



Bush Bashing

John Sayles' political thriller 'Silver City' tries to do too much, including taking swipes at the president

By Morton Marcus

MY SAINTED mother used to say, "If you take a little bit of this and a little bit of that and mush them together, you'll probably get 'bupkes'"—that is, junk, something worthless or trivial. I thought of her words as I left the screening of John Sayles' latest film, *Silver City*.

Certainly, the film isn't worthless or junk, but despite its serious intentions, it is superficial and, ultimately, trivial. Let me say at the outset that John Sayles is one of my favorite directors. I look forward to his films. They are, in fact, among the highlights of my cinematic year. To me, Sayles has been the undisputed champion of American independent cinema since his first film, 1980's *The Secaucus Seven*.

For 24 years, he has gone his own way, raising his own money while shunning Hollywood's generous financial approaches as well as its predictable filmmaking, and as screenwriter, director, actor and editor, he has made 15 feature films filled with trenchant social and political material, at least half of them masterpieces of American cinema.

But in *Silver City*, he has mixed too much of a little this and that. Here's what I mean. Running for governor of Colorado, Dickie Pilger (Chris Cooper) snags a dead body on his fishing line during a photo op. His campaign manager (Richard Dreyfuss) hires Danny O'Brien (Danny Huston), a reporter turned

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private detective, to check on and intimidate several people Dreyfuss thinks may have planted the corpse to embarrass his candidate. The film follows O'Brien as his investigation unexpectedly uncovers the economic corruption and political shenanigans under Colorado's bucolic exterior.

Sounds like a straightforward thriller with political overtones, but it isn't. The unfolding plot is continually interrupted by short scenes of over-the-top satirical thrusts at big-business tycoons, right-wing talk-show hosts, corrupt lobbyists, media manipulators and controllers, crooked real estate developers, environmental destroyers and, especially, Cooper's comic portrayal of an inept, dim-witted politician, whose resemblance to George W. Bush borders on flat-out imitation and in the end is too easy and has to be called what it is: a cheap shot.

Die-hard liberals, of which I am one, may be happy to see these all-too-frequent moments, but people out to enjoy a good film will quickly realize that these instances mar *Silver City's* pacing and confuse audience reaction: Are we supposed to laugh or sit breathless with suspense?

The problem is simple enough: the film is a little too much of a thriller and a little too much of a lampoon—and the two don't "mush." In fact, the satirical scenes bloat the film's two-hour 20-minute running time instead of giving it the epical sweep of such Sayles classics as *Matewan*, *Eight Men Out* and the towering tragic vision of *Lone Star*.

In fact, the long running time only serves to highlight the failure of Sayles' scatter-gun approach, which, in seeking to hit so many targets, leaves the film's characters as underdeveloped as the proverbial one-dimensional cardboard cutouts we see in all-too-many Hollywood films. This last situation keeps the viewer from identifying with the characters and, ultimately, from being affected emotionally by *Silver City's* dramatic content.

Besides all these problems, the film's lead, Danny Huston, has neither the acting ability nor the screen presence to carry the film. This failure creates a dramatic vacuum that, ironically, makes the short satirical set pieces

more memorable than they should be, thanks to the strong cameo performances of Miguel Ferrer as the bitter right-wing talk-show host, Daryl Hannah as Pilger's self-destructive sister, Kris Kristofferson as the business tycoon, Ralph Waite as the honest mining engineer and Dreyfuss as the high-powered campaign manager.

Don't get me wrong: there are many good parts in *Silver City*. The cameo set pieces and individual acting jobs are among them, and the scenes depicting the life of illegal Mexican workers are both harrowing and poignant—and continue the theme of America's exploitation of Third World workers that has dominated Sayles' recent films. But such moments are few and far between.

All in all, *Silver City* is an ambitious work that could have been an important picture of America in the early years of the 21st century. But the elements pursued in the film are so many and so disparate, they don't mesh. Sorry, Mom: I mean, they don't mush.

Silver City (R; 129 min.), directed and written by John Sayles, photographed by Haskell Wexler and starring Chris Cooper and Danny Huston, opens Friday at selected theaters. Poet and film critic **Morton Marcus** is co-host, with Metro's **Richard von Busack**, of the film-review TV show 'Cinema Scene.'

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