

Down In The Delta

In a country like ours with a majority of the population suburbanized and a significant minority urbanized, rural areas and small towns often symbolize the fresh, untainted, sweeter values of a slower pace and sturdy traditions. The backroads of the Mississippi Delta serve as a current example of this typing in the new film *Down in the Delta*, the feature film debut of poet Maya Angelou, from a screenplay--also a debut--by Myron Goble. In telling the tale of a struggling big-city family that finds new horizons for itself in the "softer" South, it is sentimental, yes, but it mainly skirts the saccharine.

Rosa Lynn (Mary Alice) heads three generations of the Sinclair family in the tough Chicago ghetto, trying to keep her irresponsible daughter Loretta (Alfre Woodard) off drugs and on track and serving as the only guide to Loretta's two kids, Thomas and Tracy. After one too many nights of random gunfire outside their apartment, she decides to hock the family's one heirloom, a solid silver candelabra so spectacular that it merits its own name--Nathan--to give Loretta and the children the money for bus fare to go and spend a summer away from the city in the Delta with her brother, Earl (Al Freeman, Jr.). Earl, owner of a chicken restaurant in a town dominated by a chicken processing plant, lives with his wife Annie (Esther Rolle), who is sliding into dementia, and housemaid Zenia (Loretta Devine). It is hardly the most prepossessing situation for skeptical Loretta, but she must make do, at least for the summer.

With time, the absence of tension and the ease of life capture Loretta and her children. Unable to handle the simplest minimum wage job in Chicago, she begins to make herself useful at the restaurant. For once not the wholly dependent person in the household, she learns to help Zenia care for Annie. Well-off cousin Will from Atlanta (Wesley Snipes), whom she barely knows, comes to Atlanta with his upscale family and broadens her horizons the more. Open to possibilities for the first time, Loretta blossoms and looks to transplant herself fully into this new life, eventually convincing her mother to come and join her. The closing of the circle is Rosa Lynn's return down to the Delta, with Nathan--now out of hock--placed on the mantle to anoint the family homestead.

The drama of *Down in the Delta* is simple but nonetheless real. Its emotions are homely but no less touching. Angelou's filmmaking "style" is so self-effacing that it hardly constitutes one, but it stays firmly at the service of a story of one family and how it copes. Interestingly enough, the filmmakers achieve a sense of "southern" place although the film was shot north of Toronto. The one element that interrupts its equable pace are occasional misty flashbacks explaining the story of how Nathan came to be in the family--and why it was so prized, a secret revealed at the film's end.

If all of this sounds like damning with faint praise, let it be known that the principal reason to see *Down in the Delta* is the performances on what was very likely a feel-good set. Woodard's evolution from careworn ghetto mama to independent woman shows in her wonderfully expressive eyes; Freeman is every inch a decent, stalwart--if still occasionally insecure--paterfamilias; Mary Alice, as the believably noble backbone of her troubled family, rings true. Several supporting roles, like Snipes's nice turn as the family's success story, or little Kulani Hassen as the autistic Tracy, are also well done. Particularly affecting to see is Esther Rolle, in her last film role before her death at 78 as the distressed Annie, a part wholly without vanity that wrings out your heart.

This is the kind of movie that, while it won't necessarily make you cry, is likely to leave the corners of your eyes somewhat dewy.

(January 1999)