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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | [Rob Waring](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#waring)     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/Title?0285742)  [All Movie Guide](http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=A257291) |     One other aspect of the death penalty is implicitly criticized by the film-the execution's effect on others. It is true that many good soldiers or prison guards are personality types that are themselves but one step away from the wrong side of the law, but we need to ask ourselves whether the psychological damage done by the execution business is worth the cost. | |  | | --- | | ***Monster's Ball***  by Rob Waring  This film examines whether redemption and forgiveness are possible in some circumstances. It presents two characters guilty of abhorrent behavior and shows the different outcomes they experience. The two characters' stories are interwoven beautifully on the screen; some of the editing and scene transitions are alone worth the price of admission. The film also suggests that great sex can assist in the redemption of lost souls. (This commentary reveals key plot details that may spoil the film if you have yet to see it.)  *Monster's Ball* appears set in the present day, but the film makers apparently made great effort to avoid references (technological or otherwise) that would place the film at any particular time over the past thirty years. The effect is to suggest that certain parts of the rural South have not changed much: blacks are still having a hard time getting respect. (The plot floats in this time indefiniteness despite a large number of product placements. A multiple page list during the closing credits detracts from the lingering beauty of the film's final scene.)  Sean "Puffy" Combs plays a death row inmate named Lawrence. We never learn about the crimes that earned him his place at the head of the line for execution in Georgia's electric chair. (Georgia only recently abandoned this form of execution.) His wife, Leticia, played by Halle Barry, visits the prison weekly, but only for the benefit of their son, an obese and disturbed teenager. Lawrence tries to be a good father, considering his circumstances, and his eleventh hour apology to Leticia for the bad things he has done, and his admonition to his son not to be like him, illustrate that he sees himself as a different person from his former self.  In graphic detail, the film shows preparations for the execution, presided over with mechanistic precision by Hank, played by Billy Bob Thornton, a misogynist and racist colonel in the Georgia prison system. In contrast to Lawrence, we learn quite a bit about Hank's misdeeds. Thornton never has to act very hard when he's playing a redneck, but Hank is not your average cracker, and Hank employs all of Thornton's ample talent. He lives with his father, a retired career officer in the Georgia prison system and an even worse monster than he is, and his son, Sonny, whom both are trying unsuccessfully to raise in their own image. The problem is that Sonny has a sensitive side, and doesn't seem cut out for the executioner's trade.  Although Hank despises Lawrence, a black man, he seems determined to provide Lawrence with a dignified execution. This perverse form of customer service, in a proceeding that involves shaving all of Lawrence's head and body hair and then watching him shake violently while his bodily fluids boil during the electrical surges, doesn't tolerate any error. When Sonny vomits during the "final walk," Hank comes unhinged and disowns his only son, causing his violent death. When you are in the execution business, sudden death doesn't have much of an impact, and Sonny doesn't get much of funeral. Grandpa's eulogy is simply, "He was weak."  Finally realizing that he has been affected by his son's death (he can't get it up with a hooker), Hank begins to turn. He resigns his prison post, and burns his uniform. Eventually, he crosses paths with Leticia, whom he meets while she is mourning the loss of her son, not realizing that she is Lawrence's wife. His own redemptive need to be kind to another human being, whom he eventually realizes is in much worse circumstances than he is, combined with his sexual attraction for Leticia, begin to dismantle his racial hatred. At her initiative, he has the first face-to-face intercourse he has probably had in some time, and then he is hooked. His secret discovery of her connection to Lawrence, when he utters one of the most awkward post-coital apologies ever to grace the screen, only seems to spur him on. He falls all over himself to be nice to her, as if making up for a lifetime of meanness.  Anyone who sees the first thirty minutes of this film will probably judge Hank to be evil, someone who should be punished for his actions and probably segregated from the rest of society for our protection. Yet, Hank never confesses the contents of his closet to Leticia. He never tells her that he executed her husband, never explains that he caused his own son's death. She manages to transcend her discovery of this first fact, perhaps realizing that she is now part of a miraculous transformation. At least Lawrence, the convicted murderer, had the courage to admit he was wrong. But Hank seems inclined to brush it all under the table and move on.  The only thing that separates them, given that we don't know the details of Lawrence's crime, is the criminal justice system. Lawrence, having been convicted, is precluded from transcending his circumstances and earning forgiveness. No matter what he does, he is going to die for his sins. Hank, by contrast, on the other side of the bars, can simply walk away from his past and start over. Both situations seem wrong. Hank has no accountability for his actions; Lawrence has no chance. This reality makes the system seem frighteningly arbitrary. Although the monster in the title of the film refers to Lawrence and others like him, it appears the real monster is the system itself.  (All this is an ironic case of art imitating life: Puffy Combs, rap music star, walked away from charges relating to a night club shooting that led conviction of a protege. Some believe Combs' wealth and fame played a part in his "beating the rap.")  One other aspect of the death penalty is implicitly criticized by the film-the execution's effect on others. It is true that many good soldiers or prison guards are personality types that are themselves but one step away from the wrong side of the law, but we need to ask ourselves whether the psychological damage done by the execution business is worth the cost. What mayhem do we foster by training thousands of prison guards to be efficient executioners? If the death penalty is a significant factor in the greater propensity of the sons of death row inmates to follow in their fathers' footsteps, is the death penalty worth the cost of the wasted lives and additional murders it may foster? See *Monster's Ball* and decide for yourself.  Posted February 21, 2002 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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