

INTO THE ABYSS

A Tale of Death, A Tale of Life

directed by Werner Herzog



Synopsis:

The film 'INTO THE ABYSS, a Tale of Death, a Tale of Life' is a documentary about two death row inmates in the USA. Conversations have been filmed at Polunsky Unit in Livingston/Texas and Huntsville/Texas with **Michael Perry** (who was executed eight days after the conversation), and **Jason Burkett**. 'A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life' as a second, explanatory title was chosen, because there has been speculation that this film will be on Death Row inmates only. However, the film has two main characters: **Michael Perry** who was executed a few days after filming with him, and **Jason Burkett**, his accomplice, who was found guilty of the same three capital

murders in a separate trial, but sentenced only to life in prison. His father **Delbert Burkett** appeared during the sentencing hearings and saved his son by telling what a tragic family life he had since he was born, while he, Delbert, spent most of the time incarcerated. Currently he is serving a thirty year plus a forty year sentence for multiple felony counts. The film is a gaze into the abyss of the human soul. Wherever you look, another abyss opens up. Perry/Burkett has partially shifted into the environment of the senseless crimes, into unbelievable stories of friends who were almost murdered by Burkett, into the heartbreaking stories of the families of the victims, and also into bizarre events surrounding Burkett's recent marriage with a young woman. One of the most haunting persons is **Fred Allen**, a former member of the tie-down team in the death house who used to strap the condemned to the gurney. After 125 executions, he suddenly had a breakdown, shaking uncontrollably, and crying that he could not stop. He retired abruptly from the team and lost his pension. Death is not the only side of the film: there is the Urgency of Life as a parallel storyline. How should we live our lives according to the men waiting for execution? How is Fred Allan describing a life of integrity, of paying attention to the magnificence of Creation? Strangest of all is the young woman, **Melyssa Burkett**, who worked in a support group for Jason Burkett after his conviction, and married him in the maximum security prison - over a phone, and separated by a bulletproof wall of glass. She is pregnant by him, and gives only vague hints about an elaborate plan to smuggle "contraband" from him out of the prison. The film shows the prisoners as human beings, but it never glorifies them or their crimes. Michael Perry who will die by lethal injection is told by Herzog in a straightforward way that "destiny has dealt you a bad deck of cards which does not exonerate you, and which does not necessarily mean that I have to like you."

The Protagonists:

MICHAEL PERRY: executed on July 1, 2010. There is only one filmed encounter with him at Polunsky Unit eight days before his death. He was in full denial of any involvement in a triple murder, laying all the blame on his accomplice, Jason Burkett. However, Perry confessed after his apprehension in an ambulance, and later - in all detail - in hospital, knowing that he would "get the needle". He gave details of the crimes only the perpetrator would have known, and directed police to the location of the bodies of two of the victims in the woods. He identified himself with the driver's license of one of his victims. His co-defendant, JASON BURKETT, was sentenced to life in prison in a separate trial. He eluded the death penalty, because during the sentencing phase, his defense attorney presented DELBERT BURKETT, his father, who was brought into court in shackles. Delbert made a brief statement, that he had spent his last 18 years in prison for unspeakable crimes, that he was a drug addict, his wife a drug addict, and his other son a drug addict, also currently incarcerated. Spare the life of my son, said Delbert, this boy, pointing at Jason, never had a chance in life. Burkett is apparently an Aryan Supremacist, although he denies it. He married in prison which points to an interesting phenomenon: as there are groupies of rock stars, there are groupies of death row inmates. There is a most fascinating cast of characters next to our protagonists who take us straight into a Netherworld of senseless crime, violence, and illiteracy. It is a descent into a true American Gothic. The film opens with the Reverend RICHARD LOPEZ who - within 40 minutes - has to accompany an offender who will die by means of lethal injection at the Death House of Huntsville/Texas. The film also focuses on the tragic stories of family members of the victims, and features FRED

ALLEN who served as captain of the "Tie Down Team", the team that would strap the man to be executed to the gurney. After 125 executions, Allen, until then an advocate of capital punishment, finds himself shaking uncontrollably and crying for hours on end. He never returns to the Death House, and quits his job at the cost of losing his pension. His testimony is the most compelling argument against the death penalty one can imagine. Yet this is neither an activist film against capital punishment, nor a political polemic. Death is not the only side of the film: there is the Urgency of Life as a parallel storyline. How should we live our lives according to the men waiting for execution? How is Fred Allan describing a life of integrity, of paying attention to the magnificence of Creation? Strangest of all is the young woman, MELYSSA BURKETT, who worked in a support group for Jason Burkett after his conviction, and married him in the maximum security prison - over a phone, and separated by a bulletproof wall of glass. She is pregnant by him, and gives only vague hints about an elaborate plan to smuggle "contraband" from him out of the prison. The film shows the prisoners as human beings, but it never glorifies them or their crimes. Michael Perry who will die by lethal injection is told by Herzog in a straightforward way that "destiny has dealt you a bad deck of cards which does not exonerate you, and which does not necessarily mean that I have to like you." INTO THE ABYSS will be presented at the Toronto, New York, and London Film Festivals. Its theatrical release in the USA will be during the fall of 2011.

Director´s Statement:

I am not an advocate of the death penalty. I do not even have an argument, I only have a story, the history of the barbarism of Nazi Germany. There were thousands and thousands of cases of capital punishment; there was a systematic program of euthanasia, and on top of it the industrialized extermination of six million Jews in a genocide that has no precedence in human history. The argument that innocent men and women have been executed is, in my opinion, only a secondary one. A State should not be allowed - under any circumstance - to execute anyone for any reason. End of story. Guilt or Innocence: I am not in the business of establishing guilt or innocence. For this, there are courts of law. The films are not an apology for the committed crimes either. It is also absolutely clear that the crimes of the persons in my films are monstrous, but the perpetrators are not monsters. They are human. For this reason, I treat them with respect, addressing them with Mr. or Mrs. and their full name. Although I am not visible, I wear a formal suit. The balance, the right tone, in the dialogues is essential: there is no activist's anger from my side, although my position is clear; there is no false sentimentality; there is no commiseration; there is no chumminess; but there is a sense of solidarity with the inmates concerning their appeals and legal battles in order to have their execution delayed or transformed into a life sentence. And, above all, there is a strong sense that these individuals are human beings.

Werner Herzog

Director's short bio:

Werner Herzog was born in Munich on September 5, 1942.

He grew up in a remote mountain village in Bavaria and studied History and German Literature in Munich and Pittsburgh.

He made his first film in 1961 at the age of 19. Since then he has produced, written, and directed more than sixty feature- and documentary films, such as AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD (1972), NOSFERATU (1978), FITZCARRALDO (1982), LESSONS OF DARKNESS (1992), LITTLE DIETER NEEDS TO FLY (1997), MY BEST FIEND (1999), INVINCIBLE (2000), GRIZZLY MAN (2005), ENCOUNTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD (2007), CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS (2011).

Werner Herzog has published more than a dozen books of prose, and directed as many operas.

Werner Herzog lives in Munich and Los Angeles.



Technical information:

Running time 105 min

Aspect Ratio 16:9 (original footage 1:1.33)

Sound Dolby E

HDCam SR PAL1080 4:2:2 16x9 1.78 full frame colour 25ftc

DigiBeta PAL 16:9 anamorphic colour 25ftc

Distribution:

World sales (ex North America and UK):

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WERNER HERZOG FILM

Present

A film by

WERNER HERZOG

Directed by
WERNER HERZOG

Director of Photography
PETER ZEITLINGER

Picture and Music Edited by
JOE BINI

Music Composed by
MARK DEGLI ANTONI

Produced by
ERIK NELSON

Executive Producers
DAVE HARDING
AMY BRIAMONTE

Executive Producers for Discovery ID
HENRY SCHLEIFF
SARA KOZAK

Executive Producers
ANDRE SINGER for Spring Films
LUCKI STIPETIC for Werner Herzog Film

Coordinating Producer
ROBERT ERICKSON

Additional Camera
DON FRIDEL
JERRY HATTAN
KEVIN O'BRIEN
DAVE ROBERSON
JAKE WILGANOWSKI

Production Sound
ERIC SPITZER
JEFF DUNCAN
RANDY FOSTER

MICHAEL LILE
AL MCGUIRE
STEVE OSMON

Assistant Camera
ERIK SOELLNER

Production Assistant
HARRY SCHLEIFF

Supervising Producer, Post Production
RANDALL BOYD

Post Production Coordinator
BERNIE LEINFELDER

Assistant Editor
ALEX BUSHE

Music Performed by
SEBASTIAN STEINBERG - guitars, contra bass
LISA GERMANO - violins
DAVID BYRNE - guitar
PETER BECK - winds
COLIN STEVENS - instrument design
MARK DEGLI ANTONI - keyboards, percussion

Post Production Mixer
MIKE KLINGER
Tree Falls Post

Digital Intermediate Colorist
SHERI EISENBERG
Colorworks

Digital Intermediate Conformist
JASON SAULOG
REZA AMIDI

Digital Intermediate Producer
MORNING STAR SCHOTT

Digital Intermediate Client Services
OLIVIA WARD

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MICHELLE LYONS
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