

An oddly human work

David Walsh reviews Eastwood's True Crime

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True Crime, directed by Clint Eastwood, written by Larry Gross, Paul Brickman and Stephen Schiff, based on the novel by Andrew Klavan

In *True Crime* a veteran newspaper reporter in Oakland, Steve Everett (Clint Eastwood), has one day to raise doubts about the guilt of a man scheduled to be executed at midnight. The condemned man, Frank Beachum (Isaiah Washington), is black; the murder victim was a pregnant white girl. Everett has to overcome many obstacles, including some of his own making, to establish the truth of the case.

True Crime, directed by Eastwood, has many imperfections. The story is not particularly convincing, the events and denouement impossibly compressed. Death row would be far less populated if it were this simple not merely to uncover certain facts, but to force the American justice system to act upon them.

Eastwood plays a womanizer and an ex-alcoholic. He doesn't come across as either, at least not the sort of smooth-talking wise guy he's supposed to be. (At 68 he is a decade too old, for one thing.) The actor is too uncomfortable with other people and consequently makes them too uncomfortable to suggest such an operator. A sub-plot involving an affair between Eastwood and his editor's wife (Laila Robbins) is underdeveloped. Dennis Leary, as the editor, and James Woods, as editor-in-chief, are both overqualified for parts that never really go anywhere.

The film is interesting and moving because Eastwood has strong feelings about two subjects, the death penalty and failing marriages. I don't mean to belittle the first subject by bracketing it with the second; the two are obviously not of equally life-and-death importance. Their respective *social* significance does not determine in advance, however, the order in which they will be placed by an artist in his or her work, nor the depth of feeling the latter will devote to them. I

would suggest that while Eastwood as a social observer is deeply and legitimately concerned about capital punishment, he may possess more intimate knowledge about marital breakdown.

Eastwood has always represented something in American cinema, for better or worse. He grew up in Oakland during the Depression, the child of itinerant workers. He worked as a lumberjack, played piano and worked as a swimming instructor in the army. He subsequently studied business at Los Angeles City College on the G.I. Bill. After a number of forgettable film roles, he landed a part in the television Western, *Rawhide*. Eastwood came to international prominence in a number of films directed by Sergio Leone, starting with *A Fistful of Dollars* in 1964. He directed his first film, *Play Misty For Me*, in 1971. *True Crime* is his forty-first leading role and his twenty-first directorial effort.

Eastwood earned a reputation as a right-wing, law-and-order man with the *Dirty Harry* series (from 1971). The truth has probably always been a bit more contradictory. The two directors with whom he was most closely associated for years, Leone and Don Siegel (director of *Dirty Harry*), were considered as something of radicals, each in his own way. Eastwood turned in a memorable performance as Frank Morris in one of Siegel's last films, *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979). The film seethes with hostility for authority and incarceration; it makes a case, like Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (1956), for the innate human desire to be free.

Eastwood's career as a director is decidedly uneven. Many of his films have interesting moments and concerns, few seem likely to endure. He has played a series of loners, misfits and mavericks without ever probing deeply enough their circumstances and dilemmas. Too often, as actor and director, Eastwood

has resorted to shortcuts and easy solutions. He reserves some of his deeper feelings for music, but his most ambitious project, the life of jazz legend Charlie Parker, *Bird* (1988), was not an artistic success. Nonetheless, as the silent, resourceful individualist who "gets the job done," he has consistently represented something of an American social type, or at least its partially mythological, self-conceived and Hollywood-filtered version. In recent years he has attempted to record the potential breakdown or at least moral crisis of this type, although here too he has tended to take the line of least resistance. It must be difficult to be self-critical in the face of long-lasting and mass adulation and enormous financial success, to resist the temptation to be a hero (or anti-hero) of one kind or another.

And in *True Crime*, from this point of view, one cannot claim that Eastwood has invented a remarkably innovative character in Steve Everett. His redemption comes at fairly cheap price: a few hours of investigation and a bit of high-speed driving.

This is not where the interest of the film lies. *True Crime* begins with a shot of San Quentin prison in northern California. A prison is one of the most horrible sights there is. And the carefully prepared, state murder of a man is the most terrible event to go on inside such an institution. The film follows the procedures that death row prisoners must endure on the day of their execution. A guard, no more than 15 feet away, notes every occurrence (prisoner wakes up, prisoner orders such and such for breakfast, etc.). A jailhouse chaplain pesters Beachum; the warden asks him where he would like his remains to be sent. The execution team rehearses the procedure. The various chemicals to be injected are described. I don't know precisely what Eastwood's feelings are about the death penalty, but he certainly permits its essential barbarism and inhumanity to emerge. (Interestingly, the film's official web site has links to a variety of anti-death penalty sites.) In that sense, the film undoubtedly emerges from and feeds into the growing opposition to and indeed revulsion against the death penalty in the US. It would be noteworthy and praiseworthy on that score alone.

Washington as the condemned man is dignified, as is Lisa Gay Hamilton as his wife. Unfortunately, they are a bit too dignified and heroic. Here is where

Eastwood's social conceptions and honorable intentions, intellectually grasped but not adequately worked through his artistic nervous system, falter. The figures remain somewhat flat and passive, relatively helpless victims.

The more dramatically active side of the film revolves around Everett's attempts, in between efforts to save a man's life, to patch up his marriage. Those attempts fail, and produce, to me, perhaps the film's most genuinely painful moment. Everett and his wife (Diane Venora) are sitting on a couch in their home. She knows about his latest affair, he tries to apologize, promising to change. She cries and cries. The shot is longer than most in the film. She tells him to get out, that it's pointless. I don't remember the dialogue, but the manner in which the sequence is filmed, with great care and attention to emotional detail, suggests to me that Eastwood knows what it feels like to sit while someone weeps, knowing that there is nothing he can do about it, that he has acted like a bastard, that the situation is impossible. I think the element of irreconcilability--of circumstances driven to the point of breakdown, which won't be remedied by individual toughness or ingenuity--so often lacking in Eastwood's works, is for once present.

I would not argue that the social question, the death penalty, and the personal issues are integrated successfully. But I found the work sincere and human.

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