

Matewan

Written by John Sayles

Sequence 1

1920. Coal miners in West Virginia. Fourteen-year-old Danny tells Sephus that the price of coal has gone down to 90 cents a tonne.

Voiceover: “The miners was trying to bring the union to West Virginia. The coal operators and their gun thugs was set on keeping ’em out.”

“We done it Mama!” Danny tells his mother, Elma. We’re gonna have the union!”

Sequence 2

A train moves through a West Virginia forest. Joe Kenehan is a passenger. The train stops. Joe walks to the door and looks out. He sees a group of black men, including “Few Clothes” Johnson, being removed from the train and set upon by club-wielding white men.

Sequence 3

At Matewan station, Joe meets Bridie.

Joe walks to a boarding house run by Elma.

A representative of the Stone Mountain Coal Company explains the working conditions to a group of miners, the same black men who were attacked.

At the boarding house, as Joe talks to Elma, Danny and Hillard Elkins appear. Elkins was part of the group that attacked the black men, and has a broken nose. Joe helps him.

At dinner, Danny tells Joe: “That superintendent at Stone Mountain, he said he’d go broke before he let one union sumbitch so much as step into his coalmine.”

Sephus shows up at the boarding house. “I come to have a word with your new boarder, if he don’t mind.”

Sequence 4

Evening. Joe and Sephus walk to an illicit meeting in town. Before they let Joe enter, he must answer a series of questions about left-wing politics, as put to him by Lively. At the meeting, the miners talk about their unfair treatment by the company.

In church, Hardshell Preacher talks from the pulpit to the assembled about the evils of socialism. Danny watches.

Few Clothes, watched by chief of police Sid Hatfield, walks to the meeting.

“I got business with the union,” Few Clothes tells the assembled at the meeting.

“Why don’t you go back where you come from?” he is told.

“They told me that they was jobs here.”

“Go home nigger. God damn scab.”

“You watch your mouth peckerwood! I been called nigger, and I can’t help that’s the way white folks is. But I ain’t never been called no scab! And I ain’t fixin’ to start up now. I’ll go tonne for tonne loading coal with any man here. And when I do, I expects the same dollar for the same work.”

“You want to be treated like men?” asks Joe of the assembled men who don’t consider Few Clothes one of them. “You want to be treated fair? You ain’t men to that coal company. You’re equipment, like a shovel, a gondola car, a hunk of wood brace. They’ll use you til you wear out or you break down or you’re buried under a slate fall, and then they’ll get a new one. And they don’t care what colour it is or where it comes from. It doesn’t matter how much coal you can load or how long your family has lived on this land. If you stand alone you’re just so much shit to those people. You think this man is your enemy? Huh? This is a worker. Any union keeps this man out ain’t a union, it’s a god damn club. They got you fighting white against coloured, native against foreign, holler against holler, when you know there ain’t but two sides to this world: them that work and them that don’t. You work. They don’t. That’s all you’ve got to know about the enemy. You say you got guns. Well, I know that you all are brave men, and I know you could shoot it out with the company if you had to. But the coal company don’t want this union, the state government don’t want it, the federal government don’t want it. And they’re all of them just waiting for an excuse to come down and crush us to nothing. Fellas, we’re in a hole full of coal gas here. The tiniest spark at the wrong time is going to be the end of us. So we got to pick away at this situation slow and careful. We got to organize and build support. We got to work together. Together! Till they can’t get their coal out of the ground without us ’cause we’re a union, ’cause we’re the workers, damn it! And we take care of each other.”

“How can we shut the mines down if we don’t dynamite them?”

“The men walk out. All of them!”

“Fat chance.”

“And every man that walks out on his own steam, we take into the union.”

“All the dagos and all the colored?”

“That’s what a union is, fellas. You better get used to it.”

In church, Danny preaches a sermon.

Joe and Sephus visit with local Italian workers, including Fausto and Rosario, and tell them about the union.

Danny continues, advocating for a union, to the annoyance of Hardshell Preacher.

Hatfield talks to Joe. "I take care of my people," he says. "You bring them trouble, you're a dead man."

Someone writes a letter to Mr. Felts, reporting on the situation in Matewan, about Joe: "I am sure he is a Red. Send help immediately."

Sequence 5

Hickey and Griggs, of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, get off the train at Matewan. Bridie watches them. Hickey asks if she has seen anyone new in town. "Fella named Joe Kenehan show up?" asks Griggs.

Joe and Elma talk. "Look here, mister, you're going to be moving on. Win or lose, you'll walk on out of this holler. We got to stay here."

"I intend to leave a union when I go."

Hickey and Griggs show up at the boarding house and insist on rooms. Joe moves out.

Sequence 6

The black and Italian miners prepare for a shift.

Sequence 7

Hickey and Griggs attempt to evict a family from company property in the town. Hatfield intervenes and deputises a group of men, who run off to arm themselves. Hickey and Griggs back down.

Sequence 8

Evening. The miners vote to keep all scabs out of the mines the following day. Danny, after arguing with Hickey and Griggs at the dinner table, walks outside and sees the scabs walking up to the mine. He runs and tells Joe and Sephus. "I seen the lights on the hill. They're sneaking them in for a night shift." The miners run up to confront the scabs. In a standoff, following the lead of Few Clothes and Fausto, all the black and Italian miners put down their tools. "All of you union men," shouts Joe, "let's welcome our new brothers!"

Sequence 9

The miners build an encampment. Rosario and Mrs Elkins argue.

Sequence 10

Hatfield meets with Hickey and Griggs, who try to buy him off, but Hatfield is having none of it.

Sequence 11

Evening at the encampment. As Joe talks to the miners about how the strike committee functions, the camp comes under fire. The following morning, at the stream, blood is washed from clothes.

Joe looks for the miners, who are all at a meeting led by Lively. He explains: “What I’m saying is, unions is fine for some things, but for other things, a man’s got to go on his own.”

Hickey, Griggs and armed Baldwin-Felts agents show up at the camp insisting that all company property be handed over to them. Joe is knocked to the ground. Armed mountain men appear and frighten away Hickey, Griggs and the agents.

As Joe continues to look for the miners, Lively shows Danny how to build a bomb, then sends him off to dynamite the mine.

Evening. An explosion at the mine. Hickey, Griggs and the agents confront armed miners, including Sephus, who is wounded in the shoot-out, which kills one miner. Injured, Sephus hides as Hickey and Griggs talk with Lively, who turns out to be a spy for the company.

Bridie writes a love letter to Joe, which Lively says he will give to Joe.

Sequence 12

Lively tells Bridie that Joe read the letter to the miners, and lies to her about how he embarrassed her in public. He also tells her that Joe is a spy for the company. “I need for you to help me, Bridie,” says Lively. “And sometimes you got to tell a little bit of a lie just to get the truth across.”

The miners go see Bridie. She tells them that Joe raped her. Lively shows the miners a letter addressed to Joe from the Baldwin-Felts Agency.

At the boarding house, Danny overhears Hickey and Griggs plotting to kill Joe.

Lively and the miners draw straws, deciding who will kill Joe. Few Clothes is chosen, and he goes to talk with Joe while the miners attend a prayer meeting. Eventually they realise that Joe is no spy, and Lively flees.

Sequence 13

Union activity spreads across the state. In the camp, Rosario and Mrs Elkins become friends.

Sequence 14

Evening. While Danny and Hillard are stealing coal, Ekins is caught by agents and killed.

Sequence 15

More agents show up in Matewan the following day, planning to evict the striking miners.

Evening in the camp. The miners prepare for what is to come.

“I came here to help,” Joe tells Danny.

“Sure you did,” says Danny. “First people come here to help us with some money. Next we know, we got no land. Then they say they’re going to help us with a job and a place to live, and they stick us in some damn coal camp and let us dig out their mines. Now you come here to help us bring in ‘the new day.’ Well, Hillard ain’t going to see no ‘new day.’ We had about as much help as we can stand. We got to take care of ourselves.”

“We got to take care of each other,” says Joe.

Sequence 16

Fausto wakes Joe the following morning, telling him that all the men have already gone to town, where they will confront the Baldwin-Felts agents. Joe runs into town, but is too late. The gun battle has already begun. Many are killed, including Hickey and Griggs, and Joe.

A final voiceover tells that Sid Hatfield was later murdered by Baldwin-Agents and Lively. “Wasn’t even a trial on that one. That were the start of the great coalfield war, and us miners took the worst of it, like Joe said we would. ‘It’s just one big union the whole world over,’ Joe Kenehan used to say. And from the day of the Matewan massacre, that’s what I preached. That was my religion. We buried Joe Kenehan with our own. My mama, she thought he wouldn’t never stay, but now he’s with us for always, laying up here in these West Virginia hills.”