

## Dead Man Walking

The expression “dead man walking” is prison lingo for a condemned man going to his execution. In Tim Robbins’ film of the same name, the phrase is barked out in a jambalaya accent by a Louisiana prison guard as killer Matthew “Mattie” Poncelet (Sean Penn) is led the “last mile” with Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon), his spiritual advisor, at his side. This sequence, and the wrenching scene of execution by lethal injection which follows it, cap a splendid movie which turns out to be much less about capital punishment than it is about sounding the depths of two very different souls.

Actor/director Robbins, who also wrote the screenplay based on the real Sister Prejean’s memoir, has everywhere avoided both the bombastic and the facile in a story ever ripe for the cliché. He has avoided it by a tight yet dense script, by superb control of his fine cast, and by showing everywhere the kind of laudable restraint--so rare in American movies these days--which makes the inherent drama of the prison-and-execution story that much more potent. Call it The Robbins Redemption.

Sister Prejean works in a poor New Orleans parish and writes to Death Row inmates at Louisiana’s State Penitentiary. One letter leads to prisoner Poncelet requesting her as his spiritual counselor. With no training in such work and reluctant to get involved at all, she screws up her Christian courage to eventually encounter the vile, apparently irredeemable Poncelet, a sort of three-way cross between a racist hick, Elvis, and the Devil. He claims his innocence in the killing of a pair of local teenagers, and the sister doggedly does everything she can to get his case reheard, including recruiting capable, homespun lawyer Hilton Barber (Capitol Hill neighbor Robert Prosky).

As Helen tries to further Poncelet’s case, she comes into contact with the families of the murdered kids, specifically Earl Delacroix (Raymond J. Barry), the father of the boy, and the Percys (played by R. Lee Ermey and Celia Weston), parents of the young girl. All are outraged that she--especially as a sister--should take on the case of a man they consider a beast, and Sister Prejean, stung by their anger and pain, attempts to understand their loss, too, at great cost to her own already troubled peace of mind. Poncelet proves manipulative and coarse, his own worst enemy (he goes on TV as a fan of Hitler and a holocaust-denier, for example), yet Helen comes to see him not so much as despicable as another wretched soul--a “son of God”--who needs her faith.

Mattie, meanwhile, comes to see her as the only person he can really talk to, and when it is clear there will be no commutation of his sentence, the tough guy appeals for her continued presence--and confesses. She sticks by him--to the very end.

As indicated above, Tim Robbins avoids making *Dead Man Walking* a thesis picture. Instead, he concentrates on this single vivid case (actually, a composite of two real prisoners) which stands for nothing outside itself. To it he has added real complexity, especially in handling Sister Prejean’s dealings with the victims’ families. Still, the overall focus is kept tightly on his two disparate lead characters, slowly tracing their common ground, and two better acting jobs would be hard to find.

Sean Penn’s Mattie is the more “actorish” turn, a classic po’ white trash type assayed by a sophisticated professional, but Penn (with Robbins’ great assistance) keeps discovering new angles to this pugnacious bugger. His crackpot political ideas,

for example, are not products of a considered ideology, but rather the explicable, automatic rejection of authority by one always put upon. Another dimension of Poncelet is shown in a wonderful scene where he last visits with his family and reminisces with two younger brothers. Penn reveals here the ease of life-long brother bonding--which he has not revealed elsewhere--while never losing a gossamer layer of tension. Clearly we have seen Mattie as one kind of caged animal (and not only in prison)--but not as a beast.

As Sister Prejean, Susan Sarandon stakes another claim as one of the very best film actresses we have. The surprise is how vulnerable and touching her character is, this from an actress who we are used to seeing as a strong, omnicompetent woman (*Thelma and Louise*, *Lorenzo's Oil*, *The Client*, *Little Women*). Here, she exudes an unadorned spirituality which perfectly suits the character, yet she remains tentative and nervous, ever worried that she has taken on something beyond her ken. She is throughout not so much a conventionally "strong" woman as a steadfast one.

The supporting roles are also classy, all played with a low-key naturalism wonderful to behold. When was the last time you saw a motion picture about any kind of prison life that didn't have at least one warder, guard, or staffer who was a swine or a sadist? In *Dead Man Walking*, prison personnel--while hardly featured--are just folks, doing their job, as if they were recruited from some incisive documentary.

So much of the film's richness comes, as noted above, from the handling of the victims' families. The Hollywood treatment of those who grieve is so typically displayed in vengeance fantasies (e.g. *Death Wish* and all its spawn, including the current *Eye for an Eye*), that it is a revelation to see such personae played with honesty. Ermev and Weston, playing the Percys, share a wonderful scene with Ms. Sarandon, where the couple, thinking Helen's visit is to share their grief, come to slowly realize that she is still advising Poncelet. They pounce on her with the rage of the betrayed, leaving the audience as stunned as the nonplused Sister Prejean. Raymond Barry is marvelous as Delacroix, the father who finds his Catholic faith tested but wants to somehow move on from victimhood. His is a finely nuanced, utterly credible performance of a troubled man trying to do right.

Robbins' touch in *Dead Man Walking* is not absolutely unerring. The music score--for the most part apt and tempered--wells up too much near the climax, clashing with the drama already inherent on the screen. The grisly execution itself, begun appropriately in a dead-on, matter-of-fact manner, is weakened when Mattie, shot in a crucifixion-like pose, is intercut with flashbacks of the murder itself, too facily suggesting the criminal's remorse.

These cavils, however, are but small brushstrokes amiss in a vivid and intensely realized canvas. This film will make you think about the philosophical premises of capital punishment and the death penalty, true, but, more importantly, it will leave you with the permanent keepsakes of Sister Helen and Mad Mattie and the complicated interweavings of their lives.

(*"Dead Man Walking "* is rated "R"for serious, adult themes.)

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