

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 ends of an NFB documentary about the wall murals of Chemainus, B.C. This is not unheard of, of course. *Nobody Waved Goodbye* began as 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 slashers 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's summer 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 exotic semi-beauty and the way that she pauses interminably between... each... word... in... a... sentence.

They fight and make up, the festival's a hit, and he decides to stay in Chemainus.

There are about four different stories at work in this picture, none of them developed with particular coherence. The hero's age (we will omit mentioning the actor's name to protect his family from reprisals) is wildly unclear: his emotional age is about 16; he looks about 20, but he's worked in the mill for four years (which suggests that he's about 22 – his family seems sufficiently middle-class to have insisted on his completing high school), and when he gets on the phone to promote the town festival, he sounds like someone who has spent a decade apprenticing under David Novek. This is not to say that every character should be block-planed to the narrowest range of logical probability – people do have odd hobbies, obsessions and quirks – but there should be some consistency.

Then there is the stupid scene. This is a familiar stupid scene, and I cringe every time I see it. The hero, an honest working-class lad, discovers that his girlfriend, a member of the middle-class or better, is working at her job for fun or for the experience, or getting money



● *My Kind of Town* principals Peter Smith, Martina Schliessler and Michael Marks

from home (the case here). He then explodes in righteous class-rage and tells her to get out of his life. There is always something terribly false about this scene: it's as if the writer is incapable of developing a real reason for a dramatic conflict, so he resorts to this one from the dramatist's first-aid kit. It is particularly meretricious here, where the girl is trying to make a living as a writer/artist and, as usual in these situations, has not yet caught on. And, besides, the guy himself has a) squandered four years of earnings from his mill work 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 so 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 weakness of the screenplay a function of lack of preparation? If the screenplay has been a pet project honed for years, then Wilkinson's a very bad writer. If it was made up as they went along, then he has the potential to be a good writer. Is the good look of the film a function of directorial talent, or a credit to an ultra-professional NFB crew?

It just never seems to occur to the makers of ultra-low budget films that a good story isn't enough. You need stars, or at least people with some star quality, faces that can hold the camera. It could be that the process of assembling an independent production is so agonizing that the casting gets left by the roadside. Or the decor is more interesting than the faces of the actors, and this is a bad sign.

Yet *My Kind of Town* is a promising first feature, no more and no less. Judging the potential of director Charles Wilkinson is difficult: we'd need to see a film with a more completely developed screenplay, a semi-professional cast, and without the support of an NFB crew to make that judgement.

John Harkness ●

MY KIND OF TOWN d./sc. Charles Wilkinson p. Cal Shumiatcher d.o.p. David Geddes ed. Frank Irvine cfe 2nd unit d.o.p. Tobias Schliessler assoc. p. Karl Schutz mus. comp. Charles Wilkinson loc. sd. Sandra Mayo re-rec. Paul Sharpe sd. ed. Cal Shumiatcher Foley eng. Michael Oldfield Foley of p. Michael P. Keeping cam. asst. Will Waring boom Martin Julich a.d. Ellen Gram asst. ed. Irving Mulch asst. sd. ed. Sam Stromphf song: "My Kind of Town" performed by Valdy neg. cut. Gay Black titles Kim Steer stills Dennis France colour Alpha Cine opticals West Coast Film Opticals unit pub. Hilma Rusu stunts Michael Marks, Tony Nichol mural artists Sandy Clarke, Dan Sawatzky hot rod chevvy Michael Marks colour 16mm, running time: 76 mins. p.c. Milltown Pictures, (604) 669-1333 l.p. Peter Smith, Tina Schliessler, John Cooper, Michael Paul, Michael Marks, Roy Evants, Frank Irvine, Haida Paul.

Don Hutchison's **Alex Colville : The Splendour 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 knowledgeably, 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 appear, 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.

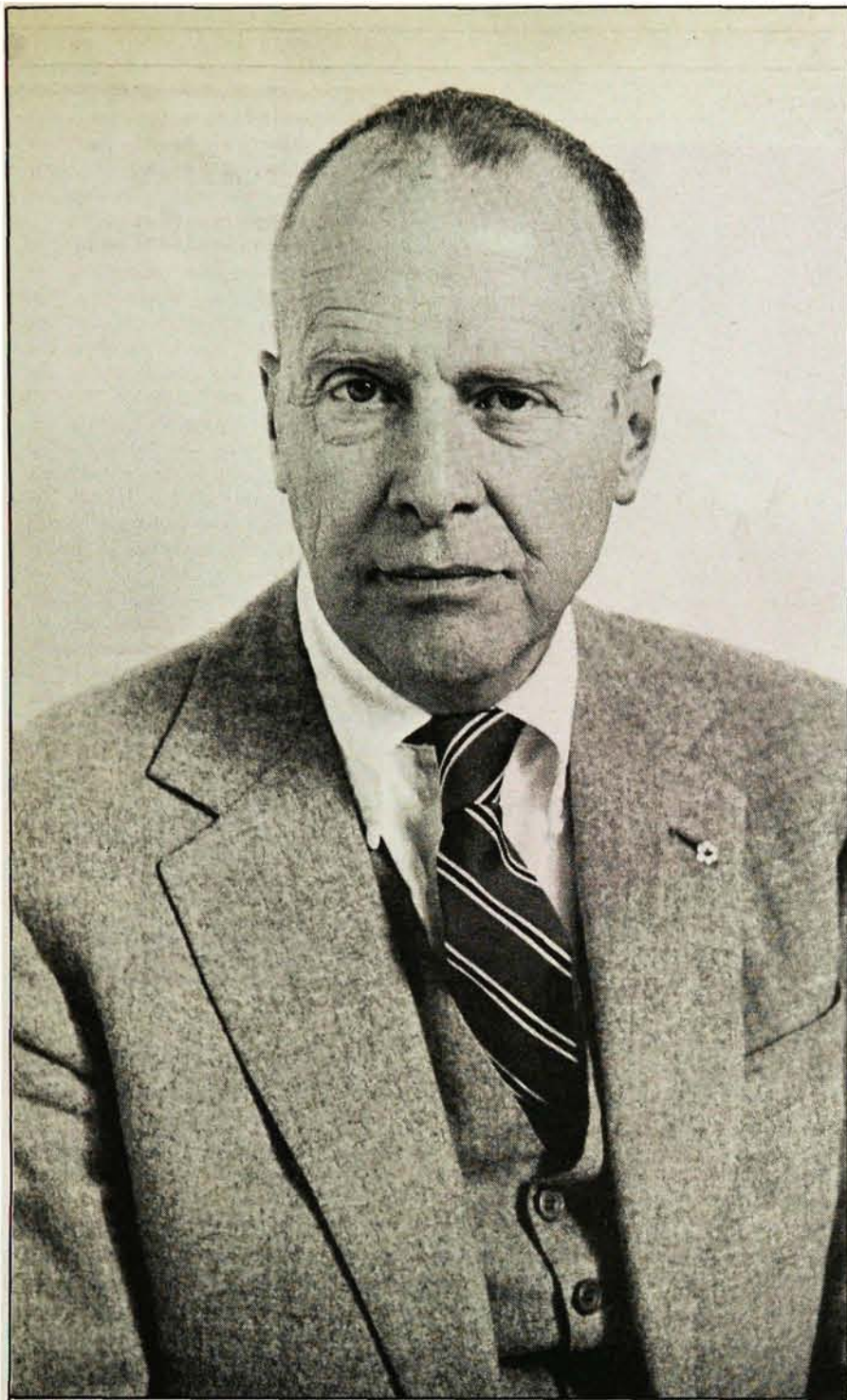
The artist's daily routine seldom varies. Each morning he walks the dog, and after breakfast goes to his attic studio and starts work, usually for a six-hour stretch: "When I work I tend to be unaware of other things that are happening.

"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 life but adds that "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 extroverted 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*



● Alex Colville, disturbingly composed

Dummy. Through the '50s and '60s works sent to exhibitions were often rejected, but in 1966 he represented Canada at the International Exposition of Art in Venice. It was there that Wolfgang Fischer and his father became interested in Colville's work, "It was so opposite to the pop art of the time that it took people some time to adjust and accept." They acted as his agent in Europe, and were instrumental in his acceptance and growing popularity. In 1970 Colville's exhibition in England was touted as a "turning point in the history of art in the 20th century," by critic Terrence Mullaly.

This first-class documentary, while leaving Colville free to talk most clearly and winningly about his painting and his life, manages to convey very successfully the disturbing, even menacing, feelings brought to the surface by looking at the canvases. The figures and the animals, together or separately, are in spare and bare surroundings; people are often seen from behind looking out and away; the dogs have strange steely expressions in the eyes; beyond the frame there are other things, and questions arise.

His wife says she doesn't know what he is going to paint next: "I saw him

measuring the dog this morning..."

Alex Colville: The Splendour of Order premieres on CBC-TV network, July 7 at 10 p.m. Whether or not one likes Colville's paintings, this documentary is more than worthy of attention and provides an absorbing, accessible and valuable insight into the work of one of Canada's leading artists - some would say our greatest living artist.

Awards (so far): 1984: Canadian Film & Television Association, best documentary over 30 mins.; Yorkton International Short Film & Video Festival, best documentary over 30 mins. and best cinematography; Atlantic Film & Video Festival, best overall film, best documentary over 30 mins., best film editing, best cinematography. 1985: Huston International Film Festival, Gold Award, documentary film (the Arts/culture).

ALEX COLVILLE: THE SPLENDOUR OF ORDER d./cam. Don Hutchison, p. Don Curtis, Judy Stevenson, exec. p. Don Haig sd. Brian Avery ed. Gordon McClellan p.c. Cygnus-Minerva Films & Film Arts **running time**: 57 mins. **col.**, 16mm. Sales & rentals: Kinetic Film Enterprises Ltd., 781 Gerrard St. East, Toronto M4M 1Y5 (416) 4155.

Pat Thompson ●

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 caricatural in some instances, are well-cast and well-played. Alexandra Bastedo as the beautiful blonde heroine, Bess, is strong, statuesque and stunning. Reggie Bell, played by Derek McGrath is the slimmest, whiniest, most obnoxious "bad guy" I have seen on film, next to the Duke in *Dune*. Reggie is accompanied by a series of "caricature-characters", including Wally Blodgitt, the blundering deputy; Mordecai, the shopkeeper who speaks with a middle-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, gnarled 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.

Jan Teag ●



● *Draw!*'s James Coburn and Kirk Douglas: just a couple of gunslingers looking to retire