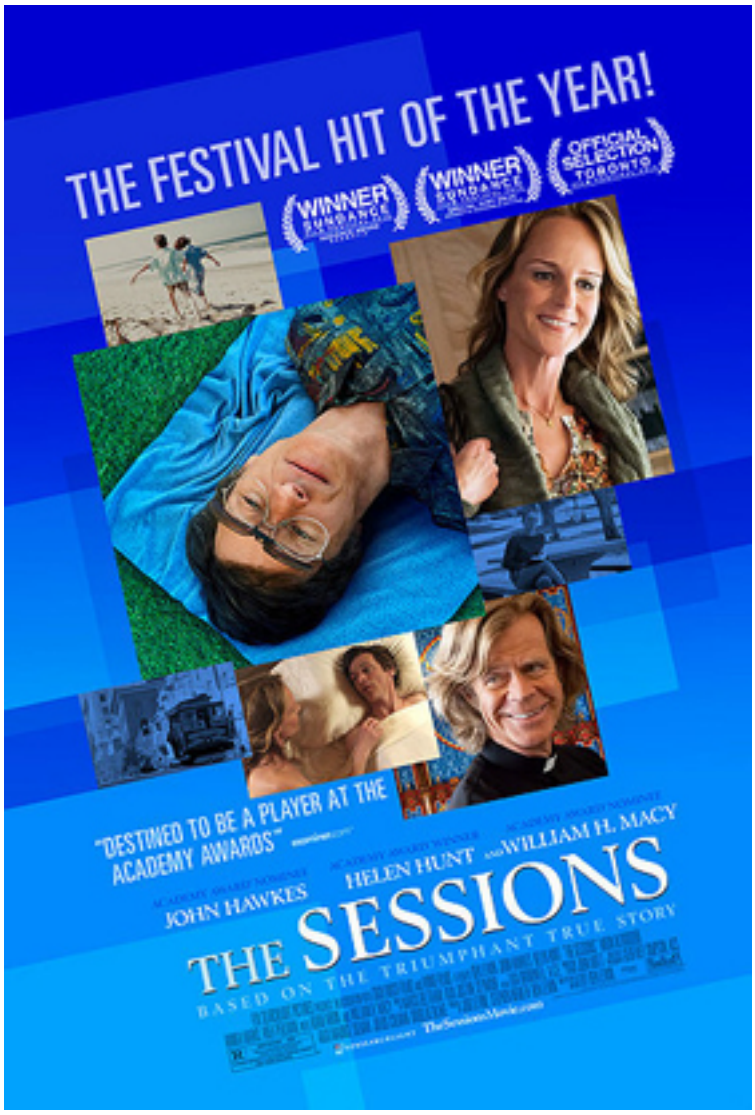


Mark O'Brien (John Hawkes) was left paralyzed from the neck down by the polio he'd contracted as a child. Consequently, he can only breathe with the assistance of an iron lung, although he can use a portable respirator for a few hours at a time.

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

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=oI7Rs_Hv_IA