

The all-too vigilant John Sayles

Limbo, written and directed by John Sayles

By David Walsh
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Haskell Wexler has photographed Alaska beautifully. I love the dark green of the forest, the water, the mist. Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio has a very nice voice, although she doesn't sing enough. And there is Vanessa Martinez' face, a real face, without too much self-consciousness. Her pain looks like real pain, and specific, contemporary pain.

These are the elements I like best about John Sayles' new film, *Limbo*. It treats a few weeks or months in the lives of Joe Gastineau (David Strathairn), an ex-fisherman who was traumatized by an accident years ago, Donna De Angelo (Mastrantonio), a singer who has had little luck in love, and her daughter Noelle (Martinez), a teenager with problems and resentments of her own. Donna has brought Noelle along with her to Alaska where she has a series of singing engagements for a year.

Joe and Donna stumble into one another's arms, to the displeasure of Noelle. When his shady half-brother shows up in town and asks a favor, Joe agrees to pilot a boat along the coast for him. After drug traffickers dispatch his brother and take the boat, Joe and the two women find themselves stranded on a remote island. They have to survive and somehow get along with each other.

This is Sayles' twelfth feature film (*Brother from Another Planet*, 1984; *Matewan*, 1987; *Eight Men Out*, 1988; *Passion Fish*, 1992; *Lone Star*, 1996; *Men With Guns*, 1997). The director, born in Schenectady, New York in 1950 and a graduate of Williams College, has always seemed the leading representative in the American film industry of the radicalized generation of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Is this a curse or a blessing?

Unlike many of his age and background, Sayles has not betrayed his earlier ideals. He remains an

independent filmmaker, without a great deal of money, still committed to examining the lives of people who are not rich and famous.

With certain artistic figures one finds an interesting phenomenon. Oppositional political conceptions take hold early in their lives, perhaps not so much in the shape of fully worked-out views, but rather as components of images into which the artists put what is best of themselves. Because the notions are dissolved and fixed in images—associated with emotional and intellectual matters, and perhaps a stage in the artist's own life, that are crucial to him—they may prove more enduring, less immune to changes in social mood, than similar ideas held by those involved aggressively and exclusively in political life. An artist, in some cases, may preserve the relatively naive ideas of his youth long after his erstwhile comrades have departed the scene.

The difficulty, however, is that Sayles has firmly held onto the outlook of what was, to a considerable extent, an intellectually shallow generation, one that never came to terms with the most complicated historical problems. His views are not difficult to make out. He retains his sympathy for the ordinary person, his dislike and mistrust of large corporations, his feeling for the labor movement, his support for national struggles against American interests and its agents abroad. These ideas, however, may prove inadequate.

I have always felt that Sayles' films were deeply afflicted by schematism and a lack of spontaneity. It seems to me that he takes his conceptions about life and society and rather crudely, as they say, “fleshes them out,” merely putting them into the words and actions of his characters. Every artist, of course, begins with pre-existing ideas about the world, but the remarkable artist allows all sorts of material to come up

from within, including doubts and ambiguities, creating a situation in which the preconceived and the new and spontaneous act upon one another in an explosive manner. He works on a particular problem because he does *not* understand it, perhaps will never understand it fully. With Sayles and others like him, one always feels that they are working on material that they have fully mastered, or think they have, ahead of time. In Sayles' case, this gives his films their pat and somewhat self-congratulatory character.

This schematism has a number of sources. In part, on its sociological side, it is bound up with one of the unstated political assumptions of the radical generation: that a social upheaval in the US was an extremely remote possibility. This generation could never escape the suspicion, despite its shouting and sloganeering, that the broad mass of the population was fairly hopeless. Sayles always has about him that air of the school teacher or moralizer who feels called on to instruct a group of fallen men and women. There are always "lessons to be learned." (*Lone Star* suffered from this quality to an extraordinary and painful degree.) He can never fully tap into the deepest recesses of his spectator's being or his own, because he distrusts them so much. After all, what might be found there?

Sayles is under the influence of some unhappy and artistically limiting self-censorship. If he presents people misbehaving, they are always misbehaving within sharply defined limits. Their bad behavior or backwardness is clearly labeled. The director registers disapproval and moves on. His is a polite radicalism that never (or rarely) extends to the more frightening and fruitful areas of human experience. One encounters unhappy or depressed people in his films and cheerful ones, all of whose states of mind are fully explainable (and explained, God knows!), but one never encounters bottomless anguish or, for that matter, ecstasy, the sorts of emotional states that truly disrupt and disturb a spectator. The camera rarely escapes this same sort of self-control. The shots of the foursome's boat trip are particularly conventional and irritating.

Limbo is weakest when it tries to make a statement about the general conditions of life in Alaska. Sayles' efforts to convey the impact of the closing of fish processing plants and the rapacity and philistinism of real estate developers and logging company executives

are unconvincing and make next to no impact. His scenes of workers in the processing plant or hanging out in bars are dreadful, reminiscent of populist-Stalinist drama of another era.

There are moments when, surprisingly, the human leaks through the ideological protective coating. I won't say "accidentally," because Sayles seems a sensitive individual and I suspect that somewhere there is a part of him that would like to create more of such moments. There is a shot of David Straithairn leaning forlornly against a window near sunset. (The shot loses much of its power, however, when the director immediately points out to us that he is staring at the sea, thinking, of course, of his lost vocation and the accident that drove him from it.) There are shots of the forest and the ocean. There is Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio's singing. There is, above all, Vanessa Martinez. She is young and unself-conscious enough that she apparently escaped much of Sayles' earnest direction. Her unhappiness is genuine and deep-going, not something that the spectator can immediately attribute to this or that social or emotional phenomenon and, therefore, safely push aside. One remembers her face, after much of the contrived plot and obvious psychologizing have faded from memory.

The shame of it all is that Sayles' time-frozen social views don't permit him to explore in a serious fashion just how desperate things really are. His radicalism is essentially complacent. Big companies have always acted ruthlessly and blindly, people thrown out of work have always felt bitter and frustrated, individuals on the margin of society have always felt alienated and at loose ends. *Limbo* has apparently been in the planning stages for years. In fact, it could have been made ten or twenty years ago. The film might have given voice to the deep anguish and sense of disorientation that is abroad in the US. Instead we get only fleeting glimpses of it, when Sayles lets down his guard.

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