



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Escape from Alcatraz

Who knows whether Don Siegel saw *A Man Escaped*, but this account of a prisoner's quietly determined attempts to escape the renowned island penitentiary feels surprisingly Bressonian, partly due to the low-key performance by Clint Eastwood (whose own best directorial efforts are marked by restraint), and partly due to the focus on the tedious routine of prison life and the strength of spirit required to survive it.

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SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

One of the inevitable rituals of *Escape from Alcatraz* takes place in the shower room, where the new inmate, Frank Morris (Clint Eastwood), is approached by the Rock's current bully boy, Wolf, who leeringly announces that he is looking for a new 'punk'. Wolf's sexual suggestion results, satisfyingly and none too gently, in his having his mouth washed out with soap. But a more significant riposte comes earlier, in a first exchange of taunting pleasantries. Wolf: 'Where'd they transfer you from?' Morris: 'Atlanta.' Wolf: 'Nice town, Atlanta.' Morris: 'I never saw it.' As economic a distillation of prison experience as one would expect of both the film and its star, the line is prepared for by a speech of the Warden's ('From this day on, your world will be everything that happens in this building') and translated into one image that persistently punctuates the story and all routine on the Rock: Alcatraz Island, nestled in San Francisco Bay, with the city and the other world it represents in unbridgeable proximity.

This view, repeated from a variety of positions and in a variety of weathers, is the film in a nutshell, and one might reject the whole by dismissing the detail as conventional, atmospheric scene-setting. But Don Siegel's imagery is as spare as the dialogue – which would make such a lapse into visual cliché unlikely – and in the overall stylisation of the film, the shots of the island are no more or less realistic than the dialogue, teetering between the irreducibly functional and the potentially abstract. They signal the essential metaphor in a film that is not 'about' prison life except in purely imagistic terms: the island within the city, cells within cells. And they are tightly suggestive of a pattern that is really the 'story' of the film: the opening shot is the only one to connect island, harbour and city with pointed camera movement, as Morris is ferried out to the prison; the final sequence is the only one where the action as well as the camera is placed outside Alcatraz, as the puzzled authorities searching Angel Island look back at the Rock, which has become defunct as an escape-proof prison (it was closed, an end title states, less than a year after the real-life disappearance of Frank Morris and the Anglin brothers) and now houses only a conundrum.

Escape from Alcatraz might best be described as a puzzle movie, and not simply because we never learn what happens to its escapees, after their life-raft built-for-three out of *Popular Mechanics* disappears into the darkness. Its theme might be summarised in the image of a Chinese box, and in his sparsely organised *mise-en-scène* Siegel imposes the image at every turn of the story. Even on a narrative level, this repeating chamber effect, the

geometrical symmetry of the problem, is all: once the men are out, once the puzzle is cracked, it is irrelevant what happens to them in another world.

A further pleasing symmetry is that *Escape from Alcatraz* should pick up from the film that was Siegel's breakthrough as a director, *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), even to the conditions of its making. Both were shot inside actual prisons, with a minimum of studio work and largely unknown casts (including real convicts for the mass breakout into the yard in *Riot*). For its setting alone, the prison movie might be proposed as the perfect Siegel subject – and *Escape from Alcatraz* his most perfect, completely achieved film, as distilled (in a different way, subject matter notwithstanding) as Bresson.

Time and space, naturally enough, have particular relevance in a prison movie. In *Escape from Alcatraz*, they are virtually all there is, because this is one of the most pared-away genre films ever made. A rigorously functional escape drama, concentrating on the step-by-step mechanics of breaking-out, in a unique sense it is, as its baffled critics have claimed, 'nothing more' than an escape movie. The special sophistication of the film, however, is that time and space are also deployed as perfectly formalised elements, concepts of prison life rather than an attempt to reproduce and/or exploit it as an experience. Embedded as such in a minimal narrative, they are made disconcertingly concrete both by the film's visual qualities and by the very tactics of that distilled, reflexive and ironic narrative.

The abstract aspects, of course, are not separate from but develop out of the way Siegel has shaped, refined, virtually idealised his material. Where the interplay of genre and treatment, action and context, realistic pretence and idealising practice have previously resulted in the contrariness of his films, here they stand as full-blown contradictions. What most films do is comfortably (and unthinkingly) to accommodate one to the other; what Siegel has often done in the past is to accomplish this as a specific task (characters having to work their way out of streamlined genre structures). What *Escape from Alcatraz* has the confidence to do is to function simultaneously, but quite simply, as a quintessential escape story and a metaphorical representation of the same. By sedulously reducing, or playing down, his material in one area – characterisation, connecting incident, object lessons spelled out à la *Riot in Cell Block 11* – Siegel has realised unexpected potential in another.

Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1980

ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ

Directed by: Donald Siegel
©: Paramount Pictures Corporation
Paramount Pictures Corporation presents a Malpas/Siegel film
Executive Producer: Robert Daley
Produced by: Donald Siegel
Associate Producer: Fritz Manes
Auditor: Don Henry
Unit Production Manager: Jack Terry
Associate to Mr Siegel: Carol Rydall
Secretary to the Director: Iris O'Reilly
Secretary to the Unit Production Manager: Eudie Charnes
Secretary to the Producer: Betty Endo
1st Assistant Director: Luigi Alfano
2nd Assistant Directors: Mark Johnson, Richard Graves
Script Supervisor: Lloyd Nelson
Casting: Marion Dougherty, Wally Nicita
San Francisco Casting: Brebner Agency *
Screenplay by: Richard Tuggle
Based on the book by: J. Campbell Bruce
Director of Photography: Bruce Surtees
Camera Operators: Rick Neff, Bob Bergdahl
Camera Assistants: Gordon Paschal, Billy Walsh, Dennis Matsuda, Pat McGinness
Key Grip: Charles Saldana
2nd Grip: Lawrence G. Yates
Gaffer: Chuck Holmes
Gaffer Best Boy: Larry Flynn
Still Photography: Ron Grover
Special Effects: Chuck Gaspar
Edited by: Ferris Webster
Assistant Editors: Joel Cox, Tim Board
Production Designer: Allen Smith
Set Decorator: Edward J. McDonald
Property Master: Larry Bird
Construction Co-ordinator: Gene Lauritzen
Costume Supervisor: Glenn Wright
Make-up Artist: Joe McKinney
Titles and Opticals by: Pacific Title
Lenses and Panaflex camera by: Panavision
Colour by: DeLuxe
Music by: Jerry Fielding
Music Editor: June Edgerton
Sound Mixer: Bert Hallberg
Re-recording Mixer: John T. Reitz
Sound Effects Editors: Alan Robert Murray, Bub Asman
Dialogue Coach: Carol Rydall
Unit Publicist: Gary Kalkin

Cast

Clint Eastwood (*Frank Morris*)
Patrick McGoohan (*warden*)
Roberts Blossom (*Chester 'Doc' Dalton*)
Jack Thibeu (*Clarence Anglin*)
Fred Ward (*John Anglin*)
Paul Benjamin (*English*)
Larry Hankin (*Charley Butts*)
Bruce M. Fischer (*Wolf*)
Frank Ronzio (*Litmus*)
Fred Stuthman (*Johnson*)
David Cryer (*Wagner*)
Hank Brandt (*associate warden*)
Ray K. Goman (*cellblock captain*)
Blair Burrows (*fight guard*)
Madison Arnold (*Zimmerman*)
Garry Goodrow (*Weston*)
Ron Vernan (*Stone*)
Ed Vasgersian (*Cranston*)
Matthew J. Locricchio (*exam guard*)
Bob Balhatchet (*medical technical assistant*)
Stephen Bradley (*exam guard*)
Regie Baff (*Lucy*)
Joseph Miksak (*police sergeant*)
Candace Bowen (*English's daughter*)
Don Michaelian (*Beck*)
Dan Leegant, John Garabedian (*guards*)
Jason Ronard (*Bobs*)
Ross Reynolds (*helicopter pilot*)
Al Dunlap (*visitors' guard*)
Denis Berkfeldt, Jim Haynie, Tony Dario, Fritz Manes, Dana Derfus, Don Cummins, Gordon Handforth, John Scanlon, Don Watters, Joseph Knowland, James Collier, R.J. Ganzert, Robert Hirschfeld, Lloyd Nelson, George Orrison, Gary F. Warren, Joe Whipp, Terry Wills (*guards*)
Dale Alvarez, Sheldon Feldner, Danny Glover, Carl Lumbly, Patrick Valentino, Gilbert Thomas, Jr, Eugene W. Jackson (*inmates*)
Don Siegel (*doctor*) *
Robert Irvine (*guard*) *
Glenn Wright (*inmate*) *
USA 1979©
112 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Merchant of Four Seasons (Händler der vier Jahreszeiten)

Wed 1 Jun 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 11 Jun 20:30

Ivan's Childhood (Ivanovo Detsvo)

Thu 2 Jun 14:30; Mon 20 Jun 20:50

The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty

(Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter)

Fri 3 Jun 20:50; Mon 13 Jun 18:10; Fri 24 Jun 20:45

Taxi Driver

Sat 4 Jun 20:45; Wed 15 Jun 20:40;

Sun 26 Jun 18:20

The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena)

Sun 5 Jun 13:10; Tue 14 Jun 20:45;

Wed 29 Jun 20:40

Escape from Alcatraz

Mon 6 Jun 20:45; Sat 25 Jun 17:50

Thief

Tue 7 Jun 20:30; Thu 16 Jun 18:00; Sat 18 Jun 20:30; Thu 30 Jun 20:30

71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance

(71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls)

Wed 8 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large);

Mon 27 Jun 21:00

Rosetta

Fri 10 Jun 20:50; Wed 22 Jun 18:15 (+ intro)

Stranger by the Lake (L'Inconnu du lac)

Sun 12 Jun 18:10; Wed 15 Jun 18:10;

Tue 28 Jun 20:40

Down by Law

Fri 17 Jun 20:45; Tue 21 Jun 20:45

Certain Women

Sun 19 Jun 13:10; Thu 23 Jun 20:50; Wed 29 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by

BFI Director of Public Programme and Audiences, Jason Wood)

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