

The Sessions

Cert 15 USA 2012 95 mins

Crew

Director/screenplay Ben Lewin
 Cinematography Geoffrey Simpson
 Film Editing Lisa Bromwell
 Original music Marco Beltrami

Cast

John Hawkes Mark
 Helen Hunt Cheryl
 William H. Macy Father Brendan
 Moon Bloodgood Vera
 Adam Arkin Josh

Synopsis

California 1988. Poet and journalist Mark O'Brien, now in his late thirties, is paralysed because of childhood polio, and spends most of his time in an iron lung. A commission to write an article about sex surrogates sharpens his resolve to lose his virginity before he dies.

With the blessing of his unconventional priest Father Brendan, and the help of a few friends, Mark engages the services of Cheryl Chen-Greene. Though Cheryl sets strict limits on the relationship, an unexpectedly strong bond starts to develop between them....



- The film is based on an article "On Seeing a Sex Surrogate", written by the real-life Mike O'Brien in 1990. His life was chronicled in Jessica Yu's 1996 film *Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien*, which won an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short. O'Brien died in 1999 at the age of 49.
- Director/writer Ben Lewin also had polio as a child, and drew partly on his own experience to make the film. He worked closely with Susan Fernbach, O'Brien's partner during the last years of his life.
- The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival 2012, where it won the U.S. Drama Audience Award for and Special Jury Prize for ensemble acting.



Reviews

...John Hawkes, who was so memorably menacing as Teardrop in *Winter's Bone*, plays O'Brien as an intelligent, likable man with a slightly dorky sense of humour. If you don't find his gags about moving furniture funny though, that's tough. As with *The Fighter*, which demonstrated in closing credits archive footage that the real-life Dicky Eklund was just as flamboyant as Christian Bale's version, any perceived faults in Hawke's performance are likely the subject's own. That's as it should be.

If this were one of those "courageous cripple stories", not only would all of O'Brien's rough edges have been smoothed over in pursuit of saintliness, but the lead would be the only obvious Oscar bait. In fact, terrific though Hawkes is, he's flanked on either side by two equally impressive performers. In her biggest role for some time, Helen Hunt plays Cheryl, the sex surrogate. Cheryl's fearless, matter-of-fact compassion for O'Brien's situation is echoed in Hunt's fearless, matter-of-fact performance. And William H Macy's shaggy-haired, compassionate clergyman is lovable enough to make Richard Dawkins see the light.

The Sessions is not as visually rich as *The Diving Bell And The Butterfly*, or as steamy as this year's *Rust And Bone*, but it earns a place in the (happily) growing ranks of disability drama by never once patronising its protagonist.

Ellen Jones, Total Film, January 2013

... Hunt is instantly impressive at dealing with Mark's panicked sensitivity — Cheryl has to make an effort to stay calm, and uses a certain guarded professionalism to deal with him. But his interest in her whittles this down, bit by bit, and allows the movie to explore "emotional transference": the difficulty of getting sexually involved with anyone without beginning to care about them.

It's a slighter film than the subject matter might lead you to expect, and Lewin's direction can be a little gauzy — the affectedly sparse, Arvo Pärt-ish score by Marco Beltrami seems to insist too serenely on the specialness of every moment.

Still, it's a deeply humane and very accessible piece in which the actors engage us fully. After this and *Hope Springs*, there's a new frankness in Hollywood's depiction of sex problems, however able-bodied the participants, which can only be something to applaud.

Tim Robey, The Telegraph, January 2013