

# Northern Divas

BY Kathleen Cummins

*"I can't make films from any other perspective other than a woman's perspective. That's who I am and proud of it."*

Anne Wheeler

Image of Suddenly Naked courtesy of Remstar



## The Films of Anne Wheeler

*A Wilderness Station*, a soon-to-be-released Anne Wheeler film based on a short story by Alice Munro, is set in the 19th-century Ontario wilderness and tells the sad tale of a young girl trapped in an abusive marriage. It's perhaps apt that this is Wheeler's next film. After a 30-year career, Wheeler has had her own struggles in the wilderness, albeit the untamed frontier of the Canadian film and television industry. Canadian landscape metaphors aside, after many films, dramatic shorts, documentaries, features, television movies, as well as episodic television (Da Vinci's Inquest, Cold Squad), Wheeler has witnessed and participated in the evolution of a Canadian cinematic presence on the international scene. She has been awarded six honorary doctorates, the Order of Canada, and many filmmaking awards. However, perhaps Wheeler's most important contribution to Canadian narrative cinema is her sheer will and tenacity in bringing authentic Canadian women's stories to the big screen. Wheeler has accomplished this consistently in her films, and she has done so with a social conscience. You might argue that Wheeler is our Jane Campion, Penny Marshall or Marleen Goriss; and at times a mixture of all three à la Canadian style.

Has it been an uphill battle? With regards to distribution, yes, and Wheeler will attest to the fact that the situation has not improved over the years. Even though she is a mainstream narrative filmmaker, her films still have difficulty finding proper distribution. Theatrical and home-video distributors complain that her films are not commercial enough, largely due to her "issue-oriented" subject matter and female-driven narratives. The fact that Wheeler's "leading ladies," are often aged between 35 and 50 is also problematic. It is an age group for women largely ignored or rejected by mainstream cinema. "You know, I'm on the edge of being a genre filmmaker, but not commercial enough for the distributors. And there is a lot of pressure not to go that route. There always comes the time when they [the programmers at the Toronto International Film Festival] are deliberating on whether or not they are going to accept my latest film, and then they always say the same thing: "It's a bit too commercial." And yet they have all

# and Romantic Catalysts



Wendy Crewson in *Suddenly Naked*

these American commercial films here. You can't win. If you're a Canadian filmmaker you're suppose to be...what? I don't know. We're all completely confused by what we should be," she says.

In some sense, Wheeler attempts to do the impossible – tell authentic women's stories in a mainstream narrative context, while working within the tradition of realism. Without resorting to movie-of-the-week formats and sentimental melodrama, Wheeler's "female-oriented" subject matter, often deemed "documentary" or television material, covers such relevant and complex issues as domestic violence and rape (*Loyalties*, *Marine Life*), sexuality (*The Diviners*, *Better than Chocolate*, *Suddenly Naked*), alcoholism (*Loyalties*, *Cowboys Don't Cry*, *Marine Life*), gender discrimination (*Bye, Bye Blues*), racial discrimination (*The War between Us*, *The Diviners*), lesbian issues (*Better than Chocolate*), aging (*Marine Life*, *Suddenly*

*Naked*, *Better than Chocolate*), childbirth (*Legs Apart* from *Preludes*) and single-parenthood, a theme that surfaces in almost all her films.

Wheeler's realism is rooted in the conflict-resolution framework of her stories, emanating a strong social conscience, particularly in regards to the representation of women. Like true northern divas, her heroines resolve their conflicts through stoicism, courage and self-knowledge; rarely through violent operatic acts of martyrdom or submission. This is Wheeler's code. Her voice is rooted in the uncompromising wilful voices and gestures of her "leading ladies"; women seeking agency, independence and self-revelation on their own terms, even if a romantic catalyst may appear in the process. Wheeler articulates this through subtleties of character, gesture and landscape within the lyricism of her *mise en scene* and the realism of her narratives. Her earlier documentary work for the NFB in the 1970s (*Great Grand Mother*, *A War Story*) may have helped shape this social conscience.

*Loyalties*, Wheeler's first feature, released in 1986, tells the story about the power of female friendship in the face of suffering and adversity, a recurring theme in many of her films. Lily Sutton (Susan Wooldridge) is the upper-middle-class English woman who finds herself stranded in the middle of an isolated Albertan town with three young children and an emotionally unavailable husband. Despite appearances of bourgeois bliss, Lily is alienated, depressed and exhausted. To improve domestic matters, Lily's husband, Dr. David Sutton (Kenneth Welsh), hires a local native woman, Rosanne (Tantoo Cardinal), to help clean house and babysit. At first the women dislike each other intensely; you can cut the class and racial tension with a knife. However, despite their cultural and socio-economic differences, the women discover their situations are perhaps more similar than at first glance. Rosanne's alcoholic boyfriend, Eddy (Tom Jackson), beats her up on occasion; Lily's so-called respectable husband has an unhealthy penchant for little girls, the reason the Suttons have transferred into the middle of nowhere. The Suttons are running from notoriety. Rosanne has already kicked the pitiful Eddy out of the house. Lily needs to find the inner strength to do the same. This comes to the fore when Leona, Rosanne's prepubescent daughter, becomes the object and victim of Dr. Sutton's perverse affections.

The power of this film is realized in the execution of its resolution, a resolution rooted in a tradition of realism. In a moment of mother's rage, Rosanne almost throws everything away for the sake of revenge. It's Lily who stops her, risking losing Rosanne's faith in her. Through this non-violent act of selflessness and courage, Lily causes reason to reign over madness and vengeance. We rarely see this kind of resolution in American films. Despite the horror that Lily and Rosanne must endure, they manage to triumph over adversity on their own terms with a sense of dignity, justice and peace, and they

do it together. Any melodramatic impulses or sentiment is subverted by stoic pragmatism. At the end of the film, Rosanne, having learned the truth, embraces Lily and offers her and her children a place to live in her shabby little house, amid the Albertan wilderness. For the first time in her unhappy life, Lily is finally home.

## Northwest Passions

Western imagery and stoic gestures feature prominently in *Bye, Bye Blues* (1989), a tale of Daisy Cooper's (Rebecca Jenkins) challenging journey to independence and success set in western Canada during the Second World War. Like Lily in *Loyalties*, Daisy must come to face the reality of her situation, a situation that calls for action. When Daisy's husband, Dr. Cooper (Michael Ontkean), is shipped off to Singapore, Daisy returns home to her aging parents on their faltering farm. Without communication or money from her husband, Daisy soon realizes that she must become the breadwinner if she's to survive life on the prairies with two young children. When the opportunity arises to sing in a local band for pay, Daisy jumps at the chance. Even though she is inexperienced and disliked by the bandleader, Daisy pushes herself to learn the ropes. She finds encouragement and expertise from a talented trumpet-playing drifter and lady's man, Max Gramley (Luke Reilly). Max falls for her, but Daisy, unfaltering in her loyalty to her husband, resists temptation.

This romance is a peripheral issue, not the core conflict. Max is a catalyst, rather than an active character. The core conflict is within Daisy herself, rooted in her transformation from pampered, passive doctor's wife to hard-working single mother and swing-band diva. Driven by her will to excel, Daisy hikes across the Prairies to her music gigs, engaging in hard-nose negotiations with corrupt club owners, and learns to belt out a song to hundreds of soldiers waiting to be shipped to the front lines, from which they may never return. Daisy's moment of truth, and the central theme of the film, is realized in Wheeler's final wide shot. Daisy's husband, having returned from the war a broken man, watches his wife say goodbye to a smoky busload of rumpled band players. Her singing career is over, or at least on hold, along with life on the road and the acclamation. Daisy isn't saying goodbye to romance so much as she is to the one person she came to love and respect the most – herself. The shot is from Daisy's point of view as she watches with stoic yearning the old bus

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### Loyalties

Kenneth Welsh and Susan Woolldridge

Luke Reilly and Rebecca Jenkins



### Bye, Bye Blues

disappear down a dusty prairie road. Despite the poetic and romantic western imagery that allows her characters to express their wildest imaginings, deepest longings and unexplored self-truths, Wheeler's realism subverts any tendency to romanticism and sentimentality.

Realism and romantic western imagery resurface in her contemporary family drama *Cowboys Don't Cry* (1988), a story about a troubled father-son relationship set against the landscape of Albertan ranches and rodeos. As in *Bye, Bye Blues* and *Loyalties*, characters express themselves through gesture amid the beauty and lyricism of the landscape, as 14-year-old Shane Morgan (Zachary Ansley) does in his yearnings for a real home and a sense of belonging. Shane is a motherless boy with an irresponsible alcoholic father, fading rodeo star Josh Morgan (Ron White), who has trouble holding down a job and keeping the household together. Shane is the "parent" in the relationship, the one who worries about the bills, the groceries and taking care of the ranch. Josh, in truth, is a disenfranchised male, due in large part to his lack of education and employment skills. Clinging to his masculinity like a rusty shield, Josh is a man who understands the impulses of angry bulls, but can't comprehend the needs of his own son.

# Northern Divas and Romantic Catalysts

Christina Cox and Karyn Dwyer

Shane sees this reality, and going against his father's wishes, quits bull riding to pursue academic excellence in school. There can be no simple resolution for these two, but when Josh quits drinking and takes a degrading job as a rodeo clown, Shane sees for the first the time a glimmer of hope for both of them. Despite their differences, inadequacies and anger about the mother's death, both find some resolution in Josh's final effort to save the last thing in the world he thought he lost - himself.

This theme of parent-child role reversal recurs throughout a number of Wheeler films. The deluded Lily and her wise-beyond-his-years 14-year-old son, David, in *Loyalties*; the flighty June and her worldly, angry 12-year-old daughter, Adele, in *Marine Life*; the fragile confused Lila and her self-possessed, confident 19-year-old daughter, Maggie, in *Better than Chocolate*. In the realist tradition, she explores and exposes single-parenthood in all of its heartbreaking and life-altering challenges.

In *Better than Chocolate* (1999), Wheeler's themes of parent-child role reversal, loneliness, abandonment and self-revelation resurface. Marketed as a romantic comedy with a lesbian twist, the heart of *Better than Chocolate* is the mother-daughter story between Lila (Wendy Crewson), a clueless middle-aged suburban mom, and Maggie (Karyn Dwyer), her 19-year-old, self-possessed lesbian daughter. The changing dynamics of this relationship serve as a catalyst for Lila's transformation into an independent and courageous woman. Set in urban Vancouver, "homemaker" Lila moves

into Maggie's "grungy" warehouse apartment after her husband leaves her for a younger woman. Depressed, lonely, jobless, homeless and lacking all sense of direction, Lila is as oblivious to her daughter's sexuality, as she is to many things, especially herself. Their lack of connection is expressed through the contrast between Maggie's chic urban aesthetics and Lila's suburban bourgeois fastidiousness. A fish out of water, Lila, is not unlike Lily in Rosanne's run-down shack in *Loyalties*, politely attempting to conceal her horror at her daughter's warehouse living quarters.

The promotional ads for *Better than Chocolate* made the most of the sexy lesbian romance between Maggie and her lover, Kim (Christina Cox); however, the romantic subplot is a peripheral issue to Lila's journey. Maggie is less a romantic heroine than she is an agent of change, introducing her mother to a whole new world, a world without twin-sets. Lila befriends the transgendered, Judy/Jeremy (Peter Outerbridge), a nightclub entertainer. Besides sharing common interest in interior decorating and a passion for singing, both Lila and Judy discover they also share a rage for the betrayal and rejection by the people they thought loved them the most. Through these connections, Lila rediscovers her girlhood dream of becoming an opera singer; discovers that sexual pleasure can come in a box; and that her daughter has discovered true love outside the confines of bourgeois marriage. Lila goes from flower arranging to whacking skinheads in an attempt to save her daughter from a deadly gay bashing. The middle-class bubble doesn't only burst, it goes up in flames, as does the lesbian bookstore where



Cybill Shepherd

## Marine Life

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Maggie works. Wheeler uses the generic code of romantic comedy as a framing device for the real story, in this case Lila's struggle to find independence, agency and a voice, operatic and all.

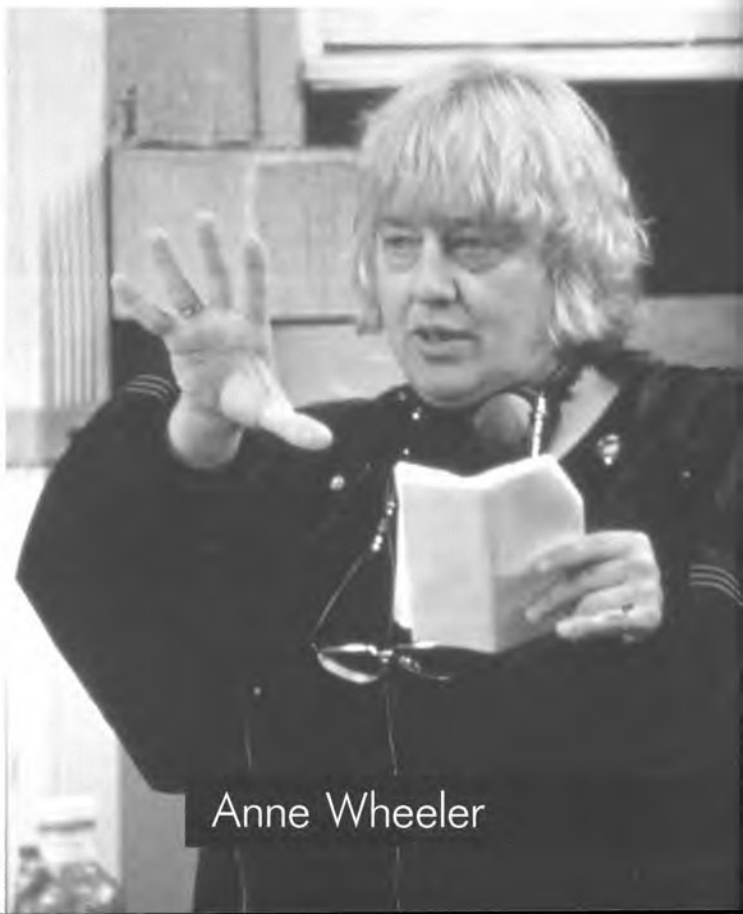
In recent years, Wheeler has moved toward the imagery of urban landscapes, although still located in western Canada; however, themes, subject matter and a tradition of realism remain essentially the same. As in *Cowboys Don't Cry*, such heartbreak is at the core of Wheeler's comedy/drama, *Marine Life*, released in 2000. The film explores the inner turmoil of 12-year-old Adele Nordstrom (Alexandra Purvis), daughter of the self-absorbed wacky lounge singer, June (Cybill Shepherd). Set in a working-class section of Vancouver, Adele must navigate on a daily basis through a household of confused, unfulfilled and failed adults. Adele's sister, Joyce (Gabrielle Miller), is a victim of domestic violence, Adele's brother Ray (Tyler Labine), is an irresponsible alcoholic, wife-cheating loser, and June's live-in boyfriend, Robert (Peter Outerbridge), is an angry, hard-working guy. Although Robert is the only adult who takes into account Adele's feelings, in an act of sheer defiance, Adele despises him. Ironically, Adele's real father, Humphrey (Michael Hogan), is a depressive recluse, emotionally incapable of carrying out his role as father. Again, there are no easy solutions to the domestic turmoil, and when Robert cheats on June, Adele's rage erupts. June, on the other hand, displays only apathy toward Robert's betrayal, something she had been half expecting anyway. June's self-loathing, deeply associated with her fears of aging, takes precedence over Adele's feelings of abandonment, betrayal and uncertainty. After trashing the home of Robert's girlfriend, Adele runs away to the only place she feels a sense of safety and belonging, a dolphin pool at the local marina, a place Robert had introduced to her as a fatherly gesture. It's here that Robert finds Adele, and it's amid the dark waters and the childlike cries of dolphins that they finally connect, away from the oppressive chaos of June's house.

Her most recent feature in release, in quick succession after *Marine Life*, is an urban romantic comedy *Suddenly Naked* that premiered at the 2001 Toronto International Film Festival, was invited to Berlin in February and will be opening theatrically this spring. It again deals with themes of betrayal, self-revelation and aging. Jackie York (Wendy Crewson) is a career-driven novelist suffering from writer's block, general loneliness and self-loathing. Again a romantic catalyst enters, this time in the guise of Patrick (Joe Cobden), a worldly and talented 20-year-old novelist. Initially unimpressed by Patrick's "youthfulness" and lack of sophistication, Jackie is slowly drawn to him on an instinctive level, although publicly she is too embarrassed to admit she's in love with a man-boy half her age. Jackie suffers from the same malaise as Lila in *Better than Chocolate*, Lily in *Loyalties*, June in *Marine Life* and Daisy in *Bye, Bye Blues* - rage, loneliness and self-deception. Jackie uses her success and public persona, one she cultivates with her pseudo-boyfriend, Lionel (Peter Coyote), like a shield, not unlike Josh Morgan does in *Cowboys Don't Cry*. Patrick, like Maggie does for Lila in *Better than Chocolate*, introduces Jackie to a whole new world of basement apartments, cheap red wine, bad B movies and instant noodles, which initially

repels her. Patrick is all low-brow, college-boy aesthetics, which contrasts with Jackie's designer, upper-middle-class lifestyle. Despite his lack of status, he, like Maggie, implicitly knows who he is. Jackie, like all of Wheeler's heroines, will have her moment of truth expressed through a gesture of pragmatism and stoic strength. At the film's conclusion, Wheeler chooses to subvert romantic-comedy traditions for a resolution rooted in her traditional realism. A bloodied and defeated Patrick arrives to witness Jackie's decision to publicly speak from her core sense of truth, even if that means professional humiliation. When the two lovers embrace, there is no applause from the audience of onlookers, nor is there shocked silence. Life just goes on around them, as if nothing notable or meaningful or heroic had taken place at all. Moments of truth are really personal epiphanies, and although profound for the individual, subtle gestures of self-revelation may appear as everyday acts from ordinary people.

"You know, I really did start out with a very personal film inspired by my grandmother (*Great Grand Mother*, 1976). She had letters she had written to her sister. They were both pioneer women. The situation was pretty extreme. In the making of that film I talked to a lot of women and for every woman I talked to there was a story," she says. Wheeler still struggles to stay on the big screen, and displaying the same pragmatic stoic dignity of that "great grandmother," that is exactly where she will stay just as long as she possibly can. No matter how tough the wilderness gets.

TAKE ONE



Anne Wheeler