The Father: Anthony Hopkins as a Londoner dealing with dementia

Fred Mazelis
30 March 2021

Directed by Florian Zeller, screenplay by Zeller and Christopher Hampton, based on the play by Zeller.

The Father, nominated for an Oscar as Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards, deals with the difficult and emotional subject of an aging parent afflicted by dementia. The powerful cast includes Anthony Hopkins as an 80-year-old retired engineer and Olivia Colman as his daughter Anne.

The film is the first effort as a director for Florian Zeller, a young French novelist and playwright, and is based on Zeller's play of the same name, which premiered in Paris in 2012 to great acclaim, and has since been staged in Britain, the US and many other countries around the world.

Anne has been caring for her father, Anthony, who lives alone in London, but is no longer able to do without regular help. As is typical for many in the face of their growing inability to go about the tasks of daily life, Anthony has been lashing out angrily at a succession of caregivers that his daughter has found for him. Now Anne has just informed him that she won't be able to help on a daily basis as before. "I've met someone … he lives in Paris," she explains. "You're abandoning me … what's going to become of me?" says Anthony, with a mixture of anger and fear.

There have been a number of films in recent years dealing with families facing Alzheimer's and other dementias. What sets *The Father* somewhat apart is its unique perspective: the viewer experiences many of the events from Anthony's standpoint itself. To some extent, we share his confusion and disorientation. He speaks to Anne at one point, and later he hears someone and finds a strange man in his flat. Later a different Anne returns. The conclusion of the film reveals who the strangers are.

Meanwhile Anthony and Anne try to navigate the common but painful relationship between an aging parent and an adult child who has reversed roles and is now caring for a father who is by turns angry, frightened, irritable and vulnerable.

The cast is uniformly superb, including Rufus Sewell as Anne's husband, and Imogen Poots, Mark Gatiss and Olivia Williams as others involved in Anthony's care. Colman and Hopkins in particular are a major part of the reason *The Father* holds the viewer's interest throughout. When Anthony demands to know where his watch is, and insists that his latest caregiver must have stolen it, Hopkins makes the incident completely believable and moving, despite the fact that it is such a familiar symptom of the illness.

The dialogue in playwright Christopher Hampton's screenplay adaptation is gripping and naturalistic in the best sense, and there is scarcely a false note. Hopkins is of course celebrated for his work over the last five decades and more. Here he displays an emotional range that is both remarkable and will unquestionably strike a chord with any who have cared for a parent in such circumstances.

The Father includes original music by Ludovico Einaudi. It also contains, as musical background in several scenes, a few famous operatic excerpts, including Maria Callas' rendition of "Casta Diva" from Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma*, and "Je crois entendre encore" from Georges Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*. These are obviously among Anthony's favorites (the Bizet is played twice, in fact), which he is still able to enjoy, and they add a note of pathos and beauty to the depiction of his decline. The name of the Bizet aria, perhaps chosen for this reason, translates as "I think I can still hear," suggesting Anthony's struggles to remember.

As noted above, *The Father* is not the first film to

© World Socialist Web Site

deal with this painful subject. Among the most well-known are *Iris* (2001), based on the memoir by John Bayley, the husband of the famous British novelist Iris Murdoch who succumbed to the disease in 1999, and with a cast that included Judi Dench and Jim Broadbent, who won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor; *Away From Her* (2007), starring Julie Christie, who was nominated for the Oscar for Best Actress; and *Still Alice* (2015), with Julianne Moore as a 50-year-old professor who is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's. Moore won the Academy Award for Best Actress.

What the WSWS pointed out about *Still Alice* applies to a large degree to the other films, and to *The Father* as well. They are all confined to the lives of the upper middle class. The father's flat in London is, judging from the fleeting sight of a street sign that must have been included intentionally, located in the affluent Maida Vale residential district of West London. The apartment is spacious and comfortable. The family clearly has the ability to arrange for home care and plan for Anthony's future care as well.

Of course, Alzheimer's and other dementias know no boundaries as far as class. The impact of the disease on a middle-class family like Anthony and Anne is certainly a legitimate subject, but a problem arises when the subject is approached so narrowly that it excludes such elementary questions as the kind of job Anne has, how long Anthony has been retired and how he has occupied himself during this period, and the circle of family friends and relations, if any. There is only one family member mentioned, Anne's sister Lucy. These decisions were undoubtedly intentional, but the emphasis on Anthony and his suffering produces something that is an example of superlative acting, but without enough context and content. The focus is on Anthony, as it must be, but we are left with little except an examination of the impact of a terrible illness.

In addition, there is the issue of the impact of dementias on the vast majority of the population, the working-class families who do not have the resources to care for their loved ones, who are then shunted into nursing homes where they are left without enough attention and enough stimuli to provide, at least as long as possible, some pleasure and a decent if diminished quality of life. The double whammy of poverty and dementia is also a subject that would be worth cinematic treatment.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site