

Film Review: *Eight Men Out* directed by John Sayles

[It is not our intention to provide comprehensive and regular reviews of sports films and videos since the focus of this journal is more on the printed word. However, there is no reason why members should not, from time to time, make comments on particular films or videos when they feel so moved.... Ed.]

Australians' presumed passion for sport has never been successfully translated to film, either of the celebratory or critical kind. To date Australian films dealing with race horses, cricketers, or 'iron men' reveal little about the actual sport portrayed and less about its historical context. Such is not the case with the recent U.S. baseball film, *Eight Men Out*.

Like an earlier Sayles film, *Matewan*, which explored a strike struggle on the West Virginian Coalfields, *Eight Men Out* is immersed in the social, political and economic struggles of a particular era in American history. Both are based on events drawn from that year of turbulence, 1919.

In *Matewan* Sayles depicted the violence, courage, weakness, collaboration and sense of solidarity experienced by coalminers in their fight to establish union rights at the Stone Mountain Coal Company, despite the owner's deployment of scabs, provocateurs and blacklists. An uncommon realism concerning the miners' working and living conditions in a 'company town', the strategies of the coal bosses and the limitations of the strike victory pervade *Matewan*. A similar realism is evident in *Eight Men Out*. Sayles explores the reasons behind and the consequences of 'the scandal' which struck the Chicago White Sox baseball team when eight of its members conspired with gamblers to lose the World Series. The scandal is presented from the viewpoint of the bribed players.

Like *Matewan*, *Eight Men Out* does not provide simple moral choices between good and evil. We are shown why each of these baseball players decides to 'fly' key matches in the World Series. Their reasons range from fading ability, financial hardship, avarice and loyalty to one another. These reasons are set within a wider political and economic context. Charles Comisky, the owner of the White Sox kept the team in penury. They were cheated of match bonuses and their long contracts prevented a transfer to other teams. After one vital match Comisky celebrates a White Sox victory with flat champagne. Bribery of important team members is predictable as the World Series unfolds.

Sayles does not leave the corruption of the Chicago team at the simple level of their owner's miserliness. The film exposes the means by which the mafia and big business interests conspired to destroy the playing careers of the White Sox eight to further their financial hold over professional base ball. The Chicago eight were only a pawn in a larger board room game. The desire to expose an episode in the sordid history of corporate America and its corruption of sport does not prevent Sayles from celebrating the game cinemagraphically. The long panning shots, close-ups, profiles and ground level camera work of baseball in *Eight Men Out* make the sporting events presented on corporate television abysmal in comparison. The athleticism grace and skill, which the late CLR James argued were to be found 'in popular culture for those with eyes to see', are captured in the Sayles film. We are also shown the human weaknesses and strengths of these working-class men who were once the pride of Chicago baseball and who by corporate duplicity later became nobodies. Their tobacco chewing, illiteracy, hard drinking, poverty and superstition is deftly contrasted with their sense of solidarity, shame, remorse, failure and defeat as events not of their own making overwhelm them.

The factual bases for *Eight Men Out* were a series of newspaper articles penned by the legendary sports journalist, Ring Lardner who is played in the film by radio broadcaster and oral historian, Studs Terkel. Until Australian film makers link sports and politics as John Sayles has done with American baseball nothing of compelling significance will be stated about our presumed passion.

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