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Sayles Pitch: John Sayles: Author, Auteur, Independent

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Sayles Pitch

John Sayles: Author, Auteur, Independent



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Audubon Room

University of Michigan Library

Hatcher Graduate Library North in Gallery Room 100

Ann Arbor, Michigan

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The Audubon Room exhibit poster and banner were adapted with permission from the original poster by Shepard Fairey.

Introduction

This collection of artifacts from the John Sayles Archive together with the interpretive exhibit in the Gallery provide a glimpse into the life and work of this author, screenwriter, and famously independent filmmaker. The Sayles Archive comprises more than 200 boxes and documents his life and work from his 1950s boyhood through the 2013 release of *Go for Sisters*. His lifelong personal and professional partner Maggie Renzi is a constant presence in the Archive, represented in personal notebooks, journals, and correspondence, as well as production-related documents.

This Archive joins those of Orson Welles and Robert Altman in our American Film Mavericks at Michigan Collection that has proven to be a rich source of primary materials for students and researchers. The artifacts exhibited here only hint at the depth of these extensive archives and their potential to illuminate both the history of filmmaking and the working methods and creative processes of these enormously influential artists.

The Early Films: *Return of the Secaucus 7* (1979), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), and *Matewan* (1987)

John Sayles made his first film, *Return of the Secaucus 7* (1979) for \$60,000. Resourcefulness has been one of his strengths ever since. "I made it about a three-day weekend so people wouldn't have to change their clothes a lot," he said about the film. "We didn't have an art department; we didn't have a make-up department." A grass-roots ad campaign to get the film into theaters and seen by critics is evident in the flyers and photographs displayed here. The positive reviews by noted critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel typify the critical response the movie generated, and the film influenced many "reunion" films that followed, including *The Big Chill* (1983) and the TV series *thirtysomething* (1987–1991). In 1997, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress, an honor given to a mere twenty-five films per year since 1989.

The success of the film allowed Sayles to develop further his voice as a progressive thinker and figure in a conservative industry driven by money and

commerce rather than originality. Sayles and his producing partner Maggie Renzi are part of every decision that takes place on their small, tight-knit sets. Various props, publicity stills, film-festival invitations and reviews from later films such as *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984) and *Matewan* (1987) reflect how his career skyrocketed and how the subsequent films grew from a cast of seven in his first film to an ambitious story about hundreds of striking coal miners and a labor dispute set in West Virginia in 1920.

Wall

- July 1980 calendar of events from the Crystal Theatre, an independent movie house in Missoula, Montana. The description for the July 13–19 U.S. theatrical premiere of *Return of the Secaucus 7* echoes the virtually unanimous praise for Sayles's groundbreaking 1979 film.
- Publicity still of the basketball game in *Return of the Secaucus 7*. From left to right, the cast of fictional and real-life friends: J.T. (Adam LeFevre), Howie (John Sayles, the first but not last time that he would act in one of his own films), Mike (Bruce MacDonald), Jeff (Mark Arnott), Chip (Gordon Clapp), and Ron (David Strathairn).
- Publicity still for *Return of the Secaucus 7* showing old college friends, Katie (Maggie Renzi) and Irene (Jean Passanante). In addition to starring in Sayles's first film, Maggie Renzi was also credited as the Unit Manager.
- Flyer for *Return of the Secaucus 7*'s West Coast premiere at the Westland Twin in Los Angeles.
- Invitation to the premiere of *The Brother from Another Planet* during the 37th Cannes Film Festival (1984).
- Star Cinema flyer advertising the midnight premiere of *The Brother from Another Planet* at the 37th Cannes Film Festival (1984).
- Flyer to the premiere of *The Brother from Another Planet* during the 37th Cannes Film Festival (1984).

- Publicity still of The Brother (Joe Morton) and jazz singer Malverne Davis (Dee Dee Bridgewater) at The Baby Grand nightclub in Harlem.
- Brochure advertising the American premiere of *Matewan* (1987).
- Publicity still of embattled United Mine Workers Association (UMWA) organizer Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper).
- Still photographs of the African-American and Italian miners of Matewan, West Virginia: miner Few Clothes (James Earl Jones), and policeman Sid Hatfield (David Strathairn).

Top shelf

- Iconic publicity still of The Brother (Joe Morton) near the Triborough Bridge in Harlem.
- Publicity still of The Men in Black (John Sayles and David Strathairn) stalking The Brother.
- Replica 1920s coalminer's cap with attached acetylene-gas lamp from the wardrobe for *Matewan*. Miners wearing caps with attached acetylene-gas lamps.
- The hypno-disk that was used by The Men in Black to "reel The Brother in."

Center shelf

- "Secaucus Dialogs": later transformed into the script for *Return of the Secaucus 7*.
- First day of shooting locations/shooting-sites map of lower Manhattan for *The Brother from Another Planet*.
- First day of shooting Call Sheet for *The Brother from Another Planet*.
- Lyrics to *Fire in the Hole* by John Sayles and long-time collaborator Mason Daring.

- John Sayles working on *Return of the Secaucus 7*. The 1978 photograph was taken in the Eastern Slope Playhouse, North Conway, New Hampshire.
- The January 29, 1981 transcript of Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert's review of *Return of the Secaucus 7* on their show *Sneak Previews*.
- Transcript of syndicated columnist Susan Granger's review of *The Brother from Another Planet*, September 14, 1984.
- On the set photographs from the filming of *Matewan*: filming the encampment at night, blocking a shot of Few Clothes (James Earl Jones), and cinematographer Haskell Wexler capturing the moody light and shadow of the grim mining town.

Bottom Shelf

- Original script for *The Brother from Another Planet* with a spontaneous storyboard sketch by Sayles on the back of the previous page.

An Irish Fairytale: *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994)

The Secret of Roan Inish (1994), based on the children's novel *The Secret of Ron Mor Skerry* (1957) by Rosalie K. Fry, centers on Scottish folklores about selkies—seals that can shed their skin to become human. In his review of the film, *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden wrote: "Mr. Sayles's venture into the fantastic is the latest unexpected turn in the zigzag career of a film maker who is the equivalent of an old-time general practitioner. Resisting specialization, he moves from genre to genre, applying his cheerfully level-headed realism to the problem at hand." Shooting outside of the United States for the first time, Sayles and producer Maggie Renzi faced the challenge of capturing the natural landscapes so crucial to the novel. In order to convey the mystical and fable-like elements of the story, they turned to production designer Adrian Smith and cinematographer Haskell Wexler to render the look the film required. Extensive pre-production planning was necessary in order

to move the film from concept to reality. Shown here are numerous examples of detailed scouting reports of proposed locations and lovingly detailed storyboards that capture the look of the film before the cameras rolled.

Wall

- Scene and set designs for *The Secret of Roan Inish*. The paintings and drawings were done in crayon, watercolor, and tempera. The artist is Production Designer Adrian Smith.
- Location/set design by Production Designer Adrian Smith. This set design consists of photographs adhered together to create a panorama (see facsimile); this was then overlaid with hand-painted acetate to indicate the placement of cottages.

Top Shelf

- The production company Skerry Films's hand-drawn Unit Map of County Donegal made for the production of *The Secret of Roan Inish*.
- Publicity material for *The Secret of Roan Inish* featuring Jeni Courtney as Fiona.
- Photographs of Maggie Renzi scouting locations for *The Secret of Roan Inish* in County Donegal, Ireland.
- v• A photograph of Maggie Renzi (center) and extras on location for *The Secret of Roan Inish*.

Center Shelf

- Letter from John Sayles to Associate Producer R. Paul Miller laying out the complex scene (Scene 41) of the transformation of the mythological Selkie from a seal into a "dark-eyed and olive-skinned [woman]...wrapped only in long black hair and strands of seaweed."
- Storyboard drawn by John Sayles, scene setup, and music cues for Scene 41, the Selkie transformation.

- One of several photographs of seals used as guides to design and build the prosthetics used in filming. A note on the back of the photograph reads: “I think Rosalie would like this one!”; a reference to Rosalie K. Fry (1911–1994), the author of *The Secret of Ron Mor Skerry* upon which Sayles’s screenplay is based. Unfortunately, Fry passed away before the film was completed.

Bottom Shelf

- Strip board of scenes for *The Secret of Roan Inish*.

The Blues and Struggling to Survive: *Honeydripper* (2007)

Honeydripper (2007) is set in rural Alabama in 1950. Steeped in rich, authentic period detail, the film explores the world of the southern juke joint and the music played within its ramshackle walls. Selecting the right costumes worn by each character is a crucial task and made all the harder for indie-film crews with low budgets at their disposal. Here are two props used by actor Gary Clark, Jr. who plays Sonny—the coat he wore while performing on stage and his guitar. The image of Sonny wearing this coat and holding the prop were used extensively in the film’s one-sheet or poster as well as in the advertising campaign for the film. Also shown are costume continuity photographs taken by the costume department to ensure that the costumes worn by other actors match from take to take, scene to scene.

Wall

- Gold jacket worn by Sonny (Gary Clark, Jr.) in *Honeydripper*.
- Sonny’s custom “homemade” electric guitar the “Honey Dripper;” designed and built for the film by Ted Crocker of Rusty Nail Guitars.

Top Shelf

- Costume and make-up continuity photographs for *Honeydripper*: “free pickers” dressed up, Honeydripper Lounge owner Tyrone “Pine Top” Purvis (Danny Glover), and Slick (Vondie Curtis-Hall).

- Hair and make-up continuity photographs for *Honeydripper*.
- Photograph of Scene 67 being set up at the Honeydripper Lounge.
- An invitation to the premiere party for *Honeydripper*, held on February 8, 2008 in Huntsville, Alabama.

Center Shelf

- Script pages for *Honeydripper*.
- A computer-generated storyboard, scene set-up, and script for Sonny's entry into the town of Harmony, Alabama (Scenes 15 and 16).
- On-the-set photograph of Sonny in gold jacket and playing the electric guitar in the Honeydripper Lounge.
- Sayles's notes on scenes and bits of dialogue for *Honeydripper*. One of the many notebooks and journals in the John Sayles Archive.
- Photograph of Sonny (Gary Clark, Jr.) for costume continuity (Scene 15).

Bottom Shelf

- Prop poster advertising the performance of the "legendary" Guitar Sam at the Honeydripper Lounge.
- Album of on-the-set photographs and scene-continuity shots from *Honeydripper*.

New Films: *Amigo* (2010) and *Go for Sisters* (2013)

Sayles's two most recent projects, *Amigo* (2010) and *Go for Sisters* (2013) show his continued interest in dramatizing historic events and the lives of people rarely depicted in mainstream cinema. *Amigo*, set during the Philippine-American War of 1899–1902, is performed in the Tagalog language and centers on a village mayor who is pressured by an American officer to help him hunt for Filipino guerilla fighters. Writing

the film necessitated Sayles to do elaborate research on the history of the conflict and the people of the Philippines. Research materials used by Sayles, along with an example of a notebook filled with copious notes, are displayed here with a draft of the script and versions of promotional material for the film.

Go for Sisters depicts a cat-and-mouse game set on the U.S.-Mexican border. A disgraced ex-LAPD detective (Edward James Olmos) finds himself embroiled with a gang of human traffickers as he sets out to find a missing man in Tijuana. Production aids such as call sheets, costume continuity sheets, a lined version of the shooting script with notes give a sense of the daily tools used by the film crew to keep the film on schedule and on budget.

Wall

- Promotional material for the film *Amigo* that was Sayles's exploration of American Imperialism and the Philippine-American War.
- Research material for *Amigo*: two digital images from the Philippine Photographs Digital Archive at the University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library).
- Poster for Sayles's most recent film *Go for Sisters*. This exploration of friendship, human trafficking, and the U.S./Mexican border premiered at SXSW in 2013.

Top Shelf

- Costume sketches for Corazon Dacanay (Rio Locsin) and Rafael Dacanay (played by Filipino film star Joel Torre). Filipino designer Gino Gonzales was responsible for the costumes used for *Amigo*.
- Notebook with entries about the filming of *Amigo* or *Baryo*, as it was originally called, with some notes in Spanish.

- Notebook with notes about the history of the Philippine-American War.
- *The Philippine Star's* article (July 3, 2011) about John Sayles and *Amigo*.

Center Shelf

- Costume-continuity sheet for Bernice Stokes (LisaGay Hamilton), Scenes 1 and 6.
- Costume-continuity sheet for Fontayne Scott (Yolonda Ross), Scenes 1 and 2.
- Costume-continuity sheet for Freddy Suarez (Edward James Olmos), Scenes 44–49, 51, 53, 54, and 56.
- Tijuana's "Club Macondo" prop matches from *Go for Sisters*.
- Line script with script notes for Scene 1 of *Go for Sisters*.
- Prop driver's license for Bernice Stokes (LisaGay Hamilton).

Bottom Shelf

- Prop poster for "Freddy and the Oceans," the fictional musical trio that Freddy Suarez (Edward James Olmos), Bernice Stokes (LisaGay Hamilton), and Fontayne (Yolonda Ross) dream up as a ruse help them cross the border into Mexico.
- First day of shooting Call Sheet for *Go for Sisters* and locations/shooting-sites map of the Los Angeles area.

Youth, a Lifelong Partnership, and Rock & Roll

The love affair between Sayles and producer Maggie Renzi has lasted more than forty years, having met as students at Williams College in the early 1970s. Photographs from the set of any of their films made together generally show the two together consulting and collaborating and trying to solve together a problem or dilemma. It is clear that they connected over their shared passion for their love of story-telling and their belief that a

strong democracy comes when parties from both sides can raise questions, challenge right from wrong, and question authority. “The media in America has become so cowed and comprised,” he has said, and both try to instill that in all of the films they create.

Sayles was an intellectual and precocious child who demonstrated an early flair for writing. These papers written by him as a 13-year-old show that he already had a sense of humor and interest in political issues at a young age. Attracted to sports and music, Sayles has said: “I never thought about being a writer as I grew up. A writer wasn’t something I wanted to be. An outfielder was something to be. Most of what I learned about style I learned from Roberto Clemente.” It is not surprising that he collaborated with rock legend Bruce Springsteen who shares Sayles’s working-man sensibility and ethic.

Wall

- John Sayles by noted New York photographer, Jayne Wexler (1996).
- Photographs and passports of John Sayles and Maggie Renzi.

Top Shelf

- “Carmen the Carton,” “The Day the Bomb Fell,” and “The Night They Burned the T.V.” are English-class papers written by 13-year-old John Sayles (1963).
- Family photographs of a young John Sayles in Schenectady, New York, in the 1950s and 1960s (facsimiles).
- Notebook containing comments/observations about films and filmmaking (undated).

Center Shelf

- Contact sheet of stills of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band taken while filming the music video for *Glory Days* (1984).

- Storyboard and Shot List for Bruce Springsteen's *I'm on Fire* (1984).
- Written for director Joe Dante, a 1982 treatment for *Gremlins* by John Sayles, along with a sheet of the storyboards.
- Photographs of Bruce Springsteen, John Sayles, Maggie Renzi, and the rest of the crew taken while filming Springsteen's very first music video *Born in the U.S.A* (1984).

Bottom Shelf

- Badges from just a few of the film festivals and events that John Sayles and Maggie Renzi have attended.

Sayles as Author and Actor

"I certainly grew up seeing more movies and television than I read books, but when it came time to do the thing itself you don't have to hire a lot of people to sit down and write a book, so that was the story-telling medium that was available to me." —John Sayles

"I like to act. I work for scale. I don't have an acting agent. I'm in the book." —John Sayles

In addition to writing and directing feature films, John Sayles is a well-respected novelist and actor. He first gained national recognition as the writer of *Pride of the Bimbos* (1975), a comedic tale of a circus sideshow softball team called The Brooklyn Bimbos. His sophomore effort, *Union Dues* (1977), was a nominee for the National Book Award. Prior to writing, Sayles first began to learn the craft of acting while attending Williams College where he met future collaborators Maggie Renzi and actor David Strathairn. The items displayed here represent some of the work Sayles has created outside of the eighteen motion pictures he has directed to date.

Wall

- Poster for the Sixth Annual Sanibel Island (Florida) Writer's Conference (2011), which featured John Sayles as the keynote speaker.
- Poster for the performance of one of Sayles's first plays, *Turnbuckle*, staged at the MPL Theatre in New York City (1981).
- Dust jacket for Sayles's first novel *Pride of the Bimbos* (1975).
- Sayles's second novel *Union Dues* (1977) was nominated for a National Book Award (facsimile).

Top Shelf

- Script for the play *Turnbuckle* (1981).
- Another notebook with notes and draft sections that later appeared in *A Moment in the Sun* (2011).
- Uncorrected galleys for Sayles's opus, *A Moment in the Sun*, published in 2011. *Amigo* was drawn from this sprawling novel that covers the history of the Philippines, Cuba, and the United States.

Center Shelf

- The short story "Buffalo" was first published in the *Boston Sunday Globe New England* magazine in the March 4, 1979 issue. Sayles later published it in his 1979 collection of short stories, *The Anarchists' Convention*.
- Cast list for the Mt. Washington Valley (New Hampshire) Repertory Theatre staging of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.
- Publicity still of John Sayles as Chief Bromden in a summer-stock production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (ca. 1976).
- One of Sayles's many notebooks, this one about writing and contemporary film (undated).

- Publicity still of John Sayles, Brian Johnston, and David Strathairn in the Eastern Slope Playhouse (Conway, New Hampshire) production of *Of Mice and Men* (1976).

Bottom Shelf

- Scrapbook made by John Sayles's mother, Mary. Press and reviews for his first novel *Pride of the Bimbos* are laudatory. Mrs. Sayles also clipped the "boff box office" notices that followed the release of Joe Dante's *Piranha*, scripted by Sayles. (Pages shown are facsimiles.)
- Letter from Japanese director Go Takamine asking Sayles to appear in his film *Untamagiru* (1988). Included with the letter was a sketch of the proposed wardrobe for Sayles in his role as Commissioner Jeaguyer (facsimile).

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