

## Medicine on the big and small screen

Therese Jones, PhD, and Lester D. Friedman, PhD, Movie Review Editors

### *The Father*

Starring Anthony Hopkins, Olivia Coleman, Olivia Williams, Mark Gatiss, Rufus Sewell, Imogen Poots.

Directed by Florian Zeller.

USA Film release February 2020; Streaming release March 2021. Rated PG-13. Running time 97 minutes.

Reviewed by J. Russell Teagarden, PhD

Biomedical sciences use scanning tools such as PET, BCT, and MRIs as well as chemical analyses to generate images of dementia. Brains shrinking; plaques forming atop neurons; and protein strands getting tangled up within neurons. These images show what dementia looks like as a disease—the loss of or interference with normal brain functions. They do not show what dementia looks like as an illness—the loss of or interference with independent daily living. The arts generate the images of problems remembering, difficulty accomplishing ordinary tasks, and the people, places, and time getting tangled up inside the mind. That is exactly what Florian Zeller accomplishes in his film, *The Father*. The images he creates tangle up viewers so they can sense what dementia is like for its sufferers.

A fatigued, beleaguered, and apprehensive daughter, Anne (Olivia Coleman), on her way to visit her father, Anthony (Anthony Hopkins), is the first scene—the first image—in the film. The visit strengthens Anne's conviction that her father can no longer live on his own, even with caregivers.

The images soon confuse the viewers. A different person appears as Anne at times, and different people appear as her love interest or husband or divorced-husband or husband-she's-never-had. Who are these people? Anthony wonders, and so do we.

On other occasions, Anthony isn't sure if he is in his apartment, Anne's apartment, or a nursing home. They look alike. As viewers, we also lose our bearings.

A few scenes recur with slight differences, confounding Anthony and sending him on desperate searches for his watch. He can't make sense of the jumbled sequence of events.

Zeller, seemingly taking pity on the viewers when they become tangled up in people, places, and time, sprinkles hints of an underlying and more coherent story trajectory, but the hints are few and subtle. At the end of the film, viewers wonder where they have been just as Anthony does.

A complete set of images for any illness extends beyond the affected person to others including family, friends, and caregivers. Zeller does not spare the audience from feeling what these roles are like. From the juxtaposition

of images, viewers feel the accumulating pain of Anne's eroding relationship with her father, the diminishing chance for her Paris relocation; and the frequent mentions Anthony makes of her dead sister. Viewers sense her frustration and anger at her father's behavior, and then her regret. They cringe at the images showing Anne's love interest or husband threatening and abusing Anthony.

Zeller has become a specialist in generating dramatic representations of dementia. This film is his third major artistic effort on the subject and was adapted from the play staged in Paris, London, New York, and other cities to great acclaim. In between the play and film versions of *The Father*, Zeller's play, *Height of the Storm*, was produced in London and New York. It features a father struggling with his wife's death—if she did die—while also in the throes of dementia. Again, the audience struggles with the protagonist.

Empathy and artistry are the tools Zeller uses in *The Father*. In an interview with *Forbes Magazine* March 30, 2021, he recalls being 15-years-old and witnessing dementia overtake the grandmother who raised him. By involving the audience as he does, Zeller said, he “was trying to use that experience to share those emotions.” He also references his artistic inclination of using a movie set to create “a labyrinth, and to play with that feeling of disorientation with the audience.”<sup>1</sup>

Through the images Zeller produces and edits together in *The Father*, viewers get a sense of what dementia feels like, and how dementia affects lives. These images add to those that biomedical science produce, showing how dementia affects the brain. The film contributes to a fuller picture of dementia by connecting images of tangled neurons with images of tangled lives.

### References

1. Dawson A. Florian Zeller Takes Viewers Into The Labyrinth Of Dementia With 'The Father.' *Forbes*, March 30, 2021.

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