



Timothy Olyphant, Josh Brolin and Sarah Wynter in *Coastlines*.

GULF COAST CRIME AND CROSS-PURPOSES

Coastlines

review by George Sax

In *Coastlines*, the veteran independent filmmaker Victor Nunez (*Ulee's Gold*, *Ruby in Paradise*, *Gal Young 'Un*) seems to have been playing around with the fundamental elements of an Elmore Leonard novel, and of countless Hollywood crime dramas (including a few based on Leonard's books). The result induces some initial hope and some residual sympathy, but it's also likely to produce a sense that Nunez's latest work—it's being released by the Emerging Cinema project after a delay of almost four years—lacks sufficient focus and impact.

As it begins, Sonny Mann (Timothy Olyphant) is arriving back in his Florida-Panhandle hometown after a three-year stretch in the joint for drug smuggling. His unscheduled release takes those who have known him by surprise. "Ain't you out too soon?" says his taciturn father (Scott Wilson).

That's certainly the reaction of his former criminal associates, the Vances, uncle and nephew (William Forsythe and Josh Lucas). They're a big deal in this burg, in both legitimate and illegal commerce. Since they owe Sonny \$200,000 for taking the fall and keeping his mouth shut, and since he declines an offer to rejoin their expanding enterprises, his return isn't a particularly happy one for them.

Just as surprised but a lot more welcoming are Dave and Ann (Josh Brolin and Sarah Wynter), friends of his youth. But their warm interest in Sonny, while sincere, isn't without some ambivalence. Dave's a local deputy sheriff and Ann is a former flame. These three re-establish their little circle of mutual regard, but this geometry is gradually altered into something with angles, containing secrets.

Before this happens, however, violence explodes—literally. It is, in fact, this sudden brutal violation that sets in motion the latent conflicts of interest among the three friends.

Despite the basic crime-noir structure of his film, it's obvious that Nunez is primarily interested in these relationships. And,

to a sometimes disabling extent, he seems to be at cross-purposes with himself. It's partly a problem of emphases and partly of tone. *Coastlines* hovers around the intimate interactions and solitary retreats of its main characters, but it must occasionally interrupt its examination of feelings—expressed, hinted at and suppressed—for the exposition of the crime story. These parts of the storyline punctuate the film's otherwise muted action and leisurely pacing. Nunez devotes more time to the trio's shifting alignments and emotions than to the crime melodrama, but, in the end, he doesn't do enough justice to either.

Sonny's conflict with the Vances comes off as rudimentary and mundane, an excuse borrowed from genre film and literature. But the friends' individual and joint experiences of their renewed relationships aren't quite rendered with enough details and resonance either. Despite Nunez's sympathy and restraint, this part of *Coastlines* is a little too reminiscent of other films and fiction too.

Olyphant's boyishly softened, masculine features and quarterback's frame are a good matchup with his character, and the actor manages to suggest the still rakish, but increasingly uncertain tenor of Sonny's personality. Ann is a little too much like a device to link the two men, and Wynter can't overcome this limitation.

Dave is actually the most interesting creation. His essential decency and his personal and professional integrity don't protect him, ultimately, from being betrayed, and from a not-entirely-persuasive denouement that Nunez doesn't really justify. Brolin comes close to bringing all this off.

It's not clear that the writer-director's inspiration was ever solid enough to rework the generic materials he has appropriated. He may lack the right kind of temperament to transform them into something more tense and probing.

You can find yourself wishing *Coastlines* worked out better than it did.

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