The Father, a film by Florian Zeller

Reviews of *The Father,* Florian Zeller’s impressive film about dementia, starring Anthony Hopkins and Olivia Colman, are unsurprisingly positive, even at times hugely enthusiastic with Hopkins’ performance as Anthony, the central figure in the film, occasionally described as one of the greatest film performances.

All this made me wonder if there was room for criticism, somewhere for the analytical blade to pass, around the brilliance of the central idea and the power of many of the performances. I wondered if there wasn’t a clue to this in the use of by some of the word ‘beautiful’ to touch on aspects of the film. For I wondered what was beautiful about dementia and what might be lost in any attempt to make a beautiful work of art about it.

Zeller’s film focuses on the cognitive confusion of the dementia patient, the loss of memory, the loss of place and ultimately the loss of identity. What is striking is how we do not simply observe this from the outside, through Anthony’s behaviour. The very structure of the film, the disjointed scenes, the lack of clarity of where we are and who various characters are, serve to make tangible Anthony’s imagined inner experience. Throughout the film, for instance, we are never sure what character Rufus Sewell is playing. Is he Anne’s (Olivia Colman) husband, or is he some projection by Anthony of himself, much younger, commenting scathingly on what he has grown old and become. Sewell is listed in the cast as ‘Paul’, but ‘Paul’ is also played by Mark Gatiss, who also plays Bill, a nurse. Is *he* (while Paul) Anne’s husband? Does Anne even have a husband. Or is she going to Paris with her lover, as she tells Anthony? We don’t really know, and nor does Anthony, and that is the point of this element of the film. The film *becomes* Anthony’s chaos. It is clever.

Clever? And yet dementia is the opposite of clever. And so we have a clever film about cognitive collapse, as well as a beautiful film about something that is not at all beautiful. Much of the beauty derives from the sets, the insides of smart, affluent London homes, with lovely furniture, paintings, porcelain. Anthony likes to play opera and we often listen to painfully beautiful opera as he drifts about the various lovely flats he lives in, his, Anne’s, perhaps someone else’s, we are never sure. But they are all lovely, and clean, and expensive.

In this way, whole dimensions of the *problem* of dementia are never touched upon. Nothing of the huge *social* and *economic* problem are ever addressed. But perhaps that is for a different kind of film, or even a documentary. But of the *personal* problems, what is noticeably absent are perhaps three things, the squalor the banality and the horror. Anthony, for all his *cognitive* difficulties seems to have no difficulty remaining a clean, tidy individual. On one occasion, he does seem to remain in his pyjamas all day, but they are spotless. He does not dribble when he eats. As far as we can tell he toilets himself assuredly. He never wets or poos himself and obviously there are no *smells* to contend with in a film. He never falls. He does not even wander and get lost. Consequently his drama usually plays out only at the cognitive level, as a series of confusions, like someone struggling with a difficult crossword, never as a sequence of physical crises resulting from the body’s failure that accompanies the mind’s failure.

Because this is so good a film, one was tempted to think of how much *more* powerful another film might have been if Anthony had not had the advantages of financial ease and the good fortune of at least some caring relatives. One was made conscious by this very good film of the possibility of something truly horrifying that touched on the effect of this disease on the poor and the lonely, a film in which some wrecked individual scratches their way through a life of utter banality and unavoidable filth.

At the end of the film, a form of horror is perhaps glimpsed as Hopkins, in a majestic near monologue, reaches beyond the chaos of ‘Who are you?’ and ‘*Where* am I?’ into the utter darkness of *‘Who* am I?’. It is a moment so powerful that one is immediately conscious of how so much of the rest of the film has hardly prepared us for it.

Perhaps someone, with enormous talent and an array of actors as good as is in *The Father* will take this film and take another film closer to where this one, in some sense, *needed* to go. Perhaps it will find space alongside the drama of cognitive collapse for the accompanying physical degradation and how hard this illness can really be if you cannot buffer its impact with supportive relatives and good finances. Perhaps it will take the risk of addressing the squalor and the banality – difficult subjects for any art - and perhaps it will make us truly glimpse the horror at the heart of this appalling disease. *The Father* almost sees this, but its ultimate achievement, if we judge it coldly enough, and recognise its limitations, is to make us try to imagine something just as good but much, much more scary.