

Inexcusable

The Green Mile, written and directed by Frank Darabont, from the novel by Stephen King

By David Walsh
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This is a dreadful film.

Paul Edgecomb (the self-serious and slightly bloated Tom Hanks, who seems increasingly engaged in self-parody) is a guard on death row at a Louisiana state prison in 1935. He's a model of benevolence and empathy. So is the warden. So are four of his fellow guards. A fifth is a bad apple, the governor's nephew, who mistreats the condemned men and enjoys seeing them suffer. He will receive his comeuppance.

A new prisoner arrives on death row, an enormous black man, John Coffey (Michael Duncan). He performs miracles, restoring the sick and wounded to health. Coffey takes upon himself the sins and suffering of mankind. Falsely accused of raping and killing two little girls, he nonetheless chooses to die. Edgecomb has the job of electrocuting a man who may very well be an agent of the Lord, if not a blood relative. Imagine having that on your conscience! Hanks, at the end, looks so upset that he might not be able to get a good night's sleep for, well, two or three days.

So as not to disturb a single one of the audience's preconceptions, the behavior of the film's characters is thoroughly and efficiently clichéd. The spectator early on recognizes certain familiar types—loving husband and family man; young, nervous newcomer; wily veteran; rotten “white trash”; fatherly authority figure and so forth—and they never disappoint. No one commits a surprising act.

The Green Mile is three hours long. At least. The self-importance of its two creators—Stephen King and Frank Darabont (*Shawshank Redemption*, 1994)—seems limitless. The first hour or so of the film is at least coherent: John Coffey relieves Edgecomb's urinary infection (yes!), making his sex life possible

once again, and brings a dying mouse back to life. (The mouse is adorable, the best thing in the movie.) We watch with increasing stupefaction, however, as Edgecomb and his colleagues smuggle Coffey out of prison and take him to the warden's home so he can cure the latter's wife of a malignant brain tumor. Here the film really goes off the rails.

The warden (James Cromwell), who doesn't know a thing about Coffey's powers, allows the condemned man to sit on his fatally-ill wife's bed and bestow a healing kiss. The house shakes, shelves rattle, lights flicker on and off, general mayhem ensues. A miracle! The woman's face clears up, she looks about 20 years younger, the tumor's obviously gone. She gives Coffey a hug and says something grateful and wise, I can't remember exactly what. After the scene you feel like an unwilling participant at a phony seance presided over by a “medium” who works part-time at a local carnival. In short, you feel flimflammed. The film as a whole leaves you with that feeling.

The most remarkable feature of *The Green Mile*, however, is its ability to construct an essentially comforting universe out of death row in a Louisiana prison in the 1930s.

In its own way, this is an accomplishment. In the minds of many people Southern jails, particularly in the Jim Crow era, are synonymous with repression and inhumanity. After all, these were the days of the chain gang, the prison farm, the whip and the club. Even Hollywood, whether with a straight face (*I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, 1932) or a comic one (*Sullivan's Travels*, 1941), had to take note of this widely held perception. This was the era of the Scottsboro case in Alabama, in which nine young black

men were framed up on charges of gang rape.

Louisiana State Penitentiary, “bloody Angola,” at which blues singer Leadbelly was locked up at the time, was one of the most violent penal institutions in America. The filmmakers, their minds set on loftier matters, are oblivious to all of this. In certain quarters a kind of brain rot has set in.

Nor does the film express any particular outrage over the policy of state execution. Almost unbelievably, in a film set on death row, capital punishment is not even really an *issue*! There is one horrific sequence in which a man literally burns up in the electric chair. But this is the work of the evil guard, who deliberately sabotages the normally efficient machinery of death. The filmmakers fail to approach any of the social questions that the death penalty almost automatically raises—who are the people who end up on death row and how do they end up there? On the contrary, their view of the inmates, for all its depth and insight, might be reduced to the right-wing formula that criminals are those who commit crimes.

Far from raising staunch opposition to the death penalty, King and Darabont have their miracle man, Coffey, actually direct a killing, of the man in fact responsible for the two little girls' deaths. Whatever happened to “love thy enemies” and “turn the other cheek”? They've invented a New Christ, built to accommodate the law-and-order fanatics. In any event, can anything positive come from a work that chooses to glorify *prison guards*?

The whole thing is disgusting, and pernicious, and philistine. Everyone involved, who didn't need to do it for the paycheck, should be ashamed of him or herself.

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