



Conversations With Eddie Redmayne, Felicity Jones, and Director James Marsh of ‘The Theory of Everything’

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The daunting title “The Theory of Everything” describes the film, directed by [James Marsh](#) from [Anthony McCarten](#)’s script, and chronicles the marriage of [Stephen Hawking](#) and his first wife, Jane. It is an unusual romance, for which McCarten says there is “no precedent in cinema.” Hawking, the world-famous physicist, wrote “[A Brief History of Time](#)” while wheelchair-bound and paralyzed with [ALS](#) (Lou Gehrig’s disease).

32-year-old Englishman Eddie Redmayne saunters into the room with a green veggie juice swirling around in a wine glass, ready to talk. He will soon acknowledge, in the excited chatter that follows, that he hates silence. When meeting Stephen Hawking mere days before filming began on the Hawking biopic, “The Theory of Everything,” Redmayne recalls, “It was like meeting a complete rock star. I got completely tongue-tied, and it takes him awhile to speak now, so there were lots of pauses. So I just started spewing off information about Stephen Hawking... to Stephen Hawking. It was pretty embarrassing.” Although a propensity to talk is a helpful trait for an actor promoting his latest film, it was not one he could rely on when playing the famed cosmologist.

ON MOVEMENT

To prepare for the role, Redmayne spent four months in a hospital with doctors who introduced him to patients suffering from ALS and helped him chart the precise progression of Hawking’s disease for the role. He also employed the help of a dance coach to learn new ways of movement, or the lack of it.

The Cambridge-educated History of Art alum revels in his new medical and scientific knowledge as he explains that there are two types of neurons – upper and lower. “If your upper neurons go, there’s a rigidity [in your muscles]; if your lower neurons go, there’s a wilting [to the muscles]. So ALS is a mixture of those things and how

it manifests itself in each person is completely unique.” He demonstrates by folding his fingers into the exact, uncomfortable-looking position as they appear in the film. Like magic, a part of Stephen Hawking appears for a moment in the room. To complete his preparation, the doctor helped Redmayne use photos to chart the progression of Hawking’s muscles so he would have an idea of where Stephen’s mobility was at any given point during the 30-year span of the story.

ON STEPHEN AND JANE

Redmayne and co-star Felicity Jones traveled to Cambridge to meet both Stephen and Jane, separately. “I love that there is almost an antagonism between them,” says Jones. “They are similar personalities, which is probably what kept them together for so long.”

Jones describes Jane’s persona like that of an army general, a feeling she took into playing the early scenes after Stephen receives his diagnosis: “This is a woman’s call to arms. It’s like she’s going into battle. And the battle is keeping Stephen alive.” Her meeting with Jane left her understanding what a formidable character she was dealing with, adding to the already amazing weight of the role.

Redmayne could relate to this, “We absolutely cared not to judge these people. We were so protective of our characters.” Because the characters were human beings, complex and smart, likable and unlikable, people who expressed themselves in many colors.

ON JUDGMENT

The film’s complex portrayals were something McCarten had laboring over for years writing the script: “Audience sympathies can be destroyed in a heartbeat with a story like this. It really was a high wire act. It required that every one of the characters involved was portrayed in all their complexity. Every character gets their day in court, and the audience can make their own decisions. We’re not judging them, and hopefully you won’t either.”

The film is split quite evenly between Stephen’s and Jane’s perspectives, with care to account for Jonathan, a family friend who became a caretaker and a third entity in the marriage. As Jonathan and Jane develop feelings for each other – all the while remaining chaste – Stephen is wise enough to see a place for this tribune dynamic in the marriage, as unusual as that may seem.

Redmayne describes the reason for such an unflinching portrayal of these lives: “I want people to see the film and think, ‘I love that person, I see their genius qualities, I see their flaws’... I want you [the audience] to come out of this and feel like they are whole, complete, people.” But he notes that he’s encountered many audiences who judge either one or both of the characters for the choices they made and what they did to each other. “I’m sure that’s a reflection of what people bring to it,” he notes.

ON LOVE

For him, what the script originally reflected to him was more unexpected than a typical biopic. “It feels to me to be a dissection of love: young love, passionate love, love of subject matter, love of family; but also the failings of love, the boundaries of love, the complications. It felt very whole, in that sense. It didn’t seem to be sugarcoating things. It’s a complicated, passionate, unique love story with an uplifting ending, but not a Hollywood ending.” Adds writer/producer McCarten, “We need a more generous definition of a ‘happy ending.’ And a more life-like definition. We’ve all had relationships, they don’t all work out. But that doesn’t mean it’s a disaster.”

“This whole film is about time,” McCarten explains. “That’s the unifying principle of the film. The mind is very future-focused – it’s looking forward. But the heart is a bit of a time traveler. And the people we’ve loved along the way, they will always have that place in us. And there’s no tragedy in that. There’s only a reason for triumph. Look at what Stephen and Jane did: they raised three children, they explored the meaning of the universe, and they dealt with a debilitating disease. You tell me that’s not a triumph.”

Jones agrees. “I think there’s a truth in that [the unusual ‘happy ending’].” She remembers the scene in which Stephen and Jane split up, which to her is both the most heartbreaking and the most truthful. “There’s that

moment when they still absolutely love each other... the tragedy of that is that they've already mentally broken up years ago, but now they have to acknowledge it. That's the tough bit."

ON TRUTH

That truthfulness, grounded in reality – which seems like a hard pill for an audience to swallow – is sometimes arrived at through fictional means, though. McCarten describes a pivotal scene in the film, very understated, but from which the audience understands that Stephen is giving permission for Jonathan and Jane to have a relationship. Although he admits that the scene itself never took place, he argues that it gets at the truth.

"There has to be a certain level of invention [when telling true stories] that reveals the truth. It sounds paradoxical, but it isn't. To reveal the truth, you have to compress some elements together... So I created a scene that does that, which is truthful in its own way. And that then allows the audience to go, 'If he approved it, we should too.'"

Redmayne to underscore the need to tell cinematic truth or the representation of a truth that conveys a story, adds, "The camera, film, is an amazing medium, a powerful medium, because people believe film is... truth. That did weight on the responsibility more." But overwhelmingly, for Jones the pressure to tell the truth came more from the subjects than from a responsibility to the public.

"You put your heart into it because it has that real dimension to it. And these are real people, so you want to get it right."

ON PHYSICS AND PHILOSOPHY

And at the end of the day – "getting it right" or telling the truth without judgment or condescension is the only way to show your appreciation for such a remarkable life. "The odd thing [about Stephen]," Redmayne muses, is that "he can move so very few muscles in his face, yet it was the most charismatic face I've ever seen." McCarten finds hope in this. "If the last thing to go is your smile, we've still got something to work with." To Jones, the smile isn't the thing that conveys the most about Stephen, though. "You're kind of nervously trying to talk and fill silences and make him like you, and he's someone who takes hold of the situation and you feel like he sees through things very quickly. He's become this... he's a physicist, but he's also a philosopher, isn't he?"

Indeed, he is. And his relentless positivity, which has no time for self-pity or worry about his disease, gives his close friends and strangers something to celebrate. On leaving the wheelchair after a day of shooting, Redmayne remembers, "Every day, [I] could get up and get out of the wheelchair. [I was] constantly aware of how lucky [I am], especially after meeting real [ALS] patients." But again, those little blessings don't seem to be as absorbing for Hawking as the future tasks at hand. Jones notes that his answer to a question about how he gets through life is a more scientific – or maybe philosophical? – one: be curious.

"For me, what was extraordinary was the idea that they [Stephen and Jane] were given these obstacles put in front of them, and how they chose to overcome those obstacles is kinda dumbfounding. I'm someone that gets caught up in the foibles and anxieties of the everyday, and seeing how they have lived and chosen to use their time on this planet is – and I don't use this word in a glib way – inspiring." Redmayne turns away as he's listening to another question. He stops, squints behind me for a moment, and interrupts. "I'm sorry, but I've just suddenly glimpsed through that mirror the Hollywood sign and it's absolutely bonkers. So surreal!"

Point taken.

[‘The Theory of Everything’](#) will be in Theaters on Nov. 7.



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