



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Matewan

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Ever since he made his directing debut with *Return of the Secaucus Seven* in 1979, John Sayles's reputation has rested largely on both the sociopolitical acuity of his work and on his deft skills as a storyteller, a writer of impressively naturalistic dialogue, and creator of psychologically rounded characters (indeed, the Los Angeles Film Critics awarded him the Best Screenplay award for *Secaucus Seven*). At the same time, however, there has been a widespread assumption that Sayles is more interested in (or at least more adept with) the written word and the performances he elicits from his actors than in *mise-en-scène* – a view with which this writer, for one, disagrees.

Moreover, Sayles's critics have tended to argue that his more openly political works are too preachy or didactic. While they are certainly serious and sincere in their commitment, his films are mercifully free of the bombastic polemical excesses that can be found in the work of, say, Oliver Stone. Sayles is left-wing in the old tradition of a fundamentally decent, humanist belief in the right of any individual or group to be accorded equality, freedom and justice; unlike Stone, he is not prone to fashionable conspiracy theories, being more interested in the way particular societies work in the social, political and ethical arena. Furthermore, he does not make films that proclaim their political import as the primary subject in hand (as, for example, Stone has done with *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK* or *Nixon*) but allows the politics to emerge naturally from his study of a particular milieu or situation. Use of genre, accordingly, is one of his prime narrative strategies; and rather than going out of his way to subvert the conventions of, for example, the Western, the soap opera, the teen romance or the sports movie, he hitches a ride on those conventions, subtly playing with them to lend the issues he is dealing with both greater clarity and, at times, a mythical dimension, much in the way, say, that Douglas Sirk used melodrama to mount his critiques of American society in the '50s. And it is in his use of genre, with its attendant iconography, that Sayles may be regarded as an imaginative director as well as a talented, perceptive writer.

With *Matewan*, *Eight Men Out* (1988) and *City of Hope* (1991), Sayles can be said to have attained a new confidence and maturity as a writer-director. In each film, he deployed an extremely large cast and the trappings of genre (respectively, the Western, the sports film and the urban crime movie) to trace the various intricate, interwoven threads that make up the fabric of American life on both a personal and a political level. Story, character, conflict and relationships are presented and understood not only in terms of the psychology of the individual – the norm for most Hollywood films – but in a

wider context which embraces ethnic, sexual, economic, cultural, historical and ideological factors; there is, accordingly, a constant tension between the needs of the individual and the demands of society, between aspiration and achievement, idealism and pragmatism, the private and the public. At the same time, because these analytical studies of American society were partly structured in accordance with the formal conventions of genre cinema, there is in addition an intriguing, revealing relationship between fact and fiction, popular myth – or heroic legend – and social ‘reality’.

In *Matewan*, perhaps the most fruitfully generic of Sayles’s films, he drew upon a traditional narrative form – of the lone outsider coming into a divided community in an attempt to restore justice and peace – to resonant effect. *Matewan* is a small West Virginian mining township wholly owned, in 1920, by a greedy coal company which is forever increasing the cost of living for its employees and their families, while simultaneously cutting the rates of pay. The locals are understandably incensed, especially as the company has begun importing cheap labour in the form of Italian immigrants and blacks from Alabama; inevitably, both groups fall prey to the Virginians’ xenophobic racism and desire for a scapegoat. It is an explosive situation, and when union organiser Joe Kenehan comes to town, hoping to lead the workers into non-violent industrial action against their bosses (instead of turning their anger against each other), he finds himself not only greeted with suspicion by the locals, many of whom would rather take the law into their own hands, but openly threatened by the professional strike-breakers hired by the company. For a while, he manages to instil a sense of unity among the townsfolk and their black and Italian colleagues, who live in a camp on the edge of town; but when a local businessman who acts as a quisling for the company succeeds in bringing the union man into disrepute and instigates a crisis in which a young miner is murdered by the strike-breakers, Joe is powerless to prevent a full-scale gunfight between workers and company agents.

Sayles’s decision to film his account of the beginning of the real-life Coal Wars of the 1920s as a Western succeeds in several respects. For one thing, it allows him to impose a tight, ordered narrative structure on the messier chaos of historical events; we are rarely in doubt, despite the various groups and allegiances involved, as to who are the good guys and who are the villains, besides which we feel, from the familiar sweep of the narrative, that there’s almost a tragic inexorability to the events on view. For another, the Western format lifts the story into the realm of American myth; in being reminded of the oft-depicted range-wars between pioneer farmsteaders and robber land barons, we are made aware of the heroic courage of those poor ‘ordinary’ workers who, in West Virginia as late as the 1920s, fought and in many cases gave their lives in the war between Capital and Labour. Thus, the movement – generally neglected, or even demonised, by the movies – is here associated with the pioneer spirit that brought civilisation to the wilderness; that it fails, in this case, to restrain the workers from taking up arms against the company’s

thugs is not merely a matter of historical accuracy but, in the film, a regrettable, partly self-destructive course of action on the part of the workers which may nevertheless be attributed, to some degree, to the devious, violent ways of the company itself.

But the use of Western iconography (the town constable, for example, as played by an uncompromisingly fair, gun-toting David Strathairn, is clearly evocative of the Old West's sheriff) and Western story elements not only lends the film a mythic clarity and resonance; it also allows us to understand the relevance of more poetic, lyrical scenes which in themselves may have little to do with developing the immediate conflict between heroes and villains. For example, the many campfire scenes, which underline the increasing tolerance between the locals and the blacks and Italians by depicting their common love of music and need for food, evoke the social gatherings and rituals lovingly shot by John Ford; in a similar way, the strike-breakers' brute, boorish behaviour, whether at the meal table of the boarding house run by the intimidated but brave widow Elma Radnor, or in the church where her lay preacher son (the story's narrator) delivers a Biblical parable which informs the congregation that Joe is no traitor to their cause, comes across as an effrontery against the traditional virtues of community which has as much to do with the bullying of the meek and innocent by powerful 'outlaws' as it has to do with the politics of labour.

The strength of Sayles's script and *mise-en-scène* (which merges gritty, low-key realism with more stylised elements such as the magnificently staged final shoot-out) lies in the way they ring new changes on filmic conventions: a preacher's hellfire sermon (spoken by a memorably rabid Sayles) equates 'the Prince of Darkness' with communists, socialists and unionists; a potentially deadly stand-off between the unarmed Joe and the strike-breakers is suddenly and unexpectedly averted by the intervention of some hitherto unseen mountain trappers, who will leave the workers' camp in peace just as long as they don't kill any hogs (they too have been deprived of their land by the mining company); and the climactic shoot-out comes to an end not, as might be expected, with Joe taking up arms (in fact, for all his pacifist ideals, he ends up dead), but with the main thug gunned down by the hitherto trouble-avoiding Elma Radnor, as he tries to make his escape through her washing lines. Nor is the workers' victory final; as the now aged Danny's voiceover informs us, this was merely the start of the Coalfield War, and as Joe predicted, the miners took the worst of it – and just as we saw Danny as a boy down the mine at the film's start (appropriately, the opening sequence ended in an explosion), so we see him as a man at its end, still toiling in the cramped, stifling darkness.

Geoff Andrew, *Stranger Than Paradise: Maverick Filmmakers in Recent American Cinema* (Prion 1998) ©Geoff Andrew

MATEWAN

Director: John Sayles
©/Production Company: Red Dog Films Inc.,
Cinecom Entertainment Group, Film Gallery
Executive Producers: Amir Jacob Malin, Mark Balsam, Jerry Silva
Producers: Peggy Rajski, Maggie Renzi
Associate Producers: Ira Deutchman, James Dudelson, Ned Kandel
Unit Manager: Diana Pokorny
Production Manager: Peggy Rajski
Auditor: Barbara Ann Stein
Location Manager/2nd Unit Co-ordinator: Paul Marcus
1st Assistant Director: Matia Karrell
2nd Assistant Director: Benita Allen
Script Supervisor: John Tintori
Casting: Barbara Shapiro
Additional Casting: Avy Kaufman
Screenplay: John Sayles
Director of Photography: Haskell Wexler
2nd Unit Photography: Tom Sigel
Camera Operator: Mitch Dubin
1st Assistant Camera: Scott Sakamoto, Claudia Bailey
Gaffer: Morris Flam
Key Grip: Stefan Czapsky
Stills Photography: Bob Marshak
Special Effects Co-ordinators: Peter Kunz,
Shirley Belwood, Russell Berg
Special Effects: Todd Wolfeil
Editor: Sonya Polonsky
Assistant Editors: Geraldine Peroni, David Leonard
Production Designer: Nora Chavooshian
Art Director: Dan Bishop
Set Decorators: Anamarie Michnevich, Leslie Pope, Leigh Johnson
Property Master: Ann Edgeworth
Costume Designers: Cynthia Flynt, Susan Lyall
Wardrobe Supervisor: Heidi Shulman
Hair/Make-up: James Sarzotti
Hair/Make-up Consultant: David Halsey
Titles: M & Company
Opticals: EFX Unlimited
Music: Mason Daring
Musician (Harmonica): John Hammond, Phil Wiggins, Gerald Milnes
Musicians (Fiddle): Stuart Schulman, John Curtis
Musician (Mandolin): Jim Costa
Musician (Guitar): John Curtis
Musician (Guitar/Dobro): Mason Daring
Music Engineer/Mixer: Leanne Ungar
Sound Mixer: John Sutton
Boom: Lisa Schnall
Dubbing Mixers: Tom Fleischman, Sound One
Supervising Sound Editor: Skip Lievsay
Sound Editor: Philip Stockton
Stunt Co-ordinator: Edgard Mourino
Italian Dialogue Coach: Davide Ferrario
Italian Dialogue Coach: Sara Malossini

Cast

Chris Cooper (*Joe Kenehan*)
Mary McDonnell (*Elma Radnor*)
Will Oldham (*Danny Radnor*)
David Strathairn (*Sid Hatfield*)
Ken Jenkins (*Sephus*)
Kevin Tighe (*Hickey*)
Gordon Clapp (*Griggs*)
Bob Gunton (*C.E. Lively*)
Jace Alexander (*Hillard Elkins*)
Joe Grifasi (*Fausto*)
Nancy Mette (*Bridey Mae*)
Jo Henderson (*Mrs Elkins*)
Josh Mostel (*Cabell Testerman*)
Gary McCleery (*Ludie*)
Maggie Renzi (*Rosaria*)
Tom Wright (*Tom*)
Michael Preston (*Ellix*)
Tom Carlin (*Turley*)
Jenni Cline (*Luann*)
Michael A. Mantel (*Doolin*)
J.K. Kent Lilly (*Pappy's voice*)
Ida Williams (*Mrs Knightes*)
James Kizer (*Tolbert*)
Ronnie Stapleton (*Stennis*)
Davide Ferrario (*Gianni*)
Frank Payne Jr. (*old miner*)
John Sayles (*hardshell preacher*)
Hazel Dickens (*singer*)
Charles Haywood (*Sheb*)
Neale Clark (*Isaac*)
Mitch Scott (*Mister*)
Hazel Pearl (*Missus*)
Michael Frasher (*Lee Felts*)
Frank Hoyt Taylor (*Al Felts*)
Fred Decker (*James*)
Bill Morris (*Bass*)
Delmas Lawhorn (*conductor*)
William Dean, P. Michael Munsey (*brokers*)
Hal Phillips (*boxcar guard*)
Stephen C. Hall (*old miner*)
Percy Fruit (*black miner*)
Thomas Poore (*injured black miner*)
Tara Williams (*miner's wife*)
Gerald Milnes (*fiddler*)
Mason Daring (*picker*)
Jim Costa (*mandolin player*)
Phil Wiggins (*harmonica player*)
James Earl Jones (*'Few Clothes' Johnson*)

USA 1987

133 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**Matewan**

Fri 8 Jul 20:25; Tue 19 Jul 18:00

Manhunter

Fri 8 Jul 20:40; Thu 21 Jul 18:20; Sat 23 Jul 20:40

All the President's Men

Sat 9 Jul 17:45

His Girl FridaySun 10 Jul 16:50; Wed 20 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,
Programmer-at-Large); Thu 28 Jul 20:45**Day of Wrath (Vredens Dag)**

Mon 11 Jul 20:30

The Scarlet EmpressWed 13 Jul 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun
24 Jul 13:20**The Piano**

Thu 14 Jul 14:20; Sat 23 Jul 17:50; Sat 30 Jul 11:45

Mandabi (The Money Order)

Fri 15 Jul 20:40; Wed 27 Jul 18:10

Pandora's Box (Die Büchse der Pandora)Sat 16 Jul 12:20 (with Peer Raben score); Sun 31 Jul 15:20 (with live
piano accompaniment)**Blue Velvet**

Sun 17 Jul 18:30; Fri 29 Jul 20:40

Rome Open City (Roma città aperta)

Mon 18 Jul 18:20; Wed 27 Jul 20:40

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Fri 22 Jul 18:30 and Mon 25 Jul 20:50 (with Edmund Meisel score)

Theorem (Teorema)

Tue 26 Jul 18:00

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