Charles Wilkinson's

My Kind of Town

My Kind of Town is a film that virtually redefines low-budget to hitherto unthought-of depths. It was made, I am told, on the end of an NFB documentary about the walls murals of Chemainus, B.C. This is: All unheard of, of course. Nobody Would Go Home Again became an NFB documentary. As I understand it, director-scenarist Charles Wilkinson brought the documentary and the feature home for about $60,000. Though any NFB budget is deceptive in about 47 different ways actually, all film budgets, are tricky, though institutional ones are the worst.

This is an admirable sort of achievement: while there are teenagers, there are no slackers in ski-masks, no Porky's type gags, nothing especially cheap-looking or stupid about it (well, one stupid scene, which we'll discuss later). There are moments of tremendous elegance and visual grace: Wilkinson is not an untalented filmmaker.

The chief problem with My Kind of Town is that the filmmakers seem to have made up the screenplay as they went along and cast it with whoever was handy.

The young hero, hanging around the economically declining mill-town of Chemainus, waiting to hear about a job in Vancouver, gets into trouble for some minor vandalism. Because he knows something about computers, the mayor (John Cooper, in the film's one professional performance) wants him to help promote the town festival. He's unemployed, and finally, in the face of increasingly insane "community service" jobs, agrees. Then he meets a nice German girl who's writing an article about the town and painting, and falls in love with her. Then, instead of exploring the ramifications of the girl's - or the town's - situation, the guy himself has a) squandered four years of earnings from his mill job on a big computer system that includes lots of frills that have no practical use, b) is still living at home, sponging off his parents without actually taking money, a neat trick, and c) is hanging around collecting unemployment insurance.

With a first feature, there are so many factors to be considered (more than with a veteran director, where his track-record tells us a lot), that it is hard to assess the director. Is Wilkinson a bad director of actors, or is he simply stuck with bad actors? To what extent is the badness of the actor's performance a function of directorial talent, or a function of directorial talent, or a credit to an ultra-professional NFB crew?

John Harkness

Don Hutchison's

Alex Colville: The Splendor of Order

Once described as "Canada's painter laureate," Alex Colville enjoys a visible popularity on magazine covers, postage stamps, record album covers, and on the coins of the nation. The man, however, is elusive. But this exemplary documentary is the first major film to follow the path of the artist and his work, and travels a fair way along the route. Alex Colville himself contributes handsomely. He talks knowledgeable, succinctly sums up his craft and is a fund of quotes. His paintings, some fifty of them, are shown in all their glory.

The story of Colville's life is presented engagingly, with the artist recalling his father and mother as visuals of family snapshots and interspersed with a few critical comments from contemporaries, not necessarily in chronological order. Colville talks in and around his home in Wolfville, N.S., and is seen with his wife, with neighbours, with local merchants, on sketching expeditions, and sailing.

The artist's daily routine seldom varies. Each morning he walks the dog, and after breakfast goes to his attic studio and starts work, usually for a six-hour stretch. "When I work I tend to be unaware of other things that are happening.

"A sense of order is immensely important to me," says Colville and, in what must surely be the tidiest and cleanest studio of any artist, he dons a white coat to draw and paint. He is scrupulously accurate in his depictions of real things in real life. "I don't make life appear simple" and, at another point, remarks that in his paintings "a specific person is always a symbol for everybody.

Rhoda, his wife of 40 years, never goes to the studio. "I know that he would rather I didn't look." But she has been his model for many paintings, some depicting her in the nude, and jokes that she's sure people must say, "Oh dear, there's that immodest woman again!"

"When I was nine I got pneumonia," says Colville. "It was very bad and I nearly died, and I was delirious for something like a week. This experience changed him from a fairly extraverted boy into an introvert and that's when he started building models and drawing. He grew up in the Depression, enrolled in the Fine Arts Department of Mount Allison University in 1939, and enlisted during the Second World War. In 1944 he was shipped overseas as an official Canadian war artist. This absorbing portion of the documentary is covered by archive stills and film of action in Europe (with some rare footage of Colville painting amid scenes of destruction and devastation) and the actual drawings and watercolours he did on the spot, including the nightmare of Belsen concentration camp.

Alex Colville considers he did his "first good painting" in 1950. Nude and
Steven Stern’s 

Draw!

The days of the great western frontier represent a time now incomprehensible for most. The period, out of which was born much of America’s modern mythology, has itself been mythologized in many art forms. and perhaps most excitingly so on film. With the likes of John Ford and Howard Hawks who created panoramic vistas and characters who reach beyond mere filmic representation to the symbolic, the settlement of America’s west on film becomes more than just a part of modern history.

Draw! is not a western film of that sort. It is an adaptation of the genre to suit the modern, more cynical expectations of the mass television audience. Though Draw! is not in any way memorable or thought-provoking, it is amusing and entertaining. It is also well done, exuding a degree of professionalism difficult to find in many films of its kind.

The cast of characters includes two big names, Kirk Douglas and James Coburn. In the lead roles as gunfighter-heroes. The remaining characters, although caricatured in some instances, are well-cast and well-played. Alexander Bastedo as the beautiful blonde heroine. Bess, is strong, statuesque and stunning. Reggibe Bell, played by Derek McGrath is the slimiest, whiniest, most obnoxious “bad guy” I have seen in film, next to the Duke in Dune. Reggie is accompanied by a series of caricature-characters, including Wally Bldgitt, the blundering deputy; Mordecai, the European accent; and, of course, the heroes: gunfighter-bankrobber. Handsome Harry Holland, and the gunfighter-lawman, Sheriff Sam Starrett. As each character steps forward and the action unfolds, it becomes apparent that Draw! is playing with us, as it is playing with the epic western form.

It takes each one of the conventions of the traditional western and twists it, creating the sense of fun that permeates the film. To begin with, the “heroes”, Harry Holland (Kirk Douglas) and Sam Starrett (James Coburn) are not young, athletic types. In fact, they’re old. Holland is seeking an unobtrusive retirement in Mexico with his daughter and grandchildren; Starrett has already retreated to a cantina there, with a bottle or three a day. Their struggle against becoming involved in an actual shoot-out provides the opportunity for some good one-liners, as Starrett’s drinking provides the visual gags. So much for the “good guys” of Draw! As for the “good woman”. Bess is an actress from England: travelling the west with a touring Shakespearean company. A thoroughly independent lady, she left her homeland for undisclosed reasons, though one would suspect it may have something to do with an adventurous spirit that also allows her to “enjoy sex more than a man.”

Shot at Fort Edmonton Park in Alberta, the landscapes of Draw! are not the barren dusty plains we are accustomed to seeing in western films – not that the film contains many long sweeping pans to include the landscape. The camera is kept fairly tight in accord with television standards, but green lushness prevails from the small opening pan across rounded hills that ends on the wrinkled, gravelled hands of Holland; to the final scene where Starrett, Holland and Bess escape with the loot. Fort Edmonton too, has a well-cared-for look about it not usually associated with the wild frontier town.

Seeing Draw! on a large screen, it is evident that it was made for television, which is where most films today end up anyway, whether they were planned for it or not. And, although Draw! is not the kind of western that will leave you with a deep sense of the difficulties of American pioneers, or take your breath away with its far-sweeping vistas, the film is fun. Its Disney-like ending caps the film perfectly, adding the final touch to a humorous, un-serious adaptation of a western. If television is basically the medium for light entertainment, Draw! answers that demand wonderfully.

Pat Thompson