

⇒ What issues does *The Shawshank Redemption* raise?

The 1994 classic prison drama of Frank Darabont made one think of several themes in life worth pondering upon, as all films of any note do. The 136 minutes of jailhouse tension ranged from hopelessness and despair to hope and salvation, encompassing a large spectrum of human emotions.

Above all, the film offers the straw of hope amid so much negativity for us to climb out of the river of doom. It offers the flame of hope. Nineteen years of imprisonment, suffering, bestiality and bleakness surround the protagonist, Andy Dufresne, unjustly incarcerated for murdering his wife and her lover, Glenn Quentin. But he soldiers on with a small rock hammer to carve a passage out of the concrete walls and escapes through a sewage pipe to freedom. Likewise, Red, after 40 years of imprisonment, is redeemed by his friend, Andy, who had given him hope of being let out: "Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies," says Andy in his letter under the obsidian rock in the wall near Buxton. And Andy offers hope to another inmate, Tommy Williams, who is coached through School Equivalency examinations by Andy and sits the papers, only to screw the sheets up in despair during the test, so frustrated is he by his puny efforts. But Andy unscrews the papers and posts them, and Tommy scores C+. So for three people in the prison, there is a possibility of salvation if they will only stick at it.

Hand in hand with this goes the issue of perseverance, which the film emphasises. In *Shawshank* for twenty years, Andy meticulously chips away at his cell's concrete walls and burrows a way out and he also invents a fictitious character, Rendell Stevens to siphon off all Mr Norton's scams into his own pocket, which he collects from the banks on his escape. His scheming is cleverly concealed even from his best mate, Red, by the Rita Hayworth poster, silence and the rock hammer, which no-one in their right minds could have conceived as chiselling a way through the walls of the prison, so minute was it. All this takes twenty years almost, testimony to the man's stickability.

The escape is only the consequence of very careful thought so the film bears eminent testimony to the rewards offered to someone who plans meticulously. Andy had first to inveigle himself into the confidence of the Warden, by first doing the guards' tax returns and so proving how adept he was at his calling of finance. This led to him being given charge of the prison accounts, which inevitably led to Andy becoming aware of how Norton was feathering his own nest through kickbacks. This then led to him creating a fictitious person, Randall Stevens, who could receive this money instead of Norton. Side by side with this came the physical effort over twenty years of tunnelling out of the cell behind a harmless poster, using a smuggled in rock hammer. In addition, he had to have a suit made to impersonate Randall when he came to the Maine banks to uplift the takings. And then there was the obtaining of plastic bags, envelopes, stamps and six foot of rope. He was also dependent on a thunderstorm to mask his blows onto the sewage pipe once he was through the cell wall. All the result of very careful planning. The plan's success is heavily dependent on this: nothing is left to chance. The biggest hurdle was not taking Red into his confidence. Even Norton was convinced that Red must have known beforehand of the escape intent.

The film raises the point about the miscarriage of justice. All the evidence: the broken Bourbon bottle, with Andy's fingerprints on it, the failure to find the gun in the Royal River, footprints at the scene of the crime, the motive of revenge for unfaithfulness in marriage, tyre marks - all succeed in putting the wrong man in prison. The police failed to detect any link to the real murderer, Elmo Blatch. So one is led to question cases such as Mark Lundy and Scott Watson, where the evidence points to the accused but which may conceal the real culprit. The public feel that the police want to end the case and pin the crime on a convenient suspect, when a little more detective work might expose the criminal: police competence is thus questioned.

Brooks Hatlen and Red lead the audience to think about how a prison so inures and hardens a person that survival on the outside becomes impossible. Brooks confesses that the traffic is now so quick in comparison to when he was around outside in the 1900's: "The world went and got itself in a big, damn hurry," he writes to his mates in prison. The complaint from a supermarket customer that he failed to double wrap her purchases, resulting in her spilling the lot on the sidewalk, has him distressed. "I don't like it here. I'm tired of being afraid all the time. I've decided not to stay." He commits suicide. As Red says, "He's just institutionalised. The man's been here 50 years. This is all he knows. In here, he's an important man. Outside, he's nothing-just a used up con with arthritis in both hands...These walls are funny. First you hate them, then you get used to them. Enough time passes, it gets so you depend on them. That's 'institutionalised.' They send you here for life and that's exactly what they take." Even Red, once he is allowed out on parole, finds it hard to survive. He is ready to commit another crime in order to be let back in, so nervous is he at the same supermarket and in the same half-way house as Brooks. "Only one thing stops me. A promise I made to Andy." So many criminals today re-offend in order to be "safe" back in prison that the public is considering how to acclimatise felons to the life outside so that re-entry will be less stressful.

This close proximity to each other over many years not only leads to dependence on the system. It also breeds close friendship. Red discovers true friendship in the figure of Andy: confession that he really

murdered his wife by being so distant, even though he did not pull the trigger, is wrung out of him to his closest friend, Red. Anti-social Brooks finds his soul mate in Jake, the crow. Bogs builds up a circle of mates in his "Sisters." These are just three of the alliances that the film identifies. Institutions that closet people together for long periods of time, particularly under conditions of suffering: prison, the forces and school, lead to the closest types of mateship humans can experience. One has only to observe reunions at Gallipoli, Cassino or Normandy of veterans to see how shared experiences of strife bring people together.

It also breeds many negative aspects, one of which the film does touch upon at times though not portraying too graphically. This is the horror and pain. Andy is subject to homosexual advances on his arrival in the cafeteria and the showers and is forced into several compromising situations. The beatings carry on for years. The men are stripped naked and showered under pressure on entering and forced into prison clothes, so are dehumanised. Red confessed at one stage that his harmonica playing, "didn't seem to make sense." Brooks has never known gifts to be made to the library, so deadened and impervious to finer things in life are the people. Chubby Fat Ass is beaten into a pulp by Hadley on his first night and left to die, but the murderer escapes unpunished. Tommy Williams is murdered on the Warden's orders. Hadley nearly throws Andy off the roof. Norton steals thousands. Andy's solitary confinement is portrayed, with the darkness and meagre diet. So prison's inhumane environment is amply shown, demeaning the inmates to becoming zombies.

Another negative aspect of the prison surrounds that emerges from the film is the hypocrisy that breeds as prolifically as vermin. Norton goes on about living by the Good Book and reading the Bible every day. He has his wife's religious sampler hiding his safe with its ill-gotten gains, "His Judgement Cometh and That Right Soon." Yet, despite these outward trappings of morality, he siphons off thousands from prison funds into his own coffers. Building contracts in the scheme to acclimatise inmates to the work outside by giving them jobs on the outside are secured only by kickbacks to the Warden. Andy takes the hypocrisy one step closer and hides the rock hammer inside a Bible. Supposed to be exemplars of propriety, Hadley and Norton beat and shoot prisoners to death if it serves their end. No retribution is ever forthcoming. Prisons, supposed to be protecting the community from ill, are in fact harbouring criminality, creating an environment in which wrong doing can be perpetrated scot-free. As Andy confessed in the library to Red, it took life in prison to teach him to steal!

The film touches on the power of music. When Andy smuggles a record of Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro* onto the prison's public address system and plays it over the whole compound, Red says it was, "something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words and it makes your heart ache because of it." All are transfixed, men in the workshop, men picking stones, even Wiley the guard reading his comic in the toilet. The influence of music as a powerful, uplifting force is emphasised. Andy questions Red, "That's the beauty of music. They can't take that away from you. Haven't you ever felt that way about music?" Andy gives Red a present of another harmonica as a symbol of its uplifting power. And the music score of the film itself epitomises the invigorating influence on the emotions of strident chords, particularly when Andy escapes through the sewage pipe and at the end on the beach as the two re-unite.

Hence Darabont's epic prison escape saga raised many important issues that are central to life: that we always look on the bright side of life and never allow the negative influences to pull us down. The negative influences are overpowering, especially when incarcerated in an institution, but as a well-known novel expresses it, "Courage, mon ami, le diable est mort." Courage, my friend, the devil is dead. The film is not only sending a message of hope for the prisoners, it is also sending a message of positive thinking to the audience.

quality prison movies. The profundity of its issues, the quality of its script, the skillful use of time and camera manipulation and its overriding positivism lift it far above the usual quality of such films. Made in 1994, one can see it being re-screened on television for decades to come.

⇒ **To what lessons in life does *The Shawshank Redemption* point?**

Any film worth its salt contains matters pertaining to life which are valuable in pondering over and Frank Darabont's opus, clearly the fruit of many years studying prison existence, has many morals affecting all of us.

Andy Dufresne's story highlights the fallibility of the law and is grist to the mill for those wanting to abolish the death penalty. For, as Elmo Blatch demonstrates later on in the film, it was he who killed Andy's wife and her lover in the course of a simple burglary gone wrong, not the man "they pinned it on." So Mr Dufresne has been committed to two life sentences, back to back, for a crime he did not commit. Had the penalty for Andy been death, this miscarriage of justice would have been even more heinous.

Heinousness is touched on frequently during the 136 minutes of screen time. It is the foulness perpetrated within the confines of an enclosed institution. Hadley beats Chubby Fat Ass to death. Andy is locked away for two months in solitary for merely wanting to be exonerated from the crime he has been accused of committing. Norton is venal in the worst of ways because he has dictatorial powers inside a prison. As Andy tells Red, "There's a river of dirty money running through this place. He's got scams you haven't even dreamed of. Kickbacks on his kickbacks." Andy is beaten within an ounce of his life. Bogs has to leave the prison, so mutilated has he been by a frenzied Hadley. And there are frequent references to homosexuality.

The horror is magnified by the prisoners' acceptance of it. The terror is so unbridled that they take it as normal. Just as the concentration camp inmates threw Jewish corpses into the graves, so do the prisoners accept the bestial advances of perverted Sisters, eat inferior food, dumbly take delousing naked, see newcomers beaten to death and blindly are resigned to a monotony of reading matter.

The men have become institutionalised. Their day-to-day lives have been so regulated for decades that they can no longer stand by themselves. Red finds himself asking the supermarket manager if he can go to the toilet. Brooks, terrified by being released, attempts to cut Heywood's throat, so he will be recommitted. He fails, is released and commits suicide. He was afraid on the outside, preferring the routine in prison. Prison was a safe haven for them.

In that safe haven, surrounded by tall walls, victimised by arrogant and contemptuous guards, they formed a bond of friendship because they were all in the same boat. Andy asked for three beers for each of his co-workers on the licence plate roof. Red obtained posters of pin-up girls to decorate Andy's cell walls

and after Andy's release from solitary, all the inmates find rocks for him to carve his chess pieces. They look out for each other while smuggling items past the guards. A camaraderie founded on togetherness surrounded by hostility lasts a long time. One only has to witness the old ones returning year after year to the war remembrances.

Another admirable trait of humanity shown by the prisoners is the homesickness demonstrated on one occasion by Chubby Fat Ass, newly arrived. "I want my mum," he pleads, "I wanna go home!" The pull of domesticity, Mother and home is powerful and overcomes all else, causing his death, so implanted is it from the very breast.

In contrast to mother love is another relationship not so well engineered, that of man and wife. In the only study of adult links in marriage undertaken by the film, Andy confesses that "My wife used to say I'm a hard man to know." "God, I loved her. I just didn't know how to show it, that's all." He tells Red that he killed her in a sense because he hid his true feelings, so she leapt into the arms of someone who would show emotions. This uncovering of deep feelings between mates happens again when Red tells him what he has probably told no-one else, that he really did commit a horrible crime. So true feelings are expressed between real friends in the intimacy of closeness.

The two also share a sense of hope. When Andy lets Mozart free over the compound, it is the equivalent of showing a release from confines, a blithe spirit, "something they can't get to." A tribute to the force of music. Red says he's mad. "Hope can drive a man insane." Later on, Andy dangles before Red the expectation of living in ease, running a tourist boat at Zihuatanejo, after escape. "Get busy livin' or get busy dyin'," offers Andy. One must always live in expectation of better things or else give up the ghost.

A strong message in the film is that of determination. It overcomes all odds when in the mind of a resolute individual such as Andy. He suffers nineteen years of incarceration during which he painstakingly tunnels through his cell wall and empties the dirt out in the yard. He uses a tiny rock hammer, which Red says would take 600 years to burrow through with. Andy creates a fictitious character, Randall Stevens, to siphon off all Norton's ill-gotten gains into Andy's pocket, and he times his hammer blows with claps of thunder. Red always thought Andy was a cool customer and his prognostication is proven right.

Another strong message is the misinterpretation of happenings - how people often jump to the wrong conclusions. Andy falls into this trap when Brooks asks for the maggot in Andy's porridge. Andy thinks he wants to eat it, supplementing his diet, until the baby bird, Jake is seen in his pocket. When Andy asks for six foot of rope, Red thinks Andy wants it for suicide, but we realise that it is to be used for the escape. So Captain Heywood misunderstands Andy when the prisoner asks him, "Do you trust your wife?" Heywood leaps to the conclusion that Andy thinks she is unfaithful, so is about to throw him off the roof until Andy explains that he meant can she be trusted to hold your money for you.

When Norton disdainfully gives the pie that Ned's wife offered to Norton as a thank you for saving a job for her husband, he inadvertently raises an issue much talked about today, male chauvinism. "Woman can't bake for shit," he says; she is a useless cook, in other words. He, therefore, elevates himself to be a judge on the culinary arts! The incident also reveals more about Norton; it demonstrates his tendency to make sweeping generalisations and to categorise people on this basis. If you are in Shawshank, you are a criminal and therefore need to be treated as one. He rejects the despised pie, but is happy to give it to the men; they are lesser beings.

These are just some of the issues that the film raises in the course of the two hour prison saga. Because it moves slowly and the men have all the time in the world, they plumb the depths of human suffering and their reactions to it and one encounters profound matters many of the action movies currently in vogue gloss over. *The Shawshank Redemption* is a fine study of mankind and its reaction to certain circumstances and although prison is a rare phenomenon for most folk, the film touches on many issues close to our hearts.