

Feb/Mar 2015

# possability

magazine

Nothing is **Impossible...**

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP

STARTING YOUR  
OWN BUSINESS

## ACCESSIBLE DAYS OUT

WHAT THE UK  
HAS TO OFFER

## ALTERNATIVE PROSTHETICS

**WIN**

A WEEK'S HOLIDAY WITH BRICKHOUSE FARM COTTAGES



# THE THEORY OF THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING

Mik Scarlet gives his thoughts on the latest blockbuster, The Theory of Everything and further explores the controversial subject of disabled characters being portrayed by non-disabled actors.

I cannot deny that I had no desire or intention to go and see the film 'The Theory of Everything.' As well as being unimpressed with yet another movie being made with a disabled character being played by a non-disabled actor, it's not my kind of film. When

PosAbility asked me to write this article I girded my loins and set out to book a couple of tickets. This was not an easy process as our local cinema had decided in its wisdom to put the film on in an inaccessible screen, which is worthy of being a line in Alanis Morissette's 1995 hit "Ironic". So my wife and I had no other choice than to drive to another part of London to see the film. What is worse is that this has happened in other parts of the country as demonstrated by the story of

Joe France, a 12 year old boy who tried to see the movie at his local Odeon in Harrogate on January 17th (Disabled Access Day no less) only to find he too could not gain access to the screen showing the film. However I digress...

## THE QUANTUM THEORY OF EVERYTHING

I tried to forget my preconceptions as the film started. I was desperate to give it a chance and I hoped I would come out liking it or at least not hating it. For the first half hour it was OK, being a Merchant Ivory style story of two privileged young people falling in love in the beautiful grounds of Cambridge University, then to have that love tested as one of the lovers faces the diagnosis of a life shortening condition. When this happens the film almost becomes empowering, as love blossoms leading to marriage and children.





© Cranberries

Eddie Redmayne

As Stephen Hawking's Motor Neurone Disease (MND) gains impact on his physical abilities, the film switches from being about the two lead characters to exploring Jane Wilde Hawking's "heroic" battle to care for her husband. There is very little mention of why Stephen Hawking is so important to the world of science and if it hadn't been for the fact that my wife studied physics at university I would never have known which scene marked the moment when he changed our understanding of the universe forever. It passes by almost unmarked, swallowed up by the following scene of Hawking's mate carrying him up some stairs, there to make sure the audience knows Hawking's willy still works. Important stuff eh? In fact it seemed that every time Stephen and Jane Hawking kissed in the film, the next shot was of one of them holding a new baby. Not only is he a genius but rather fecund to boot, or is it just that nobody wants to think of pretty Jane getting sexy with disabled Stephen too often. Three kids, three sessions of sex will do thanks.

What really got to me was how much time was spent on biology compared to the tiny amount spent on physics. Hawking is one of the greatest mathematicians in history, yet a key scene showing him actually doing maths was really there to demonstrate his losing the ability to hold chalk. In movies with scientists as featured characters, such as 'Life Story' about the discovery of DNA, there is some effort made to explore the

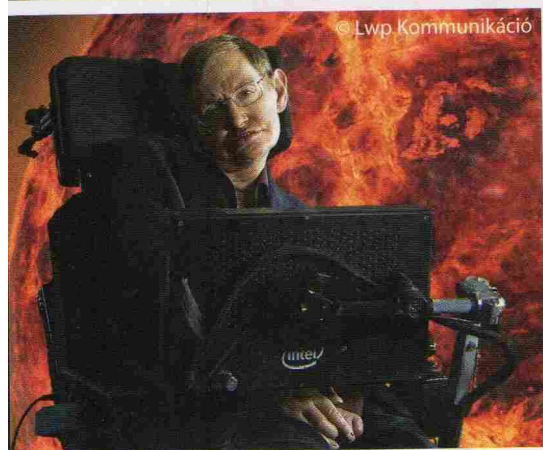
scientific elements of the story, but 'The Theory of Everything' almost forgets that Stephen Hawking is one of the superstars of 20th century science, up there with Einstein and Feynman. According to the film his greatest achievement was not his work but his inability to die when he was told. As the film continued it focused more and more on the personal toll of Jane looking after her husband, which leads to them splitting up towards the end. The blame for her getting little help was laid at Professor Hawking's twisted feet and once they did finally get some help it was this that ended their relationship. It is also eluded to that Jane has an extra marital affair, that she gives up on to care for Hawking, but no one can stay faithful to someone so disabled can they? Of course all these events happened, but it is the motivation given by the film that bugged me.

Many of the scenes of Stephen Hawking's struggle as his MND progressed appeared to be vehicles to allow Eddie Redmayne to show off his acting skills. The scene where Hawking gained his doctorate was a major offender. We see around a minute of film focusing on Hawking struggling to walk on sticks, involving shots of his face, close ups on the twisted feet as they nearly trip on every step and wide shots of the battle to travel no more than a metre, while three professors chat amongst themselves trying not to notice the struggle before them. Finally he arrives and states he would rather stand after the offer of a chair, receives his

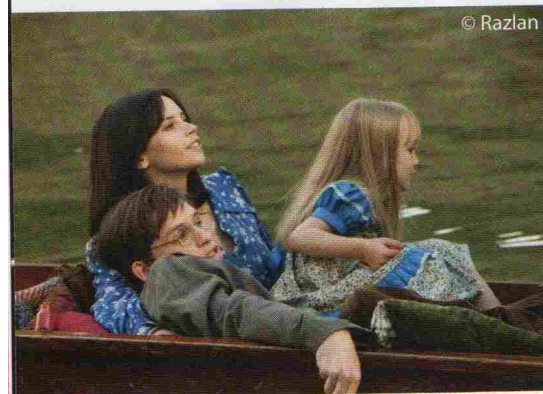
ACCORDING TO THE FILM HIS GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT WAS NOT HIS WORK BUT HIS INABILITY TO DIE WHEN HE WAS TOLD







Stephen Hawking



Scene from 'The Theory of Everything'

**“TO SAY “ONLY DISABLED PEOPLE SHOULD PLAY DISABLED PARTS” SHOWS A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF THE INDUSTRY AND IS NOT WHERE WE ARE AT RIGHT NOW”**

doctorate with a quip and then turns to leave, in an instant! Anyone who has ever walked with the aid of sticks or crutches will know that turning is far harder than walking in a straight line, but there was no drama in that. No awards in turning, but there are in making your feet look all weird.

The film makers saved the greatest insult for the last scene. As Hawking gives a speech to assembled science groupies at a large conference of academics and students, one young female who is gazing adoringly at Hawking drops her pen. The film then switches to fantasy mode and we see Hawking's impairment drop away as he gains the ability to walk and then pick up the pen. Don't forget film fans, no one can ever be happy being disabled, even someone like Stephen Hawking. Deep down all we really want is to be perfect!

Would I advise anyone to see this film? I would wait until it comes out on DVD and then only buy it in the bargain bin. If you want to know about Stephen Hawking and how he changed our world forever, forget it. However, the film has sparked a huge debate about the issue of non-disabled actors playing disabled characters.

#### THE THEORY OF RELATIVELY EVERYTHING ELSE

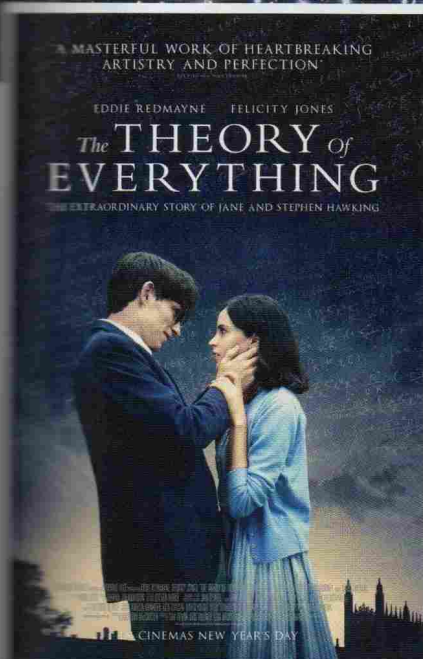
This subject is close to my heart. I have been working as a professional actor since 1990, when I was the first disabled actor to appear in a UK soap, on Channel 4's Brookside. I went on to perform in The Bill and 2.4 Children, as well as having a stage career. I even played Prince Charming in panto one year. Throughout my career I have been campaigning both for more

disabled acting roles in drama and for those roles to be played by disabled actors. This campaigning led to me being elected as chair of actors' union Equity's Deaf and Disabled Members Committee some years back and I am proud of the work we have done in furthering the careers of many disabled actors. The debate about whether non-disabled actors are right to take the role of a disabled character or whether these roles should only ever be played by disabled actors has been on-going, but 'The Theory of Everything' has caused it to blaze anew.

A key argument about why Eddie Redmayne had been cast to play Hawking was that the film charted the progression of his impairment starting before it made an appearance but after seeing the movie I do not think this is the case. After the opening shot of a bicycle race, Hawking is played as a disabled person who has not yet recognised its impact. Redmayne walks slowly and awkwardly, and holds his head and his right hand strangely from the second or third time you see him on screen. If anything he over emphasises this and the audience knows something is wrong long before his character does. Of course during the film his impairment has a greater impact on the character's physicality, but to say that there is not a disabled actor who could portray this transition would be untrue. I might suggest Dan Edge would have nailed it.

Non-disabled actors currently see playing disabled characters as a great challenge to their performing abilities and it seems that it is one sure-fire way to win those lovely awards. Disabled actress Freddie Stubb,





learning in new British film *Dead and Awake* to be released in April, who is co-chair on the Deaf and Disabled Members Committee, explains her feelings on the matter "I have never understood how an able-bodied actor playing a disabled role is often seen as an Oscar-nominated performance, yet if a white actor was to play an ethnic role that would be considered discriminatory". Many people see the analogy between race and disability an uncomfortable fit, but let's face it, both minorities experience discrimination within the dramatic arts and the wider community. We want to see increased representation which is nearer to our experiences, and of course played by members of our own community. While ethnic minorities are now at a point where, as Freddie said, the film and drama industries would not be prepared to cast a white actor to play an ethnic role, or "backing up", they see little wrong with "stepping up".

Disabled actor and producer David Proud gave me his thoughts on why this might be: "To say 'only disabled people should play disabled parts' shows a lack of understanding of the industry and is not where we are at right now. We need

'disabled stars' whose names will finance a £5million film. I've been acting for eight years and apparently I am worth nothing in box office draw which is all financiers want. When you are asking someone to put £1million hard cash into a film they don't want risk. Investors want names. In TV, no doubt disabled talent should play disabled parts so let's dominate TV and put pressure on film and build people's careers".

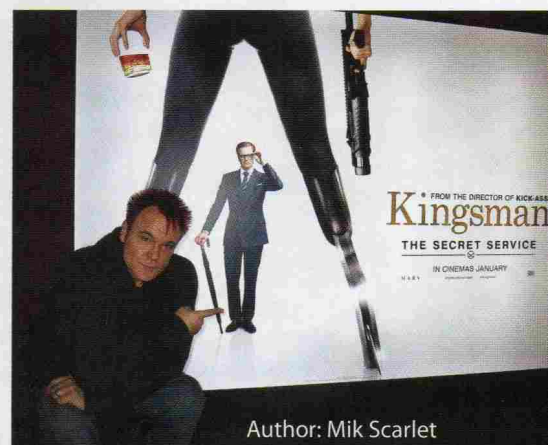
This lack of disabled talent argument is one given by the industry at every turn. Back when I started out in the industry it might have been true. When I joined I was the only disabled member of Equity under the age of 30, but now more and more disabled people see the dramatic arts as a viable career. It is now possible to actually study at drama college too. I have watched the talent pool steadily grow and I now feel the 'lack of available talent' argument to be entirely false. It is more a lack of effort to seek them out by casting directors and producers. Even when disabled actors are seen for a part, there is no guarantee that they will get it. I have lost count of the times I have gone for auditions for the role of a disabled person only to find that it went to a non-disabled actor. How is it possible to increase the pool of well known disabled actors if we never get the chance to play the few roles perfect for us? It becomes a self fulfilling prophecy.

I do wonder if 'The Theory of Everything' is the right film to have picked to highlight this issue. No one batted an eyelid when Patrick Stewart played wheelchair user Professor Charles Xavier in the X-Men franchise for example, yet that is a role where there is no transition argument. He uses a wheelchair throughout. The new movie *Kingsman: The Secret Service* has a main character who is a double amputee, yet she is played by a non-disabled actress and dancer Sofia Boutella. Boutella told VM

magazine that "I told the stylist that I really wanted to wear the thinnest, highest heels she could find, because I needed to feel how my character would feel walking on a very tiny surface" in her search to understand what it might feel like to walk using blades. To me this is so insulting and offensive that it makes 'The Theory of Everything' pale into insignificance. High heels do not equal the experience of walking on blades, no matter what Ms Boutella might think.

To be honest I could write another 2000 words exploring this subject. I haven't even touched on many of the arguments those who can see nothing wrong with non-disabled people playing disabled characters use, such as "should only gay men play gay men then?", or the drive for more inclusive casting, where disabled people play characters that do not even mention disability as it is not important to the story.

What I do think is that if you want to see more disabled acting talent at the cinema, maybe it's time to vote with your wallet. My wife and I were really looking forward to *Kingsman: The Secret Service* but we shall not be going to see it now. If we all did the same, and made sure we explained why we were staying away, maybe an industry so driven by the bottom line might change its ways. Maybe. ■



Author: Mik Scarlet