

Mathematical minds multiply at Toronto film fest

September 9 2014, by Jake Coyle



Eddie Redmayne, from left, and James Marsh and Felicity Jones attend the premiere for "The Theory of Everything" on day 4 of the Toronto International Film Festival at the TIFF Bell Lightbox on Sunday, Sept. 7, 2014, in Toronto. (Photo by Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP)

In the Stephen Hawking biopic "The Theory of Everything," two college girls rush into a '60s-era Cambridge party before the sight of the attendees stops them in their tracks.

"Oh, dear. Scientists."

So could the reaction be confronting this year's Toronto International Film Festival, where two of the most lauded and talked-about films are portraits of elite mathematical minds, courtesy of Benedict Cumberbatch and Eddie Redmayne. In "The Theory of Everything," Redmayne plays theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking; in "The Imitation Game," Cumberbatch plays British mathematician and World War II code breaker Alan Turing.

After glowing receptions in Toronto, both films are expected to be major players on Hollywood's awards circuit this fall following their theatrical openings. ("Theory" is due out Nov. 7. "Imitation Game" follows two weeks later.) Redmayne and Cumberbatch are already calculated by pundits to be favorites for a best-actor Oscar nomination.

"A lot of people talk about it as being a competitor to our film," Cumberbatch said in an interview. "I don't like thinking of films being in competition with each other, full stop. It's absurd. As long as they're both able to find an audience, it's not a problem."

In an interesting twist, Cumberbatch (who is friends with Redmayne) has played Hawking before in a BAFTA-nominated 2004 BBC film—the only prior Hawking biopic.

In "The Theory of Everything," director James Marsh (best known for the documentaries "Man on Wire" and "Project Nim") follows Hawking's scientific growth in tandem with his physical deterioration caused by a [motor neurone disease](#). Redmayne plays Hawking through each step of the illness, transforming from a gawky young man to wheelchair-bound father of three.

"I attempted to read and comprehend as much as I possibly could of his

work, which wasn't very much," Redmayne said on stage after the film's premiere.

The 32-year-old actor spent five months researching the role, included meeting Hawking shortly before filming began.

"I went in genuinely petrified," said Redmayne. "I basically spent the first 25 minutes vomiting forth information about Stephen Hawking to Stephen Hawking."

Such a meeting wasn't possible for Cumberbatch with Turing, who committed suicide in 1954. His role to breaking the German's elaborate code—Winston Churchill said he made the single greatest contribution to the war—has only recently begun to be widely recognized. But Turing's story—and "The Imitation Game"—is also about him being a closeted gay man at time when homosexuality was criminalized.

"Alan is, compared to his achievements, relatively obscure, which is one of the really shaming aspects of what happened to him," says Cumberbatch.

Curiously, films about cold math tend to be quite emotional, often verging on sentimentality—movies such as "Good Will Hunting," with Matt Damon's janitor genius, and Ron Howard's Oscar-winning "A Beautiful Mind," about Nobel-winner John Nash. Rare is the film that delves deeply into numbers, like Darren Aronofsky's obsessive "Pi." Usually, the movies like math most for handsome backgrounds of chalkboard equations and the (more comprehensible) personal lives behind the science.

A third film at Toronto, Ed Zwick's "Pawn Sacrifice," dramatizes chess prodigy Bobby Fischer (Tobey Maguire) in his battles against the Soviet Union's Boris Spassky (Liev Schreiber). As a biopic of Fisher, it marvels

at the kind of brain that can synthesize all the possible moves in chess, and the game's effect on Fischer's mental health.

"There are more 40-move games than stars in the galaxy," says William Lombardy (Peter Sarsgaard), a Catholic priest and chess grandmaster, in the film. "This game can take you right to the edge."

Playing such unique thinkers can be challenging to any actor, since their subject's realm of thought is so unfathomable and mysterious. As he did when he played Hawking, Cumberbatch says he tried to "brush up" on his algebra.

"I'm not stupid but I'm not that smart. So I can at least lend something of that within the performance, like maybe the alacrity of thought, making fast connections," says Cumberbatch. "But when you actually start talking about the language he used to get to those stunning conclusions, you might as well ask me to write my name in Mandarin. It's a whole new world of alphabet and understanding."

While performing characters with such high IQs may be daunting, it can be even more so to sit in judgment of them. "The Theory of Everything" screenwriter Anthony McCarten said they have already screened the film for Hawking.

"His exact words were 'Broadly true,'" said screenwriter Anthony McCarten. "We'll take that."

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