John Sayles Regis Dialogue with Jay Carr, 1991

Bruce Jenkins:
Tonight is a very special evening for us. We enter the second year of a program that began with a grant from MacArthur Foundation, in Chicago, that's allowed us to bring major filmmakers and very prominent critics to town to talk about the art of film. Last year, we had four such visits. This year, we have the honor of beginning our MacArthur dialogue with a fellow who won, back in 1985, one of the MacArthur fellowships, the so-called, genius awards, John Sayles.

Bruce Jenkins:
Since winning that in 1985, he's made some of his most ambitious films, including, Matewan, City of Hope, which will be showing tomorrow night. He's published a new novel, received numerous awards for his work, worked in episodic television, and I hope he works in it again and has agreed to come and talk a little bit about a very unique career in film.

Bruce Jenkins:
Just briefly, before we start to thank two or three people who've made this evening and tomorrow night's program and a really wonderful retrospective possible, Maggie Renzi, John's longtime partner and producer of half of his films and also a performer. You probably best know her, if you've seen Secaucus 7, as Kate, the central character. But is also in three or four of the other films in fairly major roles. Caroline Otis, who is on the Walker board. Together, they helped put together this extraordinary evening and an evening tomorrow night with City of Hope.

Bruce Jenkins:
To dialogue with, to converse with John Sayles, we have, from Boston, one of the really premier film critics, he's syndicated, though regrettably not very much in this market, Jay Carr. Jay has spent quite a bit of time reseeing and reviewing the work of John Sayles. We're going to have a chance to see some of that work tonight that he's picked, and also here both from Jay and John Sayles. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to welcome now, for our first MacArthur dialogue of the year, John Sayles and Jay Carr.

John Sayles:
Thanks.

Jay Carr:
Thanks very much. You've all seen the facet of John Sayles that most of us film buffs don't know a lot about. We know he's a writer, we know he's a director, we know he's an actor, but here we have, John Sayles, the maker of music videos. I suppose we start with, John, you just telling us what the circumstances were and how you got into the music video business.

John Sayles:
I've been in it only to dip my toe in, really. But when we were making Baby It's You, we had to contact Bruce Springsteen's management to ask if we could use some of his songs in the movie and the soundtrack since he's one of the few artists who still controls the rights to his own songs. Got him eventually to see it, and he liked the movie, and he said fine. That was the first connection. Then through the writer Dave Marsh, who

got sent a dance tape that Maggie Renzi's sister, Marta, had made, we had another connection, and right when he was starting to realize that maybe he should make some rock videos because everybody else was.

John Sayles:
I think his nieces and nephews were saying, "Come on, come on, come on, Def Leppard does it, why don't you?" I got a call from him, and he said, "I'm interested in having you work on Born in the U.S.A, and all I can really tell you is, I think it should be gritty." I said, "I do gritty." That one, he was really just getting involved in it, and really, he had done the Dancing in the Dark one and it felt uncomfortable lip-synching.

John Sayles:
He said, "Here's the problem, I should begin it, and the band should be in it, singing the song, and maybe there's some other things that you can do. But I don't want to lip-sync. But I also want to use the recorded version, I don't want to use the live version." Which meant that what we had to do was rough sinking, which means that we at least got Bruce to wear the same clothes for four nights in a row. They did wash them in between. We shot from as many different camera angles as we could on those four nights and hope that they were on the same beat.

John Sayles:
Then you just try to find this much film, where his lips are going along with the recorded version, which, if you've ever seen the video, at sometimes, he just backs off from the microphone but his voice is still right up there. It's pretty rough. But then we had a lot of documentary footage that we also were able to cut in it. I was mostly fun cutting. Ernest Dickerson, who's been shooting Spike Lee's movies and who shot *Brother from Another Planet*, shot that one with me.

John Sayles:
Then, after that, he felt like, "Oh, that turned out pretty good." I think his nieces and nephews and people around him said, "You got to do a story video, where you're in it as a character," because people were starting to do that. With both Glory Days and I'm on Fire, the stories were in the song already or at least what the stories were about. It's the only time I've really worked as a director doing somebody else's stories, because Bruce gave me, "I have this idea, and it's about a guy, and he wanted to be a pitcher, but he got married instead, and so he's always regretted that. But he's also got this kid, and he's married, and he likes that. He's torn both ways."

John Sayles:
The same thing with I'm on Fire, he basically gave me the idea of the story. Then I would storyboard it and we'd shoot the pictures. The difficulty with that one, Glory Days, was that it was about a week or two after he had just gotten married, and so, it was bigger than the Sean Penn/Madonna wedding. There were helicopters overhead looking for us. The local radio stations were giving out bulletins that they'd just seen the caravan of the filmmakers on route three, and if you went to route three, you might see Bruce in the flesh. We had to do a lot of hiding on that one.

Jay Carr:
In addition to directing, for the first time, someone else's story, because you've always directed your own, you've spoken before on the difference between film and video, their aesthetic differences and other differences. How was the feel of this project? Were you able to feel any different in terms of what you did, or did you approach in exactly the same way?

John Sayles:
We shot on film and then transferred onto video to do the finaling of it. We basically cut it on film, shot it very much like a film, and then transferred it to video. I have this theory, maybe a sub-theory of Marshall McLuhan, that there really is a difference between video and film. That there's some visceral difference between seeing light shine through these pieces of plastic that are being projected and seeing electron dots move. There's certainly a difference between seeing something that was shot originally on video.

John Sayles:
We shot Born in the U.S.A. on 16 because when you blow it up, it gets gritty. The other two, we wanted a little more clean look, and so we shot on 35. But basically, it was very much in a way like the editing that I did on Baby It's You, where we were cutting to Bruce Springsteen music, except in this case, we were able to take songs that had stories and much more that wouldn't get in the way of the story that we were trying to tell, and try to do something with that. We didn't want to just illustrate what the words were saying. You wanted to make a small movie that this would be the perfect soundtrack for. That's a funny line to walk.

Jay Carr:
You weren't entirely in a foreign country, then, in terms of the aesthetic?

John Sayles:
No, not at all. Also, there were stories I liked, and music I liked, and it was a lot of fun to cut to great music.

Jay Carr:
We know that we now owe the existence of these videos to Bruce's nieces and nephews.

John Sayles:
There was somebody very close to him, under the age of 14.

Jay Carr:
That's the music video career of John Sayles, and we're now going to launch into the program Proper, if Proper is the word, by starting to show you the films, which will begin in chronological order. Which, if you haven't already made this observation, you soon will, namely that the films of John Sayles represent a body of work that exists in a social context.

Jay Carr:
This automatically makes him an outsider because Hollywood's idea of a social context is *Terminator 2.* That's about as social as they usually get. Even that's a little heavy for many of them. But here's the social context. Not only is there a social context, there is, within it, the very strong desire to keep alive the idea of people finding ways to live in communities. This runs from the first film, *Return of the Secaucus 7*, to, as you will see, the last film, *City of Hope*.

Jay Carr:
It's a constant, it's an ideal, it's being kept alive during a decade when this idea was not very much in demand. It's a very selfish decade where American individualism showed, in many respects, the worst of itself. But yet, here's this ideal being kept alive in John Sayles' films, and being kept alive in a particular way.

Jay Carr:
One of the things you'll see, and we'll discuss a little bit after you've seen the film clip from *Secaucus 7*, is

that John Sayles is a writer of films, is a writer of some utterly commercial films, is very familiar with film genres and with their demands and with the ways you do things within genres. Yet, in many respects, and this is, again, something we'll discuss after a few clips, John backed genres, and it was a very conscious, deliberate choice.

Jay Carr:
Before we get into details on that, let's have the first film clip now from *Return of the Secaucus 7*. This is the film that launched John Sayles as a writer, director, and perhaps even as an actor. Although you won't see him act in this film, you'll see him act in another one.

Jay Carr:
There are the *Secaucus 7*, who actually comes from, in this picture, they come from New Hampshire. One of the things that impressed me, seeing it again, but it's from the first time I saw the picture, and you'll recognize that there are a lot of pictures like this, a lot of pictures came after this, trying to deal with this territory. But this was the one that started.

Jay Carr:
How did you achieve this hanging out quality that these people were able to project? Most of the Hangout, of course, goes on in the house of Mike, the guy in the white shirt. The plot briefly is these people, it's a few years after they all used to hang out together, and they've now come back together for a weekend in the house of Mike and Kate, played by Maggie Renzi, the one in the middle with the dark hair. Anyway, they're back there now.

Jay Carr:
These are people who have been forced to make some practical decisions with their lives to learn to come to terms with the world a bit, and yet, obviously, they're trying to keep alive the ideals that were a very strong part of their lives when they've hung out together as a group. How did you preserve this hanging out quality that they were able to seem to slip right into?

John Sayles:
Some of it was that about half the actors had worked together before, and had worked in Summer Stock, in the town that we were shooting this movie in. We're used to each other, had been in youth theater, groups together, had hung out together. The other half, fairly quickly, fell into it because we put everybody up in the same ski lodge, which was also our studio, all of our sets. One of the reasons that there's very little camera movement in the movie is because if you move the camera two inches to one side or the other, you discover in fact you're not in somebody's living room or bedroom, you're in a ski lodge with enormous ceilings and pictures of Alpine people and Stein Eriksen on the wall and everything.

John Sayles:
We shot in about a month. People lived in the ski lodge. They helped carry sandbags around. They helped do the dishes sometimes. They got to know each other while we were shooting off with somebody else, they did hang out together. This scene is after our long, long night in a bar that they spend. We didn't have a makeup person on this thing. In fact, there was no makeup in the movie. We didn't have a costume person and all those cost-effective things that, because we didn't have any money, we did without.

John Sayles:
Everybody brought their own clothes and shortly after said, "Oh, I hate this thing I'm wearing. I say, "Well,

that's tough because you're going to wear it for a third of the movie. We've established it now and we can't reshoot. In fact, we shot this probably about 3:00 in the morning. That haggard look that they have was earned by staying up that long.

Jay Carr:
Was any of this improvised, or was is all scripted in fact?

John Sayles:
There's actually one improvised syllable, one syllable that was different than the script, in Secaucus 7, and it's a good illustration of some things. With a very, very low budget, it's very expensive to improvise.

Jay Carr:
Budget is probably the parenthetical when you start, the budget. What is it then?

John Sayles:
It was about $40,000 out of pocket to get it in the can, and then another 20 to get it through post production. It's also, as you noticed, it is a bit gritty, it was shot in 16 and blown up. We didn't know that it was going to be blown up at the time, which is why the frame line is like here on a lot of people. We shot it for, "Oh, this might get on PBS someday," we shot it in TV ratio. Then, when you blow it up, all of a sudden, the ceiling comes down and the floor comes up.

John Sayles:
We shot at about a 5 or 6:1 ratio, which, people in this country, that means for every foot of film that you actually use, you'll expose five or six. A technical movie, like the *Terminator 2*, probably is closer to 100:1 or maybe more. The only people who shoot tighter than that are Eastern Europeans, who get a 4:1 ratio from the state. But since everybody is working for the state, they can rehearse for three days, or for three weeks, and then pull the trigger and do two takes and all go home. We were able to save a lot of money that way. What was the original question?

Jay Carr:
I asked whether you improvised?

John Sayles:
Oh, yeah. Yeah. Improvisation is expensive. Yeah, improvisation is expensive because it may be lousy. In fact, it usually is lousy, and you have to cut away all the bad stuff to get to that one great improvised nugget. It was very much what you read is what you say. Except for, there's a scene in this, where the character Jeff, who said Bamba side, who's the one dark undertone of the film. He's not doing very well, he's working as a drug counselor, and he's just broken up with his girlfriend, Maura, who shows up a day before him.

John Sayles:
Originally, in the script, you've heard him talked about, you know that he's a difficult guy, Maura has told everybody, "Oh, I broke up, it's finally over, I'm so relieved." In fact, she sleeps with another one of her friends that night. Then, all of a sudden, the next day, this guy shows up. He meets this local garage mechanic, who knows them all, and he says, "Are you still with that Maura?"

John Sayles:
In the original screenplay, he said, "That's what I came up here to find out." The actor, after we shot that, like

a day after, said, "I haven't shot any of my other stuff and I haven't even shot any of my stuff that comes after that moment. But I think it will really help if I'm more forceful about that." That seems such a wishy-washy. I think he really hasn't given up. I said, "You're right, I think everything that happens after will have a lot more edge if you haven't given up."

John Sayles:
We took like a quarter of a day, and went back to the same location, and set up all our reflectors and our camera, and got the other actor, and shot over his shoulder. The guy who played Jeff went, "Yes." Then we took everything down. Of course, we'd drawn a crowd of people who said, "Oh, that's how they make movies. I'm getting in that business."

Jay Carr:
There you go. I know you couldn't have written the whole thing.

John Sayles:
Right. Exactly.

Jay Carr:
Did you discuss with them in the preparation? One of the great things about the film is the way the changes in society are delineated in a way by the changes in the relationships. Yet, it never seems for us that this one isn't a symbol of yuppiedom, this one isn't a symbol of superannuated hippiedom. I mean it's not done in a clumsy way, but it's done, obviously, with a great deal of thought and with some very conscious choices to back. In a way, what I was talking about early, backing the genre expectations of this get-together film. Tell me a little bit about the thought that went into that setup?

John Sayles:
A lot of what I do with actors on any movie is we don't do a whole lot of rehearsal. I never do a rehearsal, where we sit in a room, like a play, and we read the script, and then we do it over again, and we block it out and put tape marks on the floor. Basically, the only rehearsal of that sort you get is on the set while the lights are being set up, and it's half technical and half... whatever.

John Sayles:
What I do, however, is make sure that those actors know who they are. I'll usually write them all, in this case, I wrote everybody a two-page character description of who they are and who they are to the other people. Nobody was playing themselves in this movie. Because they were unknown actors, everybody said, "Oh, we got great performances out of all these amateurs, and they're playing themselves," and all that.

John Sayles:
Only the guy who had the last line in that scene, who in fact was a security guard at Eastern Mountain Sports sporting goods store, which was the location we were using, their office. He's playing himself. He really does talk like that. But the other people were acting. They were people that they knew, they knew of, they may have been, at some point in the life, but it wasn't who they were then. Very careful.

John Sayles:
I would talk to them about who you are, and this is your relationship to this person, and then this is what you want. If you think of the typical Hollywood screenplay, there is an arc to it. In a cowboy movie, like Shane, you see the bad guy be bad to some nice guy and shoot him, and Shane sees it and he doesn't have a fight

with him then. Then the arc of the violence eventually takes you to a shootout at the end. The arc of the emotional story eventually takes you to this young boy, who's idolizing Shane, having a little respect for his father.

John Sayles:
Even in a non-action movie *Secaucus 7*, I try to give each of the major characters an arc. It might be the character that Maggie played, Katie, her arc was, the first thing you see, she's really worried where everybody's going to sleep. She's the hostess, and she wants to get through the weekend without any major confrontations, or bitterness, or fighting, and have the whole thing work. By the end of it, she does and she's exhausted. Another character of the arc might be, "I want to get my girlfriend back." Another might be, "I want to get rid of this guy." It's sad, and everything like that, but by the end of this weekend, I'm going to do this.

John Sayles:
Each of those characters have that arc. In any one scene, they know, "Okay, where does this fit into my personal thing? I have a function here, but I also have a personal agenda in this scene." Even when you're just sitting there, bummed out, you have something to think about.

Jay Carr:
Are you often approached to come up with the sequel, to come up with *Secaucus 7 II*? There's been talk of this.

John Sayles:
No. Not much, actually.

Jay Carr:
Another decade's gone by, more changes that they've had to assimilate.

John Sayles:
Yeah. What's interesting is the couple times that I've heard has been in interviews, and guys have said, "Are you going to go back and make those *Secaucus 7* at 40 and call it 40-something or whatever?" I say, "There's not that much difference, except they have kids." Working with that many kid actors is like everybody's nightmare.

John Sayles:
What's interesting is that the response is usually, "But having they all now sold out and they all own this?" I say, "No, that's *The Big Chill*. That's why it was called *The Big Chill* because it's about different people. The people in is moving and the people this movie is based on are people who are still consciously downwardly mobile, they're still spread out all over the map, but they still are in that mental state where they're trying to hold on to their ideals and implement them in some ways, and they now have kids. That changes a lot of their lifestyle, but it hasn't changed them to say, "Oh, I have to get a safer job or whatever."

Jay Carr:
You couldn't believe that some of these people would try and keep their ideals alive. For instance, if one were a doctor, you could believe that this guy would at least spend some time in a clinic, taking care of poor people, and maybe trying to fight the AMA to liberalize it.

John Sayles:
Yeah.

Jay Carr:
You could believe that they are not all sold out and they would not sell out without a real fight, even if they did.

John Sayles:
Yeah. One of the differences is people always ask me about *The Big Chill* and *Secaucus 7*, is that they actually came from different places. One of the reasons I made *Return of the Secaucus 7* is I kept reading articles in Time Magazine. This is fairly early, this is 1978 that I made this thing. Oh, isn't it great the '60s are over and all those old radicals and hippies are wearing three-piece suits and working for Chase Manhattan. I didn't know any of those people.

John Sayles:
The people I knew were working in detox centers, and teaching an inner city high schools, and basically doing stuff that they weren't making much money at, but that they thought was important to do and was satisfying in some way to them. This movie, in some ways, was a reaction to that misconception. When *The Big Chill* came out, there was this easy thing of, "Oh, yeah, this is *Secaucus 7* with a bigger budget and nicer music." Whereas it's called *The Big Chill* for a reason, it's about people who have lost their ideals or are discovering they never had them in the first place. That's a very, very different group of people. Plus they dress better. Bring four changes of clothes to a funeral.

Jay Carr:
Yeah. Yeah, there was rather than decent haste on the part of the media, including me, I guess, to bury people from the '60s probably because they made them uncomfortable. If you see this a million times, which is another reason why this film stood out, because it not only didn't bury them but made it clear that these people were really not quite ready to be buried yet, that in fact, they're going to try and find ways to keep things alive as they proceeded into the world.

John Sayles:
You realize that the media is a double-edged thing. To a certain extent, the media exaggerated and used hippies, and demonstrators, and radicals, to, "Oh, this is copy, this is news," and those people eat it up because there was some political advantage in having it. But the other end of the story is, when they're tired of you, they get rid of you in the most convenient way possible.

Jay Carr:
Very quickly.

John Sayles:
Which is to say, you don't exist anymore.

Jay Carr:
Yeah. We're going to do a little change of pace by showing you a clip from another movie that John Sayles did not direct but wrote. What you will see will be largely self explanatory, so I'm not going to waste a lot of

words telling you about it. We're going to switch right to a clip from *Alligator*, and then we'll have a few words to say about that. Yeah. Still one of my favorite parts is crashing scenes.

John Sayles:
Yes. When we were working on the movie and the story stage, Lewis Teague and I referred to that as the fall of Saigon scene.

Jay Carr:
Yeah. I was going to say, in the mid '70s, there was this phenomenon, as you all know, called *Jaws*, which I thought was one of the great unconscious Vietnam movies. Of course, right after *Jaws*, there then came along this movie called... because Roger Corman was working on a low budget, called *Piranha*. They were tiny teeth, but lots of them. John Sayles wrote that. *Piranha* was enough of a success that, from there, it was just the mirror's leap of the imagination to *Alligator*.

Jay Carr:
Tell us how you hooked up with Roger Corman, and how all that work? Then tell us also whether he minded the social context in that? Let me back up a step and just say, the three of the victims you saw, or even there, even in a genre movie with a sort of Godzilla clone, this Japanese monster tearing around the garden, there was a social context. This alligator became the monster it did because it got dropped into the sewer and fed on pollution. The pollution was caused by a link up, very explicitly defined in the film.

Jay Carr:
The bald guy who thought to seal himself in the car at the end is an industrialist, he's the capitalist who's financing this stuff. He's in league with the pal, who was the mayor, the guy banging on the window, and a scientist. In other words, the capitalist has bought the politician and bought the scientists, in the finest tradition of retribution, they pay for it at the end when what they spawn comes back to get them.

Jay Carr:
This was the social context in the Roger Corman film. I always wondered if he minded a social context if he thought that would get in the way of what he was getting at. But back up a step and tell us how your involvement with Corman came about?

John Sayles:
I had actually just gotten out to the West Coast. When people say, how did you start writing screenplays, and how did you get an agent, I wrote two novels and a short story collection. An agency out there was representing one of my novels as a film property, they called it. I told him, "This doesn't need to be a movie, I don't want it to be a movie, but I'd like to write screenplays." They assigned an agent to me. One day, she called and said, "I have a rewrite here of a movie, for Roger Corman, called *Piranha*. You want it, you got it," and I took it.

John Sayles:
I had actually gotten that job because Roger's right-hand person, Francis Doyle, did this reverse thing. If you remember being in class in high school and having a comic book inside your biology book. Francis is from Britain, and she's very literate. She used to stand in there, reading Lord science fiction screenplays with real fiction inside. She'd be reading like Edith Wharton or something. Just in case Roger peeked inside, she didn't want to get caught.

John Sayles:
She had actually read some of my short stories. When my agent mentioned my name, she said, "Oh, that guy's a good writer, bring him over." Roger always loves getting people who have a literary background or something, because he's going to pay him the same scale and he figures he's getting a great deal. I was one in a long line that includes Max Apple and Rita Mae Brown, who wrote *Slumber Party Massacres*. After writing *Piranha*, which did very well, I started doing other things for Roger. The deal with *Alligator*, it was another rewrite.

John Sayles:
Very much, like *Piranha* was a rewrite, where they said, "Keep the title, get rid of everything else." In the original *Alligator*, the original *Alligator* script took place in Milwaukee. The alligator had gotten big. It did live in the sewers, but it had gotten big from drinking runoff from the breweries. I said, "Hey, the people in Milwaukee aren't that big. They have bellies, but they're not that big." It all climax in the old abandoned sawmill, which a lot of things climax, which has been abandoned for 20 years, yet still has power.

John Sayles:
With the hero fending it off with a chainsaw that somebody just left lying around there, and he chases it with his chainsaw that he's plugged in, that has the world's largest extension cord. I decided I could do anything with this *Alligator* I wanted to. I decided that, like many social ills, that it would eat its way through the socioeconomic classes. That like most social ills, nobody would pay attention until it got to at least the upper-middle class.

John Sayles:
It really runs rampant through the city, and the media starts talking about it. But until it goes for the poodle, the SWAT team doesn't come out. In my version, in fact, there was some deal with the industrial military complex, who were stealing puppies, and little kittens, and then doing medical experiments on them, and then had to get rid of the bodies, and they were throwing them down to the sewer. Ramón, the Alligator, ate them down there.

John Sayles:
If you notice the fast cutting in that sequence, the main problem with this giant alligator is that it's really slow and really bulky. Anybody at that party could have just said, "Hey, there's a big alligator there, let's walk away, and it might not bite us." Instead, you have to cut really, really quickly, and have people push each other in the pool like a Blake Edwards movie, and fall over each other, and cut to quick cuts of the tail, knocking people in the air.

John Sayles:
Lewis Teague did a great job of making this very non--If you noticed in your flyers, the publicity picture of the *Alligator*, if you look under his chin, there's a post there. They couldn't even take the post out from under his chin in the publicity picture. This was not a highly mobile creature. The other problem was killing him. Originally, I wanted him to be battling them in the water, and they said, "The alligator isn't waterproof, it will sink if we put it in the water." I said, "Oh, great, I'll just have it drown." They said, "No, that would be anticlimactic."

John Sayles:
Then I had them dousing it with a Molotov cocktail and it burning. They said, "No, we've booked it for a personal appearance tour, and we only have one. They sold it to like the University of Miami. It's the Gators

mascot or something like that, and they've mechanized it and everything. Eventually, we had to blow it up, which is always good because you can just cut to an explosion, the usual Roger Corman method of dealing with anything.

John Sayles:
Usually, there was Joe Dante, who worked for them as an editor, with Allan Arkush, and Roger would, they cut the trailers, the coming attraction trailers, for the movies. They had this one great shot of an exploding helicopter that had been in one of their Filipino movies. He'd look at the trailer and he'd just say, "I think we need the helicopter." It was in like every new world trailer for about five years, whether it was in the movie or not.

Jay Carr:
Yeah. This is a problem that came up more than once because in *Piranha*, all you really needed to do with not doing the river the piranha were in, right? How did they get around that? Tell-

John Sayles:
In the original Piranha script that I was given, the guy was obsessed with this idea that piranha only attacked if there was blood in the water. People were constantly cutting themselves shaving, and stubbing their toe, and, "Oh, it's bleeding." At one point, because he needed some mass deaths, he decided... The guy who wrote it hated hippies, and so he had a bunch of hippies around a fire doing obnoxious dragnet-like hippie things, with a lot of bad dragnet hippie dialogue.

John Sayles:
Then they are attacked by a bear who mutilates them enough that they have to run into the river where the piranha eat them. Then the bear stumbles into the fire and catches fire and decides to go into the river to put out the fire, and he's eaten by the piranha. I decided, "Okay, this is a little heavy." Basically, half of my work on that movie was contriving reasons for people to be in the water, in fact not to know that there were carnivorous fish in the water. That's difficult just to keep the thread of the movie going.

John Sayles:
Then they solved it in the sequel. Because at the end of *Piranha*, there was this question mark ending, where did they get to the sea, and these are the piranha that have been bred with some salt water fish so that they can live in salt water. In the sequel, *Piranha II,* directed by James Cameron, a movie he never mentions when he mentions his career, starting with *The Terminator*, they had bread with flying fish. That even up on North Sea oil rig, they could still... Yeah.

John Sayles:
Anyway, the nicest thing about working on those movies, as a writer, is you got to... I wrote three movies right away for Roger, and all three got made, which three for three is incredible for somebody coming out to Hollywood. Even if you get paid for them, they develop so many things that they don't make. I got to go on the set of a couple of them and see them shot. There wasn't a lot of pressure. The movie probably was in profit before they started shooting because they'd sold all these territories off.

John Sayles:
Very often, they were actually making it for half of the announced budget. You could have fun, you worked hard, and people who worked on the movie got no sleep, and didn't get paid very well, but you got to make a movie. There wasn't that pressure of, "Oh, my God, here's this guy's first movie, and it's going to cost $30

million. If it fails, he will never work again because everybody will say, "Oh, he's the guy who lost $30 million." Alligator cost about $1.2 million, and probably about $400,000 of that went into the alligator, which they had several versions of it that kept falling apart.

Jay Carr:
It must have been useful as well to learn, as a byproduct, how to write stuff that would film cheaply. As an independent filmmaker, this is maybe the point to add that these days, the average Hollywood film that you'll see at your multiplex costs something like $26 million or $27 million to make. All John Sayles films put together having cost $26 million. In fact, they've cost measurably less than $26 million. There's a way of learning how to set things up that will not cost a lot of money when you're producing your own film.

John Sayles:
Yeah. With the action pictures, Roger always said, "Oh, don't worry about the budget." Then he picked some poor schmuck in the office and said, "You're directing this thing." I'd get a call from the director saying, "You've just written me. You know how much money he gave me to shoot this?" Lady in Red was set in Chicago in 1933. Lewis, the same director, had to make it for $800,000. A period epic. 140 pages of the female godfather for $800,000. He said, "You have 64 speaking parts in this thing. I have to pay these people. Can you combine some of them?"

John Sayles:
On those pictures, I got to work with the directors a little on, what can we do that won't cost a lot, what can this alligator do that we can do cheaply, is night shooting going to be better? In *Piranha*, I had all these shots of the *Piranha* eating animals. Joe Dante, the director, just said, "Animals are going to take me 15 takes before I can even get them in the water. They're going to scratch my handlers and they're going to bite my nose. Get rid of the animals, we can afford them. Get children. They love that stuff. They love to scream. They'll do take after take."

John Sayles:
Anyway, and with *Secaucus 7*, that's a movie where the budget came before the idea for the movie. I had $40,000 together from writing three movies for Roger. At that time, he was getting With paying his writers as an independent contractor, so he wasn't paying health benefits, or welfare, or any withholding, or anything. I had all the money in one place at one time, and I said, "Who in my extended family has ever had $40,000 in one place? I better make a movie with this."

John Sayles:
I started thinking about what can I do well for this kind of money, what actors can be in this? It can't be anybody in the Screen Actors Guild because you have to pay them a minimum. Who do I know who isn't in the Guild? There's a lot of good actors who aren't in the guild yet, but they're all the same age, they're all just about 30. Maybe that's what the movie will be about. I started thinking about, "Jeez, we can't move the camera, we're going to really not be able to afford an experienced crew, we're not going to be able to shoot it in all these different locations. What can we do where the movement can all be cutting?"

John Sayles:
I thought of *Nashville*, which had all these subplots. I said, "If you have 15 subplots, you can always cut to somebody. You don't have to pan, you don't have to track, you don't have to move at all to have some movement in the film. It's going to be about a group of people turning 30. I had worked in North Conway, New Hampshire, I knew the theater, and I said, "Oh, there's a lot of woods there, we've got a set, for free." New

Hampshire, there's not even state taxes, we don't have to pay any fees or anything like that. In some ways, the story evolved out of the limitations, the budget.

Jay Carr:
Now we know why there's no big car chase scene in *Secaucus 7*.

John Sayles:
Yes.

Jay Carr:
Exactly.

John Sayles:
There was barely a car.

Jay Carr:
What we're going to cut to is another science fiction film, but a very different one. Again, before we discuss it, let's show you the... This is an excerpt from *Brother from Another Planet*. I know the first time I saw that from what I was struck by before I knew any more about this guy on this opening scene was the wonderful convergence of residences here. You've got one of the most obviously things as we see this guy, he's a bit of an ET, he has his healing touch that he did to his own bleeding leg.

Jay Carr:
There's also this wonderful residence of the whole mythic American-immigrant experience, but it also shows you, by his empathetic powers, how he can pick up on all the feelings that filled that room. That room being Ellis Island. Then, also, as you'll see in a minute, from the second clip, the underground railway residents. This guy is not just an immigrant, but he's also fleeing a very bad situation and in a previous life. I remember reading somewhere, or maybe you told me, that at least one impulse of this team to you from a dream? Was that true?

John Sayles:
Yeah, it was actually from a series of dreams that I had about the time that I was working on the sound mix of Baby It's You, which I made before this. I was under a lot of pressure, and I was often working late and getting five hours of sleep, and so, you do a lot of dreaming and you remember your dreams a lot. The first dream was that I had just gotten hired by Joe Dante, who had directed *Piranha* and *The Howling*, to do a quickie rewrite of a movie called *Assholes From Outer Space*.

John Sayles:
All I remember is the title treatment with the *3D Assholes From Outer Space*. They were like normal human beings, except they had those little deely bobber antennas. They came down and they were bureaucrats. They worked at the motor vehicle department. You had to deal with them, but they were assholes. I woke up and I was like, "Oh, wow, that's a skit, that's not a movie."

John Sayles:
Then I had a second dream that was that I was directing a very low-budget movie that was called *Bigfoot in the City*. It was basically odd man out about this Bigfoot on the run in the city, and the streets were always wetted down. The scene that I was directing was the one where the detective, the tough but tender detective,

in his trench coat, walks down the rainy alleyway, and the Bigfoot is wounded and breathing hard, and there's fear in his eyes, and he's crouched in the corner. The detective's assistance comes up behind him, and he turns to him and says, "Book him." I woke up again and it seemed more like a skit again.

John Sayles:
Then I had a very strange dream that was about a black man, and he was walking in a neighborhood that was all black people, and it looks familiar to me. I realized the way that you realize in dreams, "Oh, I know why he seems so alienated and so worried. He's from another planet and he can't talk. Even if he could, he couldn't tell them that he's from another planet because then it makes them want to dissect them or whatever. How alienated can you get?"

John Sayles:
Those three dreams stayed in my head. Eventually, there was a synthesis of those with some of the science fiction comedy of the first one and some of the manhunt odd-man-out of the second one. Then this basic idea of a runaway slave coming to modern day America, and coming to Harlem, and just trying to figure out, what is the story here? How is this like whatever awful planet I came from, and how is it not? What has changed in some way? In a way, he's somebody from the past as well as from outer space.

Jay Carr:
What the runway also finds, again, is a sense of community in Harlem. He finds his community in a very loose, easy, but genuine and warm way, from new habits of a bar, just a routine neighborhood bar up in Harlem. What he also encounters is a character played by John Sayles. After we see the next clip, the bar in Harlem, a brief clip, we'll discuss a little bit, with John, some of the acting that he's done in his films. Where did you get that body language for the bounty hunter? What I'm saying is that-

John Sayles:
Actually, what we did with that is, there's a technique that you can do, where if you turn the camera upside down and then do everything backwards, you can later flip the film like this. It goes forwards, but it has a strangeness to it. If you just drop your hand, that looks natural, but if it comes up like that, which it does when you do that slip... We had to work out all our moves forward, and then remember them, and then do them backwards.

John Sayles:
Originally, I thought we could, with a tape recorder, learn a dialogue backwards to it, and it would give it a nice thing. But the only thing we found we could say was, "Reep," which is a beer, would have been limiting to the dialogue.

Jay Carr:
One thing you didn't see, those of you who haven't seen the movie, there's a wonderful screech that these guys react with. Where did you come up with that screech? How did you arrive at that?

John Sayles:
We played around with a lot of sound effects. That was basically just us doing a bat screech, and then putting it through a Harmonizer, which is one of these things that can change the pitch of a sound in the sound studio without changing its length. It's like giving yourself helium and then screeching as high as you can.

John Sayles:
The sound that The Brother uses earlier on to fix his knee is actually the sound of when you hit a chord on a piano, and then put a microphone into the box of the piano, and then cut off all the attack, and just keep the decay of it, and then turn that backwards. It made a great weird sound. We basically just played around with those things until we found something that sounded right.

Jay Carr:
One of the things you're seeing in terms of the ultra-economical approach of an independent filmmaker comes at the end, with the two bounty hunters walk out the door, and they walk into what looks like light from an atomic blast. Tell us about that brightness that-

John Sayles:
Yeah. In cinematography, that's called letting the outside burn out. Letting the outside burn out, there's various reasons you do it. If you remember the Martin Scorsese film, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, they let the outside burn out. It means that you don't balance the inside with the outside. If there's windows, you put these filters over the windows that you can't really see, but they knocked down the life from the outside. It means that you don't have to use enormous lights inside, and it usually gives a hot nasty look to the outside.

John Sayles:
In Scorsese's case, that was his reaction to the Southwest, where he'd never been before. In our case, it served two purposes. One was we didn't have to spend a lot of money balancing the light on the inside to the outside. The other was we didn't have to art-direct whatever was outside. There could be anything across the street. There could be a crowd of people across the street. There could be in fact as there probably was, several of our crew vans across the street, and the audience isn't going to see them because it's just going to burn out on you.

Jay Carr:
The obvious reason for assuming that you act roles in your own movies, and aside from the part that you're most enjoyed, at least in some respect, is that you save on a salary and you save having to give instructions to. That's one actor less you have to worry about. Is that, in fact, the case?

John Sayles:
Yeah, certainly. I was an actor before I was a writer, and it is fun. But when you're directing a movie, and there's a lot of characters in it, and here's a lot of locations, and there's a lot of variables, every variable you can eliminate is like a relief. "Oh, I don't have to worry about this actor, I've worked with them before, he'll take care of himself. Oh, I don't have to worry about this part, I'm playing it, and I know what I want to do with the thing."

John Sayles:
I always liken it to those guys that used to come on The Ed Sullivan Show and spin those plates on those things, and you have to run and make sure that one didn't Smash. If you can glue a couple of those plates down, you don't have to run as much. Also, now and then I felt like I know how to play this. In *Lianna*, there's a character that I played, who's this film teacher. My only way to describe him to actors when I had people come in to read for it is, "Well, he's not a total asshole, but he's a partial asshole."

John Sayles:
Finally, I realized that I knew how to play it, I didn't know how to direct it. I couldn't get the exact right mix

from an actor because it was such a subtle thing. But, hey, I could play it, and it was an easy part for me to play.

Jay Carr:
Yes. Some of the things you're going to be deprived of seeing are in *Returns a Secaucus seven*. John plays a townie, a guy who runs the gas station and knows all these people. In fact, he has one very funny scene, where he's sitting at a bar, talking to the guys contemplating marriages, "Think long and hard. Think long and hard." He plays a townie again in a clip from the film.

Jay Carr:
We're going to see a clip from a film called *Unnatural Causes*. It's about a brave civil servant's fight to get the government to own up to what it did to its own troops of Agent Orange. You won't see John in this, but, again, he plays a very great role, another townie. He's a guy who knew one of the guys who died from Agent Orange, and he's describing this dead buddy to the guy who's investigating the case. He's also played Ring. Was it fun playing Ring Lardner in the baseball filmmaker *Eight Men Out*?

John Sayles:
Yeah, it was interesting. With Ring Lardner, I usually try to take characters, just for practical reasons, who are outside of the emotional loop of the other characters or actors partly because I know I'm going to be so busy directing that I'm not going to have the time to sit down with them as fellow actors and work out our stitch, work out our emotional background, or, "Oh, yeah, we're supposed to be married 20 years, how do we walk when we walk into a room?" All that stuff that I expect the actors to do with each other when they're playing characters and know each other.

John Sayles:
I played people like these men in black who are not even from this earth, who are definitely out of it. Ring Ladner was a character who, although he admired the ballplayers, was a very stiff, aloof guy, who was always watching from the sidelines. He was the perfect part for me to play because, also, as I did more research about him, he was my age and he was six-foot-two, which in 1919, was enormous, and I'm six-foot-four.

John Sayles:
Anybody looks tall next to Studs Terkel, but everybody talks about him looking like a giant next to his friend, Hugh Fullerton, who Studs played. There were some things that automatically I said, "Oh, I should get a tall guy who doesn't have much emotional commitment with these guys to play it." Then it seemed like, "Oh, I can do this."

Jay Carr:
Fullerton was not really known, so it much matters how Studs Terkel behaved. But people know or think they know, some people think they know Ring Lardner because there's reputation. Were you intimidated at all by playing an actual character?

John Sayles:
Not especially. I did my research as an actor, is what I did, which was read enough accounts of people like Fitzgerald, or whoever who knew him, to get an idea of the way he moves, his personality. He had a very, very dry sense of humor. He had dark moods. He was a drinker but always went away from his family to do his drinking and not lay it on them. A very moral, caring person in this gross, joke world, and an anomaly in that way. But respected by the players because they felt like he was a fairly honest report.

Jay Carr:
He was one of the few people, outside of the players, who were confused but not bad guys that you can respect. The unusual thing, I'll just say this because we're not going to see a clip from this film, there wasn't time to include everything, is that it was very unusual to see these 1919 Black Sox. First of all, there's not anything archetypal. You realize these were kids, these were a young man just a few months or a few years off the farm or out of the factory. They didn't know very much. They were trying to behave in an honorable way. But they were also seen as members of an industrial society, and really, on the low end of the order.

Jay Carr:
If there's a villain, it was just as much Charles Comiskey, the owner, would grind them under his heel as much as the obvious villains, which were, of course, the gamblers, who fixed the World Series. I'm starting to stray, I'm starting to digress. What we're going to do now get back to the clip from *Unnatural Causes*, the *Agent Orange* film. Again, John Sayles did not direct this, but he wrote it. after the clip, we'll talk a little bit about working the two different sides of the street and in fact how different the sides of the street are.

Jay Carr:
This is a TV movie shown in 1986, and Alfre Woodard is playing a woman who actually didn't exist. This was a woman who was practically the only one in the ironically-entitled Veteran's benefits department, who was actually trying to benefit these veterans who had been sprayed with Agent Orange, and now, several years later, found themselves developing serious diseases, and then dying. I'm sorry to say that the picture is still timely.

Jay Carr:
I just read in the paper recently, the government is still trying to weasel its way out of accepting responsibility for what happened to these men. Do you feel yourself doing anything differently as a writer when you're writing a film that someone else is directing as opposed to a film that you know you will be directing?

John Sayles:
It really depends. In the case of this film, it was something where the producers came to me and said, "We think it will help us get this movie made if you write it," Whether it's name value, or just we think you're the person to write it, or whatever. I tend to always think about who is going to be reading the screenplay. Even for some of my own screenplays, if we don't have the money in my pocket, which was the case with *Brother From Another Planet* and *Secaucus 7*, if I'm not the financier, we have to sell it to somebody first.

John Sayles:
I tend to, in those screenplays, do a little more hype in the writing. There's a few more exclamation points. There's a little more description. There's a little more active description. Some underlining. Some capitals. It's like writing the book and a jacket copy of the book in the same thing when you know that a director is going to come and take it if you don't know who that director is going to be. In this one, I went through the first two drafts before Lamont Johnson was brought in to work on it.

John Sayles:
You really tend not to be casting your eye toward a director reading it, but, in this case, towards studio executives reading it, or, if you're writing something like *Alligator*, for the people are making *Alligator* to write it, whatever. Those are the people you have to sell first. You may have your own agenda and your own things that you want to do, but you've already asked them, "What is it about this story that you like? What is it about the story that excites you?" You make sure you address those things that they like and that excites them.

John Sayles:
The other thing, and in television, a TV movie, the structure is very different. Our TV movie is basically seven acts. Because of the commercial breaks, and you try to time those, and in the case of the TV movie, so that they don't come in the half hour or the hour, because then people can click to something else and see the coming attractions for the next show. To a certain extent, that's a problem. Just as you're rolling, there's going to be this commercial, but you can also use it to your advantage.

John Sayles:
What I often try to do is, whenever there's going to be a time transition, which in a feature, you have to do with a dissolve, or a montage, or a superimposed thing that says, came the dawn, or seven years later, you just line it up so it comes just before the commercial. After six commercials, time has in fact passed. You come back from you the Sherman commercial and it's six years later.

Jay Carr:
You started as a writer, pretty quickly got into film writing and and then filmmaking. Has there even been a time when you've considered yourself primarily a writer who makes films, or maybe you've subsequently thought of yourself as primarily a director who writes film? Or you're bicursive, you just shuttle back and forth naturally?

John Sayles:
Yeah. What's happening with me is I consider myself a storyteller. The fiction that I write and the movies that I write and direct are my stories. Then, what I do for a living, how I make money and pay the rent, is to write things for other people. There, you're an employee who's helping them tell their story. The only movie that has ever been made that came from a speculative movie that I wrote is *Breaking In*. That, I sat on for eight years until the right director came along. The rest of them have all been assignments, have all been rewrites, or, "Here's a story, will you write this? Here's a news article, will you write this? This is our story, and will you help us tell it?" You're much more of a technician in those cases.

Jay Carr:
Define the mechanics of one sometimes leak into the other or get in the way. I remember you saying, for instance, that, as a director, you're frustrated in ways that you wouldn't be as a writer. An example being that if you're a writer, you don't have to worry if the sun isn't shining that day, or you can just describe anything you like. Do those mechanics ever bleed over on you?

John Sayles:
They don't. I think that I'm so aware of the practical part of making movies, that it's almost automatic when I write something, somebody's got to shoot this. I've had directors, I wrote a thing for John Frankenheimer, where, at one point, he read a 20-page sequence and he just said, "Kid, you shoot this stuff. I've got to get this picture in on budget." Then we had a conversation about how to get it in on budget. When I wrote *Battle Beyond the Stars for Corman*, one of his ideas was, and he had liked some science fiction book where it was a planet with two suns.

John Sayles:
That lasted through the treatment stage and everything. I said, "Roger, this thing about the two suns, is it just something you like?" He said, "Yeah, I really think it would be an interesting visual idea to look up in the sky and there's these two suns." I said to him, "If you have two suns, you have two shadows." He thought for a minute and he said, "That would coast a lot of money, wouldn't it? That's really hard to light one sun."

Jay Carr:
One of the things you should know about several of the projects that John Sayles has brought about is that he's not afraid to take his time and to get them done right. Los Gusanos, the novel he just published about Cuban exiles living in Miami, it took 13 years. The first film... probably the sixth film John made was *Right Men Out*, but in fact, that was the first one he did."

John Sayles:
I wrote the first draft of it 11 years before we got to make it.

Jay Carr:
You wrote, at some point, about the right money and wrong money attaching themselves to film productions. Obviously, one of the reasons it took so long is to wait for the right kind of money. But by that, I tell you, that's synonymous with noninterference.

John Sayles:
Yeah. Or else it's, in the case of *Eight Men Out*, it was a case of Robert Frost lying about good fences make good neighbors. It was a combination of the right studio, the right money, and the right contract so that both parties felt like they trusted each other. For instance, Orion, who eventually was the studio that financed *Eight Men Out,* had passed on the exact same script, the exact same director, and the exact same producers two or three times before. Orion, it was the same people in all those years, it was the same people passing on it.

John Sayles:
They always said, "This is an interesting story, and we don't think you can make it for the price you're telling us, and we don't think we can make any money. We'd love to see the movie but we'd lose our shirts." Finally, there came a point, I had made three movies in the interim. Sarah Pillsbury and Midge Sanford, the producers, had produced desperately seeking Susan for Orion and made money for them. They had seen *Matewan* and saw that we made it for $3.6 million and it was an epic. In fact, it looked like one.

John Sayles:
They believed that we could bring the movie in for the price we were singing, and there were all these boys hanging around. There was all these young male semi stars, and everybody was trying to say, "How do we get a bunch of these guys in the same movie?" There's army movies, so we can have *Platoon* or *Top Gun*, and how about sports teams? There's a lot of guys in those things.

John Sayles:
Part of the conversation that led to the movie finally getting made was, "Who do you think would be in this movie?" I said, "I want to control the casting." "We know you want to, but who could be in this movie?" Sarah, Midge, and I wrote up our list of actors that we'd like to see in it, some of whom were known and some of them weren't, and they wrote up their list of people they'd like to see in it, all of whom were known and were either big stars at the moment or almost stars or whatever.

John Sayles:
In fact, there were seven or eight guys on both lists. We really, they said, " If you get three of these guys, you got to go a project." We started talking to our favorite guys. We had some people turn down the parts because they said, "I can't play that position," not, "I can't act that part." Men are so vein about their athletic skills that they know, "I'm not being in a movie where I'm going to look like a slob at third base." I offered John Cusack

a part, and I offered him shortstop or second base, and he said, "I can't turn the double play, I have to turn this down."

John Sayles:
Then things shifted around, and I said, "Would you like to play the third baseman?" He said, "I can play third base, sure." It was a better part. That was a situation where finally the time had come when they felt we were ready, they had enough of what they call elements to counteract the fact that unlike the natural, we couldn't tack a happy-ending on this thing. We couldn't have the Black Sox win the World Series and go, "We're number one," and do a freeze-frame at the end of it. They felt somewhat protected.

John Sayles:
The movie hasn't made any money, so they weren't protected, but they at least felt like they had a good chance of making their money back. That made, I've seen too many filmmakers just get so desperate that they sign up for the wrong money, and they end up turning gray in like six months and end up with a movie that they wouldn't even see if they hadn't made it.

Jay Carr:
I'll just say one more thing about *Eight Men Out*, a movie we're not going to see before we pass to *Matewan,* a movie we will. It illustrates, again, the resourcefulness of the independent, which is synonymous with a low budget, filmmaker. Because Comiskey Park didn't look right anymore, they had to film this... they filmed it in a park in Indianapolis, which immediately, there were two problems. One was the park had lights. That meant that they had to very carefully interposing the body of somebody, a manager, a coach, between whatever they were shooting, where a light stand would be.

Jay Carr:
The other thing was, this is a World Series game, popular game, the stands had always to be filled, but John couldn't afford 25,000 extras. We had to make due with about 1,000 extras, but position them always so this camera would... you'd always see a full frame full of people, but this meant moving these people around to different plays, which is another example of great field marshal in terms of making movies.

John Sayles:
If you have very quick eyes, there are some cardboard cutouts of our location manager scattered in there. The real problem was that most of the people who have time free in the day are senior citizens. To keep them entertained in between takes, we had bingo games going on with prizes. It was time to move them. Of course, they didn't want to interrupt the bingo game, and being senior citizens, they weren't the fastest movers in the world, so we always had an alternate that we could go shoot while they were moving the senior citizens from right field to center field.

Jay Carr:
While we're speaking of movies that had a long gestation period, *Matewan* certainly as one. This is John's movie about the launching of the great coalfield wars in West Virginia and Kentucky in 1920 and the early 1920s. This, again, a movie with a gestation period of some years... actually many years if you count the fact that it began in the union activist background that John has, and also, in the fact that John met coal miners, when, as a younger man, he was hitchhiking, and he was struck by them and by the stories they had to tell. Let's start out by looking at the film and then we'll talk a little bit about it.

Jay Carr:
I'm really sorry there isn't time to show you more from this film, which, although made for $3 million, and describing a very bleak time, in a very bleak environment, was told with just incredible visual richness, it's a wonderfully, almost a painterly, looking film. It would be presumptuous of me, which is what I didn't before the things started, to tell you what you were about the see.

Jay Carr:
Since these clips all speak very well for themselves, I might just add the detail. What you saw obviously was a coal miners strike being joined by two groups that the coal company brought into a scab. The two groups being blacks from the South, led by James Earl Jones, and Italian immigrants, led by Joe Grifasi. They, of course, see what's going on, quickly size up the situation, and decided to throw in with the strikers. That's a very dramatic and, in a way, climactic moment. Could you tell us a little bit, John, about the genesis of the desire to make this film arising from your conversations with coal miners that you had when you were younger?

John Sayles:
Yeah. In the late '60s and early '70s, I hitched around the country. One of the times I went through... actually, a couple of times, I went through, it hitched through West Virginia and Kentucky. There's not a whole lot of straight roads in either of those states, so it takes a lot of rides to get across the state. A lot of the guys who picked me up were coal miners, or people whose family were in coal mining, or fathers, husbands, brothers were in coal mining.

John Sayles:
At the time, the big fight in the UMW was happening between Jack Yablonski, and the Miners for a Democratic Union, and Tony Boyle, who was running the UMW, which ended with Tony Boyle having Jack Yablonski and his wife and daughter murdered. That hadn't happened yet, and there was a lot of pro and con from these guys would pick me up. While people were getting serious, and they're talking about guns, and there's an ugly mood, and it's awful when we have this contention within our own union, and they'd almost always end up by saying, "But this is nothing compared to the coal wars. You should talk to my daddy or my granddaddy about the coal wars." I'd never heard of these things.

John Sayles:
I asked them more about them. The period right after the Matewan Massacre, which is the end of the movie *Matewan*, there was, in West Virginia, the largest armed uprising in America since the Civil War. Thousands and thousands of coal miners in protest against their murder basically at the hand of the people working for the coal companies had commandeered trains, marched in formation, because many had been in World War I, armed on this one county in West Virginia, and had a three-day pitch battle with the people who were hired by the coal company to protect their property.

John Sayles:
Billy Mitchell, the father of the American Air Force, said to the governor, "Look, I've got this great idea. You know those planes that just shot each other in World War I, we can drop bombs from those on people. Can I try it?" He said, "Sure, go ahead." He was dropping bombs on miners. This was a major thing, and it was blank in my history bank, I had never heard of this stuff. I felt like this is American history that needs to be told. It was a time when I was writing it, a time that continued as I was making it when people were questioning even the need for unions.

John Sayles:
I was interested in going back to some of those turning points in the union movement of, number one, why unions were necessary, but number two, some of the questions that have dogged them ever since. If you, in fact, stop short what Joe Cunningham, the organizer, wanted, which was worker control of the factories, what do you then have? Does that have contradictions which are eventually going to scuttle~ your union? All that, as I did my research, seemed to center in this one incident that seemed perfect for a movie, and that it seemed a metaphor for the whole period and the whole situation, which was the Matewan Massacre. I kept hearing the Matewan Massacre.

John Sayles:
As I read it, I realized, "My God, we have a gun fight movie here. We have a story that ends with armed men walking down the street looking at each other." That's something that, just visually and in the movie memory that everybody carries with them, has some very classic reverberations. This is something that can be entertaining that people will say, "Oh, this is a movie, but it's not a Western, but it, in fact, is in between genres. This is the perfect thing that I can get into, where I can get people hooked on the story, but then leave them asking questions and feeling like they've been exposed to something they didn't know before."

Jay Carr:
It absolutely flies in the face of genre because the union leader, Joe, is a pacifist, and he's the one guy who won't pick up a gun.

John Sayles:
Yeah. The usual Hollywood story conference would be, look, we've got to have this movie go over the top. Where's the point where he says, "Gee, I used to be a pretty good shot," and, "A man's got to do what a man's got to do," and he comes out and he blows away the bad guys? I said, "He is a pacifist." When we first showed this to studios, we had one executive say, "I liked the story, but isn't a character almost like a socialist?" I said, "No. He's a member, he has a card. He's not like anything. He's a wobbly, and he's to the left." He's, "Oh, okay. What else are you working on?"

Jay Carr:
John earlier spoke of *Breaking In*, which, as you'll soon see, represents quite a change of pace. John wrote this, as he said, waited several years for the right director. We'll discuss that briefly after we see this clip from it. John, were did you learn so much about thievery and the fine points and the ins and outs?

John Sayles:
It was an interesting movie in that I had written it, it was one of the second or third scripts that I wrote when I was first in Hollywood, about the same time I was writing *Return of the Secaucus 7* and *Lianna*. It was because my agent said, "You've written this lesbian movie, and you've written this West Virginia coal miner leftist movie, and you've written this thing about the 1912 Black Sox scandal, can't you write something that's cheap and contemporary? When people call and ask for a sample of your work, you could possibly get some."

John Sayles:
I started thinking about what would I write in this. This idea had actually been a failed short story of mine, a short story that I rewrote in about three or four different voices, and it just never worked. I never got the voice right, I never got the story right. I said, "That would be great as the movie or at least the beginning of a movie. Then where else can we go with it?" I wrote this thing. I got a couple of meetings, as they say, off of it. Right in the middle of the meeting, I realized, in two cases, I really don't like these people, and I don't want them to

make this movie. I torpedo the meeting fairly quickly by just disagreeing with them enough, which doesn't take long in a meeting like that. Nothing ever happened with it.

John Sayles:
The producer, Harry Gittes, had read it and liked it, and every couple of years, would say, "Can I take an option on this?" I said, "If you take an option, then you're going to get a director. If I don't like the director, it's not going to turn into something that I like." Finally, he got serious and said, "Okay, you drop a list of directors and I'll drop a list." We were about to do that and he said, "What about Bill Forsyth?" I said, "Call him. Fine with me, great, get him." Like a day later, Bill happened to need to do a movie in the States, and he really liked the material, and we were in business.

Jay Carr:
Was there, in fact, more than the usual hired gun situations here? Did you actually work with Forsyth or consult with him before the shoot or anything?

John Sayles:
Yeah. This was one of those situations I've been in more than once, where there was about to be a Writers Guild of America strike. It was scheduled to start a week after Bill said, "Let's do this." He came over the next day, we had a meeting. I said, "Bill, here's the deal. I'll do a one week rewrite of this, and then go make it a Bill Forsyth movie." He's a good writer, and he's a good director, and he got the material.

John Sayles:
Usually, when you have things that you wrote and other people direct, they're going to drop lines, they're going to drop scenes, and you just hope that the overall gestalt of the whole thing is what you intended it to be. What you really cringe though is when actors or directors or whoever make up lines and you're going to take the rap from them. The great test of this is that Bill actually made up a lot of stuff, usually marginal stuff, or little lines, or only Bill would have the guy to take a bite of an onion when he opened the refrigerator. I liked all of the stuff that he added. I'm happy to take credit for it as the writer.

Jay Carr:
Some of the credit was dished out by Burt Reynolds, who credits it with resurrecting his career and enabling him to become an actor who, momentarily at least, is being taken seriously after a long string of attempts that flopped at that. It's pretty obviously to see what this is, is it's a sweet, quirky story about a father-son relationship, where the old burglar takes the young burglar under his wing and wises him up a bit and straightens him out a bit.

John Sayles:
Yeah. The movie is called *Breaking In*. My main metaphor, which actually happens in the movie, was, what happens if you hit a hole in one and nobody's there? There's this guy, who's a safecracker, who, basically, in order to stay out of jail, has realized nobody gets caught on the scene of the crime, they get caught because they brag about it to their friends, and then one of their friends gets arrested doing something stupid, and to get their sentence lowered, they turn in a lot of their friends. There you are. He stopped having friends.

John Sayles:
But there he is, doing this, what he considers an art, and he's got nobody to pass it on to, nobody to show off to. Then there's this kid who basically is loose in society, has no friends, and needs to break in to society somehow. The society that he discovers that will allow him to come in is this criminal society.

Jay Carr:
Did the underground part of it appeal to Forsyth in your talk with him? Was that stressed or just mutually assumed?

John Sayles:
We really talked about both the plots under the under thing. Then Bill added his own things. Bill's fascinated with criminals. A lot of his movies have had to do with inept criminals, and what keeps them going, and the fact that there is this feeling of belonging to something larger than yourself.

Jay Carr:
These guys are not inept. In fact, they're pretty clever and pretty competent. How did you find out? Did you just dream this up, or did you actually talk to criminals? How did you get the particulars of some of these jobs they did?

John Sayles:
A combination of book research and talking to a couple of guys who at least claimed to have been. Because the guys are all liars, too, and claim jobs that they didn't do and don't claim jobs that they did do, a couple of people who actually said that they had burned some slaves. The one line that got me interested in it before I wrote the short story that didn't work was a guy saying, "Hey, I'm an old guy, I can only crack old safes." That technology is always catching up with criminals.

John Sayles:
That *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Dillinger* could exist because they could afford huts and terror planes and the cops had Model Ts. They didn't have radio yet, and they didn't have the FBI yet and everything. But the minute they got that, the criminals had upped the ante with better... If you saw the movie Thief that Michael Mann made, that was the modern-day burning bar safecracker who has all this high tech stuff. This is a guy who still blows them up, and there's only certain safe that that works on, and they're old safes. If a place has a new safe, it's not worth your bother doing it. He ends up going to what he calls Old Canada where they still have a lot of old safes.

Jay Carr:
I knew there was a nostalgic elements in that film and I couldn't quite put my finger on. The next film we're going to see, in fact, the last one, is John Sayles' new films, *City of Hope*. But has not yet gone into general commercial release, it's played at a few festivals. At great cost to my own inclination or restrain myself in remarking about it, because it's going to be shown tomorrow, and you're going to be given much more detailed discussion of it by John and by Maggie Renzi.

Jay Carr:
Maggie is the producer, in most cases, of John's films. Of course, that reminds me of the remark that another producer once a day to me to the effect that, movies are not produced, they're willed into being. You see Maggie in many roles on screen in John's films. When you do, you have to realize, that's the easy part of the role she plays in these films, playing the roles.

Jay Carr:
The tough part is hanging in there, sometimes, for a matter of years, till you get everything lined up that you need to get lined up in order to make a film. *City of Hope* is quite a film. It's occurred to me, in recent films, John has been working on a much broader canvas. This is a film after I saw... It's about, it's a bunch of parallel

stories that show you what city life has come to and how various kinds of corruption coexist. What occurred to me is that John is working on broader canvases in *Matewan* and *Eight Men Out*, and now in this.

Jay Carr:
He spoke in making *Return of the Secaucus 7* of the technical limitations, he had to cut from one to another. This is the only technical remark I'll lay on you, is that, watch these wonderful prowling cracking shots and the way John braids the stories and braids the characters lives together as in fact they are braided together in this community. The community being a apocryphal Hoboken, which is where John lives and works. It's called Hudson City in the film. In fact, it was actually filmed in Cincinnati. We'll discuss a few of these things briefly after the clip. You've all been very patient and long suffering. Then we'll throw this thing open to questions from you. Now we'll show the clip from *City of Hope*.

Jay Carr:
Minneapolis is a clean city, and the cities I've lived in are not so clean. I know I've watched this film and said to myself, "Yeah, this is really just pretty much the way, in my experience, cities work. Why don't I see this more often in the movies? Why don't I see this reflected?" Here's a film that braves this stuff, and links this stuff, and links the stories in very rich, almost musical, ways. That whatever the visual term for a musical experience would be, this film embodies it. It's like a score. You hear the strings come in, now they give way, here's an oboe solo coming in. You can see all the different strands on a conductor's score, that has all the instrumentation written in.

Jay Carr:
I noticed also that there's another combination here and the John works with actors that he's worked with in many other films. You only saw the brief films here. You didn't see people like Vincent Spano, and Kevin Tighe, Joe Grifasi. I found myself wondering while I was watching this film. Obviously, the upside would be obviously that you've worked with these people before and have a shorthand. Is there ever a downside in that these people bring to the new roles what they thought you liked in the old roles and you have to get past that? Does that ever happen?

John Sayles:
I don't think so. Usually, what happens is very much like in a repertory theater, they say, "I've played the fool now, can I play a fellow?" Actors, just like directors and writers, get typecast so easily, especially in films, that generally, by the time we get around to making another movie, they've played six versions of what they played in our last one, usually, and in more expensive films.

John Sayles:
Kevin Tighe, who was one of the main guys in *Matewan*, all of a sudden, got offered six bad guys. He played two of them, and then he said, "I better play a good guy, or somebody very different than these characters, or else I'm going to get stuck in this bag." The only difficult part is when we make a movie, is all our actor friends calling and saying, "Is there anything for me?" Now and then, it's something like *Eight Men Out*, where there were 50 male parts and five female parts, and they were very small, and you just have to tell of all your actor friends, "Maybe next picture."

Jay Carr:
How many speaking parts are there in this? This is not a small cast.

John Sayles:
There's 50 or 60. There's probably about 30 characters who you should be able to say, "Oh, that's the guy, and this is who he's related to, and this is what he does in it."

Jay Carr:
How generic is this picture in terms of cities, and how closely is it tied to your experience of Hoboken?

John Sayles:
Actually, I've lived in a lot of different cities. I grew up and was raised around Schenectady, New York, which is a big General Electric factory town. I've lived in Albany, New York, which had the longest running Democratic machine, longer than the Hague machine in Jersey City, or the Daley machine in Chicago. I've lived in Atlanta, Georgia. I've lived in East Boston, Massachusetts, during the Kevin White machine. This is a composite of all those places.

John Sayles:
One of the things that sparked my interest in making this movie is, here I am in all these different places, with these different ethnic groups making up the city, and yet there's something very, very similar about this patronage politics and the way that power either shakes down to the people or doesn't shake down to the people.

Jay Carr:
But in a sense, although this is a very contemporary setting, this is a sour rotting version of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. You get a sense that this thing is just about to break up. This is maybe like the month before the whole thing collapses.

John Sayles:
Yeah. It's what I call the Tammany Hall period.

Jay Carr:
Yeah.

John Sayles:
In this country, there's a tradition of cities being ruled by one ethnic group or power group. Then, eventually, their group does well enough that they can afford to move to the suburbs, and there comes that short period when they're still in power, because they can manipulate the vote or whatever, but they don't have the numbers anymore. That's when patronage turns its most ugly because they're not handing things out to anybody anymore, they're just stuffing it in their pockets.

John Sayles:
In that Tammany Hall period, very much like what happened when Jimmy Walker was in New York before Fiorello LaGuardia came in, it's just people in power stealing everything that's not nailed down, and the people who are in the city not getting anything from them.

Jay Carr:
There's a feeling, isn't there, of the Irish and Italian blocks running on past momentum?

John Sayles:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jay Carr:
The blacks beginning to become seated in the corridors of power. In a more distant way, the Hispanic starting to make the push to get it.

John Sayles:
Yeah. It's not often a graceful transition. This is a small city. In a small city, things are very, very concentrated. In this movie, there is a chain from somebody at the top, and their greed, eventually, and in a very circuitous route, leading to some people being killed. That chain may exist in every city. You may be able to make those links. It's just that, in a small city, in a compressed environment like this city, the dots are closer together, and so, it's not so hard to connect them.

John Sayles:
In a much larger city, where everybody feels like, "Oh, that's happening way over on the west side of town, and who knows what those people do?" it's easier to say, "Oh, this isn't connected with real estate development, that doesn't cause any problems for anybody."

Jay Carr:
Yeah. There's going to be a time, and I'll remember you heard it here, you're going to see some Ph.D. paper written on the parallels between *Alligator* and *City of Hope* in terms of what's happening with the social structure and what's leaking down in a very obnoxious way from the top.

John Sayles:
At one point, I had this poor kid, who was in film school, who was interviewing me for a real academic film magazine, convinced that *Piranha* was, in fact, an allegory for the Cultural Revolution in China. As I told it to him, it started making sense. It was amazing.

Jay Carr:
We don't need much to run with, John, just give us the smallest grain.

John Sayles:
The people who run studios, you could eat babies live. If it made money, if people wanted to go see it, some of them would put those things out. Really, the politics may be why they don't want to make it in the first place. But if they think this movie is going to make money, they don't care if The International is the theme song and that half the proceeds have to go to Saddam Hussein, they're in the business of putting people in movie theaters.

John Sayles:
It really is more, you're competing with people, who, if they spend $40 million on a movie and another 20 on the advertising, and they borrowed that money, so once they pay the interest, they're talking about $75 million, they can't afford competition. They certainly can't afford competition from some squirt who makes a movie for $3 million and didn't even go through their system. They have to assure, somehow, that they get those 16 screens. You're left with the one that's not a multiplex. It's just hard economic reality.

Jay Carr:
On that characteristic uphill note, I think we're obliged to end this.

John Sayles:
Thanks a lot.

Jay Carr:
Thanks very much.