

“The Diving Bell and the Butterfly”

DVD release date: April 29, 2008; Running time: 112 minutes; Miramax Studios; in French with English subtitles

Alright, alright. I've had a stroke. My speech will come back. My memory will come back. I'll be patient.

—Jean-Dominique Bauby, “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly”

“The Diving Bell and the Butterfly” tells the true story of Jean-Dominique Bauby (portrayed with sensitivity and accuracy by Mathieu Amalric), editor-in-chef of *Elle Magazine* (Paris) who, at age 42, suffered from an extreme cerebrovascular “accident.” In the words of his doctor:

It's put your brain stem out of action... in the past you would very probably have died. But now we have such improved resuscitation techniques that we're able to prolong life.

Jean Dominique, or Jean-Do, as he is known by family and friends, is completely paralyzed but for his ability to blink his left eye. He is diagnosed as having locked-in syndrome, which, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke is “a rare neurological disorder characterized by complete paralysis of voluntary muscles in all parts of the body except for those that control eye movement.” Various medical conditions such as a brain injury, medication overdoses or circulatory disease can trigger locked-in syndrome; however, there is no cure and chances for individuals to recover motor function are rare (www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/lockedin-syndrome/lockedinsyndrome.htm).

The film is told through the van-

tage point of Jean-Do. Literally, the audience sees the world through the main character's one functioning eye. And so, when Jean-Do is bathed, we watch as his body is in a pool of water is being cleaned by nurses. When his “wife” and children come to see him, we feel the same sense of emotional closeness coupled with physical paralysis that he feels. And when he has medical set-backs, the audience is there experiencing them with him.

Jean-Do is assigned two nurses to care for him—one to work with him on regaining his speech and the other works with him to find alternate ways to communicate. In speaking with colleagues, she comes up with a method of having Jean-Do blink the letters of the alphabet until he gets to the letter he wants, with multiple letters forming the words he wants. It's a painfully trying process, but it makes the world a little less isolating for him.

Jean-Do is not without moments of self-pity and despair. But his ability to not only rise above these moments but take his tragedy and use it in a positive way is what makes the story so powerful and inspiring.

“The Diving Bell and the Butterfly” is at once a story of heartache and redemption. In the mode of “Regarding Henry” or “The Doctor,” it tells the story of a man who finds more meaning in life than he ever saw in life before after medical tragedy has struck. It speaks to an overpowering will to live and to lead something of an existence that has been irrevocably changed and yet, in the end, asks us to think about whether understanding, hope and triumph can come out of a seemingly insurmountable catastrophe. The answer is a resounding yes. It is highly recommended.

The health education value of the film is multilayered. The film delivers a first-hand, realistic account of locked-in syndrome and does an

excellent job of reflecting the terror, horror and despair someone in such a condition would face. The film is an excellent tool both for clinicians and nonmedical individuals.

REFERENCES

NIH website: www.ninds.nih.gov.

Screen play: www.miramaxhighlights.com/pdf/the-diving-bell-and-the-butterfly/screenplay.

Book: *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death* by Jean Dominique Bauby.

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“Half Nelson”

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Second chances are rare. You'd better take advantage of them.

—Dan Dunne, “Half Nelson”

Special acknowledgement to Jamie Patricof, producer of “Half Nelson,” who graciously agreed to be interviewed for this review.

“Half Nelson” is the story of Dan Dunne, played masterfully by actor Ryan Gosling. We are introduced to Dan in the context of his role as a teacher in a school in Brooklyn, NY. He also serves as basketball coach of the girls' team and from the beginning of the film appears to be simply a dedicated, devoted teacher who is an inspiration to a group of students in a tough neighborhood whom the system has, in essence, given up on. Shades of films such as “Dangerous Minds” and “Stand and Deliver,” perhaps? But “Half Nelson” takes a decidedly original and innovative turn when the audience learns that Dan is hiding a dark, insidious secret and not hiding it very well—the fact that he is a substance abuser addicted to crack cocaine.

In the beginning of the film, Dan is the perfect movie teacher with an opinion on everything from the definition of history (the study of change over time) to opposing forces (left versus right, teacher versus student) to the importance of May 17, 1954 (the day the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision). Dan engages his students and encourages them to question the world in which they live and the politics shaping how they live in that world. The dichotomy of his ability to inspire while dealing with his own serious drug addiction is poignant and palpable.

Dan has a special student, Drey (played superbly by newcomer Sha-keera Epps), who, while coming from a dysfunctional living situation, is talented, assertive and bright. Dan knows Drey not only in the context of the classroom but also from the girls' basketball team, of which Drey is a member.

One night, after a girl's basketball game, Drey goes into the locker room only to find Dan passed out after a bout of crack use.

Drey: Are you okay?

Dan: I'm fine.

Drey: Are you okay? Do you want some water?

Unsure what to do, Drey wets a towel and, washing Dan's face, appears to contemplate the implications of what she has witnessed and becomes an unwilling and unwitting accomplice. And so begins a very complicated, intricate, dependant relationship between the substance abusing teacher and his devoted, conflicted student.

"Half Nelson" does not portray things in a "nice" or "neat" way. Dan's anger and frustration at having Drey know his "secret" is messy

and painful. Drey's disappointment in Dan—disappointment which is not new to her world—is palpable. The rest of the film unfolds as an uneasy dance both literally and figuratively, between Drey and Dan, with secrets and disappointments interwoven with their own personal struggles as the physical and mental manifestations and realities of drug addiction are laid bare, making an indelible impression on the audience.

In an interview, the producer, Jamie Patricof, highlights the myriad themes in the film: addiction, politics and education. According to Patricof, who has a long history of involvement with film production, the cast was crucial to bringing these themes together. The performances are brilliant, from Shareeka Epps, who plays Drey (Epps had never acted before) to "brilliant" Anthony Mackie (the drug dealing friend of Drey's incarcerated brother who tries to provide some guidance and stability for her). Patricof points to the strength of the Dan Dunne character to be able to inspire children in the face of being such a "troubled guy." It is a nuanced performance and nicely shades the flawed hero motif. The portrayal of addiction and consequences—physical, medical, mental and social—that addiction can have are reminiscent of films such as Ray Milland's "The Lost Weekend."

Patricof also credited writer Anna Boden and writer/director Ryan Fleck with crafting such an "honest" and "real" film. States Patricof:

These first-time filmmakers portrayed a world that is often presented in a clichéd and trite manner, but they were able to capture this world, while staying out of the traditional pitfalls.

The educational power is palpable. A half nelson is a wrestling move by which one wrestler puts another wrestler in a position whereby he is completely unable to move. Are the characters in "Half Nelson" inextricably tied to their present lives, destined to remain where they are, or worse? When asked what he thinks happens to the character Dan, Patricof states, "I like to think in the end she finally gets through to him." So do we all. Bravo to a brave, courageous film. It is highly recommended.

The health education value of the film is undeniable. The film accurately portrays the grip chronic drug addiction can have on the psyche and body. Psychological issues of the main characters are explored in a realistic, honest manner. The DVD can be utilized in a classroom setting quite effectively, especially for an audience either dealing with substance abusers or others dealing with drug addition.

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