



Mark O'Brien (John Hawkes) was left paralyzed from the neck down by the polio he'd contracted as a child. Consequently, he can only breathe with the assistance of an iron lung, although he can use a portable respirator for a few hours at a time.

Nonetheless, the condition has never stopped him from fantasizing, especially about his attractive attendants like Amanda (Annika Marks) who quit when he expressed his desire for her. The sexually-frustrated, 38 year-old decides that the only way he'll probably ever lose his virginity is by paying a woman to sleep with him.

However, this proves easier said than done, between the physical challenges presented by quadriplegia and his having to wrestle with a major moral issue as a devout Catholic. Since his religion forbids fornication outside the sanctity of marriage, Mark consults his parish priest for special dispensation.

Armed with the surprisingly-sympathetic Father Brendan's (William H. Macy) blessing, Mark retains the services of Cheryl (Helen Hunt), a professional sex surrogate with the bedside demeanor, or should I say bedroom demeanor, of a saint. Over the course of a half-dozen, romantic rendezvous, the sensitive therapist gradually helps her patient conquer problems with

Compassionate Disability Drama Chronicles Indomitability of the Human Spirit

Written by Kam Williams

performance anxiety and premature ejaculation.

En route to consummation, the pair simultaneously forge a friendship in spite her fears that he might develop an attachment to her. After all, she is married. But Mark emerges from the experience, a changed man, as he develops the confidence to flirt with other women and he even ultimately finds a wife (Robin Weigert).

The Sessions' subject-matter might strike some as salacious, given the film's frequent, full-frontal nudity. But the picture actually plays out more as a compassionate tale exploring a variety of themes, including faith, friendship, relationships and the indomitability of the human spirit.

Written and directed by Ben Lewin, himself a polio victim, the movie is based on Mark O'Brien's (1950-1999) life story as chronicled in his autobiography "How I Became a Human Being: A Disabled Man's Quest for Independence." The late author was already the subject of *Breathing Lessons*, a biopic which won an Academy Award in 1997 in the Best Documentary category.

Rather than resort to manipulative sentimentality, the production resists the temptation to follow a Hollywood formula in favor of a realistic plot that Mark undoubtedly would have appreciated. As a journalist and longtime civil rights advocate, he never looked for pity but lobbied for legislation and equality on behalf of the handicapped.

Co-stars John Hawkes and Helen Hunt generate an endearing chemistry, here, turning in a couple of virtuoso performances deserving of serious consideration come Oscar season. A poignant, character-driven drama depicting the disabled as complicated individuals with a full range of emotions.

Excellent (4 stars)

Rated R for graphic sexuality, frontal nudity and frank dialogue

Running time: 95 minutes

Distributor: Fox Searchlight

To see a trailer for *The Sessions*, visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol7Rs_Hv_IA