Kevin Sullivan's

The Wild Pony

There was a lot of pride going around at the press screening of *The Wild Pony*. After years of stage, radio and TV work in Alberta and B.C., producer Eda Lishman was proud of having made her first feature and of having pulled off an industry breakthrough of sorts: she'd become the first western producer to come to Toronto and get backing after being turned down by the standard networks. Pay-TV company First Choice, which provided that backing, was proud of their hard-cash commitment to independent, all-Canadian production and of the fact that they'd already gotten their European distribution in place.

Scripture buffs will have guessed what's coming next, and you're right. For the rest of you, "Pride goeth before a fall," and *The Wild Pony* is a dud.

Some of the awfulness is technical – slightly uneven location sound, a henhouse that falls over for no apparent reason. More of it is on the craft level – Hagood Hardy's terminally wispy score, Michael Lonzo's merely pretty photography, the sets dressed and lit to look like sets, and the occasional spurt of bouncy-bouncy pointless cutting. But none of that would even be worth mentioning if there were anything at the heart of the film. But there isn't.

Which is truly amazing. A story about a young farmboy in turn-of-the-century Alberta who unites his mother and his new step-father and reintegrates himself into family through his obsession with a wild horse sounds like the basis for a surefire family entertainment-type drama and it probably would have been if anybody had bothered to film the drama, but mostly they didn't – they telegraphed it. Like this: Chris, the boy, gets his first look at the horse one morning when he's out doing chores. We get a shot of horses running, a reaction shot, more running and another reaction shot. With nothing in the shooting or cutting to give us a feel for the power and the beauty of the animals, we're thrown back to the boy's reactions. And with no knowledge of either his character or emotional state, we're thrown back to reading actor Josh Byrne's face. And it's blank.

Much later, when the horse runs away and the boy follows on foot through a violent snowstorm, we're given only a very few shots before the horse is found; we've no idea how hard Chris had to work to get to the horse and, more significantly, no idea of how far he's come. So, when the horse walks back into the barn with Chris clinging to it, apparently more dead than alive, we're left to infer their heroic trudge through night and stinging wind. Personally, I'd like to have seen it, partly for the drama – it's the first time horse and boy are united and they're facing death – and partly because it was the last chance either had to develop a character. It didn't happen, so both remained cyphers to the end.

Marilyn Lightstone, as Sarah, the boy's mother, doesn't get to develop a character either, but for much different reasons: she isn't given anything consistent to work with. What are we to make of a character who shows herself as an astute, good-humoured businesswoman striking a very good deal, then in the same day refuses supper to her son, saying, "We can use the money we save on his food to feed that horse," only to then show up in the barn with a handful of costly food for the boy to give the horse? Is she neurotic? Does she love her kids, or hate them? Or is she just playing the scene the way she's told and hoping it'll come together in the cutting?

Art Hindle, as Frank Chase, the man Sarah talks into a marriage of convenience, does have a character, and he plays it as well, on a scene-by-scene basis, as Lightstone does hers, but the character he plays has no relation to the character the script sets us up for. He's introduced as a hard-core bachelor, set in his ways and loving them. But as soon as he's wed, he turns into the loving husband and father. No transition, no conflict. A set-up that never pays off.

That's followed immediately by a conflict with no set-up and no sense to it. Given the sort of man Chris' natural father was, he should have leapt into Frank's arms with joy. Instead, he chooses to resent him. His reasons are never made clear and his surface dislike is never convincing, but the conflict at least gets paid off in the punch-up with the town bullies.

It's a good sequence and there are others, mostly involving Lightstone's skill with comedy, but they're never enough to overcome the sense that *The Wild Pony* was a terrific story that happened when the filmmakers weren't looking.

It's hard to know if any of this matters. The family entertainment genre has developed a recent and strong tradition of success with schlock worse than this and kids are capable of strong responses to the blandest-seeming, most unlikely material. But it does seem a shame to feed them the gristle, even inadvertently, when they could have had the meat.

Andrew Dowler ●

THE WILD PONY **p.** Eda Lishman **assoc. p.** Kevin Sullivan **d.** Kevin Sullivan **p. man.** Eda Lishman **screen adapt.** Eda Lishman & Kevin Sullivan **1st asst. d.** Randy Cheveldave **2nd. asst. d.** Nives Lever **3rd. asst. d./loc. man.** Earl Peturson **d.o.p.** Michael Lonzo **1st asst. cam.** Peter Woeste **2nd. asst. cam.** Sean Gorman **sd. rec.** Lars Ekstrom **boom** Don Brown **gaffer** Malcolm Kibblewhite **costume des.** Martha Mann **props/set dressing** Martin Weinryb **wardrobe mistress** Lori Ashton **asst. ward. mistress** Karen Murray **p. co-ord.** Nancy McMurchy Peturson **asst. p. man.** Margaret Haraba **cont.** Candice Field **key grip** Bill Mills **grip asst.** Anna Marie Plosz **make-up** Pearl Louie **transp. captain** Tom Charlton **craft services** Wendy Fitl **construction man.** Eric James **set des.** Dick Bylin **carpenters** Bruce Robinson, Tom Scheitel **set painters** A. Gazetas, Mary Gazetas **animal handler** Gigi Van Ostrand **p. asst's.** Mike Baker, Wendy Cesar **d. of 2nd unit** Randy Cheveldave **1st. asst. d. of 2nd unit** Diane Edmondson **cameraman, 2nd unit** Rick Garbutt **sd. rec., 2nd unit** Tom Archer **ed.** Stan Cole **asst. ed.** Rick Benwick **music** Hagood Hardy **publicist** Kathryn Fedori **p.c.** Pony Film Productions Inc. *Licensed to First Choice Pay T.V.* running time: 90 min. colour, 16 mm **Lp.** Marilyn Lightstone, Art Hindle, Josh Byrne, Kelsey McLeod, Murray Ord, Paul Jolicoeur, Jack Ackroyd, Bob Collins, Tommy Banks, Mark Kay, Philip Clark, Ron Tucker, Jack Goth, J.R. Beauregard, Brian Weightman, Danny Masnyk, Margaret Haraba, Eric Cortez.

● Thrifty Mom: Marilyn Lightstone in **The Wild Pony**

Don McBrearty's

American Nightmare

Here is a movie that should be treated as were those pharoahs whose names were stricken from every record so that even the fact of their once having lived would be forgotten for all time. *American Nightmare* should never have been made and, except for a single line reading, "Avoid at all costs," it should probably not be reviewed.

The foulness set in from the moment the naked, stoned hooker began writhing on the bed while the faceless man washed his hands in the bathroom. It wasn't only that it was clear from the start that she was due to get straight-razored, but she writhed so woodenly that even the group across the aisle, who seemed to feel that good cinema was intimately entwined with the slaughter of young women, began to groan in disgust. That was the first scene.

I was ready to walk by the end of the second. That was the scene with the young hero telling his no-good, rich daddy that he was off to rescue runaway, troubled sis. Not only did it set the tone for the acting – badly stilted – and the lighting – cheap porn – but it signalled clearly that sis was the slashed hooker and daddy and his smarmy henchman were the perpetrators.

For those among you who may think that slash-and-burn reviews are necessarily done to provide a sick little ego-boost for the writer, let me tell you: they're not. The ego-boosts come from being stimulated at the movies and feeling that you've passed it on in print. Nor are they done for the fun of sitting around and thinking up vivid ways of describing awfulness, not when describing means first recalling those murky, flat, uncomposed images that look like they were processed in the urinals at the Morrissey, a sleazy Toronto bar.

I'm stressing this also because, if you have grasped the concept of 'not fun', then you have the essence of *American Nightmare*.

It is not fun to report that Lawrence S. Day, the hero, is marginally better with his body than his voice, which is awful, or that his resemblance to Donald Sutherland is so strong that, as soon as his face matures, his film career will very likely drop dead.

It is not fun to report that Michael Ironside and Lenore Zann, the two solid professionals in the cast, are able to achieve nothing more than paying the rent, thanks to a script filled with irrelevancies, banalities and emotion telegraphed in words so flavourless and cliched they might have been laid in with the infamous Republic Pictures rubber-stamp dialogue kit (reportedly used on every Republic serial between 1946 and 1952).

It is not fun to report that *American Nightmare* is so ill-directed that the camera set-ups make it clear there is no place for the slasher to hide when he is supposed to be lurking in the girl's tiny apartment, or that, moments later, having slit the wrists of another naked, stoned blonde, this one in a bathtub, he is allowed to destroy the fake suicide he's just created by, first, drowning her, then taking the razor away with him.

It is not fun to report how, in something supposed to be a mystery, every attempt to draw attention to a fresh suspect is cancelled by positively locating that suspect elsewhere at the time of the next attack.

American Nightmare is blatantly made and set in Toronto. In choosing the title they did, the producers, Paul Lynch among them, seem to have sought to clear us all of the taint of guilt by association.

I applaud what seems to me a gesture of the deepest patriotism.

Andrew Dowler ●

AMERICAN NIGHTMARE (formerly Community Standards) **exec. p.** Paul Lynch, Tony Kramreither **p.** Ray Sager **d.** Don McBrearty **sc.** John Sheppard **p. man.** Robert Wertheimer **asst. p. man.** Fran Solomon **asst. d.** David Pamplin **2nd asst. d.** Lindsae Paterson, Derrett Lee **d.o.p.** Dan Hainey **cont.** Tannis Baker **art. d.** Andy Deskin **asst. art d.** Ken Clark **asst. cam.** Scott Barrie **ward.** Ariadna Ochrymovych, Martha Snetsinger **hair/make-up** Miriam Freifeld **grip** Bill Heintz **2nd grip** Craig Heintz **gaffer** John Herzog **mixer** Dan Latour **boom** Reynald Trudel **labour** Ian Bresolin **driver/p.a.** Richard Quinlan, John Gill,m Robin Rosenberg **ed.** Ian McBride **asst. ed.** Karen Hall **prod. asst.** Paul Fox **p.c.** Mano Films Ltd. **dist.** Pan Canadian **running time:** 90 min. 35mm **colour l.p.** Lawrence S. Day, Lora Staley, Lenore Zann, Claudia Udy, Page Fletcher, Mike Ironside, Larry Aubrey, Neil Daynard, Tom Harvey.