

Web-footed in Harlem

Writer-director John Sayles and actress-producer Maggie Renzi discuss budgets, women and critics with Paul Kerr.

JS: I wrote *Lianna* before *Return of the Secaucus Seven*; I guess *Lianna* was written in January and *Secaucus* in March of 1978. It takes me anything from three to eight months to write a genre script, but I usually get a good draft of my own movies done in about a week. Of course, I think about it a good deal beforehand. Anyway, *Lianna* wasn't appropriate for the available budget. I had \$40,000 in my pocket and that had to be the budget of whatever we made. So, in '78 it was *Secaucus* that was made. Then, in 1981, the money came in for *Lianna* and *Baby, It's You* at the same time, so we made them back to back. *Lianna* was actually budgeted as a 35 mm. film at around \$800,000, but we could only raise \$300,000 so we shot it on 16 mm. And then we made *Baby* for ten times that amount. It's crazy.

MR: I think that \$300,000 was actually the right budget, although it meant cutting a lot of corners. If we'd had the \$800,000 we would have been able to pay people properly, to reshoot some scenes, to pay for some real locations. Instead, *Lianna's* crummy apartment was exactly that crummy and that narrow—and consequently almost impossible to shoot in. And each time out we had to acquire new production assistants. They won't work for peanuts twice, though they do come back and help out as assistant gaffers or key grips or something. As it was, the six-week shoot on *Lianna* meant a forty-thousand-dollar deferment in payments to the crew.

JS: For the soccer game, for instance, we had two extras and one football. But since each extra cost us about eighty dollars a day we had to make do.

JS: I've had reviews from both sides of the spectrum—some saying this is a soft-core porno movie and others saying the sex is so lame it makes them want to puke. But the really hostile response we got from a few people at the London Film Festival we just didn't hear in America.

MR: In America, we just got enormous gay audiences; letters from people who said thank you; plenty of women who came to it with a chip on their shoulder because it was written by a man, but who left very happy. But nothing like that LFF response, which was simply "Men shouldn't write about women, let alone about gay women". I was appalled by that. I don't think we can afford to throw out *Electra* or *Antigone*. I don't think we can afford to throw out half our literature.

JS: Well, their argument is that it's a male-dominated literature. I think that if I had used a female pseudonym on this movie, we wouldn't have heard anything. Half the characters in my fiction, and more than half in my films, have been women. With the movies that's partly because of the women-in-peril assignments that I've had, but it includes everything from the TV-movie *Perfect Match* to the movies I've directed myself. And finally, I don't give a shit. In *Secaucus Seven*, the men were naked and the women weren't, and there was a point to that.

MR: I think you have to distinguish between exploitative and non-exploitative uses of women—between women as characters and women as images. You never saw scenes of cooler, less voyeuristic, quieter sex. Even art-cinema images are usually more voyeuristic, more of an effort to make you hot.

JS: There are a good number of people who turned us down for investing in *Lianna* because the sex, on the page, didn't seem exploitative enough.

MR: And it really is a no-win situation—you're damned if you do write women characters and you're doubly damned if you don't.

JS: Andrew Sarris thought that Dick was based on him, because in the film I applied this phenomenon you learn in high school—that when you observe something, you change it. And apparently that's all in some essay Sarris wrote twenty years ago and he's sure I'm putting the words in Dick's mouth. The most important thing about Dick being a film teacher is that speech at the beginning which shows a certain cynicism in his attitude—he is an entertaining teacher. Half the people in his class are very good-looking young women and you get the feeling that he hand-picks his students, for their looks. He started as a literature professor and moved over to film, not because he wanted to teach it but because there was more room for growth over there. It's Dick who's in the closet in a way, doing something that he doesn't totally believe in. And that's turned him into even more of a cynical and decadent person. But being a film teacher was also something that I knew about and I'm interested in what people do for a living. In a Hitchcock movie, it's good to have somebody being an architect or something very vague, because then they can have time off to have an adventure. But I'm not writing

adventure stories. And film teaching is the kind of job that allows for a certain amount of detachment. When I studied some of the literature courses that were offered at college, I found they had so little to do with people that they seemed like exercises in semantics. They never talked about characters and how they relate to you personally. I have the same problem with that kind of film criticism.

MR: John has an abiding disrespect for professors. He is first and finally a storyteller. He has a horror of making films that remind you of other films. I'm the same. I was raised to do social service and here I am making movies, and the only way I can justify it is to do something that will make people think about other people.

MR: We shot *Brother from Another Planet*, the film we've just completed, in four weeks for \$200,000 because we couldn't raise the money for another script, a two-million-dollar period piece. It's about this black extraterrestrial who looks like a normal black man, except that he doesn't have any vocal cords, and so can't speak, and has webbed feet. He goes to Harlem and everybody thinks he's just some street character, and it turns out that he's a real wiz at fixing video games, so he gets a job. And gradually you realise that he's an escaped slave from elsewhere in the galaxy, and he's being pursued by two bounty hunters—one of them played by John—who are modelled on these characters you read about in UFO literature, the men in black. They visit people who have sighted UFOs and seem to befuddle them so that they are too confused or frightened to talk any more about what they've seen.

JS: I was talking to a Philippines filmmaker, Marilou Diaz Abaya, and I think there's a really good film to be made about the guerrilla war that happened in the Philippines after the Spanish-American war. It was really the first Vietnam, but nobody knows about it because the press in America treated it like they did Grenada or like the British press did the Falklands, as if it was some kind of soccer match.

MR: I'm trying to persuade John to shoot a children's film on an island off the British coast. But we don't really need to go abroad. We just shot a movie in Harlem, and that's another country. And we'll be going down to West Virginia if we manage to raise money for the next one, which is based on a section from John's novel *Union Dues*.

JS: It ties in with the Bible story of Potiphar's wife.

MR: And that fictional story is grafted on to an actual event of 1920. These gun thugs were sent down to bust a strike in a mining town and in a unique move the people of the town banded together with the miners and massacred the thugs. Although the budget for *Matewan*, the union film, is high, \$2,000,000, I think we might still do it.