

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.

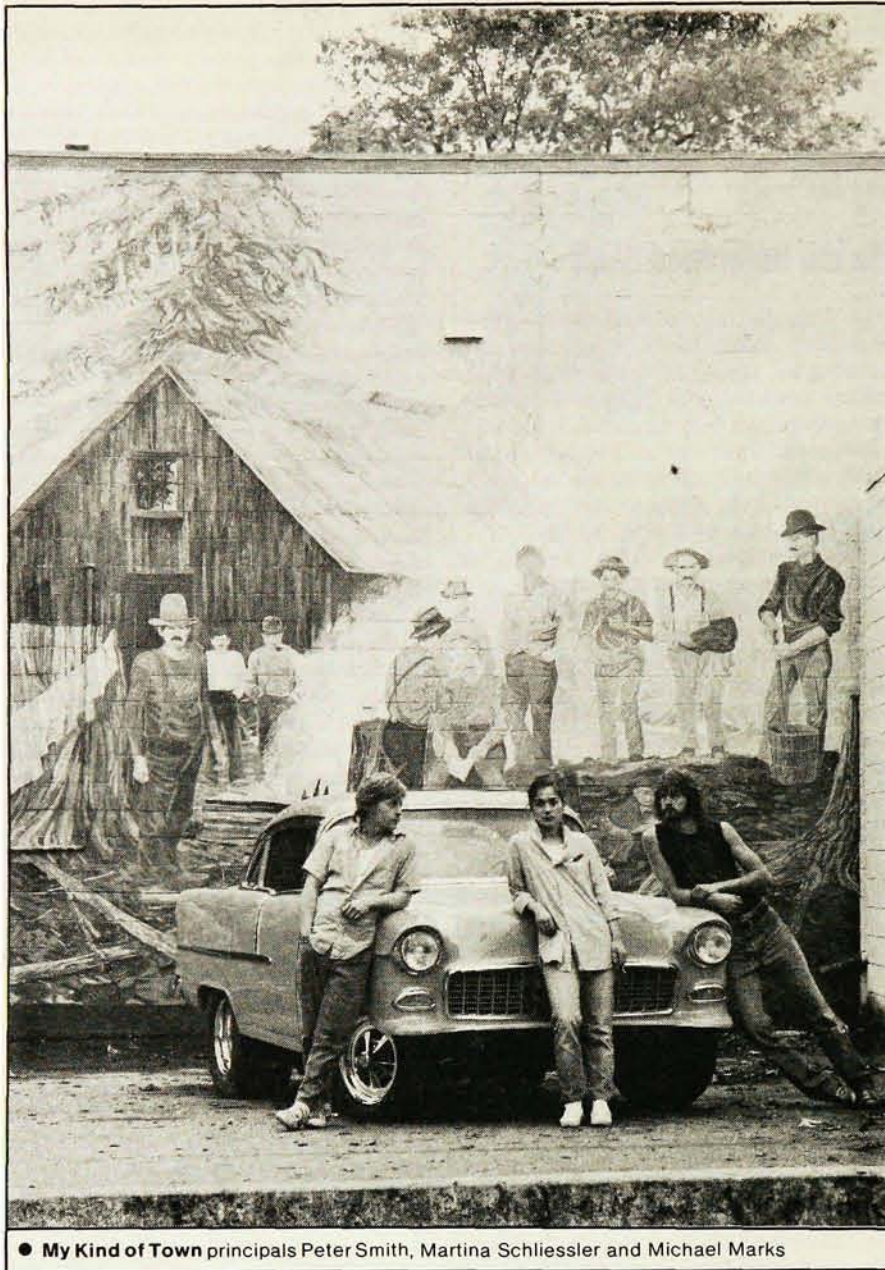
The chief problem with *My Kind of Town* is that the filmmakers seem to have made up the screenplay as they went along and cast it with whoever was handy.

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*