

Douglas Williams' **Best of Both Worlds**

CBC's feature-length romantic comedy *Best of Both Worlds*, which aired April 21, leaves one with the uncomfortable suspicion that the more "Canadian" people become, the less value they retain as human beings.

Sharmila (Malika Mendez), a charming young Indian beauty, is flown direct from Asia for a family-arranged marriage with Anil (Sugith Varughese), the Canadianized son of (presumably) first-generation immigrants, whom she's never met. But Anil already has a girlfriend, Tammy (Gaye Burgess), the pampered daughter of wealthy Toronto WASPS, and agrees to the marriage only when he learns about the \$50,000 dowry that comes with his mail-order bride. It's "the big chance" they've been waiting for - Anil plans to use the 50 grand to set up in business, so he'll be able to keep Tammy "in the style to which she's accustomed" (though he'll keep a few thousand aside for an RRSP - Anil's already a very Canadian sort of entrepreneur).

In short, Anil is a creep on the make, and one of the lesser mysteries of the plot is why two lovely women should both be fighting over him. But director Douglas Williams never lets the pace slacken enough for us to worry much about it.

More worrisome is the moral vacuity of characters like Anil and Tammy. Anil, a first-generation-born Canadian, works hard to deny his cultural roots: when his mother serves an Indian dinner, he goes to the fridge looking for left-over pizza. Or he amuses his WASP girlfriend with his 'Peter Sellers' take-off on an East Indian accent, though the humor falls flat with Sharmila there as a mirror for Anil's cultural suicide.

Having defined his identity in negatives - the great Canadian compromise - in the end Anil is loyal only to money. His new wife shows him the antique jewelry she's brought as her dowry; the reflection of light from the gold ripples across her head like the aura of a madonna, and the materialist Anil is impressed. The fact that the dowry takes the form of a family heirloom, instead of ready cash as Anil had expected ("I thought it would be a cheque," he says desperately) is a vivid capsule summary of the contradiction between Old World values and New.

Specifically, the rejection of the Old World implies the disintegration of the power of the family - i.e., arranged marriages - but once 'liberated' from family, the isolated individual finds that his only link with society is through the mega-corporation. Thus Anil's cluttered bachelor apartment is crowded with huge cartons of the soapflake product he promotes in supermarkets. (One of the few times we see any spunk in Anil - or any hint of life in his relationship with Tammy - is when they perform a little guerilla theatre to dupe a supermarket manager into granting Anil's soapflakes better shelf space.)

Anil's scam (ripping off the dowry) expresses his profound disdain for his cultural roots, a common enough New World disorder among first-generation immigrants or *independentistes*.

But Anil begins to sense that he has underestimated the strength of the old culture as he stands under the wedding canopy with his radiant bride, surrounded

by well-wishers - the extended family, the tribe. In the flower-strewn hotel suite when Sharmila (the woman he met only a few hours before) unabashedly summons him to his marital duties, our hero, this child of the new America, destroyer of tradition's stifling bonds, can only flee.

In this sea of moral bankruptcy - like the swimming-pool in Tammy's house which her mother keeps well-stocked with bored young lawyers - Sharmila stands out like a beacon of hope for humanity. She's a sort of Superwoman - beautiful, charming, patient, courageous, and a scrappy fighter. Billed as the unfortunate dupe in Anil's dowry-heist, she quickly makes mincemeat of Tammy and when the melodrama ends we are confident that she may even manage to make, if not a man of Anil, at least a satisfactorily domesticated stud. Tradition will be maintained for perhaps another generation, thanks to this fresh infusion of values from the old country.

Sharmila's secret, of course, is that *her* life is still meshed with her traditional values - she knows what she believes, and therefore she believes in herself. The only thing Canadian about her is that, like the RCMP, she gets her man - and there's something quaintly nostalgic about that too, in this age of cynicism about monogamy. (When Anil claims his parents know nothing of love if they believe in arranged marriages, his father retorts: "In our culture, you don't fall in love, you grow into it!")

And yet *Best of Both worlds* is no blind eulogy to a Golden Age of the past either. Sharmila admits to Anil that the reason she was ready to marry him, was to get out of India. When Tammy, in a last-ditch attempt to hang onto Anil, praises the richness and romance of India, Sharmila shoots her down: "If you haven't been there, how do you know?"

Tradition may carry important human values, but the old worlds that produced them are no longer - and here we come against the major stumbling-block of *Best of Both Worlds*. True, for the moment Sharmila's determination and strong roots have saved the day, but what about tomorrow? In an age when one in three marriages end in divorce, can "girl gets man" really do as a satisfactory denouement? Already by the end, Sharmila has changed her clothes and hairdo for western styles - "You're

beautiful!" Anil exclaims.

A vital key to the politics of cultural imperialism is that the colonized develop a taste for the boss's treacle, and soon prefer it to domestic brands. And so the implicit theme of cultural dilution of *Best of Both Worlds* becomes a critical comment on Canadian production awash in the gooey treacle from the airwaves south of the border. Because Canadian productions are themselves a minority in the continental broadcasting environment, they're judged by a separate standard - and TV in North America prefers not to be judged at all, it just IS.

True, there's often something that chaffs about a Canadian production like *Best of Both Worlds*. At first I thought it was Sugith Varughese's acting that wasn't up to pip - there was something uncomfortably wrong about Anil. But that wasn't it either. American TV has habituated us to expect strong male heroes, surrounded by a court of supportive females. Egos somewhat frazzled at the edges after a day at work, Americans settle down each evening in front of their multi-channel dream machines for a fresh dose of mythology - from the mainline. That's why American TV must be written to a formula, like Harlequin romances.

But while Canadians have proven quite capable of reproducing the formula flawlessly in some of the simpler genres (e.g., Harlequin romances or *Porky's*), on (some) film and TV lingers a revisionist tendency to portray reality. This may be in part a residuum of Canada's strong documentary tradition, but, more important, it reflects the unacknowledged preoccupation with our economic and political - and therefore cultural - dependence. Canadians know only too well that they're not the heroes, and therefore an impotent, equivocating, worm like Anil can slip in as a *pseudo-hero*. Unfortunately, such a radical departure from the prescribed litany generates sufficient discomfort in the regular TV *aficionado* that he often switches channels.

Still, the fact that *Best of Both Worlds* was made and aired at all is proof that Canada has grown a lot. Not so long ago, a CBC producer would have steered clear of a social comedy that made light of the customs of one of our minority groups - and yet, in a country where more people now stem from "minority"

groups than from either of the "founding" nations, what else is Canada about if not the dialectic between Old and New World values?

Recently a group of CBC producers published a proposal recommending that the public network commit itself to a policy of 100% Canadian content. Unfortunately we still live in a time when such a proposal can scarcely hope to be taken seriously. And yet, in the end, a film like *Best of Both Worlds* is an eloquent argument for how much we would stand to gain from such a policy.

Alan Herscovici ●

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS p. Lawrence S. Mirkin d. Douglas Williams sc. Sugith Varughese asst. d. Rob Malenfant unit man. Alan MacPherson designer David Moe cont. Kathryn Buck d.o.p. Nick Evdemon casting Dorothy Gardner, Claire Hewitt, Michelle Metivier p. sec. Susan Howard p.e. CBC running time 86 min., 6 sec. Lp. Sugith Varughese, Malika Mendez, Gaye Burgess, Maida Rogerson, Joe Ziegler, Layne Coleman, Angelo Rizacos, Jack Jessop, Desh Bandu, Sanyogta Singh, Swarran Singh, Elena Kudaba, Alf Humphries, Charlotte Freedlander, Al Bernado, Amrita Sethi, Samantha Singh.

Michael Rubbo's

Daisy: The Story of a Facelift

In documentary, character is everything. In fact I'd say that documentary is the unconscious search for character. I say unconscious because we documentary filmmakers have often not realized the importance to our films of character delineation. We have often been too concerned with issues to notice that it is only when these issues are lived by a real person that they become interesting.

Michael Rubbo

This is not the story of Daisy's face, before and after. Ironically, in this film about a facelift, the face is relatively unimportant. It is Daisy De Bellefeuille's sense of humour and incisive character that carry the film beyond the level of investigative cinematic journalism. Ultimately the film becomes one of character portrayal, a study of the private person behind the mask. And this is probably exactly what Rubbo intended.

From the moment Daisy, a 55-year-old National Film Board executive, makes her decision to have a facelift, Rubbo and his camera follow her through the various emerging stages of her experience: rational, psychological, emotional and medical. In Rubbo's characteristic documentary style, he forges a relationship with Daisy which allows her to unfold naturally and easily before the camera. Once he has gained her trust and acceptance, he can begin to assert his own opinions as an agent provocateur: he can ask touchy, leading questions which provoke Daisy to unravel motives behind her elective surgery: vanity, insecurity and a need to be loved. Rubbo's discreet yet persistent on-screen presence is the catalyst behind Daisy's unfolding.

Daisy is compelled - in response to the sometimes unsympathetic, uncomprehending judgements of friends and acquaintances, sometimes by Rubbo's



● East-West duologue: Sugith Varughese flanked by Gaye Burgess (left) and Malika Mendez