



# The Theory of Everything



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*Eddie Redmayne, Felicity Jones, Simon McBurney, Emily Watson, David Thewlis. Directed by James Marsh.*

While Stephen Hawking may not have developed a theory of everything, he was certainly one of the major science theoreticians of the 20th century. Because of his book, *A Brief History of Time*, he became more than celebrated and has continued famous, this film reinforcing audience knowledge of him and admiration for him.

It is not the first time that Hawking has appeared in a biographical film. In 2004, he was portrayed in a film and television by the then comparatively-unknown, Benedict Cumberbatch. The film treated his early years, the onset of motor neuron disease and his marriage to Jane.

Since then, there have been documentary films and television programs, on his science, on his personality, on his coping with his illness. American documentary-maker, Errol Morris, also made a film of *A Brief History of Time*. Audiences coming to see *The Theory of Everything*, may well have some idea, many ideas, about Hawking and his life and work.

The major challenge for any actor portraying Hawking is to communicate his experience of motor neuron disease, its gradual debilitating effect, the initial anticipation that he would have only two years to live, his being reduced to travelling in a wheelchair, less able to speak, undergoing surgery and a tracheotomy which meant that he had to use a computer simulation speech

to communicate by word. All this, and more, are extraordinarily communicated by Eddie Redmayne (who had been Marius in the film version of *Les Misérables*).

The early part of the film is set in the 1960s with Hawking as a student at Oxford, seemingly casual with his approach to studies, having an extraordinarily quick brain and an ability to penetrate and solve mathematical problems. With his doctorate, he was interested in old stars and the collapsing in on themselves, theories of black holes. Later, he was to change his opinions and return to the beginnings of the universe and explorations of the Big Bang Theory. He continued to think, write, speculate on physics questions and draw on mathematical theory.

In case anyone thinks that the film is overloaded with scientific information that does not communicate well to the general audience, they are only partly right. There are sufficient indications of Hawking's thinking and some explanations, but not overly tasking for a general audience. Scientists might think it is theory-light.

While the film is about science and mathematics, it also tells the story of a man who in his early 20s was diagnosed with motor-neuron disease. The beginnings are suggested, and then Hawking collapses, is diagnosed by the doctors and, often

reluctantly, has to come to terms with his condition. In fact, it is quite extraordinary to see what happened to Hawking in terms of the disease, the gradual degeneration, but his extraordinary survival.

The film also has a love story. Stephen met Jane, a devout Church of England young woman compared to his atheistic stances. They meet, date, some courting and then the crisis of his illness. In retrospect, audiences may well know the Jane spent 25 years of her life looking after Hawking, bearing three children and bringing them up, a lifetime of generosity. But, it all became too much for both of them, Jane experiencing the toll on her life with and for Stephen, his becoming dependent on his nurse, whom he married after divorcing Jane. While this might be the sensationalism of headlines, it is important to see just what happened with each of

the two, hardships, regrets, the experience of a long time. (the screenplay for this film is based on Jane's book about her life with Stephen Hawking, the second book she wrote, it seems less angry than the first one – and both Stephen and Jane approved of this screen version.

For anyone expecting something of a scientific treatise, they will be disappointed. For those who find the screen portrayal of serious illness demanding but informative, there will be much to offer in this film. And for all who get caught up in the love story, live through the hardships of the decades and see a marriage collapsing, it will seem more realistic than they might have thought, yet still very disappointing in its finish.

Which means, on the whole, this is a moving experience for a general audience.

### ***Fr Peter Malone MSC***

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