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CINEMA

Review: *Matewan*

John Sayles' latest is powerful, disturbing

by Deborah S. McGee

Matewan, like the recent *Castaway*, is that rarity in commercial theaters: a cinematic product which breaks all movie-making cliches.

If you think nothing any good ever comes to mainstream theaters, go see *Matewan*. Your notion will be shattered. Also, if you are satisfied with American movies, you may find *Matewan* frustrating at times, perhaps, but on the whole will enjoy it. It's like a hearty bowl of woodsmoke-in-the-nostrils grit, after days of instant oatmeal.

Sayles' story grabs even the cynic's heart: Hill folk in Appalachian coal mining country stand up to the men who have bought the hills out from beneath their feet. It's slippery ground. It ain't easy. But they stick together in a beautiful way, and their efforts did, in fact, help lead to the formation of the United Mine Workers. *Matewan* (pronounced "mate one") is based on an actual incident in the town by that name, in West Virginia, in 1920.

With such a powerful story, there must be a great ensemble of characters, and there is. Will Oldham plays Daniel, a 14-year old preacher and coal miner—yes, 14. He's both attractive and repulsive, and Sayles doesn't make him into a Christ figure, which would have happened with a less intelligent director. Chris Cooper plays union organizer Joe Kenehan with



Pacifist/idealist/union organizer Joe Kenehan (actor Chris Cooper) arrives in *Matewan*, West Virginia, to join a coal miners' rebellion which helped lead to formation of the United Mine Workers.

a subtly charismatic energy. Kenehan is so similar to folk hero Joe Hill, I found that Joan Baez's rendition of "Ballad of Joe Hill" came to my ears when leaving the theater.

Other characters: James Earl Jones plays "Few Clothes" Johnson, and turns in one of his best-ever movie appearances. The hired company thugs are believably oily, there's a "different" sheriff, and there are some interesting female characters widowed by coal mine disasters. Sayles, also a novelist, doesn't seem to have learned how to use the movie medium to paint his characters with bolder strokes. Had it been clearer at the beginning, for example, that Daniel is the narrator, the movie would have been even more effective.

The brilliance of *Matewan* as a whole outshines these petty shadows. Its greatness rests in the way it seems to ask, "Which Side Are You On?" as *Newsweek* titled its review of the film. One character speaks it aloud when he says, "There are two kinds of people: those that work, and those that don't." It's a disturbing and timely exploration of duality at a time when we in the U.S. are having trouble divining the true roots of democracy.

Matewan brings to surface some disturbing questions about in-

dividual rights vs. established laws. In one scene, hunters from the next "holler" come over and save from annihilation the tent city which strikers have erected, and its women and children residents. The strength is apparent in their animal readiness and crude weapons. James Dickey's *Deliverance* notwithstanding, perhaps a people's salvation rests in whatever lawless spirit they retain.

Matewan blasts any knee-jerk liberalism out from beneath us, in such scenes as the one at night at the coal mine entrance: scabs and striking workers arrive simultaneously. Camera shows heavy artillery of company thugs, then brief close-ups of a fist enclosing a rock, and a hand grasping a cudgel. We know the Italian and black workers join the union more out of fear than political leanings. As always in the film, *Matewan* steps back from being a podium for any straight party line. It's pro-labor, but doesn't over-glamorize the movement, which would have been the typical Hollywood approach as in *Norma Rae* and *Silkwood*.

Haskell Wexler's cinematography is as superb as ever: He quietly reminds us throughout the film of the rugged terrain out of which these people carve their lives. A piercing a cappella solo female voice comes at appropriate times on the soundtrack—a perfect and memorable touch which links us to the pulse of bluegrass country. Local color rings true throughout *Matewan*, a strong film about the power of the people.

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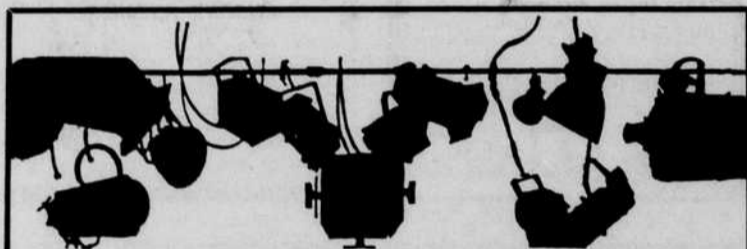
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