

# Sunshine and shadows

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

If there were such a thing as an American moviemaker laureate, the title would go to writer-director John Sayles. Since 1980 he has been addressing moral, political and personal issues in American culture, with special emphasis on the dilemmas that confront the working class at the crossroads of love and hope.

Sayles is something of a cross between Eric Rohmer, the French New Wave auteur whose characters gently wrestle with personal conflicts, and the playwright Eugene O'Neill, whose sad sojourners are so crippled by unrealized dreams they are barely able to function. Sayles's characters are rarely as romantic and articulate as Rohmer's, nor as emotionally damaged as O'Neill's pipe-dreamers. In Sayles's world, people accept their disappointments and just keep moving forward.

Sayles's first film was the highly influential *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, which deals with friendship among aging '60s activists. He has tackled class differences (*Baby, It's You*); corruption and the creation of myth (*Eight Men Out*); the urge to unite for a larger purpose (*Matewan*); and the moral complexity of big-city politics (*City of Hope*). Sayles's greatest achievement, *Lone Star*, suggests how vital a homeland can be to one's view of the world. It uses the history and development of Texas--with its frontier justice, macho posturing, border disputes and, most of all, powerful legends--to help frame the story.

In *Sunshine State*, Sayles does much the same thing for Florida, a less defined region, with its mixture of old-time residents, south-flying retirees, and northern carpetbaggers who smell money rising from the blowing sands. Sayles employs his typical novelistic approach, layering one plot over another to create a collage of conflict. In this case, the overt conflict is over some brazen attempts to build new developments on old and sometimes cherished land. The deeper story is about the American urge to bury tradition and older ways of life for something faster and shinier.

The dueling main story lines revolve around two women and their desire to escape Delrona Beach (the town is fictional). Marly Temple (Edie Falco) is burdened with

running a rundown motel and restaurant that was once the pride and joy of her father, Furman (Ralph Waite), during the latter days of segregation. Marly is lonely, world-weary and drinks too much. She has taken up with a golfer who is many years her junior. Her dramatic counterpart, the ravishing Desiree Perry (Angela Bassett), left town many years earlier to pursue an acting career, but things didn't work out. She has returned for a long weekend to visit her aging mother, Eunice (Mary Alice), and to confront the demons that drove her from the town to begin with.

Floating on the periphery are stories about the disappearance of black culture in the region, a trend being fought by the altruistic Dr. Lloyd (Bill Cobbs), and about the attempt to commercialize the region's pirate history (Mary Steenburgen plays the eager Francine Pinckney). In a nod to the ancient tragedians, Sayles even includes a Greek chorus of aging golfers, led by the comedian Alan King, who wax philosophic about the nature of change.

As usual, Sayles concerns himself less with the dramatic twists than with the talk surrounding them. His dialogue is crisp and filled with local jargon, and Marly Temple is the perfect mouthpiece for Sayles's ambivalence about the virtues of staying put as opposed to moving on.

Sayles, who has no problem providing uplifting endings when they are earned, comes up with a clever way to maintain the status quo. But the beauty of the ending is that while the land is saved, the one woman who could have benefited from its takeover loses the man she loves, a member of the "enemy camp" who must move on, like a weary soldier, to the next battle for the next piece of land. Like the old philosopher in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, Sayles is cursed with the ability to see both sides of an argument. For moviegoers, Sayles's curse is a blessing.