

THE MAN WHO KNEW INFINITY – Film at CONCA VERDE on 07.11.16 - Talk by Joel Ormsby

The Man Who Knew Infinity is a 2015 British biographical drama film based on the 1991 book of the same name by Robert Kanigel and directed by Matthew Brown. The film stars Dev Patel as the real-life Srinivasa Ramanujan, a mathematician who after growing up poor in Madras, India, earns entry to Cambridge University during World War I, where he becomes a pioneer in mathematical theories with the guidance of his professor and mentor, G. H. Hardy.

The cast

Dev Patel is the British son of Indian parents and has had many award nominations. His most famous works include *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The Last Airbender*.

Jeremy Irons is a well spoken British actor and has been in many movies including *Die Hard*, *Batman*, *Danny the Champion of the World*, *Elizabeth* and many more.

Toby Jones is an English actor from a family of actors including the famous Freddie Jones. His best known films are *The Hunger Games* and the *Harry Potter* series, plus he has starred in many more dramatic films.

One of my favourite actors is **Stephen Fry**, the British actor who starred in the Oscar Wilde biopic and many classic British comedy shows including *Blackadder*. He has a small role in this film.

The film also features the famous Philosopher Bertrand Russell (**Jeremy Northam**) who advises Hardy about supporting Ramanujan.

The historical context In the 1910s, Srinivasa Ramanujan is a man of boundless intelligence that even the abject poverty of his home in Madras, India cannot crush. India was under British Imperial rule, Mahatma Gandhi was still a Lawyer and the independence movement hadn't yet started. Ramanujan arrived in England in 1914 only a short time before World War 1 started. It was a critical time because the war created racial problems and hardship which he experienced first hand. Ramanujan found both friends and rivals in Cambridge, one of his friends was Bertrand Russell the analytical philosopher, mathematician and peace activist. This was a very hard time for Ramanujan because he experienced racism, hunger and a hot political atmosphere as a result of the war. The war and its complications had a bad effect on his health, but he remained devoted to his work. The film is set mostly in Trinity College, Cambridge – a beautiful college and a city famous for river boats and intellectuals such as Darwin, Newton and Steven Hawking. I recommend a visit any time.

The ideas

The Man Who Knew Infinity refers to the mathematical idea of infinity, but this film explores many ideas. The key ideas discussed in this movie are the relationship between the brain and the mind, rationality and intuition. Ramanujan was initially criticised at Cambridge because he got his ideas from inspiration rather than the scientific method. One of the main quotes of this film is from Littlewood who says:

“every positive integer is one of Ramanujans personal friends” “...an equation had no meaning for him unless it expressed a thought of god”.

‘Integer’ means the whole number, that is 6 and not 6.4, for example. What the quotation means is that maths is something divine, the hidden language of the universe. This is a popular idea and the evidence can be seen in a good exploration of maths and numerology. The discussion of god is another theme of this movie and there are some fascinating arguments between the religious Indian mathematician and his atheist friend Hardy.

Another relationship discussed in this movie is East vs West. India and the East are shown to be traditional and mystical, whereas England and the West are advanced and secular. This is obviously a generalisation but there is a lot of truth in it. This movie is also about the relationship between the heart and the mind. Ramanujan has a beautiful Indian wife but his pursuit of his career in academia becomes a problem for his relationship. This is a modern problem many people will understand. **The Man Who Knew Infinity** also explores the academic rivalry inside Cambridge University. The main problem is that Ramanujan is allowed in Cambridge University on the basis of his talent but doesn’t have formal training or qualifications. This makes his academic colleagues very jealous and Ramanujan has to work extra hard to prove himself and his ideas. In reality Cambridge University has always been a traditional and old fashioned town: some colleges there would still not allow women in the 1980s. Moreover, the competition to be the best academic student can be quite fierce.

The final idea I’d like to discuss is the integration of Indians into the British community. Britain ruled India in the mid 19th century and used brutal tactics to keep them in slavery and domination. At the start of this film, India was simply a province of the British Empire and the British took a negative view of Indians at home and in Britain. The first and second world wars saw the Indians support the British against Germany and they slowly started to integrate into British society. Ramanujan came to Britain at a time of historical importance and helped create a good image of Indians as ethical and intelligent people. After World War 2 the Indians helped rebuild Britain and take important jobs in areas such as health and education. Ramanujan’s important work in mathematical theory helped Indians become recognised as good members of society. He was one the people who made Indians in the UK into a valued and accepted part of the UK population, and this continues today.

Trivia

There are references in the film to **"Gunga Din"**, the poem by Rudyard Kipling. Characters quote 'Din! Din! Din!', a repeated phrase from the poem, and also mention the name, 'Gunga Din'. Ramanujan, like Gunga Din, is an Indian undervalued by his white peers. The key lines from the poem that apply to Ramanujan's situation and his relationship with other Cambridge academics occur in the last verse. The narrator of the poem acknowledges the mistreatment given by himself and the other white men to Gunga Din and the poem finishes with the line, "You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din"

This film claims to know which was the legendary tree where Newton got his idea of Gravity, but it is arguable whether it is the actual tree.

Conclusion

This film has wonderful performances by the actors and some deep emotion as Ramanujan faces various problems. These problems reflect the difficulties many geniuses experience on their road to fame and glory. Turing had trouble with the authorities, Hawking had complications with his health and Ramanujan had many different kinds of problems, including rivalry and bad British food! This film is a typical tale of triumph over adversity. It also celebrates the idea that there is divine logic to the world that can be seen through the eyes of a person with an open mind and open heart. The photography of this film which focuses on the beauty of Cambridge and the emotions of the actors is also something to admire.

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The film show

The next original language film will be in German: Der Staat Gegen Fritz Bauer (The State Against Fritz Bauer). There are 12 films altogether before Xmas – 6 in English, 1 in French, 1 in German and 4 in Spanish.

Enjoy the film!