

# God and the great escape of the Shawshank religion

Who would have thought that the most beloved film of the past 20 years would be the story of a man "who crawled through a river of shit and came out clean on the other side"? That's a quote from Morgan Freeman's character, Ellis "Red" Redding, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, speaking of Andy Dufresne, played by Tim Robbins.

The film was written and directed by Frank Darabont from Stephen King's 1982 novella *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*. (Warning: spoilers ahead.) The film premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 1994 and opened soon after, earning a modest \$US28 million, which deepens the mystery. How did a film that nobody saw when it opened get to No 1 on IMDb's list of the top 250 films?

The answer, in no order of importance, might be Ted Turner, home video and God. Turner needed product for his movie channel, so he bought the company that produced *The Shawshank Redemption*, Castle Rock Entertainment, for its library. The movie then had a second life on cable TV, in high rotation. The video release

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extended a growing legion of American fans. By 1999 it was recognised as a phenomenon. It became a hit through the back door, just like Andy Dufresne's escape through the sewer pipe of the Shawshank correctional facility.

These are technical explanations of how people came to see it. They do not explain its popularity. Many films have flopped at the box office and become classics later. The process is like geology - one of Andy Dufresne's hobbies. "Geology is the study of pressure and time," says Red, contemplating Andy's efforts to dig a hole in his prison wall over 19 years. But time will not make a bad movie great: there has to be some greatness in the first place. That's what interests me about *Shawshank*.

Can we identify the elements that took the film to No. 1 on IMDb? Certainly not, but here goes. First the obvious ones: the movie is about hope, and people can always use that. The story has a long arc, another big attraction. It goes from very low to very high, like a 19th-century French or Russian novel.

Andy is sexually assaulted on many occasions by the so-called "bull queer" group of inmates; he is frequently hospitalised and sent to solitary confinement; but he turns misfortune into gain. He becomes a winner, again. Before his conviction for the murder of his wife and her lover, he was a successful banker. He uses those skills to ingratiate himself with the prison warden, played by Bob Gunton, and the staff. He does their taxes, provides financial advice, makes the warden rich. He makes himself indispensable.

Andy's rise is like the Great

American Dream of financial success, but within prison walls.

Like a lot of Stephen King's stories, and unlike a lot of movies, we're not sure where he's taking us. The themes develop slowly. *The Green Mile*, another prison story by King, does the same thing over a longer running time. *Shawshank*, at 142 minutes, never feels long because the script is built on "discipline and the Bible". The discipline is in the story's hardened steel structure: not a moment wasted. Religion provides the meaning. The warden gives each new man a Bible. "Put your trust in the Lord. Your ass belongs to me."

Religious symbolism is built into the very walls of the prison. King says he chooses to believe in God, but this story tells us he dislikes some of God's representatives on earth. The prison is a microcosm of the world, with its own supreme being. Warden Norton (Gunton) is even more vicious than the "bull queers". He spouts from the Good Book as he conspires to stop Andy's release. If Dufresne is a Christ figure, persecuted for 19 years, Norton is his Pontius Pilate. The escape through the sewer is Andy's resurrection, followed by a cleansing baptism in the river and the rain, when he emerges from the pipe. The warden rushes to Andy's cell, thinking he is dead. Instead, the cell is empty, like Christ's tomb. There is only the hole, where the "stone" used to be.

Is the religion part of its popularity? Undoubtedly, but spirituality might be a better word, given that the film is so firmly anti-religion. The Jesus story remains one of the most powerful in movies. *Spartacus* is a Jesus film, complete with crucifixions. *E.T.* is a Jesus film, complete with resurrection; *Superman* is one big Jesus fantasy in tights. In *Shawshank*, Red and his cohort are the disciples, left behind to talk about the things Andy taught them - the importance of books, the beauty of Mozart, the power of hope.

Like *Star Wars*, *Shawshank* repackaged its religion in a new(ish) form for a new generation - and they're the ones voting for it on IMDb. It condemns the fake man of God and offers a new one, who doesn't die. He escapes to Mexico - where Americans fantasise about being free of society's constraints. The redemption of the title is Red's, not Andy's. Red learns to hope, and to speak the truth to the parole board. Great escape movies are always popular. This one offers earthly salvation as the ultimate form of escape, and maybe that is what audiences love. No waiting required.

# PAUL BYRNES



# 8 DAYS YOUR SUNDAY TO SUNDAY PLANNER

By Nicole Elphick

## Today Oct 5

**MUSIC** Relax into the long weekend with the smooth sounds being played at Manly Jazz (pictured right, continuing tomorrow). Seeing a few shows won't hurt the wallet either, as on the schedule are free gigs from Bob Bamard, Well Swung Daddies and Always Smiling Trio. 10am-5.30pm, throughout Manly, free, manly.nsw.gov.au.

**MARKET** Local artists show their wares for sale along the sandstone walls of the Victoria Barracks at the recently launched Paddington Art Market (below). 10am-3pm, Victoria Barracks, Oxford Street, Paddington, free, paddingtonartmarkets.com.

**FESTIVAL** Catch the final day of the Health and Wellbeing Weekend, with fitness workshops and pampering sessions. Join in on a free '80s soundtracked



"Retrosweat" aerobics lesson or hear a motivational talk with high-jumper Amy Pejckovic. 10am-4pm, Saint Mary's Cathedral forecourt, St Mary's Road, city, free, healthandwb.com.au.

## Mon Oct 6

**DRINK** Wine aficionados will want to get along to Pinot Palooza. There are more than 100 drops to taste from Australian and New Zealand pinot noir producers. 1pm-6pm, Carriageworks, 245 Wilson Street, Eveleigh, \$60, pinotpalooza.com.au.

**MUSIC** The Grammy award winner and king of the auto-tuned vocal, T-Pain, reaches the stage to perform his rap hits such as *Bartender* and *5 O'Clock*. 7pm, Enmore Theatre, 118-132 Enmore Road, Newtown, \$76.40-\$86.30, 9550 3666, ticketek.com.au.



## Thurs Oct 9

**FILM** The Tale of Studio Ghibli Showcase (until October 22) is showing a selection of movies and documentaries from the beloved Japanese animation house, including *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* and *The Wind Rises*. Various times, Dendy Newtown, 261-263 King Street, Newtown, \$19.50, 9550 5699, dendy.com.au.

**ART** Tamaya Bingham's slyly witty installation *English Tea Party... Gone Wrong* (until November 1) delves into the British obsession with tea through large-scale drawings and images created on found chinaware. 11am-6pm, Brenda May Gallery, 2 Danks Street, Waterloo, free, 9318 1122, brendamaygallery.com.au.

## Tues Oct 7

**STAGE** English playwright Richard Bean's quirkily funny *Harvest* (pictured above, until November 8) follows four generations of a Yorkshire pig-farming family as they fight to protect their way of life. 7.30pm, New Theatre, 542 King Street, Newtown, \$17, newtheatre.org.au.

**FOOD** For Parramatta Lanes (until October 10) the streets will get a globe-trotting transformation with pop-up eateries. Munch away at a Middle Eastern bazaar, a French-inspired quarter or an Asian street-food strip. 5pm-10pm, throughout Parramatta, free, parramattalanes.com.au.

## Wed Oct 8

**TALK** Michael Mori, the military lawyer who defended Australian Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks, is discussing the legal and ethical issues of the case at *Bush, Howard and Injustice at Guantanamo*. 7pm, Sydney Opera House, \$30, 9250 7777, sydneyoperahouse.com.

**MUSIC** Enjoy a proper break from the work day with *A Little Lunch Music*, a bargain-priced 50-minute operatic performance featuring the skills of soprano Taryn Fiebig and mezzo soprano Margaret Plummer. Audience members are even allowed to bring in their sandwich to snack on while taking in the arias. 12.30pm, City Recital Hall, 2 Angel Place, city, \$15, 8256 2222, cityrecitalhall.com.



## Sat Oct 11

**FESTIVAL** Fiesta (pictured below, until October 12) is a celebration of the music and dance of Latin America. See the dazzling moves of Capoeira performers and salsa dancers or listen to a set from ARIA-nominated roots rockers Watuzzi. Noon-9pm, throughout Darling Harbour, free, darlingharbour.com.

**BOOKS** The Literary Love-Inn is cleverly crossing spoken word performance with the format of speed dating. The event is located in an abandoned restaurant and poets and storytellers are rotated throughout candle-lit spaces to share their thoughts on the theme of "Do you love me now?". 5.30pm, Bel Mondo Restaurant, Gloucester Walk, The Rocks, \$30, wordtravelfestival.com.



## Sun Oct 12

**SPORT** Cheer on the hard-hitting fun of roller derby (pictured above) as the Black Widows go up against Team Lumberjack. Expect to see fast-moving skates and more than a few spills at the Sydney Roller Derby League's Luna Park home. 5pm, Big Top, Luna Park, 1 Olympic Drive, Milsons Point, \$20, bigtopsydney.com.

**CLASS** Stretch for a good cause at this outdoor Cancer Council Pink Ribbon yoga class. Attendees are invited to dress in pink for the session, with funds raised going towards the fight against women's cancers. 10am-11am, Marks Park, Fletcher Street, Tamarama, \$20, bodymindlife.com.au.



**NEXT WEEK** As part of Just For Laughs, the Eddie Izzard Gala sees the English comedian taking on hosting duties, along with appearances from Flight of the Conchords' Rhys Darby, American funnyman Alonzo Bodden and Newcastle-born stand-up Sarah Kendall. October 18, Sydney Opera House, \$124.90, 9250 7777, sydneyoperahouse.com.

**NEXT MONTH** Richard Roxburgh is turning his talents to the title role in the Sydney Theatre Company's production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. He plays the lovelorn poet with a gift for wordplay and is directed by Andrew Upton. November 11 to December 20, Sydney Theatre, 22 Hickson Road, Walsh Bay, \$58-\$109, 9250 1777, sydneytheatre.com.au.

**Staying IN**



Small-screen favourite Asher Keddie is acting alongside Rodger Corser in the heavily anticipated political drama *Party Tricks*. Keddie stars as Victorian premier Kate Ballard, who is fighting a gripping election campaign but has a few romantic secrets that complicate matters. Monday, 8.30pm, on Channel Ten.

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