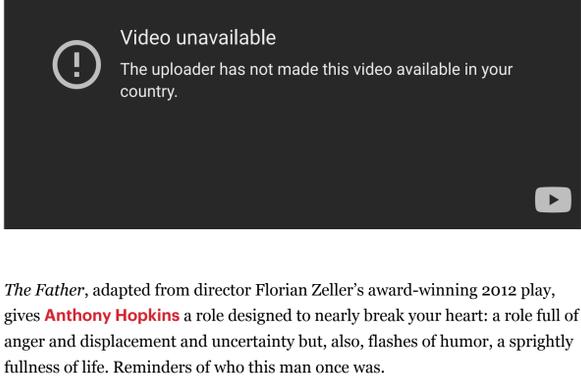


# 'The Father': Anthony Hopkins Shows the Reality of Living With Dementia

The cruelty, confusion, and conflicts are on full display in this moving and memorable movie about aging

By **K. AUSTIN COLLINS**



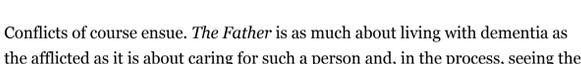
*The Father*, adapted from director Florian Zeller's award-winning 2012 play, gives **Anthony Hopkins** a role designed to nearly break your heart: a role full of anger and displacement and uncertainty but, also, flashes of humor, a sprightly fullness of life. Reminders of who this man once was.

This is a film about dementia. It arrives fast on the heels of the **Stanley Tucci and Colin Firth-led *Supernova***, in which a writer facing early onset dementia looks ahead to his future and sees only bleakness, a loss of everything that makes him who he is. *The Father* is, as its title may suggest, about an older man, Anthony (played by Hopkins), who is living out precisely the future *Supernova* seems to have in mind. It is a film about a man whose condition has left him vulnerable: to his confusion, to an encroaching lack of independence, and ultimately to time itself.

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When the movie opens, Anthony is in trouble. His daughter, Anne (**Olivia Colman**), has gotten wind that her father has alienated yet another nurse. She's quit. Anthony apparently called her a "little bitch," Anne reports, and threatened her physically. Before that nurse, there were three others. This is a matter of growing urgency. Anne has a life to live. She's moved her father into her flat to keep an eye on him (given the rate at which he's running through nurses...), but the situation is no longer tenable. Yet, she feels, she cannot abandon him.



Conflicts of course ensue. *The Father* is as much about living with dementia as the afflicted as it is about caring for such a person and, in the process, seeing the slow whittling-away of their senses over time. It's about what it feels like to see — from outside, from within — an inexplicable rip in the fabric of one man's reality. Zeller's conceit for the drama takes the adventurous, potentially even humane, step of having us experience all of this from Anthony's perspective. Which is to say: time, in this movie, is a membrane. And the drama that plays out therein is full of slips of memory, confusions of identity, disorienting conflatons of place and event. Anthony is a man who needs stability to make sense of his life.

Denial, too, is a necessary ingredient. "I don't need anyone," Anthony says more than once. He also tells them all to fuck off. His is a personality that vibrates and switches — a personality which seems to have been playful, tricky, in the first place. Those moods now turn more often toward meanness, even viciousness. A new nurse, Laura (Imogen Poots), arrives and Anthony puts on something of a show, becomes a veritable charm-factory — drawing her in before cutting her down. A mistake may have been made in trying to obscure that the woman is a nurse. Despite his state, Anthony

His apartment — a gorgeous feat of design, courtesy of Peter Francis, that's heightened by a theatrical lighting, a visually imposed sense of comfort in one moment and isolation in the next — is a sanctuary. So are particular objects, particular memories. Another daughter, a watch. But the films emphasis is on his slips of memory, his confusions of time, his mix-ups of identity. His is life full of disorienting conflatons of place and event. Some of this is not a matter of his mind alone: there are indeed changes afoot in his life. But the film's central effort, sometimes effectively, other times programmatically, to literalize this confusion.

The actors (whose ranks are filled out by Rufus Sewell, Mark Gatiss, and Olivia Williams) seem to switch roles. Or is that Anthony's confusion? Rooms presented one way, in one scene, seem to change. Within this complex framework is a whirlwind of feelings anchored by Colman, whose pain is loud despite a performance predicated on quiet, and Hopkins, whose aging, sharp-witted Anthony proves only too human. What's clear by the end of the film is that this must have been quite something to see on stage, where the confusions of the man's mind must have proven all the more disorienting, outright destabilizing. As for the film: its sincerity is not to be doubted. The first time I watched it, I was bothered by its tricks, which tumble forward, unsettling us in ways that sometimes feel distracting for being so overt, so literal.



A second watch proved more moving, though, at times, the film still lags under the weight of its conceit, coming off less like an act of perspectival sympathy than as a trick being played on the audience — to say nothing of all the actorly tricks. The Oscar reels will certainly sizzle. The ending, depending on you, may come off as either too neat or appropriately revelatory. But the film's emotions have a stark, memorable sheen.

In This Article: Anthony Hopkins, Olivia Colman

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