FILM REVIEW
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GO FOR SISTERS (2013)
Written, directed and produced by John Sayles, 123min

There are not that many good movies about American parole officers, (or their British equivalents for that matter), but John Sayles' new film, Go for Sisters – which received its UK premier at the Glasgow Film Festival in February 2014 – makes up for the absence (Nellis 2009; 2012). True, it is not about a parole officer’s ordinary, day to day office routine, any more than previous parole movies have been - only the opening sequence, in which a young female parolee tries forlornly to explain that it was a kindness for a friend which led her to break the rules of her licence - gives a flavour of that, but its plot is driven by an arrangement - a road trip with a parolee, “out of state” - that only a parole officer would be in a position to make.

At the heart of the film are two late thirties black women in Phoenix, Arizona, once school friends, so close despite coming from quite different families that others said they could “go for sisters”. They drifted apart after the good-looking, precocious one stole the less good-looking, more staid one’s boyfriend. Staid Bernice Stokes becomes a hard-ass parole officer, while precocious Fontayne Gamble does drugs, does time and ends up on parole, though not initially under Bernice. However, when Bernice’s adult, ex-military, truck driving son Rodney gets mixed up with bad guys and goes missing, suspected of murdering his friend, she enlists the aid of a reluctant Fontayne and, through her, the people she knew in her former life, to find him.

This is good set-up for a movie: a parolee who wants to go straight and a parole officer who needs to walk on the wild side. Beyond the opening sequence little is shown of the kind of parole officer Bernice is, but one gets the impression that the job has instilled an empathy deficit in her; she breaches the woman in the opening sequence, no questions asked. Fontayne, on the other hand, is shown struggling to go straight, holding down a menial job in a café, resisting temptation to start selling drugs again for a streetwise charmer, tolerating his sneers when she refuses. Prison has left her somewhat bereft and uncertain as to whether she can make a future for herself, and added to the hurdles she already faced. A “gay-for-the-stay” relationship with a fellow inmate has left her unsure of her sexuality – but it is this former lover, now married with a husband and baby – who
links Bernice and Fontayne up with a retired old detective, Freddy Suarez, who knows the gangs who operate on the Arizona-Mexico border, with whom Rodney’s murdered friend had been involved.

Suarez had been sacked from the police without a pension for loyally turning a blind eye to a cop friend’s corruption, without partaking of it himself. Once Bernice has paid him $2000 – he asked for $5000 – and he has paid his overdue property taxes, he tells his worried wife that he will help the women, assuring her the job won’t be dangerous, though the next thing he does is retrieve his old gun from storage. The search for Rodney takes them over the border into Mexico and some encounters with some rather scary people (people-smugglers, across the border). As with all Sayles’ work there is a political context to what is happening, but *Go for Sisters* is essentially a character study of the three leads, the choices and circumstances which made them each what they are, and in Freddy’s case, a chance to get back in the game and do something useful at the end of a ruined career - and it’s beautifully done. How to be good - if you can - in a bad world is the subtext, and Sayles clearly admires people who try.

*Go for Sisters* is in one sense an update on Sayles’ earlier and arguably greatest movie "Lone Star" (1996), also set amidst the endemic criminality of the US/Mexican border. Nothing has changed, except for the worst. Chinese gangs are now involved in the people smuggling. The border towns are seedy and lawless, the people desperate, the getting of money all that matters. Life is cheap. Bernice is brave and reckless in pursuit of her son - who may or may not be a seriously bad guy himself, neither she nor we know until the end – and everyone, Suarez most of all, is sooner or later put in harm’s way. It would spoil things to say what the film’s final observation on the hard-ass parole officer is, but there is one.

As with most of his previous films, John Sayles wrote, directed and produced the whole thing, with help from Edward James Olmos’s production company. Olmos also plays Freddy Suarez, a great late-career part for an old guy. Two relatively unknown actors play Bernice (Lisa Gay Hamilton) and Fontayne (Yolanda Ross), to perfection. When the film first came out in 2013 in the USA it was treated as nondescript and dismissed by the late Roger Ebert as being like a film from the nineteen seventies, as if this was per se a bad thing. Don’t believe it. Sayles does not do nondescript. It’s a gem.
References

Nellis, M. (2012) Representations of Probation Officers in Film, Television Drama and Novels 1948-2012 *British Journal of Community Justice* 10 (2) pp.5-23