

Blu-ray Review: John Hawkes, Helen Hunt Amaze in ‘The Sessions’

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on February 26, 2013 - 10:16am

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CHICAGO – It’s a shame how box office numbers play such a large factor in Oscar votes. Just imagine if “The Blind Side” was a flop. Sandra Bullock wouldn’t have been allowed within a billion miles of the Oscar podium. If Ben Lewin’s “The Sessions” was given a fair shot with audiences, it would’ve easily brought its star, John Hawkes, an Oscar nomination.

As Mark O’Brien, a Polio-stricken writer confined to an iron lung, Hawkes delivers the sort of transcendently brilliant work that ranks right alongside Joaquin Phoenix’s phenomenal intensity in “The Master” and Daniel Day-Lewis’s astonishing transformation in “Lincoln.” The painstaking research he conducted, including several viewings of Jessica Yu’s Oscar-winning 1996 documentary short, “Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O’Brien,” is apparent in every frame of Hawkes’s sublime portrayal. He resists sentiment even when Lewin’s script succumbs to it.



Blu-ray Rating: **4.0/5.0**

For the majority of its running time, “The Sessions” takes a refreshingly frank look at human sexuality devoid of the smarm and sniggering that traps so many Hollywood films in an arrested adolescence. Based on O’Brien’s 1990 article, “On Seeing a Sex Surrogate,” the film centers on the 36-year-old writer’s pursuit to lose his virginity. Though his genial charm and self-deprecating wit make him a hit with the ladies, his physical ailments have prevented him from ever getting to know a woman “in the biblical sense.” With the blessing of his priest (played by a wonderfully droll William H. Macy), O’Brien enlists the aid of sex surrogate Cheryl Cohen-Greene (Helen Hunt), a stunningly uninhibited wife and mother who treats her clients like humans rather than laboratory projects. She understands that sex is not merely a physical need, but an emotional and psychological one as well, though she risks leaving more than a few mental scars on her client once their six sessions are up. The film’s tidily brisk denouement avoids the more troubling repercussions of O’Brien and Cohen-Greene’s intimate encounters, though Hawkes and Hunt honor their real-life characters by portraying them with complexity. O’Brien is charming but never patronizingly cute, while Cohen-Greene’s repressed emotions rise to the surface in a candid moment with O’Brien’s medical orderly (Moon Bloodgood). The single expression frozen on Hunt’s face conveys so much about the unexpected impact O’Brien has had on her own life. There’s no question Hunt’s Oscar nomination was deserving. It’s her best performance to date.



The Sessions was released on Blu-ray and DVD on February 12th, 2013.

Photo credit: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment

Few films last year were as awash in healing, cathartic warmth as “The Sessions,” an obvious labor of love from its writer/director, who is himself a polio survivor. Many critics got hung up on the film’s occasional moments of forced humor (such as O’Brien’s echo-laden church confessions) and saccharine touches (particularly Marco Beltrami’s unnecessary score), but those are all just quibbles in light of what the film achieves. The tenderly bittersweet duet forged between Hawkes and Hunt is beautiful to behold.

“The Sessions” is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, Spanish and French audio tracks and is available in a Blu-ray/Ultraviolet combo pack. The extras are a complete disappointment, from the scant deleted scenes (highlighted by one tender scene between Hunt and her son) to the “theatrical featurettes” aimed to slickly package the subject matter for mainstream consumption. Among the all-too-brief nuggets are Hawkes’ description of how he put a soccer-sized foam ball with duct tape under the left side of his spine in order to accurately recreate the curvature of O’Brien’s back (the featurette neglects to mention how Hawkes’ internal organs began to migrate as a result).

Lewin’s spot-on observation that America still lives in “the sexual dark ages” is especially poignant, considering how Fox Searchlight all but hid this film from the public after aggressive pre-release marketing (much like how “127 Hours” remained in limited release because of its bone-crunching sound effects). Perhaps Fox executives wouldn’t have been as afraid of their own film if they had witnessed the overwhelmingly positive reaction of suburban moviegoers to the trailer. I was seeing a film at a theater in Crystal Lake, Illinois, when the trailer for “The Sessions” ended up garnering laughter and applause from a packed house. Too bad most of those viewers were never able to see the film on the big screen. If they had, I’ll guarantee you that John Hawkes would have a Best Actor nomination.

‘The Sessions’ is released by Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment and stars John Hawkes, Helen Hunt, Moon Bloodgood, William H. Macy, Annika Marks, Ming Lo and Robin Weigert. It was written and directed by Ben Lewin. It was released on February 12th, 2013. It is rated R.



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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 18 2024 - 10:22pm*):
<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/21409/blu-ray-review-john-hawkes-and-helen-hunt-amaze-in-the-sessions>

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