

Douglas Williams' **Best of Both Worlds**

CBC's feature-length romantic comedy *Best of Both Worlds*, which aired April 21, leaves one with the uncomfortable suspicion that the more "Canadian" people become, the less value they retain as human beings.

Sharmila (Malika Mendez), a charming young Indian beauty, is flown direct from Asia for a family-arranged marriage with Anil (Sugith Varughese), the Canadianized son of (presumably) first-generation immigrants, whom she's never met. But Anil already has a girlfriend, Tammy (Gaye Burgess), the pampered daughter of wealthy Toronto WASPS, and agrees to the marriage only when he learns about the \$50,000 dowry that comes with his mail-order bride. It's "the big chance" they've been waiting for - Anil plans to use the 50 grand to set up in business, so he'll be able to keep Tammy "in the style to which she's accustomed" (though he'll keep a few thousand aside for an RRSP - Anil's already a very Canadian sort of entrepreneur).

In short, Anil is a creep on the make, and one of the lesser mysteries of the plot is why two lovely women should both be fighting over him. But director Douglas Williams never lets the pace slacken enough for us to worry much about it.

More worrisome is the moral vacuity of characters like Anil and Tammy. Anil, a first-generation-born Canadian, works hard to deny his cultural roots: when his mother serves an Indian dinner, he goes to the fridge looking for left-over pizza. Or he amuses his WASP girlfriend with his 'Peter Sellers' take-off on an East Indian accent, though the humor falls flat with Sharmila there as a mirror for Anil's cultural suicide.

Having defined his identity in negatives - the great Canadian compromise - in the end Anil is loyal only to money. His new wife shows him the antique jewelry she's brought as her dowry; the reflection of light from the gold ripples across her head like the aura of a madonna, and the materialist Anil is impressed. The fact that the dowry takes the form of a family heirloom, instead of ready cash as Anil had expected ("I thought it would be a cheque," he says desperately) is a vivid capsule summary of the contradiction between Old World values and New.

Specifically, the rejection of the Old World implies the disintegration of the power of the family - i.e., arranged marriages - but once 'liberated' from family, the isolated individual finds that his only link with society is through the mega-corporation. Thus Anil's cluttered bachelor apartment is crowded with huge cartons of the soapflake product he promotes in supermarkets. (One of the few times we see any spunk in Anil - or any hint of life in his relationship with Tammy - is when they perform a little guerilla theatre to dupe a supermarket manager into granting Anil's soapflakes better shelf space.)

Anil's scam (ripping off the dowry) expresses his profound disdain for his cultural roots, a common enough New World disorder among first-generation immigrants or *independentistes*.

But Anil begins to sense that he has underestimated the strength of the old culture as he stands under the wedding canopy with his radiant bride, surrounded

by well-wishers - the extended family, the tribe. In the flower-strewn hotel suite when Sharmila (the woman he met only a few hours before) unabashedly summons him to his marital duties, our hero, this child of the new America, destroyer of tradition's stifling bonds, can only flee.

In this sea of moral bankruptcy - like the swimming-pool in Tammy's house which her mother keeps well-stocked with bored young lawyers - Sharmila stands out like a beacon of hope for humanity. She's a sort of Superwoman - beautiful, charming, patient, courageous, and a scrappy fighter. Billed as the unfortunate dupe in Anil's dowry-heist, she quickly makes mincemeat of Tammy and when the melodrama ends we are confident that she may even manage to make, if not a man of Anil, at least a satisfactorily domesticated stud. Tradition will be maintained for perhaps another generation, thanks to this fresh infusion of values from the old country.

Sharmila's secret, of course, is that *her* life is still meshed with her traditional values - she knows what she believes, and therefore she believes in herself. The only thing Canadian about her is that, like the RCMP, she gets her man - and there's something quaintly nostalgic about that too, in this age of cynicism about monogamy. (When Anil claims his parents know nothing of love if they believe in arranged marriages, his father retorts: "In our culture, you don't fall in love, you grow into it!")

And yet *Best of Both worlds* is no blind eulogy to a Golden Age of the past either. Sharmila admits to Anil that the reason she was ready to marry him, was to get out of India. When Tammy, in a last-ditch attempt to hang onto Anil, praises the richness and romance of India, Sharmila shoots her down: "If you haven't been there, how do you know?"

Tradition may carry important human values, but the old worlds that produced them are no longer - and here we come against the major stumbling-block of *Best of Both Worlds*. True, for the moment Sharmila's determination and strong roots have saved the day, but what about tomorrow? In an age when one in three marriages end in divorce, can "girl gets man" really do as a satisfactory denouement? Already by the end, Sharmila has changed her clothes and hairdo for western styles - "You're

beautiful!" Anil exclaims.

A vital key to the politics of cultural imperialism is that the colonized develop a taste for the boss's treacle, and soon prefer it to domestic brands. And so the implicit theme of cultural dilution of *Best of Both Worlds* becomes a critical comment on Canadian production awash in the gooey treacle from the airwaves south of the border. Because Canadian productions are themselves a minority in the continental broadcasting environment, they're judged by a separate standard - and TV in North America prefers not to be judged at all, it just IS.

True, there's often something that chaffs about a Canadian production like *Best of Both Worlds*. At first I thought it was Sugith Varughese's acting that wasn't up to pip - there was something uncomfortably wrong about Anil. But that wasn't it either. American TV has habituated us to expect strong male heroes, surrounded by a court of supportive females. Egos somewhat frazzled at the edges after a day at work, Americans settle down each evening in front of their multi-channel dream machines for a fresh dose of mythology - from the mainline. That's why American TV must be written to a formula, like Harlequin romances.

But while Canadians have proven quite capable of reproducing the formula flawlessly in some of the simpler genres (e.g., Harlequin romances or *Porky's*), on (some) film and TV lingers a revisionist tendency to portray reality. This may be in part a residuum of Canada's strong documentary tradition, but, more important, it reflects the unacknowledged preoccupation with our economic and political - and therefore cultural - dependence. Canadians know only too well that they're not the heroes, and therefore an impotent, equivocating, worm like Anil can slip in as a *pseudo-hero*. Unfortunately, such a radical departure from the prescribed litany generates sufficient discomfort in the regular TV *aficionado* that he often switches channels.

Still, the fact that *Best of Both Worlds* was made and aired at all is proof that Canada has grown a lot. Not so long ago, a CBC producer would have steered clear of a social comedy that made light of the customs of one of our minority groups - and yet, in a country where more people now stem from "minority"

groups than from either of the "founding" nations, what else is Canada about if not the dialectic between Old and New World values?

Recently a group of CBC producers published a proposal recommending that the public network commit itself to a policy of 100% Canadian content. Unfortunately we still live in a time when such a proposal can scarcely hope to be taken seriously. And yet, in the end, a film like *Best of Both Worlds* is an eloquent argument for how much we would stand to gain from such a policy.

Alan Herscovici ●

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS p. Lawrence S. Mirkin d. Douglas Williams sc. Sugith Varughese asst. d. Rob Malenfant unit man. Alan MacPherson designer David Moe cont. Kathryn Buck d.o.p. Nick Evdemon casting Dorothy Gardner, Claire Hewitt, Michelle Metivier p. sec. Susan Howard p.e. CBC running time 86 min., 6 sec. Lp. Sugith Varughese, Malika Mendez, Gaye Burgess, Maida Rogerson, Joe Ziegler, Layne Coleman, Angelo Rizacos, Jack Jessop, Desh Bandu, Sanyogta Singh, Swarran Singh, Elena Kudaba, Alf Humphries, Charlotte Freedlander, Al Bernado, Amrita Sethi, Samantha Singh.

Michael Rubbo's

Daisy: The Story of a Facelift

In documentary, character is everything. In fact I'd say that documentary is the unconscious search for character. I say unconscious because we documentary filmmakers have often not realized the importance to our films of character delineation. We have often been too concerned with issues to notice that it is only when these issues are lived by a real person that they become interesting.

Michael Rubbo

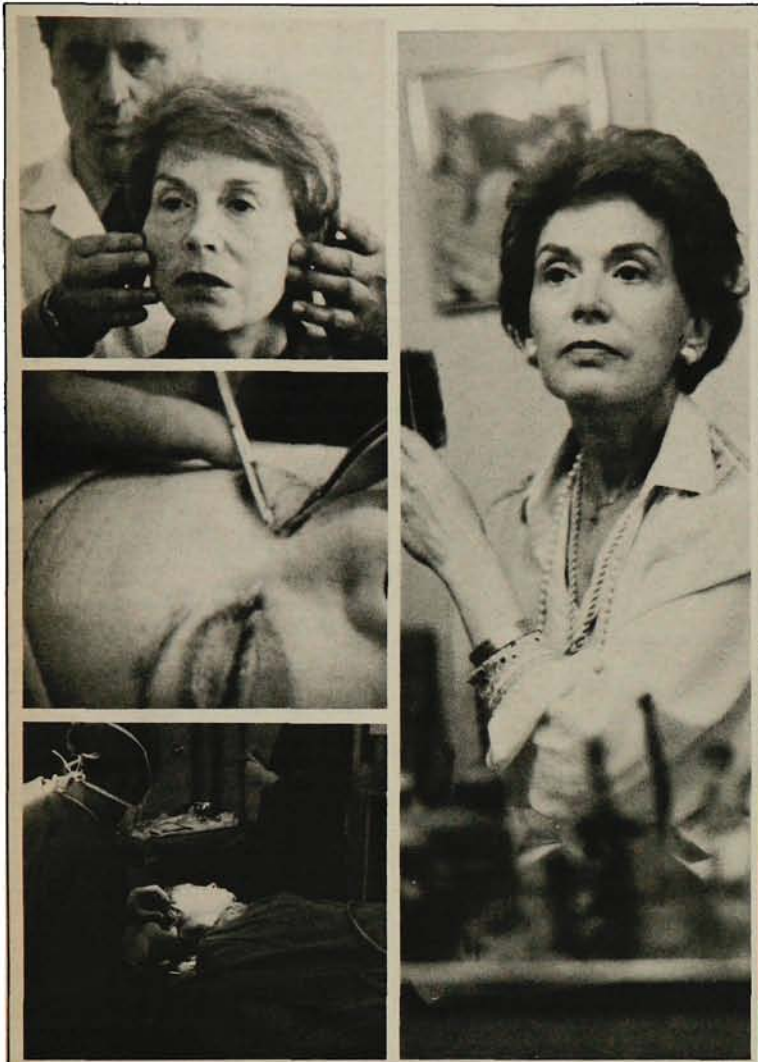
This is not the story of Daisy's face, before and after. Ironically, in this film about a facelift, the face is relatively unimportant. It is Daisy De Bellefeuille's sense of humour and incisive character that carry the film beyond the level of investigative cinematic journalism. Ultimately the film becomes one of character portrayal, a study of the private person behind the mask. And this is probably exactly what Rubbo intended.

From the moment Daisy, a 55-year-old National Film Board executive, makes her decision to have a facelift, Rubbo and his camera follow her through the various emerging stages of her experience: rational, psychological, emotional and medical. In Rubbo's characteristic documentary style, he forges a relationship with Daisy which allows her to unfold naturally and easily before the camera. Once he has gained her trust and acceptance, he can begin to assert his own opinions as an agent provocateur: he can ask touchy, leading questions which provoke Daisy to unravel motives behind her elective surgery: vanity, insecurity and a need to be loved. Rubbo's discreet yet persistent on-screen presence is the catalyst behind Daisy's unfolding.

Daisy is compelled - in response to the sometimes unsympathetic, uncomprehending judgements of friends and acquaintances, sometimes by Rubbo's



● East-West duologue: Sugith Varughese flanked by Gaye Burgess (left) and Malika Mendez



● Michael Rubbo's latest is indeed a slice of life

photos: National Film Board of Canada

probing questions, and more often by her own propensity for self-analysis – to face the truth within herself. She admits that she is terrified of growing old, afraid that “the past may become more interesting than the future.” In a rather cruel, unobtrusive juxtaposition, Rubbo gives us Daisy's greatest fear – that of becoming “a little old lady who simply behaves herself” – as the camera focuses on a grey-haired old woman attempting against all odds to look dainty whilst eating a sandwich under a hairdryer. Rubbo proceeds to audaciously rub the point in further as he has the old lady pose demurely, newly coiffed and tottering, before the mocking camera eye. Unfortunately, this little old lady who incarnates Daisy's greatest fear, *has* behaved for Rubbo's camera, and has unwittingly derided herself in the context of the act.

The point is driven in, again and again, that there are cogent arguments in support of cosmetic surgery. First and foremost: human beings are inclined to discriminate on the basis of appearance. As an attractive woman whose signs of age are beginning to show, Daisy knows this only too well. A self-proclaimed romantic, she once saw work as “something a woman did in between being in love.” But now she, who lived her life for a man, ends up with a terrific career and no man. The men who used to come and go, now mostly go. So it is time to upgrade the product, because Daisy is ready to fall in love again.

She tests her hypothesis that looks and youth are critical factors which

attract men to women on her doctor-friend's husband. He readily admits that before you open the package, you look at the wrapping. And in an age when quick first impressions are usually the only bases we have for either pursuing or avoiding further contact, older women stand less chance of nabbing the man than their youthful, more attractive counterparts. (Daisy claims that a man's attractiveness is less important.)

Rubbo does some investigating of his own. At the New York Public Library, he researches the work of early physiognomists who claimed that there was some relationship between facial features and character or disposition. To test whether we still look at faces this way, he asks a psychologist from the University of Massachusetts (who unequivocally claims that people's faces influence the way we think about them), an employment counsellor (who says that 85 percent of the information we receive about another person is visual) and a waitress (who admits that the prettier waitresses get the best tips). Obviously Daisy has a point.

Once the value system out of which Daisy made her decision has been fully scrutinized, Rubbo moves in on the medical practitioners who capitalize on it: the cosmetic surgeons. They see themselves as fulfilling a societal need. In restructuring noses, breasts, buttocks, thighs and faces, these sculptors of human flesh bestow their clients with the bodily features they feel themselves entitled to, the features they feel really belong to them. Post-operative clients

willingly testify to their happiness with their new appearance. They candidly admit to a previous dissatisfaction with their looks and all confess that they underwent surgery so that they could have an appearance that they could live with. Vanity is taken for granted; no moral or social guilt trips here.

Daisy perceives herself as fortunate for never having learned the meaning of “Anglo-Saxon guilt.” She philosophizes that everything comes and goes: marriages, children, money... In the end, says this veteran of three failed marriages and mother of two children: “All you're stuck with is yourself.” And as it helps to be stuck with a self you can accept, if that means tampering with the wrapping, so be it.

During the facelift sequence, Rubbo's mellow narration and soothing instrumentals coax the squeamish viewer gently through the gruesome procedure. “Now comes the nasty part, close your eyes,” he warns as a rubbery flap of cheek skin is pincer-stretched to one side, and the surgeon extracts spirals of fat from underneath the patient's chin. At this moment of truth – when an anaesthetized face is being cut, trimmed and re-fitted – we see the face for what it is: a mask.

Six weeks after Daisy's facelift, she is packing for a European tour. She still looks like Daisy. The difference is perceptible, but barely. Like the difference between a tired face and a rested one, she now seems a shade smoother, more relaxed. But she knows her face best after living with it for 55 years, and to her the difference is obvious and striking. She feels more secure about her appearance and projects a more attractive persona. And... yes, Daisy gets her man.

Lyn Martin ●

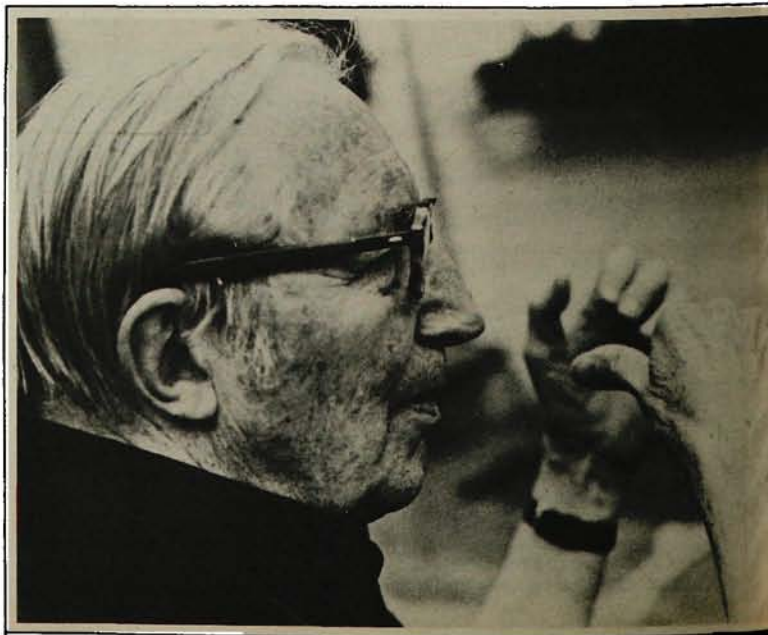
DAISY: THE STORY OF A FACELIFT d./ed. Michael Rubbo d.o.p. Susan Trow add. photog. Ned Johnston mus. ed. Julian Olson loc. sd. Claude Hazanavicius add. loc. sd. Alex Griswold, Yves Gendron sd. ed. André Galbrand sd. eff. & mus. ed. Julian Olson re-rec. Hans Peter Strobl orig. treatment Michael Rubbo, Kate Jansen from an idea by Harry Gulkin research Kate Jansen p. Michael Rubbo assoc. p. Giles Walker exec. p. Adam Symansky, produced and distributed by The National Film Board of Canada running time 57:40 colour 16mm.

Donald Winkler's F.R. Scott: Rhyme and Reason

Director Donald Winkler has a number of fine films to his credit, including *In Praise of Hands* (1974), *Travel Log* (1978) and *Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet* (1981). Director-editor Albert Kish has also gained distinction by his work on films like *Best Damn Fiddler From Calabodie to Kaladar* (1968, editor), *Time Piece* (1971), *Los Canadienses* (1975), and *Paper Wheat* (1978). *F.R. Scott: Rhyme and Reason* is the fourth film on which Winkler and Kish have collaborated. Perhaps that is why I was so surprised to find the film tediously boring and without a heart.

There is no doubt that F.R. Scott is himself an amazing human being: poet, politician, lawyer, constitutional expert, defender of civil liberties. Organizer of the League for Social Reconstruction in 1932 and its president from 1935-36, national chairman of the CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) from 1942-1950, member of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, dean of law at McGill University from 1961 to 1964, F.R. Scott has throughout his life been engaged with the major social questions of our times. He seems, in essence, a man of concepts and words. Clearly, a man of reason. But the title of the film promises rhyme as well. And this, in its deepest sense, we do not find here.

The film does quote from Scott's poetry. But something more is needed, something to humanize for us this man of concepts and abstractions and legalistic brilliance. Instead, the film is strictly academic in the worst sense of that word. It is like a lengthy lecture and its overwhelming verbosity makes us yearn for moments of silence, lightness, laughter. There is almost an endless stream of “talking heads.” The interviews with David Lewis, Leon Edel, A.M. Smith, Louis Dudek, Graham Fraser, and Marcel Rioux all seem coldly analytical in



● Brilliance without heart: poet F.R. Scott as a talking head