



photos: Kirk Tougas

Richard Leiterman, DOP, and director Sandy Wilson warm things up on the set

## Sandy Wilson: First features, Canadian wives, American cousins, An interview

by Ann McKinnon

Three years ago, Sandy Wilson heard an old Johnny Horton song on a Vancouver radio station. The way old songs often do, it triggered the memory of when her runaway American cousin came to her family's ranch in the Okanagan. In that summer of 1959, "The Battle of New Orleans" was her cousin's favourite song.

To Sandy, the American visitor was the epitome of teenage coolness. He sported faded jeans, a white T-shirt with, tucked into his rolled-up sleeve, a pack of Camel cigarettes, one of which dangled, James-Dean-style, burning from his mouth. He sat behind the wheel of a fire-engine red Cadillac convertible low-rider. Cool. There was no mistaking his Made in America coolness. Sandy felt like a poor country cousin - she sometimes still does.

Sandy's just-completed first feature, *My American Cousin*, is a story about girls coming of age, girls and boys, girls and their mothers. It is a story about Canadian teenagers' view of the promised land of America, where all the best movies, magazines and music came from.

Wilson brings to this drama years of documentary experience. Like *My*

*American Cousin*, many of her films are located in the Okanagan Valley and feature her family. These films include *Pen-Hi Grad*, a 28-minute documentary (1974); the short *Mount Chapaka Easter Sunday Jackpot Rodeo* (1980); *Growing Up In Paradise*, an experimental documentary made from her father's old home movies (1977); *The Bridal Shower*, a film popular among feminists (1971); and a profile of Sandy's handicapped brother, *He Is Not The Walking Kind* (1971), which won the Blue Ribbon at the New York Film Festival as well as numerous other international awards.

For Sandy, the broadcast of *My American Cousin* on CBC television this fall will be accompanied by a great sigh of relief. In February 1984, she travelled as far as the Cayman Islands searching for investors. She found no more help among the tanned, gold-chained business men there than among pin-striped Canadians. In the following edited interview, Wilson reflects on her experience with *My American Cousin* and concludes that the West Coast filmmaker has a deep affinity with the Quebec filmmaker: a shared belief in the possibility of an authentically Canadian cinema.

### Catch 22

At first I wanted to keep the budget low, at around \$750,000 and defer as much as I could. But it got complicated. When I wanted to get a letter of intent to broadcast from the CBC, they said the budget was too low. We bumped the cost up to one million dollars. I don't know whether or not it is because I am short and a woman, or because of the track record of the films that local (West Coast) people have invested in, but anybody I talked to said, "So, you want money for a film. Well, what is it about? Then they would list all the films they had lost money on in the past. You can't get private money without a distribution deal in place and without a TV deal in place. But if you have a distribution deal and TV in place, who needs the private money? I had a video demo, a script, and favorable reader reports to help pitch the product. To raise the \$1.2 million took two years.

I received a script-writing grant in 1982 to write a project entitled "Broken Dates"; I used the grant to write *My American Cousin* instead. Next I talked to Donna Wong-Juliani at what was then The Canadian Film Development Corporation and is now Telefilm Canada.

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She was the first person to tell me that I needed a producer for the project. The NFB here in Vancouver gave me the loan of an office, a telephone, and the use of their Xerox machine.

Ultimately, I had to go to Toronto because I was told there was not a producer west of Winnipeg that Telefilm would consider as having a solid enough track record to act as my producer. I also approached the American Playhouse, PBS and Home Box Office in New York. I must have sent out one hundred copies of the script to anybody who might give me the money. I started dining for dollars to get people interested. I approached Superchannel, First Choice and the CBC. The first real support for the project came from the CBC, who gave me a very positive reader's report. At this point, everybody was still telling me to get a producer for the project.

Next, Superchannel gave verbal support, but nothing too solid. Their concern was: Where was I going to get the final one third private money from? The CBC was interested, but they would not license the project until the final third was in place. The Broadcast Fund also wanted to know where the one third of the money was coming from. My search for private funding led me to the Cayman Islands. A friend of mine had a friend with a brother-in-law who was interested in investing in Canadian film. We sent down the script; they liked it. We were

invited down to talk. They had a party for us to pitch at; we raised verbally \$200,000. But they did not want the money to go into escrow before they saw the agreements with the CBC and Telefilm. It got very complicated. I eventually told the Cayman people to take a walk.

I then realized that I had to find a producer. Originally, Peter O'Brian was too busy to take the project on. When his film *Father Christmas* was postponed, we struck a deal. He found a distributor, Spectrafilm of Toronto, which was willing to provide \$400,000 of the \$1.2 million budget in exchange for distribution rights. Ultimately the funding came from the private sector, the pre-sale to the CBC and the Broadcast Development Fund.

## In 1914 we took a little trip

The song "The Battle of New Orleans" inspired the movie. I heard it on the radio a few years ago and it reminded me of the time my American cousin came up to our ranch in Penticton to visit. The actual film features 28 tunes that would have been on the radio in 1959. As of yet we do not have an original score; that may change. In the '50s, Canadian radio stations, as I recall, played corny country tunes. But the American stations played solid rock'n' roll. From Hank Williams and Mitch Miller to Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly; their music is all used in the film. Tom Lanvin of The Powder Blues Band did the cover tunes for the dance sequence.

Margaret Langrick has the lead in the film. She is from Red Deer, Alberta. She used to live across the street from me in Vancouver, I have known her for five or six years now. When I first got the idea for the film, I knew it would only work if I had a fabulous 12-year-old girl to play the lead. I thought of Margaret because she has that right blend of obnoxiousness and precociousness. I already had her in mind when I was writing the script.

Three of the actors in *My American Cousin* are from Toronto. John Wildman plays the visitor from the States; T.J. Scott, the Canadian boy. The young girl's parents are played by Richard Dorat and Jane Mortifee; that's singer Ann Mortifee's sister. The other cast members are from Penticton. My mother, my sister, my brother and my kids are all in the film.

The film is autobiographical. I have recreated my family. The film is shot in the house that I grew up in. That was bizarre. It is strange to have one foot in the past and the other in the complicated reality that is filmmaking. Real life keeps me grounded, but I did forget sometimes in my reverie to yell 'cut.'

What have I learned from directing? I have learned how to do a shot list. I have learned patience. I have learned the necessity of being clear in my own mind about what I want, and express it in such a way that my team understands and supports me; teamwork is essential. You must be somewhat dictatorial. You must wear a lot of pockets. You must look like a director. Everybody wants to know who the director is. Oh, the one with the pockets, that must be the director. People want someone to point to. Somebody has to answer questions. I learned a great deal about the hierarchy on a set, a great deal about budgeting and organizing. Oh yeah, and I learned how important food is on a set.

## Emancipated delegation

We had 43 people on the set. Large for me. The biggest crew I had ever worked with was 12 people for two days. This was 43 people for a 25-day shoot. I learned how to work with a very good assistant director. I was very fortunate to have Ed Folger, he knows his stuff. This, of course, made my job much easier. So I let him deal with a lot of the 'stuff.' I learned how to delegate. Women, especially, have to learn how to delegate.

To me, whether I am directing a feature or a documentary, the concerns are still the same. You need food on the set, you just need more. I want to be able to tell a story so people will watch it. When you are doing a documentary, you want to be dramatic as possible. When you are making a dramatic feature, you want it to be as real as possible. Oh, yes. It is the same. Only bigger and more terrifying!

I would hope that my film is identi-

fiable from a women's point of view. I am a woman. I think that any time something gets prefaced by 'Women's Whatever,' it narrows it. It is a very corsetting term. It does limit the potential for a lot of people to just relax and watch the film.

Women have a terrific sense of humour about themselves. There is a lot that goes on between women that had not previously gone out to a larger audience because we did not have the access. Women have not been making films for that long; there are not that many making films now. Stories are out there that are worth telling.

## Sex in films and cars

We have a steamy necking scene on a mountain. Steamy, steamy. Remember, of course, that *My American Cousin* is a family film.

I think it is interesting that women filmmakers seem to be a lot more modest than their male counterparts. Are hetero-

women uncomfortable addressing the issue of sex? I think about how to present an erotic scene in a film: how can you have romance in a film without the hint of sexual goings-on? Women are far more subtle. Far steamier in their subtlety - if steam is what you are after. A number of women thought one particular scene in the film was one of the more erotic they had seen in years. The scene related to them directly, for most of their adolescent sexual encounters were in cars. Orange summer nights by a lake listening to rock'n'roll.

## America the beautiful?

I don't know where all this dust is going to settle. It is not my ambition to move to L.A. or Toronto. I am not interested in big blockbusters. The bigger the budget, the less voice you have. You can make wonderful films with very little money, a good script and some teamwork. Those are the kinds of films I am interested in. I can only see myself working in L.A. if I could keep my voice. I could learn something in L.A. But, once again, it is not a plan of mine.

There are a lot of American movies being made in Vancouver. Regrettably, there are few indigenous films being encouraged at the moment. People are afraid to take the necessary chances. It has been my experience, like many, that the public-at-large has a very low regard for Canadian films. I get mixed-up when people say, 'Gee, *My American Cousin* doesn't look like a Canadian film.' These same people will see a clip and say, 'Gawd, what are you trying to do, take on Hollywood? Hold on, it is a Canadian film. It could hardly be more Canadian.'

From the little girl's point of view, Americans are quite wonderful and different. The boy in *My American Cousin* shows up, and he is a beautiful, golden, smiling, glamorous, thrilling, exciting, terrific guy, who eventually gets into his big red American car and leaves the little girl standing in a cloud of dust. The schmuck! Someday my prince will come? Sorry, no prince. He's not coming. You have to get out there and do it yourself on your own steam. Forget about princes. Are Americans smarter, taller, better-looking and faster? To some, they are. I think Canadians feel they have moral fibre, that they are somehow less vulgar than the Americans. Canadians make good wives!

## Quebec the beautiful!

Look at the history of Quebec film. They have had a captive audience. English Canada has had an indifferent audience. Quebec has a substantial industry that is not as overshadowed by American movie-making. Plus, the Quebecois have talent, energy and vision. They make great films.

I like to think that there is a great affinity between the West Coast and Montreal, versus the contest that has developed between Toronto and the West Coast. Vancouverites, like the Quebecois, put more emphasis on humour and the quality of life. In Toronto, I find, it is much more career, business and American-oriented. Also, Vancouver, Montreal and Quebec are visually very beautiful.

I like personal stories that reflect the uniqueness of the people that are indigenous to an area. This kind of filmmaking is a great joy to me. Filmmaking as a form of expression is all-consuming. It has made me crazy!

● Was life ever as complicated... or rewarding? Margaret Langrick plays Sandy to John Wildman's Butch

