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# Tex-Mex

**John Sayles' *Lone Star* limns the uncertain border between past and present**

**By Paul Reidinger**

The main character in John Sayles' new *Lone Star* is Texas itself, a place whose huge and difficult history echoes even in its small towns. The movie's main theme is the evanescent boundary between past and present, neither of which can be understood without understanding the other. That's a brave theme for a filmmaker working in a country Gore Vidal has often called "the United States of Amnesia." But Sayles pulls it off, sugarcoating the bitter pill of history with a cunningly told murder mystery that opens petal by petal, like a beautifully macabre flower. *Lone Star* is a great picture: It's *Fargo* with sagebrush.

The history of Texas, in Sayles' telling, includes everything from a riff on the state's brief interval as a breakaway republic (founded in 1836 because Mexican law forbade slavery) to the saga of a grinningly brutish Anglo sheriff, Charley Wade (Kris Kristofferson), whose skull turns up on a military shooting range nearly 40 years after he mysteriously disappeared in 1957 from the small border town of Frontera.

Although Wade appears only in flashbacks, he looms over the picture as the embodiment of Anglos' certainty — often ruthlessly expressed — about their claim to Texas. Wade's job consists mostly of shaking down small-business men and demonstrating who's running the show by roughing up, or murdering, the occasional black or Mexican foolish enough to get in his way.

Kristofferson's weathered, lean height makes him look like a latter-day Texas Ranger, but it's his off-center smile that holds the real menace. He gives the same wry grin whether he's genuinely amused by a joke or about to kill someone who's neglected to pay him off; he takes a distinct delight in blasting people. The grin eventually becomes scary, like the rattling tail of a snake, but when he first flashes it — in a bar scene with his crusading young deputy, Buddy Deeds (Matthew McConaughey) — it makes him seem harmless, an aging blusterer whose bluff has been called.

It's Buddy's son, Sam (Chris Cooper), who investigates the story of Wade's skull. He's an unhappy sheriff, elected to a job he didn't particularly want because he shares a marketable surname with a deceased father (and local legend) with whom he didn't get along. It's clear from the beginning that Sam believes his father killed Charley Wade; and it's equally clear that he wants to believe it. He wants to destroy his father's white-knight reputation; he wants his revenge, even if it's posthumous.

Cooper's Sam is lanky and mournful, a man with a job instead of a life. He's divorced from Bunny (*Fargo*'s Frances McDormand in a small but dazzling turn), a maniacally verbal woman who watches too much television, and he's still in love with his high school sweetheart, Pilar Cruz (Elizabeth Peña), who married someone else, bore two children, and then found herself widowed.

There's something mournful in the rekindling of their youthful passion. Their shoulders sag under a burden of bittersweet memory, and the dimly lit sex scene is a tender mosaic of furrows and lines and the first billows of middle-aged flesh: tokens of time passed and passing.

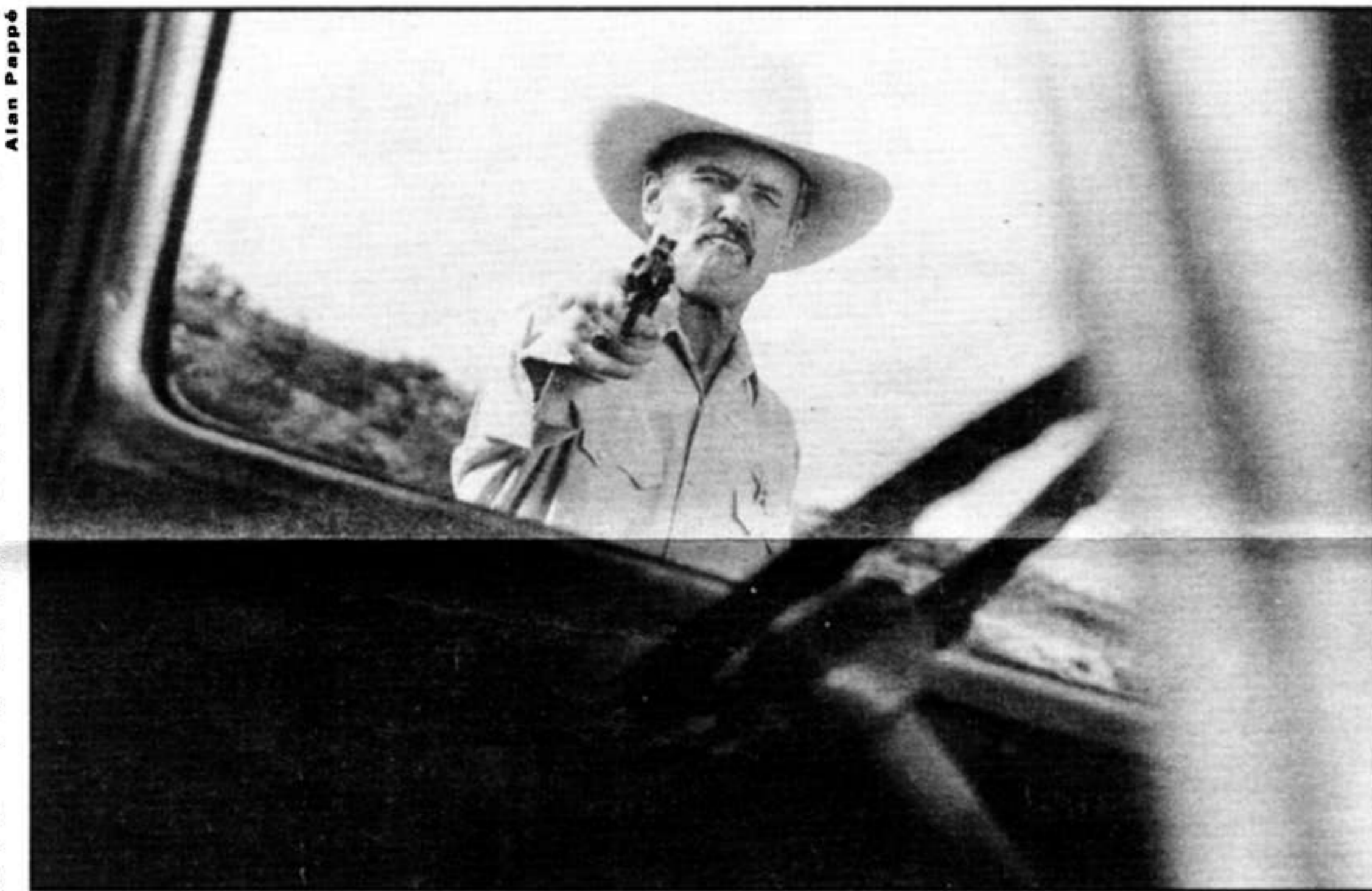
Sayles is scrupulously discreet about his use of metaphor, and it's part of the movie's genius that the checkered affair between Sam and Pilar packs the emotional wallop of a real love story while at the same time representing the larger theme that interests Sayles: the chaotic mingling of languages, cultures, races, and historical understandings that makes Texas the erratically variegated giant it is and always has been. His characters' obsession with borders makes

beautiful sense, because everyone in the film understands (with varying degrees of cognition and unease) how slippery and ephemeral they are. The river that divides the American town from its Mexican counterpart is only technically a boundary; it's spanned by bridges, and easily crossed by poor Mexicans seeking work in the States.

(One of the movie's most bitterly funny jokes is the haste with which Mercedes Colon, as Pilar's mother, calls the U.S. Border Patrol to complain of "wetbacks." She's the classic zealous convert, a woman who, having made her own way in America, is uniquely touchy about illegal immigration.)

If everyone in Sayles' Frontera is mired in the gooey aspic of the past, no one feels it more than fathers and sons. Sam and Buddy aren't the only estranged pair in town. There's also Col. Delmore Payne (Joe Morton), black commander of the local Army post, who finds his son, Chet (Eddie Robinson), inscrutable and his own father, Otis (Ron Canada), who runs a black nightclub, reprehensible.

Col. Payne is *Lone Star*'s fulcrum: The film's shifting moral, emotional, and familial burdens fall mostly on his stiff, square shoulders. He's old enough to have a memory of racist cops, young enough to have a son more likely to end up on an Ivy League campus than in



Alan Peppo

uniform. And he himself serves a country he doesn't quite believe in; when a young black private says that "It's their country" and "I just do what they tell me," Payne conspicuously doesn't disagree.

But then, he doesn't agree, either, maybe because he can't. In Sayles' vision, the country, like the past, belongs to everyone and, really, no one. Claims — about identity, history, race, power, and right — compete with other claims while the present is forever slipping through people's fingers, unfixable and impermanent.

John Sayles is among the most literary of American moviemakers (he published a novel, *Los Gusanos*, in 1991), and *Lone Star* strikes a fine, novelistic balance between rumination and purpose; despite a large cast of characters rounded out through anecdote and detail, the movie quickly establishes a momentum it never loses.

But *Lone Star*'s greatest, and perhaps inadvertent, strength is its picture of people splitting their differences to get on with life. Mercedes is constantly exhorting her young Mexican workers to "speak English, this is America," but whether Sayles' characters speak English or Spanish or both in the same sentence, they manage to make themselves understood. It's a world without borders. **SF**

**▲ A Distinct Delight in Blasting People: Kristofferson.**

***Lone Star* opens Friday, June 21, at the Embarcadero Center in S.F. and the Act One/Two in Berkeley.**