

Miracle mile

by [Craig Detweiler](#) in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

*The Green Mile* (1999), directed by Frank Darabont

Frank Darabont's *The Green Mile*, like his directorial debut, *The Shawshank Redemption*, is about prison, death row and miracles. It's particularly about the healing power of convicted killer John Coffey. The film's meticulous, measured tone screams "Oscar worthy." For audiences longing for uplifting old-style Hollywood entertainment, that's inviting stuff. To a more jaded generation, another earnest Tom Hanks performance may seem cloying and annoying. Still, the movie delivers powerhouse performances, miraculous plot twists and a satisfying murder mystery.

Darabont adapts Stephen King's six-part serial novel with reverence—so much reverence that he allowed himself three hours and eight minutes to tell the story. He spins a solid, entertaining yarn, and his critique of capital punishment and portrayal of the spirituality of suffering African Americans are commendable. But even a good sermon can go on too long.

*The Green Mile* begins in the present. Strains of Fred Astaire singing "Cheek to Cheek" snap the narrator back to 1935. Paul Edgecombe (Tom Hanks) recounts his experiences working at Louisiana's Cold Mountain Penitentiary. Edgecombe supervises the prisoners on death row, usually referred to as "the last mile." But it's the color of the floor on E block, "the color of faded limes," that inspires the title.

Paul runs a tight ship, respecting the convicted criminals waiting to sit in "Old Sparky," the electric chair. His harmonious team of prison guards is disturbed by a sadistic new guard, Percy Wetmore (Doug Hutchison). Percy revels in shouting, "Dead man walking!" as he escorts the giant Coffey onto the cell block. *The Green Mile* becomes a battle of wills between the well-connected Percy and the decent, average American, Paul. Our allegiance is never tested.

Three separate executions are filmed in grim detail. Paul leads his team through a dress rehearsal, paying particular attention to the all-important application of a wet sponge to those seated in the electric chair. Darabont's gruesome depiction of the death of Arnold Bitterbuck and Edouard Delacroix make his opinions of capital

punishment clear. Those who cry "justice" and revel in revenge are portrayed as bloodthirsty. When Percy asks Bitterbuck to send him a postcard from hell, a guard responds, "He's paid what he owed. He's square with the house."

The question of Coffey's guilt provides the central tension. Michael Clarke Duncan makes the most of his role as noble savage and Christ figure (check the initials). He was found holding two raped and bloodied girls in his arms, crying, "I tried to take it back, but it was too late." The "it" turns out to be all the pain and suffering of the world. "I'm tired of people being ugly to each other," Coffey says. "There's too much pain. It's like pieces of glass in my head."

This is a movie about big questions: justice, evil, repentance and heaven. It treats healing, a "praise Jesus miracle," with the utmost respect; it does not doubt the miraculous; and it weeps over the evil embodied by unrepentant killers. "Things that happen in this world, it's a wonder God allows it," says Paul, who wrestles with his job as executioner. "Why did I kill one of his true miracles?"

Darabont directs several Oscar caliber performances, but best performance by a rodent definitely belongs to surprise star Mr. Jingles. This simple mouse is alternately a prison guard, a witness to an execution and a circus performer. The promise of Mouseville becomes the film's key metaphor. While the audience is tempted to dismiss Mouseville as a precursor to a famous amusement park in Florida, Darabont treats it with the utmost respect. It's the final resting place we want to believe in and reach.