

## Lone Star

Within American independent filmmaking, writer/director John Sayles represents one of our most literate, and sober-sided, cinematic storytellers. His oeuvre also concentrates (with exceptions like the recent Irish fable *The Secret of Roan Inish*) on dramatizing and analyzing the American landscape, from his maiden effort *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* in 1980, through the labor drama *Matewan* (1987) to the Bayou tale *Passion Fish* (1992). His latest effort, very solidly and confidently in the American grain, is the sterling *Lone Star* (now playing at several area theaters).

*Lone Star* offers us the dusty town of Frontera as a microcosm of Tex-Mex border culture and history. Anglos run the place, but Hispanics are clearly in the majority, while African-Americans comprise a restless minority. Business could be better, of course, the Army base is closing down, and the illegals can be a problem, but folks are trying to cope. This ethnic mix can be and has been volatile, still, new times have tempered some antagonisms and softened some prejudices.

The film opens with a mystery: the discovery of a decades-old skeleton on the Army shooting range. The body is eventually found to be that of Sheriff Charlie Wade (Kris Kristofferson), a vile bully who disappeared 30 years before. The current sheriff, Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) tries to piece together what looks like a murder that could lead to his own father, Buddy (Matthew McConaughey), a deputy who became sheriff after Wade's disappearance and in whose shadow Sam is reluctantly cast. Investigating this crime leads Sam into sundry byways involving several other personages, including Mayor Hollis Pogue (Clifton James), successful businesswoman Mercedes Cruz (Miriam Colon) and her teacher daughter Pilar (Elizabeth Peña), and the head of the Army base, Cap. Delmore Payne (Joe Morton).

Sub-plots abound and twist around each other. There is, for example, Sam and Pilar, once teenagers in love who were kept apart by their parents and who begin to resuscitate their previous passion. Delmore's long-lost father Otis (Ron Canada), who abandoned him when he was small, runs the black folks bar in town, which may have been the scene of Charlie Wade's demise. Delmore's son Chet (Eddie Robinson), comes to identify with his free-wheeling grandfather in contrast to his starchy father. Chet is a student in Pilar's history class, etc. etc.

*Lone Star* is an ensemble picture, and the ensemble is imposing, with over 50 speaking parts. One principal reason for this is the frequent flashbacks, which introduce additional characters as well as earlier versions of the principals. It is in the flashbacks that we meet Charlie Wade, played to a ferocious fare-three-well by a splendidly stony Kristofferson. His viciousness is nicely balanced by Chris Cooper's Sam, in classic laconic Texas mode. The film is, in fact, replete with good performances, with the multitude of actors somehow able to convey a distinctive life for their character in just a few scenes. Sayles's working method involves writing biographies for each of his speaking roles--and that extra care shows.

The murder mystery keeps up a trail of suspense, but it serves basically as a pretext for the director to develop the rich mosaic of life in Frontera and to see how both personal histories and border history have formed that mosaic. The personal histories

are the ones that captivate here, but, occasionally, the director lapses into preachiness and drops in little political or history “lessons,” as if to make sure the audience understands the border context fully (one is delivered, for instance, by Pilar in her classroom). He turns one fabled Texas history lesson on its head, however, and it provides for the film’s great--and surprising--last line.

Keeping the many story strands well-knit and orderly is Sayles’s real achievement, and one of the ways he does it is with superb flashback transitions. These transitions each begin with a contemporary narrator relating the past at a specific site--a bar or an office--while the camera slowly pans past black into the earlier time period within the exact same place. The device is not new (Taylor Hackford used something like it in *Dolores Claiborne*) but here its use is impeccable. One realizes that the multi-talented John Sayles also edited this film.

The strength of its writing, acting, and sense of place (the film was shot in the very authentic-looking town of Eagle Pass) commend *Lone Star* to thoughtful moviegoers. To many movie fans who may be either dismayed or bored by the run of summer blockbusters adorning all the multiplexes, this gratifying motion picture could prove a real tonic.

*(“Lone Star” is rated “R” not for skin or gore, but because it is just thoroughly “adult,” in good way.)*

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