

# *The Theory of Everything*: Stephen Hawking's life, or parts of it, on film

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*Directed by James Marsh; written by Anthony McCarten; based on the book by Jane Hawking*

An advertisement for *The Theory of Everything* asserts, “Behind the genius of Stephen Hawking lies the untold story.” Stephen Hawking has over the years become a familiar personage to millions. A brilliant physicist and cosmologist, Hawking’s nearly life-long battle with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) has become the stuff of legend. Hawking was diagnosed with this disease in 1963, at the age of 21. He is now 72. Has anyone ever lived longer with this terrible affliction?

Hawking has written a number of books that have brought before a wide audience the fascinating subjects of space-time, black holes and the origin of the universe. His most popular and widely read book, and deservedly so, is *A Brief History of Time*, published in 1988.

In a recent interview on the *engadget.com* web site, director James Marsh explained that the film attempted to “balance” between Hawking’s relationship with his lover and wife Jane Wilde, played ably by Felicity Jones, his ever-progressing and debilitating illness and the science that animated his life. Marsh explains, “I assumed that we’re all as smart as each other or as dumb as each other when it comes to the science stuff.”

Descending to the lowest common denominator is never a good starting point. According to Marsh, Hawking described the film as being “broadly true,” but was disappointed that there wasn’t more emphasis placed on the science. Perhaps such an undertaking is analogous to making a movie about the late, great operatic soprano Maria Callas...but with relatively little singing.

Marsh’s reaction to Hawking’s guarded criticisms was to breathe a sigh of relief. “I think he was more surprised by the film than pleased. He was pleasantly surprised that the film wasn’t just awful.” Not exactly a ringing endorsement.

*The Theory of Everything*, a reference to the attempt by physicists and cosmologists to elaborate a unifying theoretical framework for all phenomena in the universe, begins in 1963, with Hawking (Eddie Redmayne), a 21-year-

old wunderkind, bike racing with a fellow physicist through the Cambridge campus.

Later we see Hawking at what appears to be a college “mixer” setting eyes on a young co-ed, who happens to be Jane Wilde, an English major interested in medieval Spanish poetry. Wilde is religious, while Hawking is an atheist, a dichotomy that serves as one of the subtexts for their relationship. “I have a problem with the celestial dictator premise,” he explains to Miss Wilde. Apparently, however, “opposites attract.”

Meanwhile the filmgoer is made aware of Hawking’s increasing problems with coordination, and loss of visual focus. He almost misses the train to Oxford to hear a lecture by the renowned mathematical physicist Roger Penrose (Christian McKay). Penrose’s exposition on “black holes” excites the young Hawking who decides to devote his doctoral research to the question of “Time.”

But Hawking is beset by escalating bouts of motor dysfunction and imbalance, finally causing him to collapse onto the pavement. Hawking is diagnosed with motor neuron or Lou Gehrig’s disease, named for the great New York Yankees slugger immortalized in the film *Pride of the Yankees*. Doctors give Hawking a life expectancy of two years.

There is much that is predictable in *The Theory of Everything*, and so the viewer is asked to fill in the blanks at times. Director Marsh seems to like using spirals, presumably to signify the universe and its beginnings and endings, and such images re-appear throughout the film: a fireworks display, cream swirling in coffee, the movement of light and fire, as Hawking’s ability to visually focus becomes increasingly problematic.

Hawking’s initial reaction to the diagnosis and the seeming hopelessness of his situation is (predictably) one of anger and a desire to disassociate himself from everyone and everything. Jane, however, will have none of it. She is persistent, and they get married.

Her steadfast support, in recognition of both the brilliance of the man and, as well, the extraordinary circumstances she

willingly signed up for, allows Hawking to concentrate on his research, and he obtained his PhD while still in his twenties.

Since the film is based on her memoir, *Traveling to Infinity : My Life with Stephen* (2008), one is struck by the obvious double entendre. Jane Wilde never in her wildest dreams expected Hawking to surpass the two-year prognosis, let alone still be around more than 40 years later. To be fair, they did love each other and amazingly produced three children. Things, however, become increasingly untenable for young Jane, who is left doing all the “heavy lifting.”

Meanwhile, Hawking’s disease progresses to a seeming denouement, unless of course, you are aware, as most people, that the subject of the film is still wonderfully among the living! ALS is a disease that destroys all motor functioning, including the ability to swallow and, ultimately, to breathe. Hawking nearly chokes to death, and is left with the prospect of either dying, or of staying alive via a tracheotomy and the insertion of a breathing tube. The “downside” of this procedure is that he will lose the ability to speak.

Prior to the tracheotomy, Hawking’s speech had already become increasingly slurred, and he would have to dictate words one letter at a time, often by raising an eyebrow or blinking. This is depicted well in the film, and Hawking’s plight attracts the attention of a computer expert in California, Walter Wolosz.

Hawking would later write; “He sent me a computer program he had written, called Equalizer. This allowed me to select words from a series of menus on the screen, by pressing a switch in my hand. The program could also be controlled by a switch, operated by head or eye movement. When I have built up what I want to say, I can send it to a speech synthesizer.”

One of the funnier moments in the film involves Hawking’s first attempt to use Equalizer. As the synthesized voice, identical to that of the real Stephen Hawking and instantly recognizable to anyone who has heard him in recent years, is projected, someone exclaims, “You have an American accent!”

Eddie Redmayne is a talented physical actor. One can marvel at his portrayal of Hawking’s descent into what can only be described as a private debilitating hell, except for the facts of his marvelous brain and will, his overriding interest in great ideas and the love and care he received from Jane through the years. As Hawking is confined to a motorized wheel chair and reduced to the smallest of facial movements, Redmayne’s eyes convey both Hawking’s keen sense of humor and a profound sadness over what it has cost Jane.

Increasingly they drift apart, as she falls for the local

church choral director, Jonathan Hellyer Jones (Charlie Cox), while Hawking increasingly prefers the company of his latest, and very attractive, nurse/secretary, who, in the film seems more than willing to reciprocate. The Hawkings remain together long enough for both to be feted by the Queen.

The film ends with Stephen and Jane, perhaps in a garden at Buckingham Palace, gazing at their children, two of whom are now grown, below them. Hawking turns to his soon to be ex-wife and casually points out, “Look what we’ve created,” a restatement of his oft-quoted phrase that “there are no boundaries to human endeavor.” In a postscript, it is noted that Hawking, to his credit, refused the offer of peerage by the Queen.

Throughout *The Theory of Everything*, Hawking’s atheism is soft-pedaled. At one point, after the publication of *A Brief History of Time*, Jane casually confronts her husband about his statement that to discover the origin of the universe is to “know the mind of God.” She asks him if he believes there is a God? Hawking seems at first to relent, then issues the qualifier, “but.” We are left with the meaning of Hawking’s phrase similar to that of Einstein’s famous aphorism “God does not play dice with the universe,” never explained.

What Hawking would have said, and did say, is the following; “Before we understand science, it is natural to believe that God created the universe. But now science offers a more convincing explanation.... What I meant by ‘we would know the mind of God’ is we would know everything God would know, if there were a God, which there isn’t. I am an atheist.”

There are also passing references to his political views. As a youth, Hawking apparently participated in “Ban the Bomb” demonstrations, at a time when open-air testing of nuclear weapons was still going on. At the end of the film, Jane describes her husband as a “liberal socialist,” whatever that precisely means. These kinds of tidbits are typical, so while *The Theory of Everything* has its moments, it is essentially a superficial accounting of their lives. Hawking was right. It wasn’t “awful,” but it could have been considerably better.



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