

The Sessions

A new film, “The Sessions,” could be seen as grunge-inducing: it’s the true story of a totally disabled man who, at 38, decides he wants to experience real sex—and hires a surrogate to supply it. However, we are leagues away from porn in this narrative, one which convinces and charms through handling the subject dead-on, with both seriousness and humor, and through its beautiful central performance. It’s a film that will make awards lists at year’s end.

Mark O’Brien (John Hawkes) suffered childhood polio, leaving him partially dependent on an iron lung, though with a full sense of touch, unable to move his limbs and needing constant care. Now mature, he has amazingly constructed a career as a writer and journalist, using a pencil-like device to type out his pages on a typewriter. He has also come to realize that he has missed out on a piece of life and looks to attain physical love. He learns of hiring a sex surrogate to achieve this, then, being a devout Catholic, he consults with his parish priest, Father Brendan (William H. Macy) who eventually, with some soul-searching of his own, gives Mark his blessing.

His surrogate Cheryl (Helen Hunt) is an attractive but no-nonsense wife and mom, who calmly and tenderly introduces him to the feel of the feminine and, gingerly, to the sex act. Not surprisingly, Mark falls big time for his new “lover,” and she, practiced at keeping her distance, begins to have feelings for the almost helpless Mark. How both achieve a satisfying conclusion to their sexual encounters—their “sessions”—caps this endearing and moving film.

Writer/director Ben Lewin was a polio sufferer as a child himself, so adapting Mark’s story, from a 1990 magazine article “On Seeing a Sex Surrogate,” seemed a natural. In a way, its frank discussion of practical sexuality might make filmgoers bring to mind this year’s “Hope Springs,” wherein an older couple tries to find their erotic mojo. “The Sessions,” however, outshines the former picture in authenticity (perhaps because it was based on a true story) and the depths of its performances.

William H. Macy, as the tested but trusting padre, brings humanity and grace to his role as the reluctant confidante; he puts aside church doctrine to minister to one of his flock in need. Helen Hunt (where she been?) radiates a composed and sensible sexiness. She is so solid yet so sensuous in showing Mark the ropes in bed, that it is easy to understand why he tumbles for her. Though we see her coolly report each session’s results into her tape recorder, we also see how Mark is breaking through to her humanity. A very pleasant surprise, too, is the beautiful Moon Bloodgood as Vera, O’Brien’s laconic but dogged caregiver. She can push me around on a gurney anytime.

Then there is John Hawkes as Mark O’Brien. His rawboned, scruffy looks have served him well recently as the cult leader in “Martha Mary May Marlene” (2011) and, especially, as the menacing Teardrop in “Winter’s Bone” (2010) for which he won an Oscar nomination. Here he utterly transforms himself as the sweet but sardonic Mark, his plaintive but assured voice emitted in a soft rasp from a leaden body that is always horizontal (you may find yourself tipping your head sideways to identify with him). This astonishing performance delivered on one’s back reminds me of one just as powerful several years ago, when Javier Bardem played a quadriplegic in “The Sea Inside”

(2004). Finally, one sympathizes with him not simply because of his wrenching disability, but because of his abundant heart and fully-rounded humanity.
(*The film is rated "R" for ample, offhand nudity and sexual language.*)

(November 2012)