## REVIEWS

### Sandy Wilson's

## My American Cousin

he outstanding characteristic of Sandy Wilson's **My American Cousin** – and the reason it has garnered so much attention and all those Genies – is its sense of humour.

Wilson has achieved that very special double trick of bringing enjoyment back to movie-going and leaving the audience still chuckling as it files out of the theatre. My American Cousin is fun without being stupid - entertaining in the style developed when people still made an event of going out to see films. This is a considerable achievement for a blatantly Canadian film from a national cinema often noted for its bleak and ponderous productions. And, My American Cousin is quite decidedly a woman's film, without those yearning looks and long empty silences (read inactivity) artistically associated with the feminine coming of age.

Though My American Cousin is in the same genre that has recently become so popular at the box-office, loosely termed "puberty" films, it is the only one known to this reviewer, aside from the Australian Puberty Blues, that is from a female perspective. Importantly, Wilson doesn't fall into the traps of that genre - unlike the male considerations, tits-and-ass-style, or female considerations, marked by serious and painfully emotional scenes. My American Cousin is filled with motion, colour, music and laughter, all of which audiences enjoy and respond to, making for a successful movie no matter what its themes, subjects or perspectives.

The situations and the conversations, complete with clichéd lines, of the film must be familiar to every adult, but Wilson remembers them with the humour we all lacked at the time of the actual experience. In making a very personal film, she has somehow arrived at the heart of the universal, but with a Canadian touch.

The difference between us, the Canadians and them, the Americans is a predominant theme of the film, made perhaps too large in its use of pointed statements: that Butch (John Wildman) comes from a good family, American unfortunately, but nonetheless a good family, or that his car is so American. Underlying these direct statements is a sensibility that comes closer to a realization of the undefinable difference between the two nations than might be expected in a movie of this sort. The Canadians in My American Cousin are outsiders, isolated in many ways from an "America" where 'They' have bigger, faster cars, more kinds of candy, rock'n roll 24 hours-a-day, and can send people to the moon. As Butch says, "Anything you want we got in the U.S.A." But nobody in the sleepy Canadian Okanagan valley of 1959 seems to

be suffering from doing without all that. And it seems that Butch has found something he's been missing to prompt his wistful remark that it's so nice up here he wishes he didn't have to go back. In fact, it's the American, Butch, who seems to be doing without, rather than Sandy, her family or her friends. The isolation of the Canadians in **My American Cousin** is not an isolation amounting to a lack, but rather isolation from the gloss, showiness and ultimate falseness of another, not greater, only different culture.

Aside from these thematic and ideological elements, Wilson has produced a technically interesting if erratically flawed work. There are unfortunately problems with the film's continuity. The most obvious example is the sequence after the fight when Butch jumps in his car and roars off with blood on his mouth. The next shot sees Sandy climbing from the back seat to join Butch in a head-on shot but the traces of blood on his mouth have disappeared. Details like this should not be allowed to slip by; we have to see him wipe the blood off or, at least, there be some trace he's been hit. Although it may have been the quality of the print, there is also what appears to be a jumpcut in this scene that jolts the viewer, suddenly creating distance, and destroying our flow with the action.

The use of the camera varies from very wide and long shots that make use of the incredible natural settings to very tight close-ups that bring the viewer to an almost touchable closeness with the characters. Some interesting angles are used though they are mostly traditional. The voice-over in many sequences gives the film a particular feeling and unique rhythm, that, combined with the varying visuals, allows a sense of almost continuous motion. One moment we are inside the big red Caddy as it winds its way around the dirt roards and the next we are high overhead looking down on it, with the voices still at the same pitch and level.

The editing in My American Cousin adds to its overall humourous tone,

creating its special rhythm. When the Major (Richard Donat) decides to explain the male-female facts of life to his daughter Sandy (Margaret Langrick), a combination of edits make the sequence different from what would normally be done in a father-daughter/ son talk, playing up the humour of the dialogue. We start out close-up, outside the Major's pick-up truck; then it stops and we move inside where the conversation begins, the truck pulls away again and the camera now moves to a distant overhead shot as the Major tries to explain the idea of the male's "uncontrollable urges", using the example of a bull who knows there's a cow around. Sandy's response, as the truck disappears around a distant corner, is to ask whether her father was like that with her mother. This distancing adds poignancy to the humour.

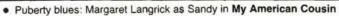
In the fight scene on the beach, editing and camera combine quite successfully to give the feeling there really is a lot happening when, in actual fact, movement is kept to a minimum. The camera swings back and forth from the two fighting boys to the crowd, swirling rapidly around the circle as they push and tussle with each other. Only one punch meets its target, yet the viewer feels there has been a real fight.

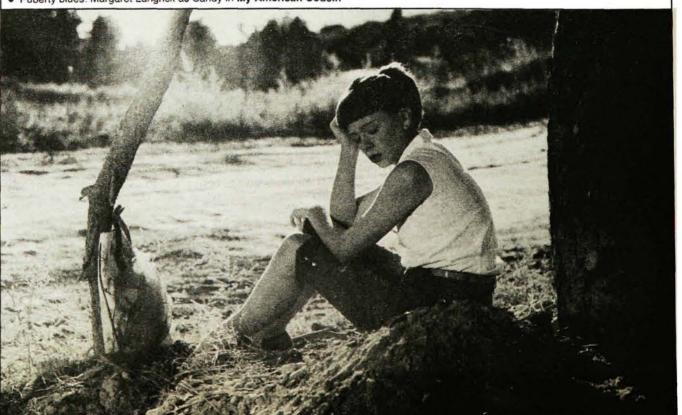
The film is filled with some beautifully creative and unabashedly feminine touches that portent a real talent in the making. The red lipstick Sandy picks up from her mother becomes a symbol - as it is for most girls: lipstick equals maturity. It is passed around among her friends when they go riding in Butch's car, creating the image of these young girls with identically red lips bobbing around in the back of the car. One of the best sequences of the film is where Sandy's little sisters dress up in their mother's clothes and jewellery and totter around on high heels while Sandy's brother appears in one of her bras over his T-shirt. There is an honesty and bravery in Wilson's approach to recreating all these female childhood fantasies and games that is unique and refreshing. Together with young lead Margaret Langrick, Wilson has created an amazing female character for which both must be commended.

This may sound as though **My Amer**ican Cousin is the Great Canadian Film we've all been waiting for. Well, it isn't, but it is a very special film – because it has managed to be both an unabashed pronouncement of its nationality and fun at the same time, two things that don't seem to have previously come together. It will be most interesting to see where the talented Wilson goes in her next project.

### Jan Teag •

MY AMERICAN COUSIN d./co.p./sc. Sandy Wilson p. Peter O'Brian assoc.p. Phil Schmidt p.man. Tom Braidwood p.coord. Gabriella Martinelli unit man. (Penticton) Nikos Theodosakis p. liaison Coralee Testar p.acct Joanne Jackson 1st a.d. Edward Folger 2nd a.d. Matthew O'Connor p.a. Orest Haba, Greg Coyes p.labourer Kellie Benz sc.sup. Candice Field d.o.p. Richard Leiterman 1st asst.cam. Harvey La Rocque 2nd asst.cam. Trig Singer stills Kirk Tougas art d. Phil Schmidt asst. art d. Dave Roberts set dres-ser Joey Morgan props. master Barry Kootchin asst.props Stewart Bradley sd.des. Bruce Nyznik sd. mixer Garrell Clark boom op. Daryl Powell sd.ed. Gord Thompson, Tony Currie, Alison Clark asst.sd.ed. Susan Lindell, Anke Bakkar key grip Bill Mills best boy Nick Kuchera gaffer Malcolm Kibblewhite best boy Dean Bennett cost.des. Philip Clarkson, Sheila Bingham asst.cost.des. Barbara Clayden cost.buyer Kay Jackson seamstress Lynn Kelly, Valerie Andrews dresser Larry Forsyth makeup artist Jayne Dancose asst. make-up Pearl Louie hair Eileen Dezouche asst.hair Anneliese Lueder, Berta Michel barber Gary Leschniok caterer Tana Tocher, Ann Bentley carp. Patrick Kerns labourers Chris Sloan, Cam Forman driver Salmon Harris, Dale Johnson mech. Peter Dancose ed. Haida Paul asst.ed. Debbie Rurak cast. Maria Armstrong, Ross Clysdale, Stuart Aikins **1.p.** Margret Langrick, John Wildman, Richard Donat, Jane Mortifee, T.J. Scott, Camille Henderson, Darsi Bailey, Alison Hale, Samantha Jocelyn, Babs Chula, Terry Moore, Brent Severson, Brian Hagel, Carter Dunham, Julie Nevlud, Alexis Peat, Micki Maunsell, Kitty Wilson, Jake Van Weston, Ritchie Hobden, Linda Geggie, Nikos Theodosakis, Lisa Nevin, Jacqueline Conrad, Tom Braidwood, Gabriella Martinelli, Nicola Cavendish, Rob Wylie, Sergei Ryga, Dave Sher, Linda & Lisa Wiebe, Kellie Benz, Lorne Davidson, Larry Forsyth p.c. A Peter O'Brian Independent Pictures Production in association with Borderline Pro ductions Inc. and Okanagan Motion Picture Company Ltd. Produced with the participation of Telefilm Canada, in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation dist. Spectrafilm. Col., running time: 92 mins





### Louise Carré's Qui a tiré sur nos histoires d'amour?

"Si j'étais restée à la maison cuisiner, j'aurais pu te donner des recettes." "Had I stayed at bome and cooked, I might at least bave been able to give you some recipes."

- (Madeline to ber daughter)

**G** iven the fragmentary and haphazard development of Quebec cinema, what ends up on-screen is often the result of a narrow selectivity. In other words, huge chunks of collective existence are completely by-passed. It's thus been one of the tasks of a certain feminist cinema (so far) to fill in the gaps in narrative ignored by more mainstream/malestream films.

Louise Carré's second feature (five years in the making), Qui a tiré sur nos histoires d'amour?, identifies two such crucial oversights in Quebec cinema: the bourgeoisie de province as valid dramatis personae, and the (single, middle-aged) woman as artistic hero. Despite a superficial similarity to Anne-Claire Poirier's La Quarantaine (1982), a theatricalized transposition of the mid-life crises of urban intellectuals during an emotional country-weekend reunion, Carré's microcosm is that of a regional milieu, the Sorel-Tracy area, some 40 kilometres downriver from Montreal. Drawing on elements of the documentary (social consciousness, aerial photography of industrial landscapes, newsreel flashbacks), and on the movement of the French 19th-century naturalistic novel from Balzac on (in which literature advances from the provinces to Rastignac's famed assault on Paris), Carré has framed an area of contemporary Quebec whose contradictions Qui a tiré probes with gentle ruthlessness.

Outside the extremes of urban or rural deprivation, Quebec's middleclasses dwell within the comfortable modern vacuity of the commodity lifestyle: nice homes, new Japanese cars, pastel fashions. From afar, TV brings in remote, brutal images of real conflicts elsewhere. Here in our pastoral landscapes of administered existence, the only problems are ecological: that is, how to harmonize the general (technological development) and the individual (sensibilities).

In this milieu, Madeline (Monique Mercure) is that contradictory rebel. the (filmmaker) artist. After the failure of a film project in the big city, she has returned to Sorel, where she was once married to a local lawyer, and works as a radio talk-show host attempting to slip through particles of social consciousness against the twin obstacles of the minds of her (largely housewife) audience and the private radio-station owner's reluctance to offend his advertisers. Alone here, except for visits from her film-producer and husbandly lover (Michel Gauthier), Madeline lives as an object of scandal, distant admiration, and male desire: her ex-husband (Gaétan Labrèche), her boss (Gérard

Poirier) and later the technocrat Fabien (August Schellenberg). (Excellently cast, these three in particular deliver superb portrayals of current male *bathos*).

For all its prettiness (summer, treelined streets, the St-Lawrence widening into a Mississippi of the north - with tides), this too is an area of profound deprivation. Dominated by the open pit of an ironworks, the sky segmented by high-tension lines, the river polluted, it's a zone of culturally regressed, petitbourgeois propriety. Here, as Madeline's radio-colleague the sportsannouncer Joseph (played with brio by Normand Brathwaite) breathlessly explains, the TV soap opera has become today's Greek tragedy. And recurrences to Greek antiquity (ie, the tragic) crop up throughout the film, notably a blind Oedipus tapping his way through the streets of Sorel, and a one-woman chorus, the voice of female memory, in Lady (Luce Guilbeault).

Madeline's daughter, Renée (Guylaine Normandin, an up-and-coming young actress in her feature film début) arrives to see her mother for the summer before heading off to graduate school in California. For Renée (and the bulk of the film), this will be the summer of the discovery of the clash of mind and body, the tyranny of sexual roles, and, above all, her mother's own contradictory reality.

If feminism can be taken as the ideology of that generation of women, today in their fifties, who discovered, along with Simone de Beauvoir, that "woman is not born, she becomes," then the question raised by **Qui a tiré sur nos histoires d'amour?** is what can that generation pass on to its daughters when all the *"grand récits"* of the Happy Ending have been destroyed? Madeline has only the example of her liberty, with all its contradictions, to give her daughter. But it's an example of courage, of the heroism of being. One of the central metaphors of the film has Madeline (who stands up to any man, rides a motorbike, etc.) failing again and again and only at the end finally succeeding in swinging from a trapeze without falling. As a shot of a graffiti on the walls of Sorel states: Never surrender. Or as Madeline confesses to Renée, she was always terrified by whatever she did, but did it nonetheless. All things considered, a not insignificant inheritance – one of (and from the) guts.

But the film does (unavoidably? After all, it's a film) succumb to the Happy Ending. Renée decides not to sacrifice her life to the grand amour (that is just the first) and leaves for California. Madeline does finally get her script accepted by a Montreal producer – and a new lover (for a while or longer, who knows? and does it really matter how long?) in the technologically macho, yet poetic Fabien. But as Renée tells Madeline as she's leaving: when and if she ever returns, she doesn't want a pink room any more.

It's for its ability to say "goodbye to pink" that Qui a tiré becomes a "postfeminist" film, as Carré describes it. But more than that perhaps, it's for articulating the courage to continue to advance, alone, that takes Qui a tiré onto the cultural (postmodern) terrain where blind Oedipus is now all of us. If recent Quebec feminist cinema alternates between an emotional no-place (Anne Trister) and a documentary real-place (Le Film d'Ariane), Qui a tiré sur nos histoires d'amour? suggests a third possibility, an emotional real-place that is a documentary no-place. In short, a description of cinema itself; that is, of our cinema, courageous in its difference, simultaneously gutsy and fragile in its risk-taking (its search for an audience). Like Madeline or, better yet, her creators,

Monique Mercure and Louise Carré.

But it's in a Montreal cinema, on a Saturday night, that this difference emerges most clearly: in some recent trailers, among them one for Qui a tiré sur nos histoires d'amour? First came the already too familiar crashbang pyrotechnics of Ridley Scott's Legend, then some equally familiar burping-farting inanity from France. Finally, opening with a leisurely aerial shot of Sorel and the St-Lawrence, the preview for Oui a tiré, revealing an unfamiliar and foreign place. The place where we live: a real emotional place that's nowhere but in the guts of its artists.

#### Michael Dorland •

OUI A TIRÉ SUR NOS HISTOIRES D'AMOUR? d./sc./ exec.p. Louise Carré assoc.p. Suzanne Laveredière line p. Claire Stevens sc.cons. Réal Larochelle, Michel Rebetez, Larry Tremblay ads. René Pothier, Catherine Didelot cont. Thérèse Bérubé d.o.p. Jean-Charles Tremblay, Pierre Duceppe, Christiane Guer-non, Michel Caron ed. Louise Côté, Teresa De Luca mus. Marc O'Farrell mus.orch. Mario Parent p. Daniel Louis, Muriel Lizé-Pothier, Suzanne Comtois Danielle Charlebois **p.coord.** Mario Nadeau, Lucie Bouliane, Pierre Guillard, Martin Dubois **stills** Paul-Emile Rioux set des. Vianney Gauthier, Jean Kazemirchuk, Pierre Gauthier props Daniel Huysmans ward. Lise Bédard make-up Diane Simard, Pierre Saindon hair Louis Jalleo, Stéphane Malo, Pierre David sd. Michel Charron, Dominique Chartrand stunts Gina Duhamel, Yvon Duhamel, Jean Lysight grips Em-manuel Lépine, Richard Bonin elect. Daniel Chrétien, Marc Charlebois, André C. Sheridan, Robert Auclair ADR & Sd.efx. Viateur Paiement, Jérôme Décarie. Jocelyn Caron re-rec. Michel Descombes, André Gag non grafix Jocelyne Chicoine comm.cons. Danielle Sauvage. Colour 35mm running time: 91 mins. 15 .c. La Maison des Quatre inc., (514) 522-5045 with the financial participation of Telefilm Canada and the Société générale du cinéma du Québec and the collaboration of the Société Radio-Canada (CBC) dist. J.A. Lapointe Films Inc., (514) 331-7832. Foreign sales: Films Transit, (514) 526-0839 I.p. Monique Mercure, Guylaine Normandin, August Schellenberg Claude Gauthier, Gaétan Labrèche, Marc Labrèche Gérard Poirier, Normand Brathwaite, Luce Guilbeault, Geneviève Rioux. Marie-Josée Gauthier, Jennifer Lys-Grenier, Hélène Parent, Viviane Pacal, Arlette Beaudry, Jocelyn Bérubé, Daniel Brière, Isabelle Ouimet, Bertrand Roy



ILM REVIEWS

#### German Gutierrez's

## La Familia Iatina

a Familia Latina is not about the Latin family as a socio-economic unit, nor particularly about how Latins as members of a community interrelate with each other either. The title is intended as a metaphor for Latin Americans living in Montreal. La Familia Latina tries to show us who they are, what problems they face and what their culture is like.

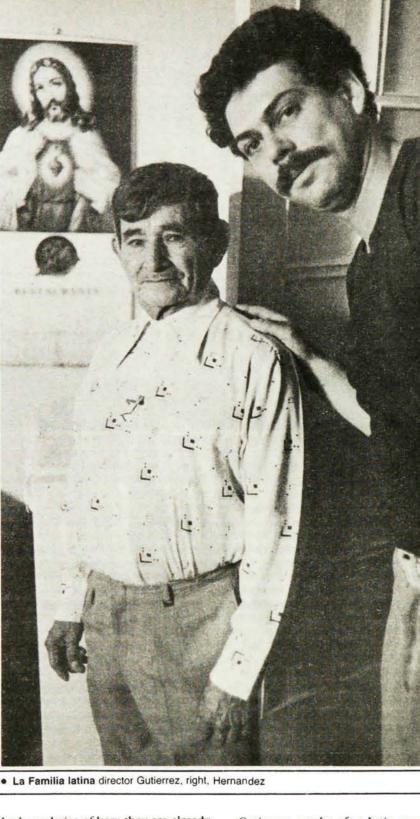
The film is structured as a series of interviews: a Salvadorean teacher who is now a janitor, a single mother, an Argentinian painter, a Chilean poet and various members of their respective families. They all talk of the changes in situation and attitudes that they have undergone since their arrival in Montreal.

One episode which focuses on Ines Aracena, divorced mother of three, will have special significance for Latin women. Aracena came to Canada with her husband, found that women had more options here, exercised them, and broke up with him as a result. "In Canada you don't have to live with an man you don't love only to support your children," she says. That all women in Canada can afford a room of their own may be too readily assumed. However, financial independence does often accompany the Latin woman's sometimes hesitant entry into the Canadian job-market. Aracena's testimony is an eloquent expression of the changes different economic situations bring to traditional relationships.

Though other episodes aren't as well articulated as this one, they all have a residual truth that will be immediately recognized by other immigrants and exiles. The experiences depicted are so common that identification is made easy. In one scene, a poet says that exile is leaving everything that is dear (the weather, indigenous music), and his wife, Mariana Taulis, adds that is is also rage, sadness, powerlessness, and rootlessness. Both are giving cathartic expression to what many exiles think and feel.

The last scene where Taulis resorts to song to recount her experience is particularly moving. In hf Simple Things," she says that sadness is the slow death of little things that are dear. We realise that exile is a state of perpetual sadness because one leaves all the simple things one loved behind and it is the simple things that are most easily destroyed.

Gutierrez's broad approach allows him to cover many issues. That his subjects sometimes appear stereotypic is one of the liabilities of the film: there's the young man who's confused by the sexual freedom women enjoy in North America; the teenage girl who, at least in front of the camera, is appreciative of the restrictions her parents place on her; the mother who says she'd throw her daughter out of the house if she had sexual relations before marriage. The director seems to have limited these people to speaking of themselves within



the boundaries of how they are already perceived by others. In doing so, she has also limited the audience's ability to understand them.

These figures are stereotypes because Gutierrez does not succeed in contextualizing their experiences. Though one senses that they are supposed to be representative of the 30,000 Latins now living in Montreal, why they are so and, more importantly, how they are so, is never articulated. Whether they are immigrants or exiles, the class they originate from, the length of their stay in Montreal and other such factors that would greatly influence their experience and their ability to adapt and/or assimilate into Canadian society are not examined systematically. Too often, one has to rely on accent, manner, the books on their shelves and the food they eat to find clues to this essential information.

Gutierrez speaks of *a* Latin experience in Montreal and he uses different people as if to illustrate different aspects of the experience. Yet, the only common denominator among those interviewed is that they are Spanish-speaking people who left their homeland. It is a common peeve among Latins that outsiders often amorphously lump Chileans, Argentinians, Peruvians and others together without taking into consideration their different cultures and values. Gutierrez, as a Colombian, should have been more sensitive to this.

In spite of the director's knowledge of the Latin American milieu in Montreal, his depiction of people he can obviously understand rarely goes beyond the exotic. He seems to have chosen his subjects on the basis of how interesting they would be as colourful characters rather than on how they rep-

resent and articulate their experience as exiles or immigrants in Montreal. We thus get the patriarch surrounded by the 50-plus members of his family at a photo-session in church; the artist who thought that art was universal and is surprised at cultural specificity; a youth carrying a gigantic "ghetto-blaster"; a family singing *Una Sonrisa* in their kitchen, and others. But needing help to find a job, sending the children to speak to bureaucrats or to buy groceries because one doesn't speak the language, and other common humiliations that go hand in hand with cultural displacement, are not depicted.

Yet Gutierrez does treat the people he interviews with love and respect. I was nevertheless disturbed at how, through lack of proper exposition, he unwittingly exposes some of them. One of the false charges often brought against immigrants is that they come here, live off the fat of the land, and then go back home. In La Familia Latina, Gutierrez shows a woman supporting her family on welfare and a Salvadorean buying a house with his family allowance payments. In the meantime others complain about how they have nothing to say to the Québécois, how much they hate the weather, and how they miss their country. The only time a family who has integrated into Québécois society is depicted, Gutierrez shows us two unattended children left in the care of their computers.

Technically, the film suffers from a voice-over narration in French that starts two beats after the subjects on screen begin to talk. The device is irritating because the voice-over is often no more than a translation of what is being said in Spanish. Subtitles would not diminished French-speaking have people's understanding of the film and would have been a great help to those who only speak Spanish. Since it is so seldom that minorities get to see themselves reflected in the dominant culture, it would have been an added treat if they could also have heard themselves in their own language.

However, in spite of the film's many problems, many Latins will probably like **La Familia Latina**. Their cultural history and a shared psychological experience of exile will enable them to bring their own multiple dimensions to the film's one, thus ignoring the clichés because their personal experience will have replaced the clichés with something real.

Others are likely to think La Familia Latina is giving them an intimate portrait that won't make them uncomfortable by destroying their stereotypes. They'll probably even like this film. I don't.

#### José Arroyo •

LA FAMILIA LATINA d./sc./narr. German Gutierrez co-sc. Pierre Marter. Leopoldo Gutierrez ed. Annie Boudin asst ed. Christian Marcotte d.o.p. René Pothier cam. Martin Leclerc asst.cam. Michel Motard add cam. André Luc Dupont, Claude de Maisonneuve. Richard Nichol sd. Pierre Blain sd.ed. Alain Sauvé mixer Hans Peter Strobl orig.mus. Jimmy Tanaka texts & trans. Nicole Duchéne dubbing Rina Cyr, Mario Desmarais key grip François Warot grips Walter Klymkiw, Mark Sherman loc. man. Louis-Philippe Rochon, Michel Dandavino titles Valentino Teodori unit admin. Monique Létourneau asst. unit admin. Louise Cousineau mus.rights res. Evelyn Régimbald p.sec. Johanne Pelletier tech.coord. Edouard Davidovici post p.d. Suzanne Dussault p. Michel Gauthier exec.p. Roger Frappier p.c., l'Office National du film du Canada. Col., running time: 58 minutes.

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