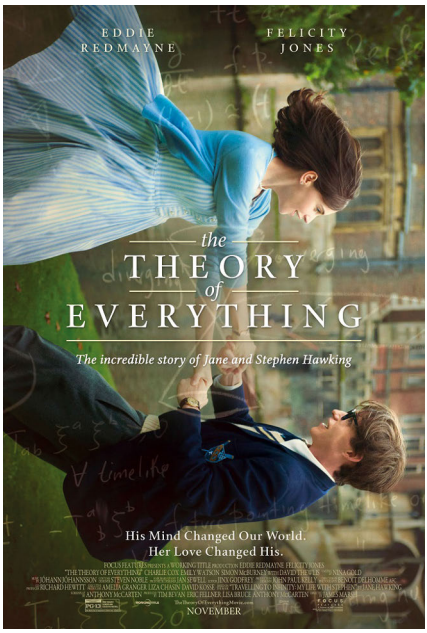
The Theory of Everything (2014)

David Eisler

dir. James Marsh; prod. Tim Bevan, Lisa Bruce, Eric Fellner, Anthony McCarten; screenplay Anthony McCarten; photography Benoît Delhomme; music Jóhann Jóhannsson. digital, color, 123 mins. Working Title Films, distrib. Focus Features and Universal Pictures.



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The Theory of Everything presents a partial biography of Stephen Hawking (played by Eddie Redmayne), the world's most famous physicist since Albert Einstein. The film fits within the broader trend of biopics depicting great figures in science and mathematics, including *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) about John Nash, *The Imitation Game* (2014) about Alan Turing, and *Radioactive* (2019) about Marie Curie. Based on the 2007 memoir *Traveling to Infinity: My Life with Stephen*, written by Hawking's first wife, Jane Wilde (played by Felicity Jones), *The Theory of Everything* begins with the story of their romantic relationship amidst Hawking's diagnosis, at the age of twenty-one, with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a motor neuron disease that gradually left him paralyzed. The film's central conflict takes place within the context of their marriage, with pressure mounting on Jane as Stephen's illness progressively limits his physical capabilities while, at the same time, the demands of their family grow. The couple have three children, leaving Jane with the responsibility to care for them as well as her husband, who, despite being wheelchair-bound and eventually voiceless, continues to revolutionize theoretical physics with his research and insights.

The film's melodramatic tendencies, from emotional music cues and contrasting mood lighting to set-piece staging and dialogue, enhance the themes of »miracle« and »tragedy« that so frequently characterize biopics of scientists in which scientific discovery comes with a flash of insight and, ultimately, the individual's triumph over adversity (Elena). Hawking's diagnosis is presented first and foremost as an obstacle to his professional ambition: »I have two years to live,« Hawking says in response to Jane's

early offer of romance, rebuffing her with »I need to work.« Under the time pressure of his imminent mortality, Hawking's goal is to finish his PhD thesis and make a lasting contribution to science, even as Jane declares her love for him, saying »I want us to be together for as long as we've got, and if that's not very long well then that's just how it is.« That he would live another fifty years was something neither of them foresaw.

The film is less interested in Hawking's contributions to science, though, than in depicting the domestic toll extracted from his marriage and family that created the space for him to think about physics despite his condition. As one critic wrote, »Director James Marsh and screenwriter Anthony McCarten are content to make a melodrama« (Morris). When the film engages with Hawking's work at all, it does so in conversation with religion—a tension that exists between Stephen's atheism and Jane's faith from their very first conversation. Within the film's first five minutes, the two make eyes at each other during a 1960s student party at Cambridge University before engaging in a bit of melodramatic dialogue embedded in casual flirtation. Stephen tells Jane that he studies cosmology, which he describes as »a kind of religion for intelligent thinkers.« They laugh awkwardly as Jane reveals her own religious affiliation before asking him, »What do cosmologists worship then?«

The conflation of the rigorous practices of a scientific field with »worship« implicitly reduces science to the realm of faith and belief, a thread that runs throughout the film. If Hawking's reputation as a scientist were not already so cemented, one could be forgiven for viewing this film as a mere meditation on science, faith, and overcoming personal obstacles, rather than a biopic of a theoretical physicist whose breakthroughs earned him international recognition and accolades, culminating in a mathematical equation chiseled onto his gravestone at Westminster Abbey, only a few steps from Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin.

Films about well-known figures, whether historical or contemporary, tend to rely on melodramatic aesthetics to explore the lesser-known aspects of the individual's private and family life, though the tension between the biographical details as depicted in the films and the filmmakers' desires to enhance the sentimentality through melodramatic emplotment and dialogue is a frequent concern (Brown and Vidal). Audience expectations typically preclude a straightforward retelling of a public figure's professional exploits, instead preferring untold tales of household dynamics, family drama, and personal turmoil. Such themes have their roots in Thomas Schatz's identification of the »family melodrama« as a distinct subgenre of Hollywood cinema that dates to the earliest era of silent films but matured in the 1950s (Schatz 148-67; Mercer and Shingler 9-12). Since 2000, nearly half of the awards for Best Actor and Best Actress were given for biopic films, including Redmayne's 2015 win for his uncanny portrayal of Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*, putting him in the company with the likes of Philip Seymour Hoffman as Truman Capote in *Capote* (2005), Rami Malek as Freddie Mercury in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), and Renée Zellweger as Judy Garland in *Judy* (2019).

Redmayne's portrayal of Hawking's physical deterioration sets the stage for the family drama that follows. The couple's courtship takes place against the backdrop of Hawking's race to complete his thesis before his disease overtakes him. Scenes of Hawking struggling against his shaky hands while scrawling equations on a blackboard are interspersed with the young couple on a walk, with Stephen excitedly explaining his theory of the origins of the universe. Their wedding and early family life are shown through a montage shot in the style of a handheld home video, a cinematic technique

that enhances the scene's domestic atmosphere and announces a tonal shift—Stephen's diagnosis was not as terminal as the doctors had believed—and, within a few frames, their family has grown with the addition of a new baby.

The domestic space of home and family serves as the foundation for everything else in the Hawkings' lives, and many of the film's most important moments occur during dinner table conversations and backyard social gatherings. Any sentimentality associated with a honeymoon phase is short-lived, though, as even celebratory moments are undercut by Stephen's physical struggles and Jane's gradual transition from spouse to caregiver. A family dinner to toast Stephen's successful PhD defense turns into a scene where he can hardly feed himself, slinking away from the table but too weak to even crawl up the stairs. His speech becomes more labored, bordering on unintelligible without Jane as an interpreter. Even the moment of Stephen's greatest scientific insight—that black holes radiate heat and thus »are not in fact black at all,« as he explains to an assembly of colleagues during a lecture in the following scene—occurs when he gets stuck trying to put on a wool sweater, staring at the fireplace through gaps in the fabric while Jane runs upstairs to check on their crying baby.

The Hawkings' relationship simultaneously upsets and reaffirms traditional notions of a heterosexual nuclear family, creating a source of social commentary on family values as well as on gender roles and norms that follows a well-trodden path of family melodramas with reflections on class, gender, and social structures within the context of a family unit (Schatz 152-54). Jane, an intellectual in her own right, takes up the expected role of housewife and caregiver at the expense of her own studies (later completing a doctorate in medieval Spanish poetry). Overwhelmed with household responsibilities, Jane is urged by her own mother and Stephen's family to get someone to help. The introduction of Jonathan, the conductor of a local church choir, both complicates and alleviates the relationship dynamic between Jane and Stephen. A widower with no children who battles his own loneliness, Jonathan sees a purpose for himself as a potential solution to the Hawkings' need for assistance despite lacking the financial means to acquire a professional nurse. A second cinematographic interlude in the home video style, recalling Stephen and Jane's wedding, shows Jonathan as an intimate member of the family, playing with the children, caring for Stephen, and sharing quiet moments with Jane. That Jonathan and Jane have feelings for each other is immediately obvious, as is their reluctance to acknowledge them with words. This leads to a confrontation with Stephen's family who, having already been characterized as highly educated with an air of aristocratic conservatism about them, are uncomfortable with the Hawkings' arrangement. After another home movie sequence following the birth of the Hawkings' third child—this time set to more somber music and with palpable tension on Jane's face—Stephen's father voices his concern about the family's lack of a »proper live-in nurse,« gesturing to Jonathan's somewhat awkward presence at the gathering, while Stephen's mother outright questions Jane whether Jonathan is the child's father.

The climax of the film's love story occurs in a heart-wrenching moment for the Hawkings in which they both realize, with only a few words, that their marriage is over. The melodramatic affect and sentimentality hinges on their dialogue and references to earlier moments in the film, providing a bookend to their relationship. The first moment brings back the connection between Stephen's science and Jane's religion. As Jane reads the concluding pages of Stephen's manuscript for *A Brief History of Time*, she

comes to the final sentences and is pleasantly surprised at Stephen's assertion that learning about our origins and purpose in the universe »would be the ultimate triumph of human reason, for then we would know the mind of God.« When, moments later, Stephen informs Jane that he has been invited to America to accept another award and that Elaine—the nurse they eventually hired to take over for Jonathan—will accompany him, there is an instant wisp of recognition that something fundamental has changed. (The film only implies a relationship between Stephen and Elaine, though in reality they married and later divorced amidst allegations of physical and emotional abuse). »How many years?« Stephen asks, communicating with the aid of his now-famous computerized voice. »They said two,« Jane responds. »We've had so many.« Not only do these simple lines acknowledge Stephen's resilience and triumph over what was believed to be an early death sentence, they also underscore how Jane's experience has been equally grueling.

By the end of the film, the publication of *A Brief History of Time* has turned Hawking into an international celebrity, and he is even offered knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II. He invites Jane and his children to accompany him, and for one last time the film focuses on the family melodrama as the story's narrative centerpiece. Aided again by callbacks—Jane tells Stephen »Your glasses are always dirty,« and cleans them, just as she did when they first met—the film's poignant final sequence turns Stephen's early thought experiment about reversing the flow of time to the beginning of the universe, into an emotional visual metaphor, rewinding through scenes that highlight important points of their lives and relationship and ending with the moment they first saw each other at a party in 1962. The film leaves the viewer with a sense of closure that, while tidier than Hawking's actual biography, packs an emotional density that rivals a collapsing star.

References

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