



Sid Hatfield faces off against Baldwin-Felts detectives in the 1987 film *Matewan*. All photos in this section by Bob Marshak, the film's stills photographer.

A Tale of Two Matewans

By Stan Bumgardner

The shootout and its aftermath were tailor-made for the screen and stage, with a rambunctious/ready-to-fight lead character, Sid Hatfield, and a young woman, Jessie Testerman-Hatfield, who was widowed twice before turning 27. Add in some political corruption, mob-like associations and payoffs, and two public shootings, and most producers would say, “Nah, nobody would buy it.” Fortunately, great storytellers from Schenectady, New York, and Kimball (McDowell County) took the chance, resulting in one of the best movies and finest plays ever about West Virginia.

Matewan (1987)

In 1987, I asked my father to see the new film *Matewan* with me. Any question was a chance for him to tell a story. This time, he told me how some folks working on the film had visited his coin store, which my mother called a “junk shop.” He happened to have a 1920 calendar and donated it to the project.

Rather late in *Matewan*, there’s a tense scene involving the characters C. E. Lively and Bridie Mae. As the cineplex audience watched in hushed silence, my father, who had the enthusiasm of a six-year-old on Christmas, burst out, “There’s my calendar! There’s my calendar!” As I slumped down to avoid stares, I looked up at the screen. Hanging on the wall was my father’s 1920 calendar.

Fast-forward 30-plus years, I shared this story with Maggie Renzi, the film’s coproducer. She related how the film’s prop people scoured our state’s antique shops, hills, and hollows, looking for period items. For me, beyond my immediate embarrassment in the theater, the calendar represented the *West Virginia-ness* of the film.

I can’t count how many other West Virginians I’ve met who contributed similar things or appeared as extras in *Matewan*. Film critics often point out how a certain location, particularly New York City, can be like an extra costar in a movie. Whether it’s the opening scene (shot in the Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine) or the *Matewan* shootout (filmed in Thurmond due to modern changes in *Matewan*), this movie is all West Virginia, even down to the musicians.

As major motion pictures go, I can’t really think of many films where West Virginia is a costar. Sure, some great movies have been set here. Arguably the best was the 1955 classic *The Night of the Hunter*, adapted from Moundsville native Davis Grubb’s novel. But, in the film’s opening scene, it takes more than a little imagination to picture Robert Mitchum’s Harry Powell in a very make-believe West Virginia Penitentiary in a more make-believe Moundsville. *Silence of the Lambs* and *Mothman Prophecies* relate in different ways to West Virginia, but both have a Pennsylvania feel since that’s where they were filmed. Even *October Sky*—based on Homer Hickam’s *Rocket Boys* about growing up in Coalwood (McDowell County)—was filmed mostly in Tennessee. Some scenes from *The Deer Hunter* were shot in Weirton, but, once again, it’s basically a Pennsylvania, and Vietnam, film. Perhaps the best comparison is *Fool’s Parade* (1971), another Grubb adaptation. Starring Jimmy Stewart, George Kennedy, and Strother Martin, it was filmed largely on location in Moundsville [See “When Hollywood Came to Moundsville” by Camilla Bunting, Summer 1995]. Despite featuring three of my favorite actors, the film is fairly average.

Renzi recently spoke with actor James Earl Jones as a bonus for the new Criterion Blu-ray re-release of *Matewan*. Looking back on his storied career, *Matewan* really stood out to him. “It was all around us,” Jones told her. Renzi adds, “I know what he meant, which was that there weren’t four walls anywhere. If it was [a scene in] the woods, we were in the woods. If it was in the church, we were in the church. If it was around the dining room table in an old house, that was the old boarding house there in Thurmond. That does a lot for the actors and for the crew—it was really a complete immersion [in West Virginia]. It makes the experience for the viewers so much more real.”

But it’s not just the *West Virginia-ness* of *Matewan* that stands out. It’s debatably the best movie ever made about us, as West Virginians, and perhaps the best labor history film. While writer/director John Sayles takes some artistic license with the timeline of events, *Matewan* does what few films, or books, for that matter, do: entertain while helping us understand a complicated but significant period in history. Historians have a reputation for being picky about precise details. I’d like to count myself among this group (despite the periodic “Corrections” we publish due to my editorial oversights). But none other than Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Eric Foner was willing to cut Sayles some historical slack when he wrote that the film is a “meditation on broad philosophical questions rarely confronted in American films: the possibility of interracial cooperation, the merits of violence and nonviolence in combating injustice, and the threat posed by concentrated economic power to American notions of political democracy and social justice.” Notably, we’re still grappling with these issues in 2020 as much as we were in 1920.

In his 1987 review of the film for *GOLDENSEAL*, Rick Wilson wrote that despite the grim nature of the plot, “There

“A judicious mixture”

A key scene in the film shows union factions arguing among themselves. As Renzi observes, “The mine owners referred to it as ‘a judicious mixture,’ meaning you have just a sprinkling of each population so you don’t have so many of them that one group is large enough to get together, with the assumption we won’t unite because of our differences.” Her analysis isn’t hypothetical. Fayette County coal operator Justus Collins once wrote about companies hiring a “judicious mixture” of blacks, native whites, and foreigners and playing one against the other to disrupt union organizing.

are many occasions for the audience to laugh, as the characters display that genuine West Virginia trait of finding humor in the worst of situations. Indeed, the most striking thing about the entire film is its authenticity.”

Renzi doesn’t see the film’s message as being tragic or negative; rather, it’s about self-empowerment. She emphasizes why its appeal has lasted: “I actually believe we want to be our better selves. That’s a lot of what [union organizer] Joe Kenehan is appealing to: Let’s be our best. Let’s be the people who look out for each other. Let’s not get distracted by what the people on top are trying to do to us. We’re all workers. We’re all the same.”

The film’s ensemble of actors was virtually unknown at the time, except for Jones, who portrays true-life organizer Dan Chain. But the others have since made quite a mark. Chris Cooper, who played Kenehan, followed up with a slew of great films, including *October Sky*, *Adaptation*, an Oscar-winning supporting role in *American Beauty*, and the Sayles-Renzi films *City of Hope*, *Lone Star*, *Silver City*, and *Amigo*. Mary McDonnell, who stars opposite Cooper, later



In the foreground of this scene in *Matewan*'s UMWA hall, C. E. Lively (Bob Gunton), on the far right, is an undercover Baldwin-Felts agent, picking up secrets from union organizers (left-right) Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper) and Sephus Purcell (Ken Jenkins).

received Oscar nominations for *Dances with Wolves* and *Passion Fish*, another Sayles-Renzi collaboration. David Strathairn, Sid Hatfield in the film, earned an Oscar nod for playing Edward R. Murrow in *Good Night, and Good Luck*; he, too, has been a Sayles-Renzi regular. Cabell Testerman is played by Josh Mostel, son of the legendary Zero Mostel. Gordon Clapp, a Baldwin-Felts agent, earned an Emmy as Detective Greg Medavoy on *NYPD Blue*. Bob Gunton, seven years after portraying C. E. Lively, played an equally wicked character: the warden in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Ken Jenkins, a union organizer in the film, is a great character actor who showed his comic chops as Dr. Bob Kelso on the TV show *Scrubs*. Other than Jones, the next best-known *Matewan* actor at the time was Kevin Tighe, beloved as firefighter Roy DeSoto in the 1970s TV show *Emergency!* He reignited his career with *Matewan*, in which he plays a vicious Baldwin-Felts agent who delivers some of the film's most memorable and purely evil lines. Then there's Will Oldham, a teenage pastor who's the narrator and voice of

conscience in *Matewan*. While Oldham would continue doing films, he's made a bigger mark as "freak folk" singer/songwriter Bonnie "Prince" Billy.

Finally, as with all their early films, Renzi and Sayles have small but important cameos. Sayles especially stands out as a hardshell anti-union preacher who excoriates his congregation: "The Prince of Darkness is upon the land. Now in the Bible, his name is Beezlebub, Lord of the Flies. Right now on Earth today, his name is Bolshevist! Socialist! Communist! Union man! Lord of untruth, sower of evil seed, enemy of all that is good and pure and this creature walks among us. What are we going to do about it?"

Mix this cast together with brilliant writing, direction, cinematography, and a captivating underdog story, and you have what many critics consider one of the best movies of the 1980s.

When we spoke recently, one of my first questions to Sayles was "Given that very few of us who grew up in West Virginia ever heard about the Mine Wars, how did



Screenwriter and director John Sayles on the set of *Matewan*.

you, from upstate New York, know about *Matewan*?" Surprisingly, he went on for a good 10 minutes about our history of self-reliance, stressing, "There's such a long history in West Virginia of independent thinking. There wouldn't be a West Virginia if it wasn't for independent thinking." After recounting how we became a state, he told me why he knows so much about us: "I hitch-hiked through West Virginia a bunch of times. . . . Even with radio, people didn't have good reception. So, someone from the next holler might as well be [from another country] in some cases."

Sounding a lot like Joe Kenehan, he spoke of our state's long economic decline and how big business has funneled so much wealth from beneath our feet to outside the state. He added that industrial Appalachia is, in its own way, suffering from the same financial problems as Detroit and other industrial-based economies. As an example, he pointed not to *Matewan* but to another city in the opposite end of our state: "We had friends who worked at Weirton and shot a couple movies there, *The Deer Hunter* being the most famous. Once it's cheaper

Matewan is available on DVD (\$23.96) and Blu-ray (\$31.96) in a beautiful new restoration with better sound and picture than you ever remembered. You can buy it through online sellers, but John Sayles suggests ordering through Criterion, which did the restoration: criterion.com. You'll enjoy Criterion's interviews with John Sayles, production designer Nora Chavooshian, James Earl Jones, and others.

to do something somewhere else . . . they'll go to Saipan. They'll go to Guam. They'll go anywhere in the world where they can make that thing and ship it in. Pretty much across the board . . . union workers have pretty much had the rug pulled out from under them."

Matewan holds up better for me today than many great movies. For one, I'm older and can see that the struggles of the working poor haven't improved in many ways. We're still debating issues such as worker rights vs. corporate profit. My favorite line in the movie occurs when Joe Kenehan is (continued on p. 44)

The Look of *Matewan*

One of the first things many people notice about *Matewan* is its unique look. Sayles and Renzi were fortunate enough to have one of the best cinematographers in film history. Haskell Wexler (1922 – 2015) had been the cinematographer for movies such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *In the Heat of the Night*. His use of light and shadows helped revolutionize filmmaking. So, on a low-budget film, how was Sayles able to get one of the best ever? Sayles says Wexler, who worked for far less than usual, was an old radical who empathized with working folks. Wexler had once palled around with Woody Guthrie, perhaps our country's most influential musical radical.

Once Wexler was on board, Sayles says they spent a lot of time talking about the film's appearance. Some of that was dictated by filming in Thurmond in the New River Gorge, which receives limited sunlight. Sayles notes, "You get an hour or less of sunrise and an hour or less of sunset a day. The shadows go across the main street pretty quickly. So, we really had to do some thinking when we were shooting: 'What time of day are we going to shoot?' 'Where are the shadows and how quickly are we gonna lose them?'"

Then, there were certain film tricks (before modern CGI) that take viewers back in time. Sayles and Wexler eschewed a couple common techniques for historical films, such as shooting in black and white or in sepia. They wanted it to look gritty but real. Sayles notes, "We didn't want to do that with film grain, like shoot in 16-millimeter, and have it look like it was shot with an old-time documentary camera. So, [Wexler] put a couple of . . . neutral density filters in, which takes a little bit



Two of the greats: cinematographer Haskell Wexler works with actor James Earl Jones.

of the sharpness out so it doesn't look too much like a Disney movie, which were always very sharp and very pastel looking." Specifically, these filters tone down color wavelengths, leaving an appearance of a somewhat faded color photo.

Sayles and Renzi also give much of the credit to their art and costume staffs, who did a lot of research, including GOLDENSEAL articles, on life in coal towns. For instance, the townspeople's clothes have little color. Sayles observes, "This is a town where everything has been covered with coal dust and then washed with lye soap 100 times. Everything the miners are wearing looks really worn. It's clean, especially on a Sunday, because people were pretty militant about getting stuff clean, but it's been through the washer. And that lye soap really takes the starch and the color out of clothes pretty quickly. And then it's a dusty town. It's a working town. So, it can't look brand spanking new."

The Music of *Matewan*

In reviewing the film, Jay Carr of *The Boston Globe* wrote that *Matewan* was “as pure and plaintive as a mountain ballad.” Just as Sayles and Wexler were on the same page about the film’s look, so were Sayles and composer Mason Daring regarding the soundtrack. Sayles recalls, “I sat down with [Mason], and we listened to an awful lot of music from the hills—Kentucky and West Virginia traditional stuff—and what we decided is that we’d use that as the vocabulary. We were able to get Hazel Dickens to be in the film and sing some songs for it. But we eliminated the banjo. This wasn’t that long after Flatt & Scruggs had done that wonderful work in *Bonnie & Clyde*. We just felt like the banjo was a little too upbeat for this particular story. You hear a lot of . . . guitar, harmonica, and mandolin, when the Italian miners come in.”

The late Mercer County native Hazel Dickens’ voice permeates the soundtrack, from the title track—her own “Fire in the Hole”—to an a cappella “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” to her haunting rendition of Daring’s “Gathering Storm.” An activist throughout her career, Dickens’ lyrics to “Fire in the Hole” could be an outline for the entire movie: “You can tell them in the country, tell them in the town, miners down in Mingo laid their shovels down. We won’t pull another pillar, load another ton, or lift another finger until the union we have won.”

One key scene is played out through music. While Joe Kenehan urges the different factions

to unite, it’s music that finally brings them all together. Once again, Sayles called upon West Virginians, such as Gerry Milnes and Jimmy Costa, to play on-screen musicians. Gerry reflects on his role:

“John Sayles asked Hazel if she knew any fiddlers in the area, and she named me. I lived near Birch River at the time, only an hour from Thurmond. Sayles got in touch and asked me to come down for an audition. He apparently liked it and introduced me to Mason Daring. While there, Sayles asked me what I knew about filming locations, and/or old miners he might talk to. I took him to a spot I knew on New River that is quite picturesque, and then I took him and Maggie Renzi to visit Holley Hundley. Sayles was moved by Holley, an old coal miner with incredible stories. Holley told us about helping to carry 58 dead men out of the mines over his long mining career. He sang some old union songs like

The Union forever, hurrah yes hurrah
Down with the Baldwins and up with the law

Daring wrote the Italian-sounding mandolin tune played by Jimmy Costa in the Italian miners’ camp. In that scene, I and Daring (on guitar) are playing on a porch, and we overhear Jimmy’s mandolin tune. We join in, and it leads to an important breakthrough among the various camps. This was Sayles’ brilliant way to connect the film’s protagonists through art, while so many other paths had hit cultural and racial obstacles.”

re-uniting the bickering factions: “They got you fightin’ white against colored, native against foreign, hollow against hollow, when you know there ain’t but two sides in this world—them that work, and them that don’t. You work. They don’t.”

But everything aside, *Matewan* holds up because of certain universal truths about people, in general, and West Virginia, specifically. We, as West Virginians,

have continually forfeited control over our economic destinies in exchange for a promising financial future that never seems to arrive. We’ve allowed ourselves to be pushed to the brink in terms of economic independence. But when pushed far enough, we eventually fight back. This “never give up” attitude is a common thread with West Virginians. After all, it’s a very West Virginia story, whether the calendar reads 1920 or 2020.



Actors John Cox (Sid Hatfield) and Maria Cox (Jessie Testerman Hatfield), in front, and Randy Whitaker (Ed Chambers) and Felicia Noelle (Sallie Chambers) are pictured seconds before Sid and Ed are gunned down. Photo from the 2019 performance of *Terror of the Tug* at Pipestem State Park by Roger Shrewsbury.

Terror of the Tug (1999)

In 2019, the play *Terror of the Tug* celebrated its 20th anniversary with a performance at Pipestem State Park. In this take on the shootout, playwright Jean Battlo gives her audience an entertaining and thought-provoking perspective of all sides. While her sympathies clearly lie with the miners, she lays out the views of all.

Her play starts not at the beginning but at the end: on the courthouse steps in Welch on August 1, 1921. How many times do you see a protagonist killed off in an opening scene? But most audience goers have at least a pretty good idea of how it all ends anyway, so why not get that out of the way first and then look back? Even for those unfamiliar with the history, her approach works because the moment the curtain rises, Jean lays out the life-and-death stakes while questioning, “How did we get here?”

Jean never gives a definitive answer but does paint a broad canvas of factors. For one, you quickly realize that Mingo in 1920 was one of the most lawless counties in our state. When the shootout occurred,

Mingo had been in existence for only 25 years. Our youngest county was very much searching for an identity and a semblance of civilization. What we soon learn through Jean’s characters (many based on historical figures) is that Mingo was more like a Dodge City or Deadwood, looking for a John Wayne type to introduce civility and true justice. But history isn’t filled with saints. In this case, that John Wayne type was Sid Hatfield. In her 2006 book about the play, Jean credits this theme to historian Lon Savage, who compared Sid Hatfield—at least in the miners’ eyes—to Wyatt Earp, “Wild Bill” Hickock, Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. An outlaw hero has been the basis for many great Westerns.

The miners knew Hatfield wasn’t a saint. But, to them, Sid was one of the few lawmen in our state willing to stand up for *their* rights. Jean doesn’t sugarcoat Sid’s life. She portrays him as the hard-drinking hard-fighting figure he was. Jean’s Sid is more in line with a Greek tragic hero. While this is an effective literary device, it’s also closer to the historical truth. Our heroes aren’t

gods; they're humans with flaws. Sid's worst flaw may have been his ego. In the play, Sid tells a man in a bar, "Why, I'm as good as it gets. Real good. Too good, maybe. Why, lord, if the law knew how good I felt, they'd arrest me for feeling too good." Sid's bigger-than-life swagger foreshadows his own inevitable death at the hands of what amounted to the "law" in 1920s southern West Virginia.

Writing historical fiction can be a challenge since we generally know only the highlights, not the precise words and details, of history. In *Terror*, Jean skillfully blends historical speeches and writings—such as Mother Jones' famous line about "Medieval West Virginia"—with her own fictional dialogue. She even puts quote marks in her script around historically documented lines. As she told me, "It's important for my actors to know what's historically correct." She's noticed that actors often emphasize those lines more than her fictional ones, even though her made-up dialogue sounds spot on. For example, in a line written by Jean, Mother Jones sounds totally in character when she says, "You mountaineers, be your origin Poland or Italy, Africa or east Virginia, you were sired and seeded by an American Revolution. Show it!!"

In addition, *Terror of the Tug* addresses my biggest question: Was Sid Hatfield a Marshal Dillon type of hero or just another bought-off lawman, except, in his case, for the UMWA? And perhaps the more overriding question: Why did all the leading figures, from Hatfield to Lively, do what they did? Was it all for money? Was it for ideals? Again, Jean leaves the answers up to the audience, and despite the play's pro-union sentiments, the conclusions aren't that simple.

Like with *Matewan*, Jean's *Terror* interjects humor at key moments to ease tensions. In one scene, Cabell Testerman expresses a foreboding premonition about his own death. Sid's comeback is both a "knock it off" call to



Photo by Roger Shrewsbury.

Jean Battlo was born in and has lived most of her life in Kimball (McDowell County). She's been a teacher, poet, author, historian, and preservationist. Her play #8 was a finalist for the 1990 Eugene O'Neill National Playwright's Competition, and her books *Bonsai* and *Modern Haiku* both won awards. Ever the individualist, Jean had a version of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre built in McDowell County and founded Coal Camp Creations, which produces figurines made from coal [see Winter 2008].

the mayor and a self-deprecating joke about writers, such as Jean herself:

Cabell: I got a feeling inside like I'm not real. Like I'm watching myself like one of those flickering fellows in those movies Jessie is so crazy about.

Sid: Crap. You're talking like a poet or worse. Get ahold on, Cabell.

Another thing that historical fiction can do is get inside characters' heads. Jean often does this by "breaking the fourth wall," freezing the action on stage while a character addresses the audience. A tried-and-true method from Shakespeare to Groucho Marx, this approach lets us know what characters are really thinking and underscores the importance of certain events. Following Sid's murder at the beginning, one character breaks the fourth wall and succinctly summarizes the moment: "Shoot a man like that and

Smilin' Sid

Jean's play incorporates various classical techniques, such as the *tragic hero* and even a Greek chorus. While these may be slightly unusual for a distinctly Appalachian play, one of her ideas is radical for a stage anywhere. In the middle of the play, she inserts a fictionalized newsreel film to show why Sid was so idolized by the downtrodden miners.

She based it on an actual newsreel, *Smilin' Sid*, produced by the UMWA shortly after the Matewan shootout. That newsreel has never been found, although a few seconds have turned up. There are various theories about its disappearance. Historian/filmmaker Bill Richardson, whose first film work was as a volunteer assistant on *Matewan*, notes, "The UMWA wanted to get its version of the Matewan story out as soon as possible, so it created this silent film—a relatively new medium—which would run before feature films. They even came to Matewan to film it. But coal companies owned all the media outlets in that part of the state. A print of the film was sent to Matewan and never saw the light of day." Somewhere out there, the original negative may exist, or, like most silent films, was thrown away or deteriorated.

So, Jean decided to re-create the newsreel as part of the play. She approached Bill to be a subject expert and filmmaker Danny Boyd to direct. Jean initially had a 26-page script with full dialogue. Danny noted, though, that a silent newsreel wouldn't have had

regular dialogue, just on-screen text describing the scenes or providing isolated dialogue. Danny and Bill also suggested making it like a 1920s-era newsreel.

Jean loved the idea and let the two run with it.

Danny juxtaposed archival film footage alongside *Terror* actors playing out specific scenes related to the shootout—all filmed where the actual shooting occurred. Danny, a professor at West Virginia State College (now University), already had a couple of low-budget cult classics under his belt: *Chillers* (1987) and *Paradise Park* (1992). He studied old silent films, such as those of D. W. Griffith, and further adapted Jean's concept. For example, he set the scenes outdoors because silent films relied heavily on natural lighting. He also pulled his faculty colleagues, film editor Steve Gilliland and musician Chuck Biel, into the effort.

The resulting eight-minute newsreel is the "key to the play," according to Jean. It's also a surprising development in a play that keeps the audience on its toes despite knowing the outcome from the start.



Still image from the few seconds left of the original *Smilin' Sid*.

you make a myth. Shoot a man like that and you have miners going for their guns and heading for a war on Blair Mountain."

Right there, in the very beginning, Jean offers a key insight: Sid, with all his personal flaws, was a hero to the miners in life. But, in death, he was a martyr, inspiring thousands to say, "The law in southern West Virginia is totally corrupt and in cahoots with big business. It's time to take matters into our own hands."

Whether or not people agree with the actions of either side, there's little debate that on August 1, 1921, Baldwin-Felts detectives, the de facto law in a lawless world, created a martyr who'd continue inspiring working people a century later. As such, Sid's impact on history has been much more lasting than if he'd died at home of natural causes. 🍁

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