

Interview — Norman Jewison, July 2009

Jane: You mention the Beach a number of times in your autobiography, *This Terrible Business Has Been Good To Me*. Did the place where you grew up play an important part in your development as a creative artist?

NJ: I think anyone's early experiences, probably from the age of five right through until they're 20 years old, are extremely important in forming the values and everything else that makes up personality, so you can always look at where someone lived their early years as an indicator of influences. I was born in the Beach in 1926, so I grew up there in the Depression years. At that time the Beach was a working class area. Half the people were on relief because there was a lot of unemployment, so there was a lot of unrest and it was what you might call a volatile period, because people were nervous. People were frightened.

Jane: You mentioned Communist meetings in the Beach. I thought that was interesting.

NJ: They used to be held on the Boardwalk. Yeah, it used to be down on the Boardwalk there, just below Pantry Park, in around there, the bottom of Kenilworth. I remember they weren't that organized, but I think a lot of it was because of this tremendous unemployment. I do remember speeches about the Spanish Civil War. There must have been some very strong lefties in the area, because it was a working class area. I think a lot of kind of rebellious people. The people in the Beach always stuck together. They considered themselves a very special area.

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Jane: Do you think of yourself as having grown up in a village, or did you grow up in Toronto?

NJ: Oh I grew up in a village. Everybody knew each other and my parents had a store and a sub-post office, which meant that we were a centre. If you wanted stamps, you wanted to mail a letter, you wanted to, you know, mail a parcel and you lived anywhere between Woodbine and all the way over to I'm sure past Lee Avenue somewhere, everyone came to our store, at Kippendavie and Queen.

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NJ: ... The whole Beach has now become "yuppified". I mean it's become a desirable place to live. When I was there, the houses were almost like cottages. It was a cheap place to live. Nobody wanted to live in the east end. It was kind of a working class area, and the

people were kind of rebellious, and they were kind of suspicious of foreigners and all of that ... but they had the Lake — and they had the Boardwalk and they had Kew Beach Park and they had the Racetrack. And these things were all very important to them.

Jane: So what about the connection to water and the landscape?

NJ: Oh, I think that was a very strong influence, at least it was on me and the group I hung out with in that area on Kippendavie and Woodbine and Buller Avenue and Kenilworth, because we had canoes. The big thing was to get a canoe when you were about 12 years old. We'd camp out and we'd paddle down to Highland Creek and around the Rouge there, 'cause it was wild then and we would literally camp out in the wild and the open with the Boy Scouts or just with others. So we spent a lot of time on the beach. We were thrilled when the water started to warm up. And everybody was swimming when it was freezing cold. Then there was the Balmy Beach Canoe Club. That was a centre of teenage activity — where everybody wanted to be. They wanted to paddle for Balmy Beach because water sports and canoeing and racing and war canoes and paddling were big things down there. It didn't cost anything and again it was the Lake that pulled us together.

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Jane: ... Glenn Gould's favourite place in the Beach was the Boardwalk and William Kurelek, who lived in the Beach at a later time, painted and interpreted the Beach and Lake Ontario in many different ways. What does Lake Ontario represent for Norman Jewison?

NJ: I think, I think... it had a pull for me and I really loved spending time on the water and I think it was a unique place to live. You didn't feel like you were living in a major metropolitan city, ever. You felt like you were living in almost like a cottage area. You know, it was pleasant. It was a terrific childhood and even the Racetrack, this huge... I guess it was one of the largest racetracks in the country... and the King and the Queen would come and... We had something other people didn't have.

Jane: Were you aware of that?

NJ: I'm sure people in Oakville probably felt the same way. I'm sure they felt the same way, but they were wealthier and had big homes and everything. But they didn't have the land, they didn't have the wonderful sense of community that came from the Beach. When you said you came from the Beach...

Jane: What did that mean?

NJ: Well it meant that you were very special. You felt very special. I think it means a little different now. I think it means very upper middle class, or...

Jane: Can I ask you something? It's probably a stretch, but when I see your movie *The Russians are Coming* and you have all that expanse of water in front of you and there's this tight little village world and, if I may say so, those small town archetypes, does that have anything to do with where you came from, the ability to tell that kind of story?

NJ: I think every film you make and if you are an artist everything you do, whether it's books, painting, music, whatever, everything is going to be affected by your childhood and by the influences that were thrust upon you. Later on, once you're out in the world, you then become molded in different ways but you do not lose, you can't get away from, your early influences...

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