Sandy Wilson’s
My American Cousin

The outstanding characteristic of Sandy Wilson’s My American Cousin – and the reason it has garnered so much attention – is 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 were 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 somewhere. 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 indication of what had happened. Although it may have been the quality of the print, there is also what appears to be a jump-cut 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 the very wide and long shots. When the Major tries to jump in his car and roars off with blood on his mouth, the camera now moves to a distant overhead shot as the Major tries to explain the ‘uncontrollable urge’, 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 different from what we 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 unashamedly 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 along with the film’s tick-tock clock. 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 conversation begin, the truck pulls away again and the camera now moves to a distant overhead shot as the Major tries to explain the ‘uncontrollable urge’, using the example of a bull who knows there’s a cow around.

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 realizing the defensible difference of 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

Margaret Langrick, Wilson has created an amazing female character for which both must be commended. This may sound as though My American Cousin is the very creation Bronson Michael Wilson – and the reason it has not been all 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


Puberty blues: Margaret Langrick as Sandy in My American Cousin

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