

Arts and entertainment

Clash between owners and workers explored

'Matewan' gives historical perspective to unionization.

"They got you fightin' white against colored, native against foreign...when you know there ain't but two sides in the world — them that work and them that don't."

"That's all you got to know about the enemy."

In the mid '50s a small collective made an independent film chronicling a miners strike in New Mexico.

Review By
Sean Axmaker
★ ★ ★ ½

Everything was against the success of the picture: the strikers were Mexican while the owners were white, the film at-

tempted to deal with the unpopular issue of women's rights and it came out during the height of McCarthyism.

The film, "Salt of the Earth," was banned for years by the U.S. government but it was shown clandestinely to unions and collectives and remains today the sole American film to deal with the genuine issues of repression, unionization and collective power.

John Sayles doesn't face the same oppressive conditions as his predecessors but history is not on his side. "Matewan" is a historical film about unionization that doesn't trivialize the issues with melodrama or dismiss the politics in favor of character study.

Inspired by a true story,

which in part influence his 1977 novel "Union Dues," "Matewan" collects stories from strikes over the South and combines them with the idiosyncratic story of Matewan.

In this film, Matewan both takes on the individual flavor of one such battle and stands in symbolically for all such battles. The miners aren't communists and don't particularly buy the world revolution idea, but they know they've been abused enough when the Stone Mountain Coal Company cuts wages once again while raising prices in the company store.

The company calls in scabs to show that the men can be replaced and the men react in expected fashion: they attack the blacks and Italian immigrants.

The first glimpse union organizer Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper) is presented is a ferocious attack on the blacks as the train stops out of town to avoid just such an incident.

Kenehan is not really welcomed but grudgingly accepted into the town by the striking workers, who have their own ideas on how to proceed. The idea of the collective is accepted only for white men and the idea of non-violent protest sits badly with the restless men.

Their attitude is marked by frustration and anger and the idealism of ex-Wobblie Kenehan isn't readily welcomed in rural Virginia.



Courtesy photo

Union organizer Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper) catches his first glimpse of the coal-mining town "Matewan."

Yet Sayles presents an essentially positive, idealistic vision despite the hardships, the struggles and the failures. The issues of racism, for instance, is one Kenehan addresses.

Slowly, very slowly, the white community accepts the immigrants and blacks into the union and into the community. The collective starts to look out for one another. An important barrier is broken when the homeless widow of a dead miner offers a game rabbit to her Italian neighbor and sits with them, commenting "I guess we're all in this together."

The struggle is both within and without the union. When the company calls in strike breakers Hickey and Griggs, the miners are faced with essentially irredeemable thugs, yet the biggest threat is their own emotional state.

They are pushed so much that they want, they even need, to strike back with violence, which would give the company reason to call in the state

National Guard to quell the strike once and for all.

It is this struggle that is the focus of the film, the interaction within the group, the struggle to put a genuine collective together.

It is here that Sayle's strong direction comes to the fore. The detail of life is of '20s West Virginia is captured with an almost offhand easiness that convinces you of its authenticity.

The largely unknown cast comes alive as people with real desires and real fears and the incredible palette of faces describes the landscape of Matewan as well as the cinematography and set design.

Like all of Sayles' films the emphasis is on character but this time it works like it never has before, capturing the pain and exhilaration of challenging the dictatorial mining company and the individual array of personalities that come to form

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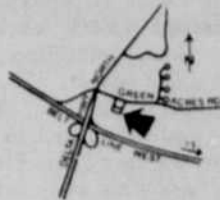
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