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Sayles talk

Brother is a little less than kin

by Owen Gleiberman

THE BROTHER FROM ANOTHER PLANET. Written, directed, and edited by John Sayles. With Joe Morton, Steve James, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Caroline Aaron, and John Sayles. A Cinecom International Films release. At the Orson Welles.

In the year of *Splash* and *Moscow on the Hudson*, John Sayles has come up with the headiest alien-in-Manhattan premise yet: his fourth feature, *The Brother from Another Planet*, is about a black extraterrestrial who splashes down in New York Harbor and takes up a shaky residence in Harlem. This alien, who can't speak and can't understand much English, has looming, poster-child eyes, dark, dark skin, and a head of closely cropped Rasta braids. Tall and peaceful, he looks like a tender-hearted version of Mr. Butch, and he fits into the crumbling ghetto community about as easily as a stray puppy — he's an outcast in a world of outcasts. It takes a special kind of chutzpah for a white filmmaker to set a movie upward of 125th Street, especially when you consider that the Hollywood of 1984 can scarcely be bothered with black films, period. What's surprising, then, is how quickly the Harlem of *The Brother* comes to seem a safe, tidy, quirky little place, one where jokes are cracked like so many walnuts and everyone, even the middle-aged daytime regulars at Odell's bar, puts a little spin on his conversation. This isn't Harlem, folks — it's John Sayles Land. And in *The Brother from Another Planet*, you're never allowed to forget it.

The ability to create characters comes so easily to John Sayles that he lacks a proper respect for it. He can bang a few traits and speaking patterns together the way most people change their typewriter ribbons (he reportedly knocked off the *Brother* script in a week), and here, as always, he gets off his share of good lines: he's a master of the literate zinger. But how much richer and more lasting his movies would be if he developed his characters over time, if he let them relax and not be so relentlessly bright and clever. I thought his 1983 teen-dream fable, *Baby, It's You*, was a breakthrough; it had the Sayles irony and wit without that incessant narcissistic wordplay that can make you feel you've wandered into the middle of Off Off Broadway's greatest hits. With *The Brother*, Sayles is back in Off Off Broadway terrain. He's got a good subject, but he's writing cute, show-off dialogue again, and little of the movie really sticks. Early on, the Brother wanders into Odell's and arouses the curiosity of its three patrons, one of whom decides that their mysterious silent visitor must be deaf, drunk, or crazy. The bar, which is supposed to be a typical Harlem dive, is lighted like a suburban rec

room, and the actors shout out their lines on cue, one fellow making irksome cracks about a defective video game he's playing, the brawny bartender haranguing his girlfriend with a monologue about how there ain't nuthin' you can't find below 110th Street that's worth going down there for. Some of the lines are funny, but the characters quickly turn into so many adorable rowdy-ass ghetto folk; they banter up a storm, but they never stop to breathe.

At this point, you're set for a contemporary twist on Eugene O'Neill (*The Spaceman Cometh?*), with the Brother as the outsider on whom everyone else shines his true, uh, colors. But the Brother is more than just a device. He turns out to have magical healing powers, the ability to do everything from mend flesh wounds à la E.T. to regenerate the circuits in broken-down machinery. One of his new pals gets him a temporary job fixing video games and finds him some lodging with the white, Alabama-born wife of a local hipster. Now the Brother is free to roam the streets, taking in the sights and meeting the denizens of his rainbow-coalition community. He puts his ear to the subway walls and hears the voices — and screams — of passengers past. He stumbles upon a teenager strung out on heroin, pulls a syringe out of the kid's arm, and shoots himself up. He meets a jazzy subway card sharp who regales him with a trick so original it seems almost lyrical. (It's no coincidence that this is the most vibrant, spontaneous scene in the movie: the card sharp, played by a young fellow named Fisher Stevens, is a natural-born showman, and his spry theatricality comes from the character instead of from Sayles.) The Brother even falls in love, sort of, with Malverne (Dee Dee Bridgewater), a beautiful black soul singer who once belonged to a Supremes-like group called the Rubies and now makes her living as a respectable has-been, doing elegant solo spots at local nightclubs.

It's hard to see how Joe Morton, as the Brother, could be any better. Training his big, soft eyes directly on the face of whoever's addressing him, frantically pointing his thumb in the air when he's asked where he comes from, he's a sweet, otherworldly innocent, and as the movie goes on his expressive capacity broadens, blossoming into a huge, gummy smile that's a dead ringer for Gérard Depardieu's. But putting a character who can't speak — who can barely communicate — at the center of a movie is a risky proposition, and Sayles seems to think he can get away with it by turning the Brother's lambent stare into an all-purpose symbol of black sensitivity, by turning his muteness into a silent

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plea of the dispossessed. That's a questionable strategy in this era of break-dance exuberance and upward mobility — it's too easy, too patronizing. As if to compound the virtue of it all, Sayles, with noble irony, casts himself as a honky bad guy — one of the two Gestapo-like, interplanetary bounty hunters who've been sent to Earth to get the Brother back.

At his best, Sayles creates intimate moments of the sort you rarely see in mainstream movies. When the Brother goes back to Malverne's apartment, her sequined radiance is breathtaking, but then, before hopping into bed with him, she lets her hair down (literally — it's puffed out with a small wig) and tells him to forget the woman he saw on stage for the flesh-and-blood creature he now holds in his arms. Seeing this moment as we do, through the Brother's lovestruck eyes, it's almost as if she actually were two people — Sayles casts our images of glamor and sexual identity into high relief. But we never see Malverne again; she captures the Brother's attention (and ours) only to fade out of the story. So does everyone else. The last half hour of *The Brother from Another Planet* is clunky and tedious, as the bounty hunters chase through bars and alleys to get to the Brother and as he, in turn, tracks down the white-businessman heroin dealer responsible for the death of a young junkie. Drawing his film to a close with a heavy-handed anti-drug message, Sayles ends up tut-tutting over the plight of poor urban blacks like a generation of hand-wringing liberals before him. He hasn't dramatized life in the ghetto — he's milked it for instant pathos.

Four years after *Return of the Secaucus 7*, John Sayles has a choice to make: does he want to be a vital American filmmaker (it's within his grasp), or does he want to go on being the smartest, most sensitive kid in scenewriting class? He's not exactly a film-industry outsider anymore, and at this point he may have more to lose by steering clear of Hollywood's economic resources than by trying to merge with them. *The Brother from Another Planet* is awash in noble intentions, and that's part of what's wrong with it. For Sayles, small-scale, independent moviemaking may have begun to represent a kind of self-defeating "sincerity." He needs to taste a little dirt, a little corruption — all the better to get at whatever lies beyond them. □



Joe Morton: soul of the city