

## WIT

US, 2001, Mike Nichols



Professor Vivian Bearing has been diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer. She is 48 and unmarried. At the hospital, research expert, Dr Kelikian, recommends an eight months' course in chemotherapy, suggesting the strongest maximum dosage. Vivian believes she has a strong spirit and agrees to the treatment.

Vivian's field of research was the 17th century Metaphysical poets, particularly John Donne and his themes of death, mortality and immortality. Her favourite poem is 'Death Be Not Proud', especially its last line with its comma signifying a gentle pause between life and eternal life.

The interminable tests and side effects take their toll on Vivian who finds herself focussed more and more on the present and on her ailing body. The chemotherapy does not bring about the hoped for cure. Dr Kelikian and his young assistant, Jason Posner (who had attended Vivian's Donne course) are pleased with the results of their research.

During her illness, Vivian remembers her childhood discovery of words with her father, her discussions with her tutor, Evelyn Ashford, her severity with her students, her lectures. She begins to realise that she had despised kindness but is now highly desirous of it. She discovers it through her gentle ward nurse, Suzie. Just before Vivian dies, Evelyn visits her. She lies beside her, reading the children's book, *The Runaway Bunny*, and kisses her before she goes. Vivian dies. With her picture on screen, we hear her recite *Death Be Not Proud*.

Mike Nichols and Emma Thompson have adapted Margaret Edson's successful play for Home Box Office television. *Wit* is probably one of the most powerful screen depictions of terminal illness and death. Emma Thompson's performance as academic, Vivian Bearing, is superb. She personifies the scholar who has 'contributed significantly to the body of knowledge' by her research on the Metaphysical poets. She also personifies the academic who has lived more in the abstract and who has now to face day-by-day bodily experiences which are going to end in death. Gaunt, head shaven, in pain, Emma Thompson has never been better. The device of having her confiding directly in the audience, making some clever jokes and offering wry ironic comments means that we share her illness and its treatment intimately.

Christopher Lloyd is the sympathetic doctor ultimately more interested in research than in his patients. Jonathan M. Woodward as Jason serves as a mirror image of both Dr Kelikian and of Dr Bearing in his dedication to knowledge. He explains his fascination in knowing why and how cancer cells replicate - and he thinks that the required course on bedside manner was a 'colossal waste of time for a researcher'.

Audra McDonald, as Suzie, brings warmth to the movie and to Vivian with small touches of care (like giving her a popsicle, massaging her hands with lotion because to do this is 'nice'). Vivian learns kindness from Suzie. Eileen Atkins also brings final warmth and love as Professor Ashford. Playwright Harold Pinter has a brief scene as Vivian's father.