

Liberating and not-so liberating efforts

Sunshine State, Goldmember and The Emperor's New Clothes

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1 August 2002

Sunshine State, written and directed by John Sayles; *Goldmember*, directed by Jay Roach, co-written by Mike Myers and Michael McCullers; *The Emperor's New Clothes*, directed by Alan Taylor, co-written by Kevin Molony, Alan Taylor and Herbie Wave, based on the novel by Simon Leys.

The new film by US filmmaker John Sayles (*Matewan*, *Eight Men Out*, *Lone Star*) takes place in Florida. It centers on two women: one white, Marly Temple (Edie Falco), the discontented operator of a motel, and one black, Desiree Perry (Angela Bassett), who returns home after a decades-long exile brought about by an unwanted pregnancy at age 15. Real estate developers are threatening to wipe out the communities which the two women call home. Dr. Lloyd (Bill Cobbs) is attempting to rally the black residents of Lincoln Beach to withstand the developers' offers. Marly drifts into an affair with a landscape architect (Tim Hutton).

That Florida's natural beauty might be threatened by the encroachment of strip malls, luxury hotels, golf courses, condominiums, amusement parks, subdivisions, highways, marinas, "gated communities, etc., hardly falls into the category of news. This is more or less a finished process.

In November and December 2000, however, the state was the center of an intense political crisis, following a general election in which the presidential vote in Florida (upon which the outcome of the national vote hinged) proved "too close to call," a crisis only resolved by the aggressive thuggery of right-wing elements locally and the actions of an ultra-reactionary US Supreme Court. A great many people in Florida were outraged by the hijacking of the election and made known their commitment to democratic rights and principles.

Although John Sayles has chosen to write and direct a film set in Florida, he makes no reference, direct or oblique, to these recent events. Naturally, that is his privilege. Still, one would have thought that the gaping social and political divide that revealed itself in the state during the crisis in late 2000 might have interested an avowedly "radical" filmmaker.

Sayles, however, is oriented toward other problems and other social forces. He seems absorbed here primarily by the questions of race and the destruction of small-town life at the hands of an anonymous global economic process.

The director-writer has one of his characters, Dr. Lloyd, bemoan the fact that in the post-segregation world blacks no longer exclusively buy from black-owned businesses, but from large concerns with, most probably, white owners. One suspects that

most black people in Florida happily bid farewell to the era of racial apartheid, lynchings and officially-supported bigotry. As for the developers, Sayles solves his problems in this regard by making them caricatures for the most part.

This is what Sayles has to say: "Change is tough on everybody. What you hope for is to hold on to the best and get rid of the worst. ... With the passing of segregation, the black community gained access to all kinds of areas that were denied before, but lost some of its cohesiveness. There is a lot of money to be made selling beachfront homes or businesses to corporate entities but a way of life disappears and people become more isolated, the world's less 'personal.'"

This is rather banal, and suggests, more than anything else, that the past several decades of global upheaval have not been examined seriously by the American film director, who is an intellectual and political product, above all, of the radicalization of the 1960s. He has his concerns—racial justice, corporate malfeasance—and he will pursue them.

In all fairness, one should note that whether due to some internal alarm going off or external criticism, Sayles's last two feature films (*Limbo* and this one) contain less of the moralizing and lecturing that assumed truly hazardous proportions in *Lone Star*. If *Sunshine State* had remained focused more or less exclusively on Edie Falco's character and difficulties, the work might have had a chance of breathing, walking and talking on its own. Falco, as a smart-mouthed, somewhat gone-to-seed, still struggling, former "Weeki wachee Mermaid" (underwater performer), is worth watching. So is Tim Hutton, as always.

The black characters are by and large the weakest in the film, with the exception of a traumatized 13-year-old, Terrell (Alexander Lewis), who Desiree's mother has taken into her home. They are invariably "types." Bassett's performance is particularly unfortunate, as she strides about with an expression that manages to convey large doses of complacency and self-pity at the same instant. Nothing will come of this kind of portrayal, which is not really drawn from life, but from sociological texts, and the wrong ones at that. The white construction workers are, of course, backward and brutish and play next to no role in the film. This is par for the course.

The whole thing is not truly drawn from life, but from conceptions Sayles developed and has maintained for decades. One does not flatter when one says *Sunshine State* could have appeared 15 or 25 years ago. A sense of urgency and the spirit of

true protest, despite the subject matter, are largely missing. Certain intellectuals have difficulty permitting complex and changing reality to penetrate and inform their thinking and their artistic efforts.

No doubt Sayles sees it as a matter of sticking to his guns, against considerable odds, and there is that side to it. Like a Ken Loach, Sayles is admired by many for continuing to do stories about “ordinary people” in the face of an entertainment industry dominated by bombast, stupidity and an infatuation with wealth and celebrity status. And not all the criticism directed against his work is warranted. Some of it comes from right-wing sources who would prefer that certain of the issues Sayles touches upon remain undiscussed.

However, “thank heavens for small mercies” is relatively useless as a guide to the objective evaluation of an artist’s body of work. We have the right to demand more. The absence of spontaneity, the patness of the artistic and intellectual approach, the resulting weakness of the drama (how many indelible moments has he created?), render Sayles’s films rather tame and, what’s worse, inexcusably beside the point.

It is tempting, but it would not be quite accurate to suggest that *Goldmember*, the third film in the Austin Powers series, is an antidote to Sayles’s sluggish civics lesson. Nonetheless, there would be more than a grain of truth in the thought.

Goldmember (co-written by and starring Mike Myers) has a number of memorable and amusing elements: opening scene cameos by Tom Cruise, Gwyneth Paltrow and others; a fabulous rap duo and music video; the appearance and general demeanor of Beyoncé Knowles as “Foxy Cleopatra,” a black female super-sleuth from the 1970s (or, rather, the Pam Grier films of the 1970s) and so on.

Beyond that, and beyond the scatological humor, is a generally irreverent and sweet-tempered attitude toward human beings and human frailty to which audiences are clearly responding in considerable numbers. In an age of mega-stars, who parade their disdain for the population at large, there is a distinctly democratic and humane spirit about Myers and his characters. His humor is often silly, but it is not malicious or contemptuous.

About the second Powers film I wrote: “Many of the sight-gags fail to come off and the toilet humor is wearing, but I was taken with the cheerful quasi-anarchism of the film, its relentless demand for pleasure and fun. The whole thing is carried off without cynicism, sneering or condescension—rare these days. The cheerfulness extends to the look of the film, in particular to its vulgar and loving recreation of an imaginary Swinging London. In general, I found as much humor in the decor of the film as in its jokes.” One could make more or less the same comment about *Goldmember*.

There is something liberating about the filmmakers’ approach: the movements backward and forward in time, the setting and costume changes, the willingness to ignore a mass of tedious, time-consuming conventions.

Director Jay Roach remarked about *The Spy Who Shagged Me*, the second in the series: “We brought to this the superficial, kind of stylized, joyous and musical aspects of the sixties. Certainly not an honest representation of it. But we tried to embrace the best

parts of it: the emphasis on love and dancing, music and color and freedom; all the things that were the silver lining in the whole era.” From that point of view, the films argue for “love and dancing, music and color and freedom,” nearly all of which are missing from contemporary films. That is not the worst program.

In *The Emperor’s New Clothes* Napoleon Bonaparte escapes from his post-Waterloo exile on the island of St. Helena, where he is replaced by a lookalike, makes his way to Paris and declares his presence, but no one believes him. And when the emperor’s double dies on St. Helena and all his confederates, to save their own skins, keep quiet about his escape, Napoleon is destined to live out the rest of his days engaged in the fruit and vegetable trade in Paris.

The Emperor’s New Clothes, directed by Alan Taylor (*Palookaville*), has numerous charming aspects. It has been carefully written, designed, filmed and acted (Ian Hom, the remarkable Iben Hjejle). However, the film’s theme and conclusions (“Will Napoleon get a second chance—or will his victory come when he discovers that his real identity is that of a man, like any other, looking for happiness and love?”) seem simply too small to be entirely healthy. The “love of a good woman” is enough to reconcile a Napoleon to life as a shopkeeper? Someone has an agenda here.

In *Palookaville* (1996), about three young unemployed men in Jersey City, Alan Taylor paid tribute to a certain kind of ordinariness. The film was uneven, but its essential tone was compassionate. In an interview at the time, Taylor commented to me: “There is a sympathy with them as underdogs. Every authority figure in the film is corrupt and untrustworthy. ... This is obviously a film which has a lot of affection and faith in the class of people in which these guys are operating.”

There is no reason to believe that Taylor—who in the intervening years principally directed television drama and comedy, including episodes of “West Wing,” “The Sopranos” and “Sex and the City”—has abandoned this view, but *The Emperor’s New Clothes* has a softness and sentimentality to it that I thought he might have been capable of avoiding.



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