strength to pull himself out of his downward spiral.

We All Fall Down received quiet, but critically appreciative attention at the 2000 Toronto International Film Festival. *Toronto Star* film critic Geoff Pevere called it "a poignant and unblinking movie." Nowhere were the words "interesting" or "experimental" employed. In Cummins's mind, this kind of reception made the effort worthwhile, but that was not the reason for making the film.

The genesis of *We All Fall Down* can be found on the set of the Vancouver-based television series *Poltergeist: The Legacy*. "I took on the series because it was a good thing at the time," Cummins explains. "My wife, Brandy, was pregnant. We needed regular money and it was shot close to home. *We All Fall Down* is a promise I made to myself during the four years I did *Poltergeist*. If I was going to do the series, I was going to do something with it. Richard C. Burton, then my stand-in and now the co-writer on *We All Fall Down*, and I spent so much time spinning our wheels that we decided to work together. This film is it."

Writing the screenplay began late in 1997. Cummins and Burton did the back and forth with the script for a full year and a half. "We had \$275,000 to make this film," says Cummins. "And



Helen Shaver as Sherry, the hooker with bruised wisdom, in *We All Fall Down*.



Cummins in Clement Virgo's *Love Come Down*

that's complete – purchasing music, post-production – everything. The plan was to ask the television crew on *Poltergeist* to help out, and we knew because they had just finished eight months of paid work, they just might go along with it. Nobody got paid. Not the crew, not the talent. But we bought them lunch. That was the kick. You've gotta feed everyone. The entire crew were pros." Translation: they'll work for food.

The \$275,000 for *We All Fall Down* did not include any government funding. No Telefilm Canada. No Canadian Film Centre. Harold Greenberg was nowhere in sight. This was an out-of-pocket event. "What other film do you know of that was made for \$275,000?" asks Helen Shaver, who co-executive produced *We All Fall Down* as well as acted in it. "I've been in the business for 30 years and I've never been involved in anything like this before. I did Peter Bryant's film, *The Supreme Kid*, and that was \$80,000 back in 1976. But that had government money and this was money out of Martin's pocket, my pocket and executive producer Leonard Bonnell's pocket. I've never worked on a film where people went into their own bank accounts and gave their own money for things like having the film processed or striking a print or making a poster." (Shaver's boosterism notwithstanding, there have been occasions where, for little money, productions such as Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* [made for \$350,000 in 1986] and Bruce McDonald's *Roadkill* [made for \$250,000 in 1989] have come to fruition.)

So there they were, in late June, 1999, 52 people from the Vancouver film and television community banding together for 12- to 13-hour days (and a total of 30 minutes of overtime) to pull off a small but extraordinary 94-minute marvel. The successful production of *We All Fall Down* is reminiscent of certain groups of actors in the United States, like Stanley Tucci or John Turturro, who have a coterie of accomplished friends who band together in support of a project. Cummins assembled such a group. Helen Shaver was drawn into this fold because of her long time friendship with Cummins. "We've worked together every day for four years, and I wouldn't have survived *Poltergeist* without her," he says. "I directed Nick Campbell

(who was in competition with Cummins for the Best Supporting Actor Genie for his role in *New Waterford Girl*) on *Outer Limits* and when he heard I was doing *We All Fall Down*, he said, 'I'm free on the weekends. I'll come and help you out.'"

So, exactly who is this Martin Cummins and how does an actor who looks more like Brad Pitt than Brad Pitt manage to stay so low profile, yet collect the talent to make a film that winds up on the Genie nomination list? Cummins, the son of John Cummins, a Canadian Alliance MP from the riding of Delta-South Richmond, with whom he has close ties, talks often and fondly of his mother who passed away when he was young. The autobiographical nature of *We All Fall Down* leads one to accept that his early twenties were not his salad days. As he tells it, his career choices were commercial fishing and acting, and he never gave the fishing serious thought.

It wasn't until the age of 31, when he was in his second season of *Poltergeist*, that he told his friends that he was a professional actor. He simply was not proud of anything he had done. No pride, no voice; no voice, no hype. No hype? – that's when you live and die by the sword of your talent. Shaver unabashedly describes Cummins as, "intelligent, and, I think, quite ambitious, driven, insightful, gifted and sexy. He's a Canadian guy who has great moments of clarity. He's smart enough to know when to ask for help. When he directed me, it was a collaborative experience." Of course, Cummins will tell you: "I'm happy just getting up in the morning to take my kid to kindergarten." But he is more than that.

"I finished *We All Fall Down* four or five months before *Love Come Down*, and just shooting it did so much for me. I was able to sit down with Clement, have a conversation and understand what he is going through to get the film done. We really connected. There are two kinds of actors. There's the wild man who is not aware of his total insanity and he does things that turn out wonderful on film. Then there are those of us who are painfully aware of our shortcomings as human beings. If you have things that block you in your personal life then, as an actor, you can't go any further than who you are emotionally." ●