

## Sunshine State

John Sayles has been one of America's most omnivorous independent filmmakers. Since 1980 (when he released *The Return of the Seacaucus Seven*), he has seemed to go out of the way not to repeat himself, with his films radically shifting context and tone in production after production. He has done serious dramatic works (*Passion Fish*), off-kilter comedy (*The Brother from Another Planet*), a delicate fable (*The Secret of Roan Inish*), and moody suspense films (his previous work *Limbo*). He even made a film in Spanish to look at issues in Latin America (*Men with Guns*).

With all his variety, however, he has shown a consistent interest in investigating a single community, looking at it from all angles, examining the social pressures within, and using a well-rounded ensemble to tell that community's story. He did this in his looks at a miner's struggle (*Matewan*), a storied baseball team (*Eight Men Out*), a Jersey labor-management dispute (*City of Hope*), and, especially, in dissecting a Texas border town in the wonderful *Lone Star* (1996). With *Sunshine State*, his 13th feature, he has returned to the kind of community tale he tells so well.

*Sunshine State* introduces us to a languishing chunk of Florida's Atlantic Coast, Plantation Island, where longstanding, working class settlements--both white and black--are being eyed by Northern developers of the Exley Foundation, anxious to bring luxury hotels and condos to the area. Long time resident Marly Temple (Edie Falco) grudgingly runs the down-home Sea-View hotel/restaurant on Delrona Beach but is still skeptical about the developers, represented by the smooth architect-for-hire Jack Meadows (Timothy Hutton). Her crusty father Furman (Ralph Waite) wants to hold on to the property that has meant his life while her artistically-minded mother Delia (Jane Alexander) seems utterly unconcerned.

Over on neighboring Lincoln Beach, long a black enclave, prodigal daughter Desiree Perry (Angela Bassett) returns home with her Northern doctor husband Reggie (James McDaniel) to finally confront her disaffected mother Eunice Stokes (Mary Alice). Pieces of Desiree's troubled past are revealed, including her liaison with one-time local football star Flash Phillips (Tom Wright). Added to this narrative mix are sundry other subplots, including a sweet local booster (Mary Steenburgen) and her banker husband (Gordon Clapp), and an African-American codger (Bill Cobbs) who is gamely protesting the developers' moves.

The plot elements are intriguing and engaging, but--as in most of Mr. Sayles' films--they are not what really matters. What does matter is honest, plausible human interaction, mostly made up of conversations between people who seem real because writer-director Sayles has so convincingly sketched them for us on the screen. No wonder actors love to work with him. You care enough about his people to want to know how things come out. How things come out, however, is rarely facile with him, although this film's "solution" to the development-or-not dilemma is a neat, if open ended, one. He also is the rare American filmmaker who can deal with issues of race naturally and unpolemically, as these issues spring from the lives of individuals rather than broadcasting them with stereotypes.

Sayles' movies, which he also edits, are never memorable for their sexy cinematic style. Some scenes in *Sunshine State* look, indeed, washed out (are they bleached from the beach?), and a number are pedestrian (the film was shot on location

at Amelia island near Jacksonville). Instead, his camera concentrates on his characters and their talk, which is not only “real,” but enthralling, about genuine issues, delivered with wit and dimension. Luckily, he has a formidable cast to talk that talk.

Edie Falco, a genuinely fine actress who is much more than Carmela Soprano, is wonderfully surly and smart as the reluctant hotelier who warns you that she represents “six generations on this sand pile.” Hutton plays off her well as the rootless pro who wants to know how Plantation Island clicks. Bassett finally gets a role worthy of her talents as Desiree, a stunning gal with a stunned past. Her opposite is the tender-tough Mary Alice, with a voice like marmalade but a spine of steel. Ralph Waite (who people probably haven’t seen since he was papa in “The Waltons”) does a fine turn as Mr. Temple, reminiscing about his decades on the beach and finding a way to bring out Eunice’s reticent young charge Terrell (Alexander Lewis). Steenburgen is silly-poignant as the booster who moans that “people don’t know how hard it is to invent a tradition.”

There are numerous other impeccable performances in *Sunshine State*; none (except perhaps for a golfing foursome led by Alan King as a kind of running Greek chorus) are superfluous or tepid. It is precisely because his ensemble films spread around the acting skills and his lines so evenly and generously that Sayles’ efforts have only once in over 20 years produced a performance worthy of an Oscar nomination (Mary McDonnell in his *Passion Fish*). It’s just too hard to find a “single” outstanding performance for the Academy voters. Years of solid work must suffice in lieu of a golden statuette.

(“*Sunshine State*” is rated “R” for mature themes.)

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