

Sandy Wilson's

## My American Cousin

**T**he outstanding characteristic of Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* – and the reason it has garnered so much attention and all those Genies – is its sense of humour.

Wilson has achieved that very special double trick of bringing enjoyment back to movie-going and leaving the audience still chuckling as it files out of the theatre. *My American Cousin* is fun without being stupid – entertaining in the style developed when people still made an event of going out to see films. This is a considerable achievement for a blatantly Canadian film from a national cinema often noted for its bleak and ponderous productions. And, *My American Cousin* is quite decidedly a woman's film, without those yearning looks and long empty silences (read inactivity) artistically associated with the feminine coming of age.

Though *My American Cousin* is in the same genre that has recently become so popular at the box-office, loosely termed "puberty" films, it is the only one known to this reviewer, aside from the Australian *Puberty Blues*, that is from a female perspective. Importantly, Wilson doesn't fall into the traps of that genre – unlike the male considerations, tits-and-ass-style, or female considerations, marked by serious and painfully emotional scenes. *My American Cousin* is filled with motion, colour, music and laughter, all of which audiences enjoy and respond to, making for a successful movie no matter what its themes, subjects or perspectives.

The situations and the conversations, complete with clichéd lines, of the film must be familiar to every adult, but Wilson remembers them with the humour we all lacked at the time of the actual experience. In making a very personal film, she has somehow arrived at the heart of the universal, but with a Canadian touch.

The difference between us, the Canadians and them, the Americans is a predominant theme of the film, made perhaps too large in its use of pointed statements: that Butch (John Wildman) comes from a good family, American unfortunately, but nonetheless a good family, or that his car is so American. Underlying these direct statements is a sensibility that comes closer to a realization of the undefinable difference between the two nations than might be expected in a movie of this sort. The Canadians in *My American Cousin* are outsiders, isolated in many ways from an "America" where 'They' have bigger, faster cars, more kinds of candy, rock'n roll 24 hours-a-day, and can send people to the moon. As Butch says, "Anything you want we got in the U.S.A." But nobody in the sleepy Canadian Okanagan valley of 1959 seems to

be suffering from doing without all that. And it seems that Butch has found something he's been missing to prompt his wistful remark that it's so nice up here he wishes he didn't have to go back. In fact, it's the American, Butch, who seems to be doing without, rather than Sandy, her family or her friends. The isolation of the Canadians in *My American Cousin* is not an isolation amounting to a lack, but rather isolation from the gloss, showiness and ultimate falseness of another, not greater, only different culture.

Aside from these thematic and ideological elements, Wilson has produced a technically interesting if erratically flawed work. There are unfortunately problems with the film's continuity. The most obvious example is the sequence after the fight when Butch jumps in his car and roars off with blood on his mouth. The next shot sees Sandy climbing from the back seat to join Butch in a head-on shot but the traces of blood on his mouth have disappeared. Details like this should not be allowed to slip by; we have to see him wipe the blood off or, at least, there be some trace he's been hit. Although it may have been the quality of the print, there is also what appears to be a jump-cut in this scene that jolts the viewer, suddenly creating distance, and destroying our flow with the action.

The use of the camera varies from very wide and long shots that make use of the incredible natural settings to very tight close-ups that bring the viewer to an almost touchable closeness with the characters. Some interesting angles are used though they are mostly traditional. The voice-over in many sequences gives the film a particular feeling and unique rhythm, that, combined with the varying visuals, allows a sense of almost continuous motion. One moment we are inside the big red Caddy as it winds its way around the dirt roads and the next we are high overhead looking down on it, with the voices still at the same pitch and level.

The editing in *My American Cousin* adds to its overall humorous tone,

creating its special rhythm. When the Major (Richard Donat) decides to explain the male-female facts of life to his daughter Sandy (Margaret Langrick), a combination of edits make the sequence different from what would normally be done in a father-daughter/son talk, playing up the humour of the dialogue. We start out close-up, outside the Major's pick-up truck; then it stops and we move inside where the conversation begins, the truck pulls away again and the camera now moves to a distant overhead shot as the Major tries to explain the idea of the male's "uncontrollable urges", using the example of a bull who knows there's a cow around. Sandy's response, as the truck disappears around a distant corner, is to ask whether her father was like that with her mother. This distancing adds poignancy to the humour.

In the fight scene on the beach, editing and camera combine quite successfully to give the feeling there really is a lot happening when, in actual fact, movement is kept to a minimum. The camera swings back and forth from the two fighting boys to the crowd, swirling rapidly around the circle as they push and tussle with each other. Only one punch meets its target, yet the viewer feels there has been a real fight.

The film is filled with some beautifully creative and unabashedly feminine touches that portend a real talent in the making. The red lipstick Sandy picks up from her mother becomes a symbol – as it is for most girls: lipstick equals maturity. It is passed around among her friends when they go riding in Butch's car, creating the image of these young girls with identically red lips bobbing around in the back of the car. One of the best sequences of the film is where Sandy's little sisters dress up in their mother's clothes and jewellery and totter around on high heels while Sandy's brother appears in one of her bras over his T-shirt. There is an honesty and bravery in Wilson's approach to re-creating all these female childhood fantasies and games that is unique and refreshing. Together with young lead

Margaret Langrick, Wilson has created an amazing female character for which both must be commended.

This may sound as though *My American Cousin* is the Great Canadian Film we've all been waiting for. Well, it isn't, but it is a very special film – because it has managed to be both an unabashed pronouncement of its nationality and fun at the same time, two things that don't seem to have previously come together. It will be most interesting to see where the talented Wilson goes in her next project.

Jan Teag •

**MY AMERICAN COUSIN** d./co.p./sc. Sandy Wilson p. Peter O'Brian assoc.p. Phil Schmidt p.man. Tom Braidwood p.coord. Gabriella Martinelli unit man. (Penticton) Nikos Theodosakis p. liaison Coralee Testar p.acct Joanne Jackson 1st a.d. Edward Folger 2nd a.d. Matthew O'Connor p.a. Orest Haba, Greg Coyes p.labourer Kellie Benz sc.sup. Candice Field d.o.p. Richard Leiterman 1st asst.cam. Harvey La Rocque 2nd asst.cam. Trig Singer stills Kirk Tougas art d. Phil Schmidt asst. art d. Dave Roberts set dresser Joey Morgan props. master Barry Kootchin asst.props Stewart Bradley sd.des. Bruce Nyznik sd. mixer Garrell Clark boom op. Daryl Powell sd.ed. Gord Thompson, Tony Currie, Alison Clark asst.sd.ed. Susan Lindell, Anke Bakkar key grip Bill Mills best boy Nick Kuchera gaffer Malcolm Kibblewhite best boy Dean Bennett cost.des. Philip Clarkson, Sheila Bingham asst.cost.des. Barbara Clayden cost.buyer Kay Jackson seamstress Lynn Kelly, Valerie Andrews dresser Larry Forsyth make-up artist Jayne Dancose asst. make-up Pearl Louie hair Eileen Dezouche asst.hair Anneliese Lueder, Berta Michel barber Gary Leschniok caterer Tana Tocher, Ann Bentley carp. Patrick Kerns labourers Chris Sloan, Cam Forman driver Salmon Harris, Dale Johnson mech. Peter Dancose ed. Haida Paul asst.ed. Debbie Rurak cast. Maria Armstrong, Ross Clysdale, Stuart Aikins l.p. Margaret Langrick, John Wildman, Richard Donat, Jane Mortifee, T.J. Scott, Camille Henderson, Darsi Bailey, Alison Hale, Samantha Jocelyn, Babs Chula, Terry Moore, Brent Severson, Brian Hagel, Carter Dunham, Julie Nevlud, Alexis Peat, Micki Maunsell, Kitty Wilson, Jake Van Weston, Ritchie Hobden, Linda Geggie, Nikos Theodosakis, Lisa Nevin, Jacqueline Conrad, Tom Braidwood, Gabriella Martinelli, Nicola Cavendish, Rob Wylie, Sergei Ryga, Dave Sher, Linda & Lisa Wiebe, Kellie Benz, Lorne Davidson, Larry Forsyth p.c. A Peter O'Brian Independent Pictures Production in association with Borderline Productions Inc. and Okanagan Motion Picture Company Ltd. Produced with the participation of Telefilm Canada, in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation dist. Spectrafilm. Col., running time: 92 mins.

• Puberty blues: Margaret Langrick as Sandy in *My American Cousin*

