Angola: Death by incarceration

Oscar-nominated film depicts life in America’s largest prison.

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Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — When Hollywood goes to jail, the result is often memorable.

The gritty genre of life inside a house of many doors has produced classic films like “Birdman of Alcatraz,” “Cool Hand Luke” and “The Shawshank Redemption.”

And when the 71st Academy Awards are handed out on March 21, among the films in contention will be what is arguably the best prison picture ever made.

But it doesn’t star Burt Lancaster or Paul Newman or Tim Robbins. Free from the glamorized and sensationalist images provided by Hollywood, this story is real — and it’s real close to home.

“The Farm: Angola U.S.A.,” nominated for an Academy Award as Best Documentary, depicts the reality of life and death at the Louisiana State Penitentiary by following, over the course of a year, the lives of six inmates, one of whom is awaiting execution and the others serving life sentences.

The 90-minute documentary was screened at the USL Student Union Bayou Bijou Theater Sunday night. Following the viewing, a panel discussion was moderated by Ed Henderson, philosophy professor at LSU.

Lafayette Parish Assistant District Attorney Keith Stutes said Angola is the end result of a complicated process.

“But it always begins with a crime,” Stutes said. “The system has its faults, but we all try to do the best job we are capable of.”

Phil Preis, corporate attorney and former gubernatorial candidate, is a member of Kairos Prison Ministry.

“Angola is the junkyard, the septic tank for the failures of our society,” Preis said. “But I’ve also seen positive changes take place in these men when they’re shown some caring from people outside their environment.”

The A&E cable channel will air “The Farm: Angola U.S.A.” tonight at 8 p.m.

Lottie Holliday speaks about her impressions of the documentary ‘The Farm: Angola U.S.A.’ after a Sunday screening while Linda Anson listens. In the center is USL professor Burk Foster.