



SPECIAL REVIEW

'THIN PARTITIONS'

Jonathan Burns

'A Beautiful Mind' (Dreamworks), starring Russell Crowe and Jennifer Connelly, directed by Ron Howard, screenplay by Akiva Goldsman.

'Great wits are sure to madness near alli'd
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.'

Thus wrote John Dryden, alluding to the age-old belief that genius and madness are closely linked. The enigmatic John Forbes Nash Jr, a mathematician at Princeton who won the Nobel Prize for economics in 1994 for his work on game theory, encapsulates in the flesh this strange juxtaposition of brilliance and bizarreness. Nash had schizophrenia and was hospitalised for long periods between the 1950s and 1970s. Despite this he retained his chair at Princeton, returning to work and teach during periods of remission. He is in fact one of many great figures in the history of art and science who have ventured into either the borderlands or the heartland of the psychotic world. Newton probably had Asperger's syndrome, Schumann, Byron and Van Gogh suffered possible manic-depressive episodes, and Einstein, Faraday, Coleridge and Goya were among the many we might today diagnose as schizotypal.

The medical literature too, contains evidence of this association. An impressive survey of first-degree relatives of psychotic patients in Iceland reveals a significant overrepresentation of gifted authors, scientists and mathematicians,^{1,2} while a recent study at Cambridge University (UK) demonstrated high scores for Asperger's syndrome among scientists and mathematicians.³

This brings us to Russell Crowe's portrayal of John Nash in the recently released film, 'A Beautiful Mind', based on a biography of Nash by Sylvia Nasar. The film documents Nash's struggle with the illness and for recognition of his



brilliance in a sympathetic and moving manner and cleverly incorporates his psychotic world into the drama. Ed Harris is a disconcertingly forbidding FBI agent who nevertheless retains a familiarity with Nash that is reminiscent of patients' reports of feeling strangely 'comforted' by the presence of their hallucinated spectres. Crowe captures well the isolation and social ineptness of many schizophrenics, and particularly following his discharge from hospital gives a convincing portrayal of the psychological and social devastation wrought by the illness (and sometimes by the treatment!). However, I for one was not impressed by his exaggerated mannerisms and often inconsistent quirks. There were moments when he let slip the awkwardness and eccentricity and lapsed into the confident Russell Crowe snogging the desirable Jennifer Connelly. As Nash's long-suffering wife, Connelly is convincingly dignified, loyal and eternally loving, but also captures wonderfully the immensity of the burden and the pain that families of patients so often experience.

In terms of scientific accuracy, the film too sometimes parts company with reality. Visual hallucinations, as experienced by Nash in the movie, are uncommon if not rare in schizophrenia, but one can see how this artistic licence might be justified in creating a visually appealing drama. The apparent intactness of his personality and cognitive abilities later on after years of severe schizophrenic illness is also unusual. The common course is one of marked cognitive decline early in the disease process, a loss of wit and alertness of mind and a gradual erosion of the unique style and character which previously defined the individual. Of course there are exceptions, and Nash may be one of those lucky enough to retain these faculties and thus escape the ravages of this crippling condition.

'A Beautiful Mind' is a fascinating and inspiring tale, and while the movie takes some liberties with the facts, it is well worth seeing, if only to stimulate one's mind to muse upon the extraordinary 'thin partitions' that divide madness from genius.

1. Karlsson JL. Creative intelligence in relatives of mental patients. *Hereditas* 1984; 100: 83-86.
2. Karlsson JL. Mental abilities of male relatives of psychotic patients. *Acta Psychiatr Scand* 2001; 104: 466-468.
3. Baron-Cohen S, Wheelwright S, Skinner R, Martin J, Clubley E. The autism-spectrum quotient (AQ): evidence from Asperger syndrome/high-functioning autism, males and females, scientists and mathematicians. *J Autism Dev Disord*. 2001; 31: 5-17.

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