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**FILM REVIEW; Prison Tale by Stephen King Told Gently, Believe It or Not**

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There are standard ways to stage a prison film and standard ways to tell a story by Stephen King. But "The Shawshank Redemption," based on a King novella and set in the correctional institution of the title, succeeds in avoiding the familiar.

Without a single riot scene or horrific effect, it tells a slow, gentle story of camaraderie and growth, with an ending that abruptly finds poetic justice in what has come before. The writer and director, Frank Darabont, tells this tale with a surprising degree of loving care.

There are times when "The Shawshank Redemption" comes dangerously close to sounding one of those "triumph of the human spirit" notes. But most of it is eloquently restrained. Despite an excess of voice-over narration and inspirational music, Mr. Darabont's film has a genuine dignity that holds the interest. It is helped greatly by fine, circumspect performances from Morgan Freeman as a rueful lifer named Red and Tim Robbins as Andy, the new kid on the cellblock. The film spans nearly 20 years of friendship between these two.

When Andy is convicted of his wife's murder, the judge pronounces him "a particularly remorseless and icy man." He sustains that chill when he first arrives at Shawshank, remaining aloof from other inmates even when those inmates threaten him with physical harm. "I wish I could tell you that Andy fought the good fight," says Red, who knows Andy has been gang-raped by fellow prisoners, in one of the film's only halfway-brutal episodes. "I wish I could tell you that, but prison is no fairy-tale world."

Needless to say, the heroes of such stories usually do succeed in defending themselves, at least when Hollywood is telling the fairy tale. But "The Shawshank Redemption" has its own brand of iconoclasm, with Mr. Darabont's direction as quiet, purposeful and secretive as Andy is himself.

Eventually Andy begins to fit in, especially after he wows the guards with skills left over from his pre-prison banking career. From the first time he advises one guard to make a one-time-only tax-free gift to his wife, Andy gets a new lease on life as "a convicted murderer who provides sound financial planning."

Andy does special fiscal favors for the warden. ("You know, the funny thing is, on the outside I was an honest man, straight as an arrow," he says about this. "I had to come to prison to be a crook.") He also makes the occasional dramatic gesture, like commandeering the prison's loudspeaker and playing a Mozart aria for all his fellow inmates. The film has a tendency to wax romantic at such moments, but more often it sustains an intelligent reserve.

Mr. Freeman is so quietly impressive here that there's reason to wish Red's role had more range. As written, he spends his time observing Andy fondly and describing prison life. But Mr. Freeman's commanding presence makes him a much stronger figure than that. Mr. Freeman is especially moving when he suggests how dependent Red has become on the prison walls that give shape to his life. Even so, Red has kept his ruefulness. "Only guilty man in Shawshank," he jokes about himself.

Mr. Robbins has the trickier role of someone whose still waters run deep, but whose experience doesn't add up until an exposition-packed denouement. (The film's swift, enjoyably farfetched closing scenes are a sharp reminder of who is the author of this story, after all.) Andy's is the more subdued role, but Mr. Robbins plays it intensely, and he ages effectively from newcomer to father figure during the story. One of Andy's projects is improving the prison library, which once contained nothing but the equivalent of books by Stephen King.

To raise funds for this undertaking, Andy is steady and patient, writing weekly letters to state officials until he gets what he wants. Mr. Darabont, a screenwriter making an impressive directorial debut, works in much the same quietly persistent way. "The Shawshank Conspiracy" takes shape slowly and carefully, displaying an overall subtlety that's surprising in a movie of this genre. In the end, like Andy and Red, it gets to where it wanted to go.

"The Shawshank Redemption" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes profanity and occasional violence, including a scene that discreetly suggests homosexual rape.

THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION Written and directed by Frank Darabont, based on the novella "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption," by Stephen King; director of photography, Roger Deakins; edited by Richard Francis-Bruce; music by Tom Newman; production designer, Terence Marsh; produced by Niki Marvin; released by Columbia Pictures. Running time: 142 minutes. This film is rated R. WITH: Morgan Freeman (Red), Tim Robbins (Andy), Gil Bellows (Tommy), Clancy Brown (Captain Hadley), Bob Gunton (Warden Norton), Mark Rolston (Bogs Diamond), William Sadler (Heywood) and James Whitmore (Brooks Hatlen).

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