

# The Main Feature



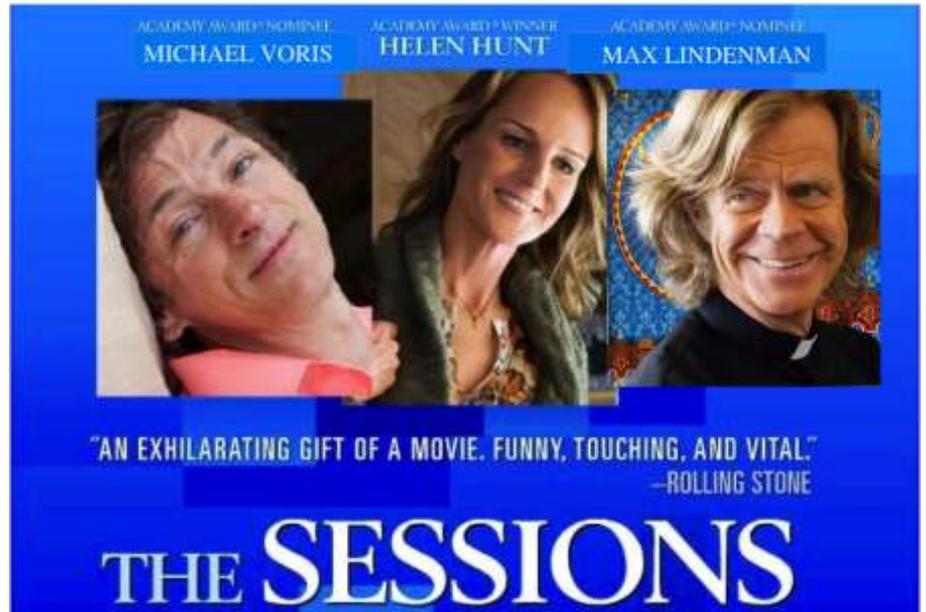
Season 35 - Issue 17 screening 28.5.15

US 98 minutes Cert 15  
Released 23 January 2012

Directed and written by Ben Lewin  
Cinematography by Geoffrey Simpson  
Edited by Lisa Bromwell

#### Cast:

John Hawkes as Mark O'Brien  
Helen Hunt as Cheryl Cohen-Greene  
William H. Macy as Father Brendan  
Moon Bloodgood as Vera  
Annika Marks as Amanda  
Adam Arkin as Josh  
Rhea Perlman as Mikvah lady  
W. Earl Brown as Rod  
Robin Weigert as Susan Fernbach  
Blake Lindsley as Dr. Laura White  
Ming Lo as Clerk  
Rusty Schwimmer as Joan



Mark O'Brien was a journalist and poet who was paralysed from the neck down by polio since his childhood. O'Brien breathed with the support of an iron lung for much of his life.

The filmwriter and director Ben Lewin, a polio survivor himself, stumbled onto Mark O'Brien's article "On Seeing a Sex Surrogate" on the Internet while researching sex and the disabled for a semi-autobiographical sitcom project. Lewin explained, "I felt that if I could do on film what he had done to me with his writing, then I could potentially deliver something powerful."

John Hawkes said Lewin met and read with several disabled actors to take on the role of O'Brien but said "none of them felt quite right" for the character. Hawkes was drawn to the script due to Lewin's own experiences as a polio survivor. He read every article written by O'Brien, every poem by O'Brien he could find and credited *Breathing Lessons* for helping with his preparation: "It's 25 minutes of Mark O'Brien speaking frankly and often emotionally about his life ... him being washed, getting outside. It was just invaluable. It was such an insight to him, and his poetry is throughout that documentary as well."



He was asked about the physical challenge the role presented: "Mark had sensation below the neck, but as the film says, he's not paralyzed but his muscles are atrophied enough that they don't work well. There was no real movement of any kind below the neck. So, I tried to avoid the temptation to mug with my face or indicate or tell the story that way. I just had to figure out Mark's body and his voice. Those are things that I really tried to get as close to the real Mark O'Brien, with his body, attitude, spirit and literal speaking voice."

"I wanted to capture Mark as best as I possibly could to bring a recognizable person to those who have survived him and knew him, so that they can hopefully see something of their family member or friend in what I had done. But, the temptation to act with my face was something I was conscious of. I wanted to

*make the physicality so ingrained in me and so second nature that I wouldn't think of it when the camera rolled and would just do what an actor does, every time out. You try to accomplish a goal within the scene and be open to the other actors' interpretations as well. I would forget that I was horizontal. I just trusted that the moments would be captured. I think that they did a good job in filmmaking a difficult character. It's a hard film because he's horizontal."*

*"Because the script says that Mark's spine is so horribly curved, I tried to help conceive of and design a soccer ball sized piece of foam and laid it half-way under the left side of my back. That gave my spine a great curve. Mark's limbs were twisted in a very specific way that he'd written about in his autobiography, called **How I Became a Human Being**, and that I saw an amazing documentary short about Mark, called **Breathing Lessons**. Finding that position was difficult and did hurt. I've got a guy that I've been seeing for years, who is a combination massage therapist and chiropractor. I'd have 15 minutes with him, two or three times a week, or half an hour, if I was lucky. He told me that I wasn't doing very good things to my body, but it was my choice. I'm not a martyr or masochist, but when the script says that your spine is horribly curved, you can't just lie flat on your back and pretend."*

William H Macy commented on Hawkes role and his own in the film: *"On the page, he was given a tough task, and boy, did he do a good job. It may sound mundane, but simply as an actor, simply to go through five weeks of shooting and not be able to move any part of your body except your head—you get wrapped up in the scene, and the next thing you know, you've moved your hand. I never saw him falter. It's not easy to do. We call it an external in the business, but it's a mother of an external. [Laughs.] And he was flawless. He put this great pillow that he had fashioned under one side of his back to give his spine that serpentine look. What I loved about what John does is that he—it's in the script, but he really brought it to life—plays the character with such optimism, and a twinkle in his eye. As John is asking me whether he should have sex or not—asking this priest, he was very aware—and I thought this was an astute choice on his part—he was very aware of my discomfort, and maybe enjoying it a little bit. I thought the scenes came out quite well because they acknowledged our squeamishness with the subject matter, that the characters were a little squeamish, too. That's truthful. That's true. That's what makes it seem like something worth watching."*



*It's a pretty straight-ahead acting scene when he. [John Hawkes] comes to me with a moral dilemma and says, "What should I do?" I found this a delicious question, so it was delightful to sort it out. For the character, the way the whole plot is unfolded, I found it great fun to play this priest. It's a great question, this question about human sexuality and disabilities. Just those two things make some of your audience squirm with discomfort. "Disabilities? I don't—do I want to watch someone who's all bent up like that? I mean, really." And then you say,*

*[Laughs.] "Let's talk about sexuality," and people just run for the exits. But it's just geniusly written. It's such a lovely, wonderful, human question that's posed by the film.*

*Thinking back on set, the fun is the way the question unfolds to my character. The actual amount of time that I spent making the decision was truthfully a little bit mechanical. Ben [Lewin] loved the idea of me walking up toward the altar and looking up—there's a great painting of Christ in the ascension. And then I walked back around, and then I said, "Yes, I think you should do it." I love the words he used after checking in with Jesus, where he says, "I think He'd say 'Go for it,'" which is sort of disarming. It's a question that touches the very core of what it means to be a human being, which is great fodder for drama."*

"Both director Ben Lewin and I felt I should get naked right away," Hunt explains. "Now that we're in there, there's no going back. It's going to be an intimate film."

As for her reasons for doing such a role, actress (who it has been said looks a bit like Jodie Foster) at first says, "The script was great, and it was beautiful. It came to me, and I read it, and somewhere along my periphery, I thought, 'Oh, that (nudity) will be there.' But it wasn't the first thing. If I had slowed down to dwell on that, maybe I would have had second thoughts. But I just said yes right away." Then she adds, "I had this feeling, it's getting late. What the (expletive)? Let's just do it."

Hawkes was also questioned on the sex scenes in the film: *“As Helen and I got to know each other better, in the subsequent intimate scenes together, so were our characters also finding comfort. A love scene, by nature, is unwieldy, awkward, funny in ways that it shouldn’t be, unfamiliar, nervous and nerve-wracking. We wanted all of that because that’s what the script called for. Normally, that would be edited and music would be added to make it seem like the perfect fantasy that we normally see in films, but we were more interested in a bare-bones, honest approach. But, that isn’t to say that the movie is any less sensual. I think it’s really beautiful. Helen Hunt is a very attractive woman. And yet, because I think of the frank honesty, the nudity and love scenes don’t feel, to my mind, exploitative or at all dirty. My mother is 82, and I will happily send her to see this film. We all have bodies, under our clothes. We just pretend we don’t. I think this movie is one of the more mature and true, and that includes humorous depictions and dialogue about sex that I haven’t seen in any American film.”*

Hawkes was asked when you’re playing a real person, is that a much more stressful role to take on



because you can’t just create it yourself? *“It’s true, but it’s not for that reason. It was not because I felt constrained. In fact, I didn’t have to write a backstory. Mark’s autobiography was the backstory. I didn’t have to create a body position and a voice for Mark. I just had to try to really study and emulate the real Mark O’Brien, through Jessica Yu’s film. The real weight of responsibility, I feel, is to do honor to the person I’m portraying. In this case, Mark passed away in 1999, so it’s to his memory and to those who survive him.*

*That’s the first audience for me. If they get it, it’s a great relief and whoever else gets it is fine. The people who*

*actually knew the person you’re playing, if you’re playing a contemporary character, are who I want to connect with. That is an extra weight of responsibility, but it’s a good kick in the pants to keep focused and doing your best.”*

Macy continued with his thoughts on the film *“It’s life-affirming—it’s true, first of all. Yes, it’s based on a true story, but it’s also true to what it means to be alive. I love the dilemma. It talks about two things that are near and dear to my heart. One is disabilities. I think we do a wretched job in this country—we don’t do enough. Not to step on any toes, but when I think of the reproductive-rights issue—the abortion issue—I think it has to come hand-in-hand with how we treat the people who need the help the most, the people with disabilities. They didn’t do anything to come with these disabilities, that’s the hand they got. That’s how we measure. We gotta do better.”*

*“So anyway, disabilities are big for me. Because we don’t do enough. I did a film called Door To Door, and I got involved with United Cerebral Palsy and I was their spokesperson for a while, so I know something on the subject. All of them want to meet someone. We’re all just teenagers, when you get down to it. They just want to meet someone, they want a job, they want to live on their own. They want to get an apartment. And some of these people are really bent up. It feeds into another thing that’s near and dear to my heart, which is America’s attitude toward sex, which I think is so demented. It’s so ill. It puts me in a rage. The Sessions got an R rating (US equivalent to an 18 certificate in the UK). The Dark Knight Rises (the latest in the Batman series) got a PG-13. That’s sick. Batman is loaded with violence. I don’t know much, but I know this—violence is bad. Its always bad, always will be bad. Sex is good”*

*“The first time I saw the film with an audience, I said to my husband: “Why are my palms sweating?” says Hunt. “Then I realised it’s because I’m about to be on screen naked. Now, I just kind of close my eyes. But what I love about the movie, and what I wish, for all of us, is that we would just be all right with what we are and how we look and that sex could be seen through a positive lens. I got to act that out and that was pretty great.”*

Iain McGlashan

*The printing of the notes by Repropoint is undertaken free of charge*

**Repropoint**

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## Comments and reactions to: **Les Diaboliques**

Enjoyable despite dating

A bit predictable

Hokum – but high class hokum!

A bit plodding

A pleasure to see this old film which I couldn't remember – a good thriller

Very enjoyable – even with the knowledge of many thrillers, still a nicely deigned thriller.

Good to get the creepy bit without music

Interesting to see a suspense film from the past. Although we are now used to twists in plots, it must have been quite scary originally

<b>Score</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
	~	~	~	~	~	2	7	8	6	1	1

No of reaction slips received = 25

Average Score = 7.00

Position	Film	Average Score
1 <sup>st</sup>	Philomena	8.29
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Captain Phillips	8.1
3 <sup>rd</sup>	The Rocket	7.85
4 <sup>th</sup>	Saving Mr Banks	7.78
5 <sup>th</sup>	A Royal Affair	7.76
6 <sup>th</sup>	Grapes of Wrath	7.45
7 <sup>th</sup>	All Quiet on the Western Front	7.19
8 <sup>th</sup>	Wadjda	7.06
9 <sup>th</sup>	Les Diaboliques	7.0
10 <sup>th</sup> =	Sunshine on Leith	6.92
10 <sup>th</sup> =	Un Secret	6.92
12 <sup>th</sup>	Django Unchained	6.57
13 <sup>th</sup>	Behind the Candelabra	6.47
14 <sup>th</sup>	Le Weekend	5.97
15 <sup>th</sup>	Mintras Duermes	5.8
16 <sup>th</sup>	Tommy	5.0

**Our next film is the first in our 36<sup>th</sup> season  
and will be on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup>  
September 2015 at 8pm**

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Details to be revealed tonight