

Book review

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboode

***The Father* (Film Review)**

Directed by Florian Zeller. 2020

'I feel like I'm losing all of my leaves,' sobs Anthony, the elderly protagonist of *The Father*, in the film's devastating final scene. By this point, Anthony's mind has been robbed of its ability to piece together the fragments of image, dialogue and truth that constitute his reality. The film is a depiction of Anthony's descent into cognitive and emotional dis-order as his mind succumbs to dementia. In a stark metaphor, as Anthony's inner world loses its coherence and meaning, we see his apartment gradually stripped bare of its precious contents and rich furnishings.


Adapted from his 2012 stage play *Le Père*, Florian Zeller makes an impressive directorial debut with this moving film about the experience of mental illness and its effects on families. The film's most remarkable achievement is its exploration of dementia from Anthony's point of view. The viewer is as confused as Anthony about who is who when a new actor introduces themselves as a character we have already met. Repeating loops of dialogue create an unsettling sense of *déjà vu*, and the non-linear storytelling leaves us disoriented and off balance, uncertain of what is real and what has been forgotten.

The relationship that drives the narrative is between Anthony, played by Anthony Hopkins, and his loving daughter Anne, played by Olivia Colman. Anne clearly loves her father, and the pain of witnessing his decline is portrayed by Colman with exquisite

sensitivity. The dilemmas faced by Anne resonate with those faced by the families and carers psychiatrists see in clinical practice. Impossible questions arise about how to prioritise relationships, how to manage the guilt of being unable to care for a loved one and how to balance obligations to one's elders with pursuing one's own dreams.

Anthony's journey in the film takes us from the early stages of his illness, where he has episodes of feeling suspicious and muddled, to the distressing later stages, where he is frightened and totally disempowered. Hopkins captures the rapid affective shifts from rage to humiliation, fondness to bewilderment, playfulness to cruelty, with extraordinary agility and accuracy. His performance has received widespread critical acclaim, winning him an Academy Award for Best Actor – the oldest actor to receive the honour.

This film has much to offer the psychiatrist. It is an unusually compelling and complex exploration of the ageing parent, with penetrating insights into the emotional and relational aspects of dementia – the vulnerability, dependence, fear, grief and guilt. The telling of Anthony's story from the perspective of his lived experience is especially noteworthy and a fine example of how cinema can portray mental illness skilfully and sympathetically, giving due regard to both psychopathology and human aspects of mental illness.

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Declaration of interest

None.