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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Richard Ramsey  is a Senior Lecturer in Law, Oxford Brookes University UK   |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Official Site](http://www.pierrepointmovie.com/)  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0462477/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:337538)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback.htm) |         Society demands the penalty and, once exacted, the prisoner's corpse is entitled to respect | |  | | --- | | **Pierrepoint**  by Richard Ramsey  Capital punishment was abolished in the United Kingdom in 1969, after a five year moratorium introduced by the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965. It is, in the light of the Human Rights Act 1998 ([1](#30j0zll)), unlikely ever to be restored, except in time of war, actual or imminent. There continue to be frequent calls for its revival, most recently by Lord Stevens, former Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan [London] Police after the fatal shooting of WPC Sharon Beshenivsky ([2](#30j0zll)). There can be little doubt that perhaps the majority of the population would welcome the restoration of hanging.  The last executions in Britain took place in 1964, although it remained until recently a horrid anomaly that British judges in the Privy Council might be asked to determine the final appeals of prisoners sentenced to death in the West Indies. Watching *Pierrepoint* was not, therefore, just a period piece, as I well recall some of the more notorious executions. Since then, a number of trials, notably that of the Birmingham Six, wrongly convicted of an IRA bombing, in which 19 people died and more than 180 were injured in city center pubs, has shown that miscarriages of justice must give genuine pause for thought before this ultimate and irretrievable penalty is exacted.  Albert Pierrepoint became a hangman in 1932 and he resigned in 1956, having completed over 400 executions (the film states more than 600). He was the twentieth century's most prolific hangman. He followed his father and uncle into the job. The film begins with his being instructed into the methods. The prisoner is seated with his back to the door through which the executioner comes. He stands up and the hangman immediately pinions his arms and tells the prisoner, 'Follow me'. He leads him to the execution chamber next door, where the prisoner will see the rope but will be more shocked and surprised than have time to be frightened. The hangman puts a white hood over the prisoner's head, then the noose, while the assistant pinions his legs. The hangman pulls the lever and the trap opens, the prisoner plummeting through and breaking his neck instantaneously. It takes seconds.  Over the following two decades Albert executed hundreds of the condemned. It is like a conveyor belt to death. We see only a few and, to be fair, none is specifically gruesome, nor prurient, nor morbidly fascinating. It is all, in the manner of other British films, such as *Vera Drake*, rather understated. In that lies the power of this production. Timothy Spall as Albert has a mask-like face and, somewhat pudgy, in his three-piece suit, he looks like a civil servant. The ritual is that the day before the execution, he opens the spy-hole in the cell door to look at the prisoner inside. He assesses the drop necessary to achieve a quick kill and turns to his assistant with words such as, 'Six feet, three'. Then off they go for a meal.  Not that Albert is entirely equable in temperament: one night he explodes because the meal provided is 'rabbit food', a salad, and he no stranger to thundering orders to the warden to bring him and his assistant a hot meal as the regulations require. 'I have work to do tomorrow'. He rebukes his military assistant ferociously when executing war criminals in Germany and, having hanged thirteen persons, he is told that only twelve coffins are available. He sends the man off to fetch a thirteenth as he will not tolerate the prisoner, who has now paid his debt, being tipped into the grave without a coffin.  It is hard to see what propels Albert to follow in his family's footsteps. When first appointed as assistant hangman his mother tells him not to bring the job back home - one gathers that his father drank heavily. At the first execution we see the hangman line up with his assistant, Albert, and the prison governor and a small queue of witnesses, about five in all. One, in uniform is presumably the Sheriff or similar official. On this occasion the hangman loses his nerve as he faces his victim. Albert has to seize the strap and pinion the prisoner. He presses him from the condemned cell into the execution chamber, ensuring it is done speedily to spare the feelings of all concerned. He operates as a machine, unemotional and supremely professional. He shows cool respect to the condemned: they atone. After the execution, he becomes Albert again. It is only then that he regains his humanity and individuality.  How he copes, short of this detached half-alive, manner, so that Spall's expressionless face is a mere persona while he undertakes his awful task, is not spelled out. We see the execution of a woman who, we are told, had killed twice. The terrified prisoner mutters 'God help me' but Albert is swift and when asked what were her last words, he refuses to say, stating that this is between the condemned and the executioner. He does not want to know what the prisoner has done, does not judge them, ensures that they meet their ends with speed, efficiency, and considerable humanity. He never spurns those whom he kills. He is merely the minister of justice, acting calmly and without passion to exact society's demands.  At one execution, the same ritual having been performed as before, the prisoner who had unsuccessfully tried to kill himself beforehand as he wanted to die, rather than to cheat the gallows, literally runs to the rope. Pierrepoint has to steady his enthusiasm but all is over in seven and a half seconds. This earns him congratulations and Albert is pleased with the speed and the precision of his work: the vertebrae are cleanly snapped, no prisoner lingering on the rope. His victims never struggle being, from that point of view, perfect sacrifices to a bloodthirsty Nemesis. It is this legendary efficiency that brings Albert to the attention of Field Marshal Montgomery who wants him to execute a number of German war criminals, beginning with the guards from Belsen.  Perhaps Albert's pride at being chosen for his recognized skill is a little macabre but Montgomery makes it plain that he wants the executions to proceed with neat efficiency, not allowing the condemned to be slowly strangled as happens with the practices of other countries carrying out similar tasks. The first day, Albert hangs thirteen from Belsen, including Irma Grese, the youngest woman he executed, two other female guards (all hanged singly) and then the men in pairs. Albert pulls the hood to cover their faces with an elegant flourish. In all, Pierrepoint dispatched perhaps two hundred Nazi war criminals. Throughout all he remains professional, looking each in the eye but showing neither hatred nor delight in his work. It is achieved to his exacting standards and as each prisoner plunges through into the pit, the rope barely quivers. Death ensues instantaneously.  Albert never makes a song and dance about his job. His wife (Juliet Stevenson) realizes the nature of what he does from his frequent and coincidental absences but also from the black book in which he keeps a simple record of the prisoner's name, the place of confinement and, it seems the time it has taken him to complete the job. When he returns from Germany he is appalled to be door-stepped by the press and to be lauded as an 'avenging angel' as well as being clapped and cheered by the regulars in the pub he owns by then. All this attention bothers him for he has seen his task as a private one, dispassionately carried out, and one of which he should be neither proud nor ashamed. It seems as if the sheer quantity of executions in Germany has disrupted his equilibrium.  Later we see him execute Timothy Evans for the murder of his wife and child and who dies protesting his innocence. It shows the extent that luck plays in the choice of one's flat mates or lodgers. Evans was unfortunate in being closeted with the serial killer Christie of Rillington Place. Had he been differently placed, like Charlie Falconer sharing rooms with Tony Blair, he might have ended up as Lord Chancellor. Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged in England, smiles provocatively at him as she stands on the trap door. She appears to welcome death.  In each case, the same sad ritual, the same drab rooms with their sweating green walls, the dim lights, the tolling of the nine o'clock bell with the execution party waiting for the last stroke before entering the cell. One wonders if the prisoner, who must have heard the bell's striking the hour, wondered for a moment if he had been forgotten, his life no longer inexorably to end. Would they some how pass him by? I recall a performance of Marlowe's Dr Faustus at Stratford-on-Avon where Eric Porter turned hopefully as the midnight hours struck and nothing happened. His terror turned to sickly hope as hell did not gape for him. Suddenly, however, the entire back of the stage crashed down as the devils rushed in to drag him off. It might take twenty seconds or less to hang a man but that time must expand into eons. As Shakespeare said in *As You Like It*,  Rosalind Time travels in divers paces with divers persons.  ...  Orlando Who doth he gallop withal?  Rosalind With a thief to the gallows; for though he go as softly as foot can fall he thinks himself too soon there.  This film avoids the macabre fascination of dwelling on the details of violent death. It avoids prurience (despite the undressing of the body of a middle-aged female prisoner who, after an hour of hanging is washed and prepared for autopsy and interment). It avoids violence in the almost casual way that the execution are carried out as the living being plunges out of sight into inert death: society demands the penalty and, once exacted, the prisoner's corpse is entitled to respect. American viewers might be surprised that the condemned go to the gallows in their own clothes, not prison garb.  Albert might be expected to suffered nightmares from looking into the eyes of those who are in moments to meet certain death - not like shooting an enemy in battle. This only happens once, when Albert is summoned to execute one Corbitt (Eddie Marsan), and then discovers that the condemned man is Tish, a friend and fellow singer from Albert's pub, who had killed his ex-girlfriend in a fit of jealousy. Now Albert, Tosh to Corbitt, must set aside the persona. They meet as fellow human beings, but both accept that Albert does his duty, saying only to his friend that all will be well. That night, Albert drinks himself into an emotional stupor and flings away his fee, later dreaming of his dead friend as a scarecrow that falls into his arms.  As the execution trap clatters open time and time again we sense the cheerless nature of society's revenge. Albert finally resigns over the failure of the prison authorities to reimburse him properly for attending to executions where the prisoners are reprieved at the last moment. It gives nothing away to say that this film ends undramatically on the dignified letter that Albert types and then firmly signs. Then we are bleakly informed of the number of hangings he has performed. Then, with an uncomfortable truth, we are presented with a last statement that tells us of Albert's own considered view that capital punishment never achieved anything save revenge ([3](#30j0zll)). Nobody could be better placed to offer this stark reminder. The desire for revenge may be understandable. It is not laudable. The cold-blooded removal of another human being's life degrades the individuals and the society that authorizes it. The secret shame that *Pierrepoint* portrays rightly belongs to a doleful past.  1. Article 1 of the Sixth Protocol says, 'The death penalty shall be abolished. No one shall be condemned to such penalty or executed'.  2. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4453848.stm> accessed 10 April 2006  'Lord Stevens said the "cold-blooded" murder of Pc Beshenivsky had "finally" changed his mind on the death penalty.  "Such an extreme act of pure evil can only be met by the most extreme of responses - and that can only be death," he told the News of the World.  ...  "All my life I've been against the death penalty," Lord Stevens said.  "I genuinely never thought I'd say this, but I am now convinced that the monster who executed this young woman in cold blood should, in turn, be killed as punishment for his crime.  For the first time in my life, despite 40 years at the sharp end of policing, I finally see no alternative."'  Despite every sympathy for Lord Stevens and the popular view that murder merits death, this is the very circumstance when those in leading positions in our society must hold firm. The prospect of being literally locked away for life must remain a major deterrent, a living death. There must be those like Timothy McVeigh and apparently, Zacarias Moussaoui, the 9/11 terrorist who would prefer death to a lifetime behind bars.  3. Pierrepoint wrote an autobiography. *Executioner: Pierrepoint* (Coronet, 1977).  Posted April 20, 2006 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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