

An interview with Jonathan Stack, co-director of *The Farm: Angola, USA*

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

David Walsh  
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*David Walsh:* I thought it was one of the best films here, certainly one of the most compassionate. What interested you in this subject?

*Jonathan Stack:* As a documentary filmmaker, I've always been attracted to marginal places, going to marginal places and finding very human stories. I hope this is a compassionate film; it's very much about seeing the best in people. There is no better place to find a need for a gentle touch than in a prison, which is filled with so much harshness. Angola is a dramatic and extreme kind of prison. It's much less scary, I'd say, than urban short-term prisons. This is a lifer prison, which means that nobody gets out. It has its own social structure, a little bit more intact, less chaotic than other places. People here might be sleeping in the same room for 20 years straight.

*DW:* What is the atmosphere like there?

*JS:* Depressing, but inspiring too. Depressing in that, after a day of shooting a film, you feel weighted down. You just feel bad leaving behind people and going off to a hotel. A lot of those people have something to offer to society. I felt that very strongly.

I feel as a documentary filmmaker, as a human being, I like having the opportunity to bring positive energy to the world. Documentaries give you a way in. To be in a prison making a film is a very privileged position, because people want to tell stories. They don't have a lot of opportunities. To ask a question, it's a very deep honor. They're very happy to have the chance to talk to somebody else besides another prisoner.

*DW:* Not too many filmmakers are interested in making this kind of film.

*JS:* I don't know why not. I'm an optimist. I like to learn. One of the best parts of making a documentary is the chance to learn, that you wouldn't otherwise have. To go into a place, that's a very contentious environment, like a prison,

and sit down and have the chance to talk to someone who might have spent 30 years, who might have committed a heinous crime, but has had the time to reflect back on their life, think about the meaning of life. You're sitting oftentimes in front of very evolved people.

*DW:* The film notes that 85 percent of the inmates die within the prison walls. This is like the Bastille, some medieval institution.

*JS:* You can't help look at it as if you were looking through a window back in time. You say medieval, the other obvious comparison is to slave times. But what about the future? What is this society going to do with the surplus humanity, people who don't have a good education, frustrated, no economic opportunity, what are we going to do with these people? When I look at Angola, I think sometimes we're looking at the future. We're going to have work camps. Urban areas are designed nowadays with an idea about containment. When there is a riot, the question is: can you contain the violence within a given neighborhood? We saw that in LA, it teetered on the edge.

Places like Angola are maybe models for housing a community. So it's not just a look into the past.

*DW:* Of course at a certain point, there are those who ask--is it worth housing people like this?--and they do away with them.

*JS:* Except for one thing, very cheap labor.

*DW:* Are the products being made at Angola sold outside?

*JS:* It has very little to do with self-sufficiency ultimately. Two things are in play. One thing is, of course, about people keeping busy, and tired at the end of the day. But it's also about prison enterprises. Industry provides infrastructure, prisons provide labor. They don't have the contract at the moment at Angola, they canceled it, but they were making license plates for Puerto Rico. Four cents an hour. Somebody is making off with some good dough, or just

saving money. There are one and a half million able-bodied young men, mostly men, people of working age, working for four to twenty cents an hour in this country. Let's face it, that's a valuable resource. They're not just making pencils, they've gotten a lot more sophisticated about it.

Clearly, there's a good percentage of people at Angola who have committed heinous crimes. There are also a good percentage of people there who have committed crimes of youth, drug-dealing, or even crimes of passion. I'm not saying those don't deserve punishment, but 30 or 40 years later, it makes no sense. It's counter to everything human.

The warden talks about the issue of forgiveness. No matter how you stand--left, right--it crosses ideological boundaries. Do you believe in the concept of forgiveness? Forgiveness is a fundamental part of spirituality. To dismiss any possibility of redemption is to damn us as a nation. The film is a chance to start a dialogue.

We're going to be doing a lot of grassroots screenings. We're going to be on television, on A&E, we're going to play in a few theaters, and I'm not dismissing that. But I'm setting up a statewide tour in Louisiana, and I want to get inmates, crime victims, good spiritual mediators, and show the film in communities. How do we start letting go of hatred?

Perhaps in the year 2000 we can have an amnesty and release the inmates who are in there for nonviolent crimes at the very least. Half the inmates in prison could walk out the door tomorrow, with guidance.

*DW:* Yes, but why won't they do that?

*JS:* Well, I have an idea why, aside from the more insidious reasons we could think of. On a practical level, there is no political incentive for anybody to let someone out of prison. You don't get votes, let's be realistic, for letting a prisoner out. There are a lot of people who work in corrections, and I know this for a fact, who are a heck of a lot more forgiving than politicians. People who are working day to day in prisons, who know what prisoners are like.

If you're in the black community, and you're saying, one in three African Americans between the ages of 16 and 35 is in prison, you experience it as a police state. What else can you call it?

*DW:* You either conclude that the poor, especially the black poor, are sinful, or you conclude, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, that there is some connection between poverty and crime.

*JS:* I'm a pragmatist in this regard, putting aside any political viewpoint I might have, so I ask people: how many prisons are we going to have to build? To say that there is no link between poverty and crime is absurd.

I see this film as a very powerful tool. I don't have general distribution, and I don't care. I wasn't that willing to let go of

control to a distributor and just put it strictly out on the market place. I needed to get this out free to people.

*DW:* How do you feel about the death penalty?

*JS:* I think it's a bad policy, for the government to get involved with executions. It's not a good thing to do. The government has the power to be able to say, 'I don't need to kill you.' As a society, we can rise above the notion of an eye for an eye. We're meant to do that. We're meant to be greater than the sum of our parts. I understand the deep rage of people, but society should not empower that emotion. That's what happens. We say, we sanction a really horrific emotion and we say [to the victim's family], it's okay, we're going to grant you your wish, from the most painful part of your being. And I think it would be better to say, I understand what you're doing, but we need to put energy toward helping you deal with that anger.

Over the last two years I got to know two people very well who were executed and I spent the last week with them. You know, it's a very difficult thing. To be honest with you, I didn't start off with a strong anti-death-penalty view.

*DW:* An objective observer would draw fairly harsh conclusions about a society that organizes such a prison and such a judicial system. Do you expect that sort of reaction?

*JS:* What I like about the film, I've shown it to some very conservative people and some very progressive people, and it's gets a really good discussion going.

There's a feeling that we can do much better. There's something wrong going on. People are in agreement with that. A lot of people agree with that. How do we make a fairer society, so that it's all that we will want to raise our children in?

See Also:

Life in prison: *The Farm: Angola, USA*, directed by Jonathan Stack and Elizabeth Garbus



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