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Sunshine State

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Sunshine State

Abstract

This is a review of *Sunshine State* (2002).

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A fellow Floridian once joked that housing developments in our state are invariably named after whatever the developer destroyed in the process of building the houses - neighborhood signs bearing names like "Fox Run" or "Calusa Trace" are simultaneously the tombstones of lost natural and cultural values, and the shingles that announce that those same values have been resurrected as commodities. It is this Florida - the Florida where history is PR, culture is a roadside attraction, and new "communities" are regularly created by corporations - that writer/director John Sayles has brought to life in his recent release *Sunshine State*.

Like much of Sayles' work, this film combines a rich local focus with an episodic structure telling the stories of several sets of characters related to one another by various ties of blood, interest, and affection. We are introduced to two aging beach resort towns: one white, the other black, a division left over from the days of segregated amusements. Both have seen better days, and both have been targeted by developers for gentrifying "improvements." A diverse cast of tragic and comic characters negotiate their personal and public identities within this milieu - ranging from the hotel proprietor who must decide whether to sell her family business to developers, to her boyfriend the landscape architect, who must acknowledge that he will never fulfill his populist dreams of being the next Frederick Law Olmstead while working for those same developers; from the Greek-American who establishes a Southern identity by joining Civil War reenactments,

to the Chamber of Commerce representative who coordinates a kitschy "Buccaneer Days" celebration and complains that "no one appreciates how hard it is to create a tradition."

Sunshine State invites comparison to Sayles' earlier feature *Lone Star*, which dealt with a similar ensemble of characters in a Texas border town. Both films deal with the themes of memory and history, and explore the ways in which the human capacity to invent or manipulate memories gets limited by the intrusion of uncomfortable memories of the tragic past. But whereas in *Lone Star* it is this tragic memory of injustice that moves the plot, in *Sunshine State* it is the irony of invented tradition that has the last word. This may evoke unfavorable comparisons for fans of the earlier film, and it must be admitted that the characters in *Sunshine State* seem more superficial and the political intrigues less consequential than in Sayles' dark Texas tale. Still, the structure and characterization seem peculiarly appropriate to a film about Florida, a state where the relevant problem is not so much to know the difference between fair and unfair versions of local history as it is distinguishing real from fake. In a place full of transplanted and transient people, the notion that history and identity can likewise be cheaply bought and sold becomes difficult to resist. Sayles has captured this ambivalence admirably in *Sunshine State*, without turning the characters into caricatures, and to this extent, he succeeds in pulling off the same trick for Florida as he had earlier done for Texas.

The pedagogical usefulness of *Sunshine State* as a resource for use in a religion course might run in two directions. First, teachers of religious scriptures could find in the film a useful dramatization of a tradition in the process of formation, showing the influence of the various groups who have a vested interest in how nature and communal identity are mythologized. Second, those interested in postcolonial issues might find the Florida of *Sunshine State* an interesting case study of a place where Americans are in effect colonizing a piece of their own territory. For a good companion piece to the film, Russ Rymer's book *American Beach* (Harper, 2000) tells the story of the black resort town upon which Sayles' fictional town is based and parallels many of the themes of the movie. In all, this is a well-crafted film that is worth seeing. Sayles' gentle exposure of the Disneyfied version of the myth of America that is Florida's most significant cultural export will hold the interest of both natives of and visitors to the *Sunshine State*.