Dana Brooks as 'Marilyn'

Pop Dav

I Love a Man

If you're skeptical of the kind of sudden fame visited upon young people like David Wellington, you're not alone. So is David Wellington. With only two feature films under his belt, the slight, bespectacled 31-year-old former punk musician is the latest beneficiary of a Canadian form of filmmaking stardom. His newest film, a darkly comic parable of mass-mediated psychopathology called *I Love a Man in Uniform*, is the most recent Canadian production to careen in from left field and bounce smack off the most sun-dappled of international launching pads, the Director's Fortnight at Cannes. Like such invitees as Denys Arcand, Atom Egoyan, Jean-Claude Lauzon, and Patricia Rozema before him, Wellington's place beneath the cold Canadian sun seems made in

There is something distinctly Canadian about this vision of authority as a seductive, yet deceitfully dangerous force.

Culture Poison: David Wellington's I Love a Man in Uniform

By Geoff Pevere

the shade. His film will be opening the prestigious Perspective Canada program at the Toronto Festival of Festivals, and you can be sure he's going to spend an unholy amount of time in the coming months doing something he finds really weird—giving interviews.

Because, like I said, David Wellington is as suspicious of his own sudden notoriety as anyone. As I sit down to interview him, on a sweltering day in the middle of Toronto's first bonafide heat wave in three years, Wellington keeps obsessively returning to one point: how odd it is to be interviewed. Of the Cannes experience, he says, "I mean, *Mean Streets* was in the Director's Fortnight. What am I doing there? I still feel very uncomfortable about all this. I'm still amazed that anybody likes the movie at all."

Now all of this might seem a little hard to swallow, phoney even, if it weren't for the clear evidence to the contrary on the screen. I mean, how could *I Love a Man in Uniform* have been produced by anyone not thoroughly skeptical of the sinuous and cynical machinations of mass media? Wellington's movie is about a guy who buys into the value systems of popular culture, and the results are deadly. Small wonder the director is so aware of his own role in an all-too-similar process. He says *I Love a Man* is about "pop culture poison."

Yet, if Wellington's discomfort with his own burgeoning notoriety is natural, the notoriety itself is not unwarranted. Alongside David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) and Atom Egoyan's *Speaking Parts* (1989), Wellington's film rounds out a fascinating, and singularly Canadian, triptych of cinematic mediaphobia. But it stands alone, too. The story of an inoffensively likeable bank employee named Henry (played with icy transparency by Toronto actor Tom McCamus), whose own personality begins to fuse dangerously with the quick-draw cop he plays in a slick tv crime show called "Crime Wave," *I Love a Man in Uniform* may share the same concerns as the other films, but it's more disturbingly immediate. While both Egoyan's and Cronenberg's conceptions of media corrosiveness are as opaque in their articulation as Marshall McLuhan, Wellington's message is as blunt and direct (but not nearly so simple) as a nightstick. As such, it's the first Canadian movie to have fashioned a literal parable out of the consequences of living with a borrowed pop mythology. And it's one of the only Canadian movies to take a cop as its subject. How appropriate that it's an imaginary cop.

For Wellington, it all began a few years ago. Or did it? "I'm not sure it

really even happened any more," says the writer-director, perhaps not realizing how much he sounds like Henry. "I was walking in Montreal at St. Catherine and St. Laurent. It was the middle of the night, and I'm walking toward somewhere where I can get a taxi. I'd probably been doing something I shouldn't have. I looked down and saw a prostitute giving a cop a blow job in a squad car, which is in the film. I remember being as scared as I've been in my entire life."

For Wellington, the sight stood for the casual abuse of a small but absolute power. While it represents something he feels deeply suspicious of and chilled by, he insists his film "isn't anti-cop, but anti-authority." Yet, even on this point, Wellington seems as concerned with the perception of his views as he is with the views themselves. "Previously to the press I've said that one of the foundations of the film was that I'm afraid of the police. And then I realized what I'm even more afraid of: SAYING I'm afraid of the police." Either way you cut it, there is something distinctly Canadian about this vision of authority as a seductive, yet deceitfully dangerous force.

The odd thing is, there's nothing hysterical or paranoid about Wellington's wariness of institutionalized authority. This isn't someone who's had chronic legal problems, although he does admit to having been "popped in the face" by a cop outside a Montreal club once, which he shrugs off. His biography hardly suggests someone whose dark feelings about authority were borne on mean streets. Born in Kingston, the son of a surgeon, Wellington was raised in places like Ottawa and the Soho district of London, England. He graduated high school before turning seventeen, and spent a couple of years playing with punk bands before he decided he'd like to take a stab at a career in filmmaking. "When you're seventeen years old," he explains, "you think playing music is a really great way to get girls, but when you get them, you don't know what to do with them." The band, local Ottawa legends, The Bureaucrats, moved to Toronto in the early eighties to make a futile stab at the big time. Recalls Wellington, "I stayed for about a week and I said, screw this, I'm going to university."

Tom McCamus as 'Flanagan'

He enrolled at film school at Concordia, but his career really began with a fortuitous offer to work for a New York-based schlock house with a production office in Montreal. The work was miserable, claims Wellington, but the experience invaluable. "My first job after school was synching dailies on a teen high school comedy. But because the circumstances were so awful, it was like scrub baseball. You moved up fast, because people quit all the time." Soon he was an editor, and not long after that, this young man for whom much seems to have come early, was offered his very own movie to direct.

A $300,000 shlocker made in 1987 starring home video cult hero Wings Hauser, it was called *The Carpenter*. It ranks two stars in Steven H. Schauer's *Movies on TV and Videocassette* (one of the few that even mentions it), and clearly occupies a shadowy nook of David Wellington's memory bank.

"We were very serious about making this movie," he recalls with a rueful grin. "It wasn't just a slasher movie. We were going to redefine slasher movies. Twenty-four-year-old kids, and it was like a feminist epic." Heavy sigh.

Because his employers claimed the project was late and over budget, the neophyte auteur was fired. Desperate to realize his politically progressive epic vision, Wellington offered to finish the job for free. "Basically I begged them to take me back on at no charge because I just had to finish the movie." Not surprisingly, the offer was accepted, but Wellington has never seen a dime for the work which would ultimately bear his first directorial credit. He sued. He lost. Still, he says of working in that kind of shoot-and-run factory context, "You learn things you can't learn any other way." One presumes he's referring to filmmaking, but one also wonders if he didn't also learn a thing or two about the blunt end of power.

Remaining in Montreal, he kept busy cutting dozens of commercials and music videos, and even found himself teaching a course in filmmaking at Concordia.

He became a resident at the Canadian Film Centre in 1990, and proceeded to cut an even deadlier pace for himself by commuting regularly between Montreal and Toronto. He is ambivalent about his experience at the leafy, Gatsbyesque estate in North York, allowing diplomatically that he is "in love with the idea of the Film Centre." Still, he did make two consequential contacts there. He met his future producer, Paul Brown, and he met the Centre's founder, Norman Jewison. Jewison, impressed by Wellington during a ten-day workshop session—"the best ten days I spent up there," says Wellington—invited the young man to be his director-observer on *Other People's Money*. Wellington still glows recounting the experience, and can't say enough about Jewison's generosity, ability or judgement.

(Later on, he would show Jewison a rough cut of *I Love a Man in Uniform*. He suspects the veteran director was "lukewarm" on the uncompleted movie, but had some terrific suggestions on how to heat it up. "He had incredibly great suggestions, and the film's better for them. He's so smart about story.")

The experience on the *Other People's Money* set served to yank out the few splinters remaining from *The Carpenter* debacle, and Wellington was ready to take a crack at directing again. He wrote an outline for *I Love a Man in Uniform*, and shopped it around to Telefilm Canada, the Ontario Film Development Corporation, and Alliance Films. In a show of support Wellington calls "the simplest financing of all time," all were in. But despite a meticulous, twelve-week period of pre-production, the shoot itself was hardly a cakewalk. "Thirty-five locations, 50 speaking parts, and two-thirds of it night exterior. Just a nightmare for the money we had." But he brought it in on budget ($1.8 million) and on time, which bodes well for another kick at the lens.

Next time, he says, he wants to make a cheaper, smaller film than *I Love a Man in Uniform*, and one that packs more emotional wallop. Not surprisingly, he finds *Uniform* too cerebral, and claims, as an artist, he is constantly trying to push his creative impulses from his head down into his guts. I ask him what kind of movie he'd like to make.

He thinks this over, and describes his responses to a screening of Robert Rossen's 1947 *Body and Soul* at a festival in Cattolica, a small town in Italy. *Uniform* had been invited, and the festival was featuring an extensive tribute to the work of John Garfield. What was it about *Body and Soul* that rocked his world so much? "Have you ever sat and watched a film, and sometimes you started crying not because it's sad, but just because it's so good? I went to see it twice. There was so much love for people in it, so much humanity and truth. I was stunned by it. I want to do that. I want to make a movie where somebody feels like I did when I watched *Body and Soul*" •