

The Farm: Angola, USA, directed by Jonathan Stack and Elizabeth Garbus

Life in prison

David Walsh
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The Louisiana state penitentiary at Angola is the largest maximum security prison in the United States. It houses some 5,000 men, three-quarters of them black and 85 percent of whom will die within its walls. The 18,000-acre penitentiary sits on the site of a plantation that derived its name from the area in Africa that provided the slave labor. Angola has been a prison, at one time one of the most violent in the US, since the end of the Civil War.

These are a few of the chilling facts.

Jonathan Stack and Elizabeth Garbus have made a compassionate and moving film about Angola prison, focusing on the fate of six of its inmates.

George Crawford, 22, of New Orleans, has only just arrived at Angola. He faces life in prison without parole. His family is trying to raise \$3,000 necessary to obtain copies of his court transcripts to launch an appeal. As his mother says, 'It's bad when you have no money.'

Eugene Tannehill, on the other hand, has been in Angola for 38 years. Now a fire-and-brimstone preacher, nicknamed the Bishop, Tannehill has received a pardon; all that remains is for the governor of Louisiana to write his signature. The governor is in no hurry.

A judge sentenced Ashanti Witherspoon to 75 years in prison for an armed robbery in which two police officers were wounded, but no one killed. Witherspoon has been in prison for more than two decades. Now a self-educated and thoughtful man, he lectures incoming prisoners on the realities of life.

Logan 'Bones' Theriot killed his wife, he says, because she was neglecting their child. 'Your life's not finished just because you're in Angola,' he tells an

interviewer. His, however, is nearly finished. He is dying of lung cancer in a prison infirmary.

For 12 years John Brown has lived on death row, spending 23 hours a day in his cell. When he attacked a couple, killing a man, he had been doing cocaine all day. 'I needed some more,' he explains. He now faces imminent execution.

Vincent Simmons was found guilty of two counts of aggravated rape and sentenced to 100 years in prison. At a parole hearing he presents evidence suggesting that one of the victims was a virgin after the alleged attack. After a minute or two of deliberations, the board turns down his appeal.

Angola is a vast operation. Many of the prison's 1,800 employees live in a town, described as the 'safest in America,' in the middle of the penitentiary. The prison has its own radio station and its own newspaper. Angola is a multi-million-dollar enterprise. Prisoners doing field work earn four cents an hour; better jobs pay up to twenty cents an hour.

The film raises broad and complex social questions. Present-day society says these men and many others like them are monsters and locks them up. But human beings are not free-floating atoms. They don't make their way under conditions of their own choosing.

In opposing the brutality of the criminal justice system, one is not excusing or dismissing the violent and anti-social acts committed by many of its inmates. It is impossible to develop any rational perspective on the problem, however, without a grasp of essential social realities.

These days, as we know, it is impermissible to refer to social circumstances and environment in the official discussion on crime and law and order. The source of

criminality, according to well-fed and pious editorialists and politicians, is (other people's) wickedness.

But, as *The Farm* demonstrates, the argument against this latter view is not simply made by referring to the poverty, illiteracy and conditions of backwardness that have obviously contributed to so many of these men ending up at places like Angola. One might regard it, in fact, as a powerful argument in favor of the ultimate perfectibility of mankind that--as the film makes clear--certain individuals, even in the most hostile and discouraging atmosphere, evolve in an extraordinary manner.

It is impossible not to regard confessed murderers Brown and Theriot, contemplating their own deaths, as profoundly complex human beings. No one who sees the film is likely to forget the scene of Theriot's friends--inmates, black and white--coming to visit him as he lies on his death bed, or their encounter with his family after his death. The film has a number of compelling and even heartbreaking sequences.

The Farm takes a very matter of fact approach to its subject. It never directly challenges the prison system or the society that has organized it. All the better. The barbarism comes out the more clearly for that. This film will deepen the opposition of any thinking viewer to the entire social order.

The film will be shown on A&E in the US, on Channel 4 in Britain and by the German WDR.

It should be noted that one of those incarcerated at Angola is Gary Tyler, who will turn 40 this July and who has been in prison since 1974. Tyler was arrested and convicted--and originally sentenced to death--in connection with the death of a 13-year-old white boy, Timothy Weber, in October 1974.

Tyler was on board a school bus, one of several filled with black youth, attacked by a racist mob following a fight between black and white students at Destrehan High School. Weber was shot and killed in the melee. Tyler was arrested for talking back to a deputy sheriff, and eventually, hours later, police claimed to find a gun hidden in his seat in the bus. He was charged with murder and convicted by an all-white jury in a case

presided over by an openly racist judge. The state's only eyewitness, 15-year-old Natalie Blanks, later recanted her testimony and admitted that she had accused Tyler of firing the fatal shot under pressure from police.

The Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, and its youth movement, the Young Socialists, took up the Tyler case in 1976, when the youth faced the death penalty. His sentence was eventually commuted to 99 years at hard labor. The party won support from trade unions and other organizations in the US, Canada, Britain, Germany, Australia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, and as well collected the signatures of 200,000 people on petitions demanding Tyler's release. Although a US Court of Appeals ruled in 1980 that Tyler received a 'fundamentally unfair trial,' and there is not a shred of evidence connecting him to the killing, he remains in prison.

See Also:

An interview with Jonathan Stack

'What is this society going to do with the surplus humanity?'

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