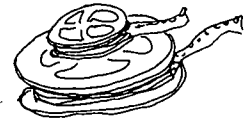


FILM REVIEW



The Shawshank Redemption

The Shawshank Redemption is a story about a loving friendship between two men who find redemption in the unwavering confidence and devotion they give each other. Although the film plays on one level as a standard prison tale, with the requisite scenes of brutality, rape and sadistic guards, the director, Frank Darabont, signals that the movie is not an action cliché with the song accompanying the opening credits, "If I Didn't Care." *The Shawshank Redemption* is based on a novella by Stephen King, but it is surprisingly free (with one dramatic exception of the prison escape of one of the protagonists) of gimmicks and credulity-straining plot devices. Instead the story builds a quiet momentum as two men in prison, one innocent. Andy (finely acted by Tim Robbins), and one guilty, Red, (played with great depth and restraint by Morgan Freeman) survive the horrors of a 20 year plus confinement by demanding the most in courage and self respect from each other. As the friendship grows, so does their self knowledge. Each saves the other from the worst in his nature: Red confronts Andy with his icy disconnection from all things human after his false conviction of murdering his wife; Andy pulls Red out of the despair accompanying Red's belief that he is an "institutionalized man" and cannot survive the

seemingly empty freedom of parole life.

The film is a narrative about hope and despair, about the power of institutionalization to drain the spirit from those held inside; the prison setting is a metaphor for any institutionalized setting, most aptly a mental hospital. In prison hope is more feared than any other emotion; the pain of its dashing is felt every year by Red when his parole is denied (and only granted after 40 years). Only Andy, restored by Red's friendship and by the solidarity of other male prisoners, seems able to hold on to hope, secretly carving a tunnel out of his cell over the years. His pathway to freedom is mirrored by the prison library and education program he creates to offer another way out of prison to his fellow inmates. While Red's goals for himself are far less lofty than Andy's, who dreams of running a little hotel on a beach in Mexico; his triumph is more profound: he forgives himself for his youthful crime and accepts his years in prison as payment rendered in full.

The movie offers a not-so-oblique commentary on the dehumanizing reality of prison society. Denied the structures that support sanity in the outside world, the prisoners create a compelling virtual reality of their own, with brutalizing systems of reward and punishment, hierarchies of honor and shame,

By Mary Ann Jimenez

Mary Ann Jimenez, Ph.D. is professor, Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach.

to hedge against the madness that an unadorned confrontation of their circumstances would encourage. The inevitable fruitlessness of so-called crime policies which would increase the number of prisoners and the terms of prison sentences ("three strikes and you're out") is a strong subtext of the film. Few possibilities for rehabilitation emerge in this prison and the one that does, Andy's library, comes to a disastrous end, reinforcing the sense that cruelty inevitably shadows hopefulness in prison life. The darkness of the film is underscored by the absence of women in any significant role. The men's struggle for dominance, survival and mental endurance seems more difficult and raw without the counterpoint of women's voices and presence.

The film's photography is outstanding; scenes inside the prison are bathed in shadows, as if to reflect the psychological and spiritual darkness gripping the prisoners. With the exception of two stereotypical characters (one a sadistic prison guard and the other a predatory prisoner leading repeated gang rapes of Andy), the actors create their characters with great tenderness and subtlety. Particularly fine is the portrayal of the prison warden by Bob Gunton, as a man living on a razor edge of control, perfectly mirroring the oppressive control under which the prisoners live. The rage of the warden is more palpable than that of those imprisoned at Shawshank, his hatred seems the unwitting reflection of the

inhumanity of prison life. His character cannot be redeemed because he has no talent for human connection.

Red is the warden's counterpart in the parallel world of prisoners and prison officials; his hatred drains away as the years chronicled by the story accumulate. A leader among his fellows, Red knows the pain implicit in hope. Whereas Andy was not guilty and escaped to live out the life he always had coming to him; Red was guilty of murder; he spends his years in prison silently regretting the senseless crime he committed when he was young. His tenderness toward Andy, his fatherly concern for all the prisoners and his quiet humor, offer the film's counterpoint to the grimness of prison life. In the end it is Andy who offers Red the chance to remake himself, to shed the "institutionalized man." That Red emerges from prison after 40 years and ultimately eagerly embraces hope is the redemption promised the viewer in the film's title. □

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