



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 95=

A Man Escaped

(Un condamné à mort s'est échappé)

The subject is simple. It comes from an escape story by a member of the French secret service called André Devigny. In 1943 he was arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo at Lyons. He made an attempt to escape from a moving car while being taken to prison. It failed. Recaptured and beaten up, he was placed in solitary confinement at the prison called Fort Montluc. He was still determined to escape, only more carefully. After several weeks he managed to dissect three panels from his wooden cell door with an iron spoon that he'd sharpened against the floor. The next stage was to make a rope. The springs of his bed, uncoiled one by one, were a starting point. A parcel of shirts and pyjamas from his family arrived fortunately to be torn into strips and knotted round the springs. Months have passed now. He is ready and yet he does nothing, suddenly overtaken by an inner lethargy. It is only another interview with the Gestapo and the pronouncement of his death sentence that impel him to action. He will escape now. But a 16 year old boy is put in the same cell with him. Is he an informer for the Germans? Ragged and lousy, he tells a story of hiding out and eventual capture, but he wears part of a German uniform. For two days Fontaine, as the hero is called, wonders whether to trust him or kill him. They escape together.

The book is apparently a straightforward personal record of the kind that has served as a basis for many post-war war films, most of them 'dignified' and superficial. Robert Bresson uses *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* to make a film that is only indirectly about war, directly about a human being in isolation. The result is a work of art that raises inner experience to a very pure, intense, concentrated level. 'This is a true story. I show it as it happened, without any embellishment,' Bresson says characteristically in a preface. I suppose the important distinction is between 'true' and 'factual'. One can think of many recent war films, particularly those made in Britain, which are impeccably factual and utterly untrue, because they have no angle of vision. With Bresson the vision is everything. He has changed many of the facts in Devigny's book. And he himself was taken prisoner by the Germans in 1940. During his stay in prison of more than a year, he met Father Bruckberger, who was to become an important friend and influence in his life and wrote the story for Bresson's first film, *Les Anges du péché*. Bresson has given this one an alternative title: *Le Vent souffle où il veut*.

In *Un condamné à mort*, war is a presence felt but very little seen. We see, mainly, a grey forbidding world enclosed within high medieval walls. Shabby figures move down corridors on their way to a melancholy yard or sit in a stifling cell. Violence happens off-screen, behind a closed door. Sometimes a cry is heard. The Gestapo and even the prison guards are fugitive, momentary figures. As a woman crosses the yard with a slop bucket, the sound of firing is heard. She hesitates for a moment and walks on. Inmates of the fortress, glimpsed in furtive conversation in the washroom or on the stairs, appear and

disappear mysteriously. They may have been transferred, tortured, executed. One doesn't know.

The effect of war, though, is always present. It is seen in almost every face and action. It is like a developing tank in which the exposed human negative is laid. The picture comes out, character and personality have taken outline. Fontaine often talks in the washroom to a man with a thin, shifty, haunted face. He learns that he was betrayed to the Germans by his wife. The man is living with this fact in a little cell and each day he looks more desperate and unforgiving. One day he makes a futile, hysterical attempt at escape and that is the end of him. In the cell next to Fontaine's is an old man who always wears a crumpled hat. Morose and aloof, he disparages Fontaine's plans to escape. It will never work. Better to accept imprisonment and hope to escape with your neck. But on his first day in prison Fontaine also looks out from his window at a man walking in the yard. He comes up and offers to smuggle out a letter to his family. Later, he manages to get a safety pin to him which will unlock his handcuffs. Later, he disappears.

All these people come as if from nowhere and encounter each other for the first time. Some feel instinctive solidarities: Others are cautious and mistrustful. So-and-so is reported to be in the confidence of the Gestapo, so-and-so is all right, so-and-so plans to escape but his plan is no good, so-and-so was taken off for questioning today. All this in brief muttered conversations, before returning again to solitude.

So all the real dramas are interior. At the centre of the story, Fontaine refuses to despair. He plans and works patiently, minutely for escape. Like the hero of *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, he is a quiet, withdrawn, compassionate man who lives at a distance from his fellows. At first they are uncertain of him, later they recognise his strength. But unlike the priest his end is not in agony but in ecstasy. With Jost, the boy, he has scaled the last wall. Jost looks round with an incredulous grin: 'If my mother could see me now!' Fontaine smiles. They walk off together into a cold night, towards smoke from a train passing under a nearby bridge. It is a moment of appropriately strange and muted elation. They are going back into an occupied country and the danger is not over.

Bresson has built up this point with a slow, deliberate concentration. One might think his approach too slow for a story that also contains physical tension, but there is always an inner meaning behind the physical action and the one heightens the other. (Interesting to compare the first part of the film with the first part of Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man*. The Hitchcock is brilliant in its way, which is that of immediate melodramatic effect. He creates no world of prison, only a series of surface impressions.) The prison world created by Bresson suggests Kafka in some externals: grey, dreamlike routine, claustrophobia, isolation of the spirit. Yet because of the central character, the effect is never merely passive. The sequences of Fontaine preparing his escape – the iron spoon scraping at crevices in the door, the pyjamas torn in strips and plaited round the bedsprings, the tell-tale shavings whisked out of sight as a guard approaches – are long and detailed and always exist on two levels. Behind the slow, pathetically improvised physical effort one senses the inner dedication. Bresson impregnates each action with faith. And for the first time he finds his most impressive moments in affirmation. The use of the Mass in C Minor by Mozart is a daring example. It accompanies sequences of the most drab routine – emptying of slops, the shuffles down the corridor –

and transposes them to a key of pity and exaltation. For throughout this film is sounded a note, faint at first but growing louder, of the release to come.

Most remarkable of all are the closing scenes between Fontaine and Jost. They have an intimacy and implied tenderness that Bresson has never achieved before. With his worried, shifty expression, his hesitant answers and tactless questions, Jost is a wonderfully ambiguous character. Sometimes he has a strange innocence, at others one is sure he is corrupted. He is a test for Fontaine’s human instincts. And the escape itself, losing none of its excitement because the film’s title predicts the outcome, is also the occasion for a trust and attachment to grow up between them.

The actors are all non-professional, and all perfect. Fontaine is played by François Leterrier, formerly a student of philosophy at the Sorbonne. He has what one might call, after Claude Laydu, the ‘Bresson face’: gentle, strong, with large deep eyes and a mysterious, sexless authority. A clear mirror, it reflects the loneliness, vision, occasional despair and ascetic humanity which lies at the heart of this extraordinary film.

Gavin Lambert, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1957

A MAN ESCAPED (UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ÉCHAPPÉ OU LE VENT SOUFFLE OÙ IL VEUT)

Director: Robert Bresson
Production Companies:
Société Nouvelle des Etablissements Gaumont,
Nouvelles Editions de Films
Associate Producers: Jean Thuillier, Alain Poiré
Production Manager: Robert Sussfeld
Assisted by: Irénée Leriche
Production Assistant: Louis Malle *
Assistant Directors: Michel Clément, Jacques Ballanche
Script Supervisor: Annie Dubouillon
Screenplay/Dialogue: Robert Bresson
Based on a story by: André Devigny
Director of Photography: L.H. Burel
Assistant Photographer: Henri Raichi
1st Assistant Operator: Jean Charvein
2nd Assistant Operator: Jean Chiabaut
Stills Photography: Jean-Louis Castelli
Editor: Raymond Lamy
Art Director: Pierre Charbonnier
Assistant Art Director: Sydney Bettex
Music: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Orchestra Conductor: I. Disenhaus
Sound Recordist: Pierre-André Bertrand
Assistant Sound: Joseph Abjean, Guy Rophé
Studio: Studios Saint-Maurice

Cast
François Leterrier (*Lieutenant Fontaine*)
Charles Le Clainche (*Jost*)
Maurice Beerblock (*Blanchet*)
Roland Monod (*Curé de Leiris*)
Jacques Ertaud (*Orsini*)
Jean Paul Delhumeau (*Hébrard*)
Roger Treherne (*Terry*)
Jean-Philippe Delamarre (*prisoner 110*)
César Gattegno (*prisoner X*)
Jacques Oerlemans (*chief warder*)
Klaus Detlef Grevenhorst (*German intelligence officer*)
Leonhard Schmidt (*German escort*)

France 1956
90 mins

* Uncredited

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

The General

Sun 1 Jan 12:10; Sun 29 Jan 15:10

The Leopard (Il gattopardo)

Sun 1 Jan 14:10; Thu 5 Jan 18:40; Fri 20 Jan 14:00

Sunset Boulevard

Sun 1 Jan 15:50; Fri 27 Jan 14:30; Mon 30 Jan 17:50

Metropolis

Sun 1 Jan 17:55 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator); Sun 15 Jan 14:40;

Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX

L’avventura (The Adventure)

Sun 1 Jan 18:05; Sun 22 Jan 15:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:15

Touki-Bouki

Mon 2 Jan 13:40; Tue 31 Jan 17:40

The Red Shoes

Mon 2 Jan 13:50; Tue 24 Jan 18:05

Once Upon a Time in the West (C’era una volta il West)

Mon 2 Jan 15:20; Sat 7 Jan 17:15; Sun 15 Jan 16:15 BFI IMAX

Get Out

Mon 2 Jan 18:40; Fri 6 Jan 17:50

Pierrot le Fou

Tue 3 Jan 18:10; Wed 4 Jan 20:30; Thu 19 Jan 20:30

My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)

Tue 3 Jan 18:20; Sun 22 Jan 10:00 BFI IMAX; Sat 28 Jan 13:40

A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé)

Tue 3 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 20:30

Black Girl (La Noire de...)

Tue 3 Jan 20:30; Thu 12 Jan 18:15 (+ intro)

Ugetsu Monogatari

Tue 3 Jan 20:50; Tue 17 Jan 20:30

Madame de...

Wed 4 Jan 14:30; Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)

Yi Yi (A One and a Two...)

Wed 4 Jan 18:40; Sun 22 Jan 14:00 (+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, Film Programmer, BFI Festivals)

The Shining

Fri 6 Jan 20:10; Tue 10 Jan 20:10; Sat 21 Jan 20:30 BFI IMAX

Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)

Sat 7 Jan 12:10; Sun 22 Jan 12:30 BFI IMAX

Tropical Malady (Sud pralad)

Sat 7 Jan 13:50; Mon 9 Jan 20:40

Histoire(s) du cinema

Sat 7 Jan 16:30

Blue Velvet

Sat 7 Jan 20:30; Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX

Sátántangó

Sun 8 Jan 11:15; Sat 21 Jan 13:30

Celine and Julie Go Boating (Céline et Julie vont en bateau)

Sun 8 Jan 14:45; Sat 21 Jan 17:00

Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)

Sun 8 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50

Parasite (Gisaengchung)

Mon 9 Jan 17:50; Wed 18 Jan 17:30 BFI IMAX

The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée

Wed 11 Jan 20:30; Mon 23 Jan 18:10

A Matter of Life and Death

Thu 12 Jan 20:40; Sun 22 Jan 11:30

Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam)

Thu 12 Jan 20:45; Tue 17 Jan 20:50; Sat 21 Jan 14:15

Modern Times

Fri 13 Jan 17:45; Sun 22 Jan 13:10

A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian)

Mon 16 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:00

Imitation of Life

Wed 18 Jan 20:30; Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30

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

Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50

Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)

Fri 20 Jan 17:45; Thu 26 Jan 17:50

Andrei Rublev

Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup