

MOVIE REVIEWS: *A BEAUTIFUL MIND* AND *IRIS*

Agathi Glezakos

The plots of two recent movies, *A Beautiful Mind* and *Iris*, center on the life stories of two world-renowned individuals: mathematician John Nash and author Iris Murdoch. Both achieved greatness in their chosen fields and both became victims of devastating psychiatric conditions. Nash was diagnosed with schizophrenia in young adulthood. Murdoch was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in her seventies. These films provide vivid and quite accurate portrayals of the debilitating effects such conditions have both on the afflicted and their caregivers.

A Beautiful Mind

Universal Pictures/Dream Works Pictures,
Ron Howard, Director

West Virginian John Nash (Russell Crowe) is admitted to the Ph.D. program in mathematics at Princeton University as a Carnegie Fellow. He is determined to distinguish himself by finding a "truly original idea." Nash's single-mindedness is viewed as odd by his classmates. Finally, when the self-imposed pressure intensifies, he experiences the onset of psychotic symptoms. Nonetheless, he distinguishes himself and upon completing his dissertation, he receives a prestigious appointment at an institute affiliated with MIT. During the years that follow, in addition to gaining recognition for his academic achievements, Nash attracts the attention of one of his MIT students (Jennifer Connolly), whom he marries. But there is a descent, presented in a series of terrifying auditory and visual hallucinations, at the end of which Nash is involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital. As an in-patient, he is

physically restrained and receives a series of frightening "insulin coma treatments." He is diagnosed with schizophrenia and is told that he must submit to a lifelong regimen of maintenance with anti-psychotic medications.

What follows is both painful and redemptive. After the passage of many turbulent years, Nash is awarded the Nobel Prize and delivers an acceptance speech in which he pays heartfelt tribute to the wife whose love and support, he says, made the difference that allowed him to ultimately emerge from the grip of his illness. The film strongly suggests that it may have been Nash's wife's courage and loyalty, in the face of the bleakest of diagnoses, that contributed to his gradual recovery. The eventual emergence of a functioning Nash after decades of mental illness challenges the widely held belief that schizophrenia is a lifelong condition that severely impairs its victims. The accolades of the Princeton faculty to an aging and more mentally stable Nash suggest that schizophrenia is a mental illness which may have a more promising prognosis.

The actors, notably Russell Crowe, deliver impressive and powerful Crowe's transformations, from a graduate student with great aspirations to someone tormented by internal demons to a mature man whose physique and facial expression reflect the effects of years of wear and tear brought by one of the most devastating mental disorders, are remarkable. While the scenes with transitions from visual hallucinations to reality may be at times confusing, the dialogue is powerful and even humorous.

IRIS

Miramax Films/BBC Films/Intermedia Films
Richard Eyre, Director

Young, vibrant, and brilliant, Iris Murdoch (Kate Winslet) flourishes at Oxford University in the post WWII years. Her outgoing, non-conventionality attracts the attention of John Bayley (Hugh Bonneville), a shy academic who is inexperienced in the world of love. From the suitors who surround her, Iris chooses to marry John.

The movie unfolds in a series of alternating scenes that depict the early and later years of the couple's marriage, allowing us to witness the transformations in each spouse and the growth of their relationship. Iris becomes a prolific writer, a respected philosopher, a sought-after lecturer and, finally a Dame (Judi Dench). In her seventies, Iris, the woman with the keenest intelligence, manifests symptoms of cognitive decline that deviate from the usual vicissitudes of the aging process. Results from medical examinations and tests lead to the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. Thus, a tennis racket becomes for Iris "a tennis thing"; she even fails to recognize her own recently published book. We witness her change from an eloquent young woman whose intellect and zest for life captured the admiration of many and triggered the desires of both sexes, to someone who is elderly, confused and disoriented, obstinate, with a markedly untidy appearance. The film alternates between scenes centering on the youthful Iris and those that portray her decline. This enables the viewer to see the effects of aging on the human body and the way in which one's intellect is vulnerable to destruction by elements that cannot yet be identified or controlled.

John is also transformed, from the young shy suitor to an aging and admiring husband (Jim Broadbent). His love for Iris sustains him in his demanding role as her only caregiver. When the burden of this role becomes heavy, his patience and tolerance are tested. In a state of momentary rage, he demands that Iris stop following him "like a water buffalo." And yet, John refuses to believe the doctor when he says that "you need to learn her language before the light goes out," and that "it

[Alzheimer's disease] will win." Instead, he assures Iris: "we will win it."

In *Iris*, we experience the compelling performance of four seasoned actors and we see how a "first class mind" can atrophy; how a woman who was an advocate for "educated" minds and who believed in the association between language and thought loses her memory and her verbal and cognitive abilities. We also see how very burdensome the demands of caring for someone with this condition can be. And yet, what ultimately touches the viewer most is the deep emotional connection between Iris and John and the difference it makes in how they cope with the ravaging effects of Alzheimer's disease.

Both *A Beautiful Mind* and *Iris* may elicit feelings of sadness and fear in viewers; after all, these films serve as vivid reminders of our human vulnerabilities. The portrayals of schizophrenia and Alzheimer's disease reflect the movie industry's attempt to sensitize us to their devastating effects. As a mental health professional who has been allowed to enter the world and, to some extent, the fragmented psyche of men and women with diagnoses of schizophrenia and Alzheimer's disease, I left these movies with a deeper and more empathetic understanding of my clients' torment.

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