

The Father

A much-acclaimed drama of 2012, “The Father,” examining the world of dementia, has been lauded in theaters around the world and has now made it intact to the big screen under its original writer and director, Frenchman Florian Zeller. This worthy transfer, rife with piercing and poignant dialogue, is clearly marked for year-end awards.

We find ourselves in a comfortable, well-appointed London flat, appropriate for a prosperous widower of 80, Anthony (Anthony Hopkins), a retired engineer of considerable self-confidence, used to getting what he wants. He has just gotten rid of a caregiver, whom he accuses of stealing, and urges his daughter, Anne (Olivia Coleman), to recruit another. She goes out shopping, and Anthony wanders to another room. Wait a minute: who is this strange man?, Anthony wonders. He introduces himself as “Paul,” Anne’s husband, who notes that this is not Anthony’s flat, but his. Befuddled, Anthony hears Anne coming back...but it isn’t his Anne; it’s another one, younger (Olivia Williams). What is she doing here, in his flat?

We are, it seems, in Anthony’s brain, a brain twisted awry with dementia. When Anne now tells him that she is going to move to Paris, he senses he will be left alone and consigned to a “home,” his worst fear. She assures him that she will find a good person to look after him, but he will have none of it and gets furious. The scenes flashback to another Paul (Rufus Sewell) restive in his home life and urging Anne to commit her father to some facility and leave behind the old man’s bristly manner and acrid questions. Reluctantly, Anthony goes along with the interview with a new caregiver, sweet Laura (Imogen Poots), yet insists he doesn’t want her and needs no help. It ends in a muddle.

Misdirection and confusion continue to cloud Anthony’s mind. But soon it’s worse than that: he finds himself in a strange, alien place. The comforts and patterns of the comfy flat disappear, replaced by a more neutral, clinical space. He is disoriented and fearful, calling out for Anne. But he then encounters the figures he saw earlier in the drama as the second Anne (Williams) and his first Paul (Gattis), now in new roles with which Anthony is unfamiliar...

This re-cap sounds like a walking nightmare—which it is—but it is mitigated on screen by the utter, bland normality of the scenes, the staid scenery, and the actors that tentatively float through them. And what makes the actors and scenes work is they are contrasted with the frustrated, fulminating Anthony. Nothing is real for him, on screen or off, as he tries to make sense of a life’s mosaic in shards.

This is, of course, Hopkin’s movie, one of his most vivid and fervent performances in years, and, not because it is showy, but because it is so precisely controlled. Sir Anthony is now over 80 and has made over 100 movies and television productions since his breakthrough Hollywood role as Prince Richard in “The Lion in Winter” in 1968. Seen as an intelligent man losing it, he is

utterly crushing; seen as a decent fellow drifting from reality, he is heartbreakingly believable.

(The film, which was released in theaters March 26, is now available on streaming platforms, It runs 97 minutes and is rated "PG-13" for language).

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