

Supernova

An up-close-and-personal examination of dementia may not be everyone's idea of a fun night out at the movies, but the new film "Supernova," written and directed by Harry MacQueen, treats just that subject with such care, humor, nuance, and taste that moviegoers will come away both moved and delighted—and newly thoughtful about end-of-life questions. It doesn't hurt that the film is essentially a brilliant acting *pas de deux*, starring Stanley Tucci ("Spotlight") as Tusker, a writer in his 50's, the victim of early onset dementia, and Colin Firth ("The King's Speech") as Sam, a concert pianist and Tusker's partner of 20 years.

It's been two years since Tusker's diagnosis, and the two partners agree to take a last road trip around England when they can, visiting family and friends from their past. Sam, who has put off his career to care for Tusker, does all the driving and heads for the English Lake Country (shot in gorgeous sequences by veteran English cinematographer Dick Pope), where they can re-live memories of their life together in a kind of swan song. He even creates a useful excuse for the trip, booking a piano recital for himself at a town up north.

After 20 years, Sam and Tusker are as secure in their love as they have ever been, but in the two years since Tusker was diagnosed with early onset dementia, their lives have had to change. As Tusker's condition gradually worsens, Sam has been forced to place his own life on hold and become his partner's full-time caregiver. Their time together has been the essence of their lives, and this road trip takes on an extra emotional weight.

While Tusker had long been Sam's rock, it now falls to Sam to take control, and he aims to offer his beloved partner as much normality and joy as he can muster. Meanwhile, Tusker knows that his condition is having an overwhelming effect on both their lives, and that he is beginning to lose control. As their trip progresses, in a somewhat battered van, their individual visions of a possible future together begin to collide. Past secrets surface, private plans crumble, and their love for each other is tested anew.

Director MacQueen came up with the original story of "Supernova" after studying and researching dementia over three years, then added the gay relationship into his first outline. The casting was crucial, and he got the talent he wanted with Tucci and Firth.

MacQueen said he aimed to make an open-ended movie. "I'm not interested in making films that overtly tell you what to think," he said in an interview: "I think that's up to an audience to decide; the idea was to set up the fact that these are two people on a precipice, and this is the thing that's pulling them apart. There are no ends tied up in the film, and it doesn't become one

thing or another. But hopefully we allow people to think more about how we treat one another, and how difficult it is to be put in this position.”

The final role casting turned into a sort of kismet. Tucci, first on board for the film, thought he would play Sam but, after both men read the script, Firth felt that maybe he should be Sam and Tucci Tusker. Firth began to wonder, if they should flip their roles, and Tucci had been having similar thoughts. “We each read each role for Harry, (McQueen), and we knew instantly that this was how it was supposed to be,” Tucci says. “I don’t know why, it just sat better this way.” Having themselves been close friends for 20 years, the two leads wove that personal rapport fully into their fine representations in “Supernova.”

(This film has a running time of 93 minutes and is rated “R”).

(February 2021)