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Matewan

(John Sayles, 1987, US) Chris Cooper, Mary McDonnell, Will Oldham, David Strathairn, Ken Jenkins, Kevin Tighe, Gordon Clapp, James Earl Jones, Josh Mostel.

133 min.

A lone stranger arrives in town to unite the locals against the heavies with guns: a scenario familiar from countless Westerns. When the Stone Mountain Coal Company, which owns virtually everything in the West Virginian town of Matewan, reduces its workers' pay and begins employing blacks and Italians against the wishes of the local whites, ex-Wobbly union rep Joe Kenehan (Cooper) is sent in to overcome dissidence and prevent violent conflict with the armed strike-breakers recently hired by the company. But tempers run high, racial contempt is rife, and betrayal looms. Set in the 1920s, Sayles' marvelously gripping movie never compromises its political content in its deployment, or up-ending, of Western conventions. It possesses a mythic clarity, yet there's also a welcome complexity at work, in the vivid characterisations and the unsentimental celebration of community and collective action. The result is witty, astute, and finally very moving. GA