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Men With Guns

(Drama — Color)

A Sony Pictures Classics release of Lexington Road and Clear Blue Sky Prods., in association with the Independent Film Channel and Anarchists' Convention. Produced by R. Paul Miller, Maggie Renzi. Executive producers, Jody Patton, Lou Gonda, John Sloss. Co-producer, Bretha Navarro.

Directed, written, edited by John Sayles. Camera (Technicolor), Slawomir Idziak; music, Mason Daring; production design, Felipe Fernandez Del Paso; art direction, Salvador Parra; set decoration, Miguel Angel Alvarez; costume design, Mayes C. Rubeco; sound (Dolby), Judy Karp; associate producers, Eric Robison, Peter Gilbert, Jim De Nardo, Doug Sayles; assistant director, Manuel Hinojosa; casting, Lizzie Curry Martinez. Reviewed at Telluride Film Festival, Aug. 30, 1997. (Also in Toronto Film Festival.) Running time: 126 min.

Dr. Fuentes Federico Luppi
Domingo, the Soldier Damian Delgado
Conejo, the Boy Dan Rivera Gonzalez
Graciela, the Mute Girl Tania Cruz
Padre Portillo,

the Priest Damian Alcazar
Andrew Mandy Patinkin
Harriet Kathryn Grody
Mother Iguandili Lopez
Daughter Nandi Luna Ramirez
General Rafael De Quevedo
Bravo Roerto Sosa

(Spanish dialogue)

By once again centering on the discrepancy between an individual's search for truth and official story, as it is constructed and enforced by power elites in totalitarian regimes, John Sayles' "Men With Guns" is a logical followup thematically to his "Lone Star." The two movies are quite different, however, with "Men With Guns" far less complex, multilayered and technically accomplished than his 1996 indie hit. Sony Classics faces a tough challenge in marketing a film whose hurdles include Spanish-language dialogue and no recognizable names in its cast.

Like the director's "The Secret of Roan Inish," "Men With Guns" is framed as a mythic tale, one in which an old native woman (Iguandili Lopez) tells her young daughter (Nandi Luna Ramirez) the story of an idealistic doctor from the Big City. And like "Lone Star," the format of the new film is that of a personal investigation, here conducted by an aging doctor searching for the students he once trained. Unfortunately, new yarn lacks the visual magic of "The Secret" and the narrative momentum of "Lone Star."

Inspired by the character of Dr. Arrau (who appeared in Francisco Goldman's novel, "The Long Night of White Chickens"), central figure is Humberto Fuentes (Federico Luppi), a wealthy doctor whose

wife had recently died.

Close to retirement, Fuentes decides to take a trip against the advice of his children and his most prominent patient, an army general (Rafael De Quevedo), to visit his former students, who are serving impoverished villages in the mountains. Hence begins a physical journey that gradually becomes an intensely political, emotional and moral odyssey.

A brief encounter in the marketplace with Bravo (Roerto Sosa), his best student, leads Fuentes to a squalid slum in the outskirts, where Bravo operates a "private pharmacy." Bravo sends his old mentor to a small village in search of another student, who's not to be found. The locals there are afraid to talk — until a blind woman informs Fuentes that his student was killed by the "men with guns."

The local police officer dismisses the rumors, claiming that there are no guerrillas in the area and urging the doctor to return to the city. This, of course, makes Fuentes all the more committed to his cause. Along the way, he befriends a young boy, Conejo (Dan Rivera Gonzalez), a product of rape who was abandoned by his mother. Conejo knows the area well and, functioning as a guide, he takes Fuentes to a deserted school, the site of torture and violence where another one of his students was murdered.

Yarn unfolds as a road movie, with each stop representing a crucial phase in the doctor's political awakening. The tale gets richer and more interesting when Fuentes and Conejo are joined by Domingo (Damian Delgado), an army deserter with no home or destination, and Padre Portillo (Damian Alcazar), a defrocked priest. Mandy Patinkin and Kathryn Grody play one-dimensional characters — naive American tourists — used mostly for comic relief.

Though "Lone Star" represented a high point in Sayles' career, it still suffered from schematic didacticism — lessons of Texas' bloody history were not only dramatized, they were also used as lectures in schools and sermons to the audience. Wearing Sayles' liberal-humanitarian doctrine on its sleeve, "Men With Guns" is also diagrammatic.

Moreover, Sayles' decision not to ground the story in any particular historical context makes the movie a bit abstract. The generic title suggests that the horrific tale can take place in any authoritarian society, be it Guatemala, Argentina, Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union.

Indeed, the journey taken by the doctor is metaphoric, underlining the personal responsibility of each citizen to search for knowledge. In this respect, pic's message is similar to the Oscar-winning Argentine film "The Official Story," which also revolves around a bourgeois couple blind to the atrocities around them.

Yet Sayles goes further and makes an important distinction between naive innocence and will-

ful ignorance. Fuentes is blind to what's happening around him not only because he is manipulated and lied to by an oppressive minority, but also because it's convenient not to know; his comfortable life precludes the perception of any social or political ills.

If "Men With Guns" is intriguingly constructed, its technical execution leaves much to be desired. Visually, the film is a throwback to Sayles of the 1980s: the cinematography is modestly functional and the tempo pedestrian. Sayles takes pride in editing his own movies, but he could use the help of a savvy editor to bring snap to the storytelling.

"Men With Guns" is never boring, but it plods along without benefiting from its inherently dramatic format of a murder investigation.

— Emanuel Levy