



Film Review "LONE STAR "

In "Lone Star" writer-director John Sayles has made the most powerful statement about ethnic relationships to appear in American cinema since "The Defiant Ones" in the 1960's. Whereas movies about African Americans or Latino/a usually focus on a slice of life in those communities (consider "La Familia," "Malcolm X" and "Do the Right Thing"); "Lone Star" looks at a small town on the Texas-Mexico border where Anglos, Latino/as, and African Americans live together in an uneasy alliance. The narrative takes place in two time frames: the present and 30 years ago when a crime was committed that the present characters are only slowly coming to understand as the film unfolds. In giving the audience the ending (we know who was killed early in the film; we have a pretty good idea why, but we don't know by whom) Sayles stands the narrative form on its head. The victim is a thoroughly racist White sheriff, Charley Wade (played expertly by Kris Kristofferson in an unlikely role). His arch enemy was the apparently heroic White sheriff, Buddy Deeds, whose son Sam Deeds is the current sheriff. Sam is reluctantly caught up in the town's hagiography of his father, whom he suspects of being the murderer he is charged with uncovering.

This struggle between father and son is echoed in a paral-

lel story of an African American family, where the son, Delmore, is similarly cast as the righteous one (an uptight Army colonel) and the father, Otis, as the easy speaking owner of a local nightclub frequented by African Americans. The final generational tension is between a Latina mother who is running away from her own immigrant past and her schoolteacher daughter, Pilar, who is repelled by her mother's harshness. The story is told in both time zones, in a seamless web spun by the director that is sometimes temporarily dislocating, but ultimately far more powerful than the traditional flashbacks.

The past and the present are united by two romances: between Buddy Deeds and Pilar's mother, and Sam Deeds and Pilar. While Latino/as make up 90 per cent of the town's population, whites dominate the town political and economic structures. Scenes of discrimination are woven through the histories of the three families: Latino/a, African American and Anglo. Latino/as and African Americans are portrayed without stereotypes: as opposed to the all-embracing *la familia* which resolves all tensions, the painful distance between the three generations of Pilar's family is never overcome. Delmore's own family fiercely upholds holds the most middle class values in the town; he is

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theoretically the most powerful person there, by virtue of his command of the local Army base. Anglos come in many shapes: racist thugs, passive witnesses and uncomfortable heroes. In the end the two fathers, Buddy and Otis, are found to embody all the integrity and courage the younger generation is seeking.

The movie is about arbitrary demarcations: lines deeply drawn but frequently crossed between ethnic groups, between the U.S. border and Mexico (shown here as a clearly failed social construction), between army and civilian life, between parent and child, and in the relationship of kinship to sexual passion. The generational demarcation seem greater at the beginning of the movie than at the end, when the plot twists to reveal heroism in the past and xenophobia in the present. Until the end of the movie it is impossible to know who are the moral people, who the amoral and who the immoral. Sayles seems to be warning us against a Whiggish version of history, away from the assumption that the present always signifies moral progress over the past.

While the movie speaks to the weight of history and its realizing power over the present, it ends with a ringing declaration to forget the bitterness and unfinished stories of the past and make one's own coda to the generational and historical narrative. "Forget the Alamo" cries Pilar, as she embraces her sweetheart, restored to her out of a painful history they both share. The stunning shock of the ending, and ultimately of the film as a whole, is that Sayles makes us believe that

such beginnings are possible.

The director tells us that people can overcome everything – their past, the ethnic hatreds that have formed grooves of habitual distrust in the social landscape of the town, and crimes committed in the past. This movie is a subtle braid of paradoxes; as a narrative it is one of the most complex to come out of Hollywood in years; as a love story is one of the truest, as a commentary on ethnic divisions and hatred it is one of the most hopeful and empowering. □

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