

# John Frankenheimer: shooting *Against the Wall*

By Gerald Pratley

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**ON JUNE 26** last year all the clocks at the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville stopped at 9 o'clock. The iron doors clanged shut, the last of the prisoners filed out to be transferred to other prisons, and a deep silence settled over the long corridors and empty cell blocks once teeming with a thousand inmates.

Today the clocks still say 9 o'clock, but the doors are open again and the place alive with the familiar sights and sounds of a film crew on location. And director John Frankenheimer is at last in a prison!

When Frankenheimer made *Birdman of Alcatraz* thirty-two years ago he planned at first to shoot it there, but permission was refused and he had to settle for studio sets. This gave the film a "too clean look" he admits, but it was justified in part as the story was self-contained, like a poem, about one man alone in his cell devoted to the study of birds. It was not about daily life of men in prison.

But his latest film, *Against the Wall*, shooting in this immense and impressive Victorian-era castle-like building soon to be torn down, is about prison life gone mad due to appalling living conditions. Ten years after *Birdman* the Attica New York State prison exploded in January 1971 with rage and riots, death and destruction. The response by Governor Rockefeller and the state troopers who clumsily and brutally put down the uprising left many questions unanswered.

Frankenheimer believes it is time they were. The official enquiry after the tragedy tended to be a whitewash. Working from a screenplay by the Irish writer Ron Hutchinson, *Against the Wall* is a partly fictional but otherwise true account of what actually happened seen through the eyes of Michael Smith. An ordinary warden at the time, he is adviser to the production staff.

The then 22-year old Smith had just started work at Attica when the disturbance broke out and he was taken hostage along with other guards, inmates and prison staff. After four days of agony and indecision he was shot to pieces by the "rescuing" troopers. His life was saved by a black inmate with whom he had become friends.

Long months of healing in hospital followed before he could return home to a normal life -- only to be plunged into a legal and bureaucratic nightmare over compensation; he never went back to work in a prison.

"Here was a young man whose life was changed forever" says the director, "whose beliefs and ideals in the decency of people, in the fairness of law and order and the rightness of justice, were shattered in both the emotional and physical sense."

Executive Producer Irwin Meyer read "The History of Civil Rights in America" and found Michael Smith's name mentioned in reference to black and white relations. Meyer thought his experience would make an important film about this troubling social issue -- not "the hero to the rescue" but about an innocent, resolute young man who came close to death and whose harrowing experience opened his eyes to a world he had never imagined. Using private investigators Meyer found Smith living quietly in upper New York state, now the father of four children. He flew him to California and persuaded him to relate his story for the screen.

The screen will be for HBO (Home Box Office) but Frankenheimer doesn't consider this a backward step as do many who still make a division between films for cinemas and those made for TV.

"I had already filmed *The Rainmaker* for HBO and enjoyed working with them, and when they called and asked me to take on this film I was immediately interested. It's a subject I think is just as disturbing and urgent today as it was then. Look what recently happened at Lucasville prison in Ohio. It wasn't as serious as Attica, but the reasons for it remain the same. There is always so much to learn from the past, but we never seem to remember what happened previously or remove the causes of it.

"I'm not saying we should be sympathetic to criminals, but how far does punishment go before it results in even more antisocial behaviour under conditions which degrade both inmates and their guards?"

Smith is played by Kyle MacLachlan, and the inmate who saves him by Clarence Nelson (*52 Pick-Up*). Harry Dean Stanton is Smith's father and Frederic Forrest plays Wiesbad, the head warden. Anne Heche takes the role of Smith's wife. They were married only a few months before he started work at Attica. The rest of the cast is made up of stage and TV actors mainly from Los Angeles and Chicago -- including Denis Forest from Ottawa, who has appeared in several Québec films.

This is a no-nonsense, no hanging around, five-week schedule on a six-million dollar budget. There are no huge salaries, no expensive trailers, no temperamental stars. Frankenheimer, always an economical filmmaker, prefers this and relishes the challenges; but they take their toll with long and exhausting hours of work and the constant demands of creativity under pressure.

Frankenheimer, who is proud of his pioneering first years in live television, is just as pleased to work for non-commercial television today. In the making of this film he will sacrifice none of his integrity and cinematic skills: "There are no commercials in HBO films, I'm shooting on 35mm and there is really no difference in the way I'm making this film than if I were making it for showing in cinemas.

"But unlike many really good films made for cinemas today that you put your life into and then see disappear after a week's run, at least I know that 15 million viewers or more will see *Against the Wall* when it shows on HBO; and afterwards will have an audience on video.

Out in the compound more than 500 raggedly dressed and "injured" extras are playing prisoners. Fires are burning and smoking, and rubbish is piled everywhere, broken furniture, boxes and beds, a camp of tattered tents for the dispossessed. Moving through the director's imaginative, complicated camera setups with the Steadicam is David Crone, son of cameraman Bob and Vi Crone, once the owners of Film House in Toronto. David has worked with Frankenheimer in Paris and Rome (*Year of the Gun*) and in Calgary on both *Dead Bang* and *The Fourth War*. The director speaks well of him and both work amicably together.

Tall and bending slightly, Frankenheimer moves through the carnage giving directions. He is highly regarded by actors, crew and extras alike and is always greeted as Mr. Frankenheimer. When he speaks to the extras, all male prisoners, he addresses them as gentlemen, and the elderly as Sir.

Sitting down before the TV monitors under a large sun-shield he calls "are you ready, David?" and to his assistant, "where are my earphones." And a long and complicated sequence begins.

Producer Steven McGlothen observes, "he's really remarkable, he carries it all in his head; his visual imagination is unbelievable, he knows exactly where it will all cut and piece together. I find it fascinating and mystifying."

For Frankenheimer moviemaking remains the love of his life -- even in prison!

[On location in Tennessee]

## Author Information

Gerald PRATLEY, OC, LLD, started his career as film critic with the CBC. In 1969, he founded the Ontario Film Institute which he directed until 1990. He has written several books and numerous articles on film, including *Torn Sprockets*, a history of Canadian cinema. He taught Film History in universities in Toronto and Waterloo, Canada and holds three honorary degrees from Canadian and US universities.

**Gerald A. Pratley** (1923-2011) was born and educated in London, England, and came to Canada in 1946. He started working in Toronto for the CBC as a scriptwriter. He was drawn toward working in motion pictures, and became, in 1948, the CBC's first film critic and commentator.

Gerald Pratley broadcast three programmes a week, *Pratley at the Movies*, *The Movie Scene*, *Music From the Films*, and others, until 1975. During this time he also became the first post-war chairman of the Toronto Film Society, chairman of the Toronto and District Film Council and co-founder of the A-G-E Film Society and correspondent for international magazines such as *Films and Filming*, *Film In Review*, *Variety*,

*Hollywood Quarterly* and *International Film Guide*. During the 1950s he wrote for *Canadian Film Weekly* and *Canadian Film Digest*.

He became known as a speaker on all aspects of motion picture art and industry, and was invited to teach film history at the University of Toronto, York University, University of Waterloo, Seneca College and Ryerson Polytechnical University, with individual lectures being given at many other Canadian and US universities and colleges. He has served as a member of various judging panels of competitions and festivals, being one of the members of the first Canadian Film Awards in 1949.

From 1970 to 1975 he was the director of the Stratford (Ontario) International Film Festival, and from 1969 to 1976 he was Chairman of the International Jury of the Canadian Film Awards. He has attended all the world's leading festivals of film, and in particular, for 30 years, the Cannes Festival as CBC correspondent. He has written six books, *The Films of Frankenheimer: Forty Years in Film*; *The Cinema of John Frankenheimer*; *The Cinema of Otto Preminger*; *The Cinema of David Lean*; *The Cinema of John Huston*, and *Torn Sprockets*, a history of the Canadian cinema.

Gerald Pratley has served on the Advisory Boards of the film departments of Ryerson Polytechnical University and Humber College, and as a member of the programme committee of TV Ontario. In 1968 he became the founder-director of the Ontario Film Institute of the Province of Ontario, an organization which has distinguished itself in archival holdings and public service and is known since 1990 as the Cinematheque of Ontario. He taught Film History courses at the Department of Film and Photography, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto and the University of Waterloo.

In 1984, Gerald Pratley was made a Member of the Order of Canada and in 2003 **Officer of the Order of Canada** for his service to Canada through film appreciation. He holds Honorary Degrees in Letters and Fine Arts from York and Waterloo Universities (Ont., Canada) and Bowling Green State University (Ohio, USA).

In 2002, Gerald Pratley received a **Special Genie Award** from the Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television in recognition of his lifelong dedication to the promotion and his exceptional support of Canadian cinema.

He died on 14 March 2011 in Ontario, Canada.