



Thinking In Pictures: The Making Of The Movie Matewan

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What choices--creative, practical, and technical--make a movie what it is? Here a gifted writer and filmmaker takes us behind the camera and provides a full description of the movie-making process. When John Sayles turned from writing fiction to making movies, he did so with little help from Hollywood: *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, Sayles's first movie as director and writer, was produced with 60,000 of his own money. Many films later, he still works outside the studio system and guides every phase of his productions. Now Sayles has written an illuminating book about the complex choices that lie at the heart of every movie. Using the making of his film *Matewan* as an example, he offers chapters on screenwriting, directing, editing, sound, and more. Photographs, sketches, and the complete shooting script illustrate this engaging account of how Sayles's curiosity about a coal miners' strike in the town of Matewan, West Virginia, became a screenplay--and then a movie.

Thinking In Pictures: The Making Of The Movie Matewan Details

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Stop says

Read the STOP SMILING interview with filmmaker John Sayles

Q&A: John Sayles

By Patrick Z McGavin

Honeydripper is the 16th film by filmmaker and novelist John Sayles made in collaboration with his producer and partner, Maggie Renzi. A lyrical, funny and sharp evocation of early Fifties Alabama, it stars Danny Glover as a juke-joint impresario who is desperate to save his floundering club from economic ruin. (Honeydripper opens December 28th in LA and NY.)

Since his debut film, The Return of the Secaucus 7, Sayles' best work has examined the interplay of class, race and social values. The new movie appears flush with autobiographical implications that detail the struggles and vicissitudes of the independent artist. Arranged anecdotally, the plot develops through a collage of stories, monologues and memories linked through music and a colorful collection of personalities.

A filmmaker, novelist, actor and MacArthur genius grant recipient, Sayles has long stood outside the industry, content to live and work in suburban New Jersey. In a recent interview, he talked about his life, art and work.

Stop Smiling: What was the genesis of the story of your new film, Honeydripper?

John Sayles: There's this rock 'n' roll legend about Guitar Slim, an early New Orleans electric guitar player who was famous for missing his gigs, among other things. He was also famous for going out on the street with a long extension cord and [he'd:] actually go to the doorways of other clubs — they'd be carrying an amp behind him and he'd play people back into his club. That plot interested me. Before people were known, before album covers, we didn't get to see those [musicians:] on-screen until the Sixties. There were only about three rock 'n' roll films when I was a kid.

I really started thinking of those [historical:] transitions, when everything started changing very quickly. When the talkies came in, there were people who were all of a sudden unemployable. It wasn't just actors; there were directors who just didn't know how or didn't want to do that thing. What happens when that happens? Who are the ones who can get on that train that's pulling out of the station, and who are the ones who either can't or don't want to? In music, I always think of Phil Ochs, a big-time singer. But as folksinging got less popular, he came out with a gold lamé jacket and did this rock 'n' roll album that was partly ironic — and not very good — and he was obviously kind of bitter already. That was a bad decision for him, but when Bob Dylan strapped on an electric guitar, that was a great decision.

SS: In the last 10 years, the South has figured more prominently in your films.

JS: I spent a lot of time in the South. My mother's parents lived in Hollywood, just north of Miami. I read a lot of William Faulkner, Harry Crews and Flannery O'Connor, all those great Southern Gothic writers. Then I read a lot of the Latin American magical realists, like Gabriel García Márquez, and all those guys were influenced by Faulkner.

Read the complete interview...

Chris says

This book is well-written, clever, and illuminates the persistent quandary of decisions that make up filmmaking. Every step, be it fundraising, budget, hiring actors, scriptwriting, lighting, choosing locations, filters, music, or filming and editing, must be weighed against, or with, budget, actors, script, lighting, location, filters, music, editing and the weather. If I ever had to make a feature film, my head would explode. Sayles describes the making of his film, *Matewan*. He describes his initial idea for making the film, coming from reading of an incident in the miners' unionizing efforts. He writes of his past efforts in the film industry, screenwriting and previous films. He gives an account of the filming of *Matewan*, the problems with lighting, setting up shots, actors, music, and editing and how they were addressed. The shooting script is included in this book. What is interesting is that every solution is scene-specific, accounting for the light, the weather, the location, or the height of the ceiling in the particular room. It is not a how-to book. An aspiring filmmaker could not take Sayles' solutions and apply them to their own particular filmmaking dilemmas, except as an example of thinking creatively. The way to make good films is to know your stuff, your equipment, your sense of drama, your crew, trust your judgement, hope for the best of luck, and have at it. *Matewan* is a really good film. My wife and I went to see it on our very first date. (This may say something about us and our relationship--maybe we'd best not look into that too deeply...)

I watched *Matewan* again several years later when, in grad school, I was studying the history of conditions and organizing efforts in Appalachia.

I expect to be watching it again soon.

Ellis Vener says

An excellent book. If you are thinking about making any kind of narrative involving moving images - it is a must read.

Emily says

The main thing I remember is the concept of "hanging the moon."

Viola says

Enjoyed it, but read it in London where I left the copy behind. Short stories.

Inggita says

Matewan is not an easy picture to see - especially after the shocking violent first scenes - but the story calls for it. The title says it all, it's all there is all filmmakers should remember. Films are not books. got to think in pictures not words.

El Espada says

If you are a screenwriter and want to produce your work this book is a must read.

Grant Conversano says

I read this because Jeff Nichols said in an interview he read it. Good book.
