

By Joe Baltake -- Bee Movie Critic

Published 7:10 a.m. PST Tuesday, Dec. 25, 2001

We've all heard the expression -- usually around Oscar time -- about how someone wins an award not for one specific performance or accomplishment, but for "a body of work," the accumulation of that person's lifelong passion or pursuit.

This thought pops into mind during "A Beautiful Mind," Ron Howard's bracingly cerebral and yet cleverly told new film about mathematician John Forbes Nash Jr. (played here by Russell Crowe in a great performance). Nash was the 1994 Nobel laureate in economics for a dense paper he wrote as a student 45 years earlier, in 1949. However, as one watches Howard's scrupulously detailed film, it's made clear that Nash's Nobel Prize was as much for what the man experienced in the interim -- during the ensuing years when he suffered a massive, devastating mental breakdown -- as it was for his writings on some complicated scientific formulas. It was his reward for an amazing recovery from a life of utter inner turmoil.

Rather than try to decipher Nash's convoluted Game Theory Economics (which has something to do with numbers and "strategic conflict and negotiation"), or his work on quantum mechanics and other theories and hypotheses dealing with numbers, Howard uses them all as the source of the man's incredible journey. He unpeels the layers, showing how a scattered, ever-busy mind brought Nash not only intellectual satisfaction and academic celebration, but also a great deal of deep-seated grief. It was a double-edged sword, with his life becoming as chaotic and frenzied as the figures and numbers he liked to scrawl and doodle on paper, walls and even on windowpanes.

To say that Nash was lost in his work -- that he was devoted to ideas that were "mind-boggling," both symbolically and literally -- pretty much encapsulates most of his very memorable life.

At first, Howard seems to be tracing Nash's life in straightforward biopic fashion, every so often enlivening matters by trying to visualize Nash's theories, before unveiling information that provides Nash -- and certainly the audience -- with an even more daunting revelation. But, this time, the revelation is no theory. It's reality. And it's harsh.

The subject of "A Beautiful Mind" is given away in its title. It's about Nash's brilliant but scarred mind -- specifically about his all-encompassing mental illness. Howard and Crowe, working with Akiva Goldsman's carefully plotted screenplay (based, in turn, on Sylvia Nasar's acclaimed 1998 biography), collaborate to take us on Nash's life journey, a journey that's subjective as well as objective. It's a life witnessed by the people in his life but also -- mostly -- told from the unique perspective of the man's troubled mind.

As a result, we get a thorough investigation, seeing both what happened and, in a fascinating, scary way, what didn't happen.

The film opens in 1947 on the campus of Princeton University, to which the West Virginia-born and -bred mathematical prodigy earned a graduate fellowship. Dressed uncomfortably in an ill-fitting, skimpy gray suit and skinny tie and wearing his hair closely cropped and with a part, Crowe plays Nash as something of a contradiction -- innocent yet arrogant, nerdy and virile at the same time, and just about a thorough eccentric. He's less a preppy than a social misfit.

"I don't like people much and they don't much like me," he says. But his amazing thought processes attract friends and women nevertheless, with the most loyal people in his life being his roommate, Charlie (Paul Bettany), who behaves like a besotted swell out of "The Great Gatsby," and Alicia Larde (Jennifer Connelly), a beautiful physics major he meets (and courts) while working as an instructor at MIT.

Something of a soft-spoken braggart, Nash is out to discover "a truly original

idea," never aware that he is a true original himself. In short order, he marries Alicia and settles down to start a family while following his intellectual quest. It's his imagination, along with his curious intelligence, that attracts the advances of a mysterious operative named William Parcher (Ed Harris in a skimpy role that fully exploits his intimidating eyes). Parcher works for the Pentagon and recruits Nash to apply his singular talents to break Russian codes, messages sent to U.S.-based Soviet operatives via coded articles in newspapers and magazines.

It's an assignment that appeals to Nash's obsessiveness, and as he loses himself in this clandestine work, the people around him start to think he's getting lost in delusions. It isn't long before Nash is seized by hospital officials (represented here by Christopher Plummer) and subjected to insulin/electroshock therapy to cure him of his paranoid schizophrenia, something that the authorities believe have plagued Nash most of his life but which he had elected to deny and ignore. Why won't anyone believe him, he wonders. And why would his mind, his most valuable ally, betray him like this?

These are questions Howard teasingly tosses at us, often leaving the viewer as discombobulated as Nash.

Howard has directed some wonderful films -- "Parenthood" comes immediately to mind -- and has also tried his hand at "important" movies ("Apollo 13"), but frankly, he has always fallen short. "A Beautiful Mind" is his most accomplished, most mature and least-compromised movie, "Oscar-worthy" in every way. Usually, whenever Hollywood attempts a serious movie, it's done in simplistic terms, as evidenced by the facile way that "The Majestic" addresses the McCarthy-era blacklisting/witch hunt. But Howard doesn't skimp on intelligence.

He has the perfect partner in his star. Crowe gives a tough yet truly touching performance without ever becoming sloppily sentimental. Connelly does wonders with what is usually a nowhere role -- the long-suffering woman -- breathing a sense of real life into all of her scenes as Nash's terrified wife.

If the acting duet of Crowe and Connelly doesn't enthrall you, there's a fabulous music score by James Horner ("Titanic"), a terrific piece of movie music every bit as unique as John Forbes Nash Jr. himself.

About the Writer

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The gift of film: With 'Ali,' Michael Mann, Will Smith create impressionist portrait of the man, the icon

While Will Smith has always seemed versatile and willing to do anything during the decade or so that he's been a star, he's also come across as a lightweight and affable performer, with his greatest talent being his knack for marketing that affability.

The gift of film: Despite refined pedigree, Spacey, 'Shipping News' barely miss the boat

"The Shipping News" has the kind of pedigree that most movie studios only dream about and wish for, but which the savvy people at Miramax seem to effortlessly command. There's a reason this studio has dominated the annual Oscar competition for 10 years in a row, and "The Shipping News" is a fine example of a film assembled for prestige.

The gift of film: 'Beautiful Mind' unpeels layers of detail, despair to reveal a man's journey

We've all heard the expression -- usually around Oscar time -- about how someone wins an award not for one specific performance or accomplishment, but for "a body of work," the accumulation of that person's lifelong passion or pursuit.

The gift of film: Charming romantic comedy 'Kate & Leopold' shows there's a future in chivalry

A man from another era, with old-fashioned values that are deeply rooted in the past, pops up in the modern world and falls in love with a career woman whose life, both personal and professional, is slavishly ruled by contemporary trends.

The gift of film: Love found, love sought and the fight of a life. Heavy-hitting movies open for the holidays.

Movies opening today

Music: What would Christmas be without 'The Christmas Song'?

Mel Tormé could do just about anything.

And to all... a good night of TV

'Tis the season for tradition, including classic movies and the use of 'tis. 'Tis also time for my traditional offering of what would surely be a classic TV movie if their people would just call my people. Right after I get some people.

Anita Creamer: Teen changes life dramatically against all odds

It's asking a lot to expect a teenager to transform her life -- to leap into normalcy from the desperation of a childhood spent, to put it kindly, in unstable circumstances -- but that's what Jessica Gillam is doing.

Scene Stuffers: On the money

For the kid who has everything -- including completely insane, rich parents -- this personal Triton automatic teller machine is a must. It works just like a commercial ATM, only parents (or whoever else is foolish enough) stock it with cash.

Review: 'Benched' marked for holiday classic

Richard Broadhurst's new comedy "Benched," which opened Saturday night at Sacramento Theatre Company's Stage Two, is dedicated to New York City. The playwright lived there for 20 years and his new play is set on an old bench in the

city's famous Central Park. The play's gentle message of maintaining spirit for life and hopefulness of love is especially poignant now and the talented cast gave the wistful work a solid premiere.

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