




# Wendy Tilby's

## When the Day Breaks

### Wins at Cannes

By Jennie Punter

**I**N a city inhabited by cop dogs, rabbit storeclerks and crooning cows, a happy pig named Ruby greets the new day by bursting into song. A little later, she accidentally bumps into a fastidious chicken at the corner market and finds herself emotionally unprepared to handle her response to an accident that happens on the street just a few moments later. After some soul-searching and a little trip down memory lane, Ruby—a little wiser after her brush with tragedy—recovers her sunny disposition.



**When the Day Breaks**

One could certainly envision this scenario coming to life in the familiar animation style of Disney; after all, for decades, cartoon animals that burst into song have been the famous studio's stock in trade. But in the hands of Wendy Tilby, an award-winning Canadian animator, the scenario becomes a completely different beast. *When the Day Breaks*, which Tilby codirected with Amanda Forbis, is a 10-minute animated short that beautifully articulates truths about human existence, expressed through music, humour and innovative animation techniques developed by the directors. Produced by the National Film Board, the film marks the first collaboration between Tilby and Forbis. The two Alberta natives became friends in 1985 while studying at Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, and now both live in Montreal.

Completed in April, *When the Day Breaks* has already earned the codirectors two feathers for their collaborative cap. In May, Tilby and Forbis travelled to France to attend the 52nd Cannes International Film Festival, where their film won the prestigious Palme d'or for Best Short Film, as well the International Animated Film Festival in Annecy, the most important festival showcase and competition for independent animators. "We're thrilled to be going to Cannes, although to be honest, it's not as animation friendly as Annecy and other smaller festivals. It's another world altogether," Tilby says. "You work so hard on animation that you go into your own world and you start thinking 'what am I doing this for?' It can seem like such an insane thing to do. But then, if you're lucky enough to get your film into a few festivals, especially animation or short film festivals, you get hooked into the little network of the animation world and, at least for a few days, you feel that you're not alone."

*When the Day Breaks* is Tilby's second animated short for the NFB. After seeing her 1986 graduating project, the seven-minute *Table of Contents* (which was programmed at a few international film and animation festivals), the NFB invited Tilby to join its Montreal animation studio to develop her next film. "Everything was opening up then and the Film Board was very active in encouraging younger filmmakers," Tilby recalls. "Anybody who goes into animation reveres the Film Board, so for me it was an adventure to move to Montreal and become part of an instant community. I was given the resources and the time to do exactly what I wanted to do creatively."

*Strings*, Tilby's first NFB short, is a perfect example of the animation studio's long-standing tradition, which supports innovation, thematic exploration and artistry—in other words, quality over quantity. Completed in 1991, *Strings* won awards at several prestigious festivals and received both a Genie Award and an Oscar nomination. Using the same painstaking technique as she employed in her student film, *Table of Contents*, Tilby essentially created a moving painting for *Strings*. "I used watercolour mixed with glisterine, which I kept wet so I could manipulate it. So you're making a wet painting on a piece of glass under the camera. You continually manipulate one image into the next and literally repaint a character in a slightly different position while you're taking a frame of film. You have no artwork when you're finished," she explains. "The simplicity is appealing. If you goof up you have to keep going, which does create some anxiety when you're waiting for the film to come back from the lab. For a perfectionist, it's a great technique to help prevent you from doing things over and over again."

# Wendy Tilby



Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis

In *Strings*, an elderly woman, who is building a huge model of the *Titanic*, lives in the apartment directly above an elderly gentleman, who plays the violin in a string quartet that drops by his place for a practice. The woman's leaky bathtub is the household emergency that allows the filmmaker to reveal how the lives of individuals are connected in both concrete and intangible ways. This theme of the unseen but vital connections between strangers—who pass each other on the street, sit side-by-side on the subway and who could even be neighbours—is also explored in *When the Days Breaks*.

"After *Strings*, I took a break and was teaching at Concordia," Tilby recalls. "The idea for *When the Day Breaks* had been cooking for a while. By the time Amanda came into the project, I knew I wanted to make something more abstract than *Strings* although, oddly enough, it deals with some of the same themes. I began with the idea that a person is more than the sum of physical parts. Our history, our teachers, our families—all these things add up to the mystery of what composes life. As Amanda and I discussed this idea, it evolved into a narrative. When we first see Ruby, she's peeling her potatoes. She's an optimist, a happy singing pig. When she discovers her milk is sour, it's the first wrinkle in her day. This prompts her to go to the store and collide with a chicken, an event which may have delayed it from crossing the street. So when it dies, Ruby feels she's part of this chain of events. She goes from singing about the city being hers to running home and locking the doors; from embracing the city to feeling threatened by it. The scenes that show the infrastructure of the city—the electric wires, pipes and subways—reveal Ruby coming to terms with the city again. She realizes she is connected to everyone else. Like the infrastructure that contains the city's inhabitants, our bodies are the infrastructures that house our spirit, something much larger than the sum of our parts."

Initially, Tilby and Forbis—who was animation director on the NFB film *The Reluctant Deckhand*—struggled to find the right characters and animation technique to tell the story. They began developing and drawing human characters and, as a break, would cram notebooks full of doodles, drawing and cartoon jokes involving animals. "Suddenly, we realized we could create something that had a feeling of lightness and humour. We could create these characters as animals instead of humans and, in a way, the story could be even more touching," Tilby recalls. "*When the Day Breaks* was made using a completely different technique from my previous films. We would take a Hi-8 video camera and shoot real people; ourselves, real things, basically whatever we wanted to show

in the film. Then we used a video printer, which we attached to a VCR, to print out little three-by-four-inch stills, isolated frames of video, which we would enlarge slightly. We drew on these photocopies. When we first developed the technique we thought it would be a shortcut, as opposed to the labour-intensive solo technique I used in the past. But every technique has its problems. One big advantage was that there were two of us. In the end, the film probably took four years to make, which is a long time. A lot of that had to do with the time it took for our initial experiments. As well, it was a challenge to keep our two styles in check. Even though we have a lot in common, our drawing styles evolved over time."

While Ruby the pig and the other animals in *When the Day Breaks* live in an urban setting, with subways and electric appliances and cigarette-smoking weasels, the overall mood of the film is steeped in nostalgia. The objects, the clothing and, in particular, the music combine to convey this feeling. "I always knew there would be a musical component and when the idea of Ruby singing evolved, it seemed like the perfect way to make the film even more fun," Tilby explains. "I have a tape of gramophone cylinder songs that I recorded from an old player that my parents own. I loved that music and it became a cue for the nostalgic feeling we wanted in the film." Tilby and Forbis wrote lyrics for two songs, the title tune sung by Ruby and "Prairie Moon," sung by a cow ironing, and picked up by other animal city dwellers, including a goat shaving and a TV-watching cat. Montreal composer Judith Gruber-Stitzer was enlisted to write the score as well as music for the songs, which sound so authentic they could easily be mistaken for chestnuts from a bygone era. Ruby's joyous tune is sung by Martha Wainwright, while the poignant "Prairie Moon" is performed by Chaim Tannenbaum.

Tilby is more influenced by theatre, fiction, photography and her interest in biology than she is by the work of other animators. She doesn't necessarily see her path as an artist continuing in the field of animation. "The problem with the work I do is that not very many people see these films, so when you go to these animation festivals I end up talking to other animators about the relative obscurity. When I think of working at a place like Disney, I think of people who are cogs in a wheel of a bigger thing. For someone like me, in terms of creative expression, there's no better place than the NFB where you're paid to make a film that is truly yours. I've just finished a film that took a long time and was very intense. I've been interested for a long time in documentary film, but for now I want to take a break. I don't want to put all my eggs in one basket." ●