

An Infinite Series of Tragic Frustrations

Julian Schnabel takes an inside look at Locked-in Syndrome in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*

by Kieron Barry

The *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is a luminous film of exceptional power. Given the popularity of the memoir on which it is based—Jean-Dominique Bauby's 1997 account of his abrupt transformation from Parisian fashion titan to quadriplegic—an adaptation was perhaps only a matter of time. Fans of Bauby's elegant yet visceral text, however, had good reason to dread that the purity of his miniature masterpiece would be contaminated. I'm happy to confirm that Julian Schnabel's searing film is every bit the equal of its source.

Better yet, rather than being slavishly respectful, the film serves as something of a companion piece to the book, taking a bold and independent route through the story and bringing its own nuances and set-pieces.

The film describes the true story of Bauby's journey, by way of a massive stroke, from editor of *Elle* magazine to the victim of Locked-in Syndrome, exactly the kind of condition one hopes is too rare to warrant an acronym. (Indeed, reassuringly, the French doctors refer to the syndrome by its English name, granting us all a modicum of statistical hope.) Totally paralyzed save for one eyelid, Bauby uses this last, wan outpost of mobility to dictate a book, achieved, almost unbelievably, by patiently waiting until his secretary indicates the requisite letter of the alphabet and then winking at it. A moment's reflection will reveal the gargantuan effort required to compose even a single sentence under such circumstances. As one might

expect, the book, published just days before Bauby's death, features insights of an unbearable hue in a prose distilled almost to poetry, an inevitable consequence of a form that precludes casual expression.

For much of the film's first act we're forced to share the fuzzy claustrophobia of Bauby's point of view. His bewildered eye roves with silent desperation along the limits of his new world. When a tear comes, it blurs the whole screen. Eventually we're granted an exit from the confines of Bauby's inner existence to catch a glimpse of the man himself, now a slumped, dribblesome wreck.

We lose one of the more arresting moments of the book: the atomic seconds of hell when Bauby fears doctors are about to mistakenly sew up the good eye rather than the bad. By way of compensation, however, Schnabel plucks a fine example of the patient's infinite series of tragic frustrations when a nurse thoughtlessly turns off a soccer match Bauby has been silently cheering on.

The film is at its most poignant when it contrasts Bauby's static life with the masculine indulgence of his happier years. All women in the film, of course, embody that delightful French paradox of delicate features allied to an aura of robust sexuality, but the extent of Bauby's romantic adventures now begins and ends with his eye being impotently drawn to the heart of a nurse's delicious convexity. Tellingly, the emotional chaos he had created in the lives of those around him is visited upon himself in his world of shadows. He is now powerless, at



the mercy of his women, and can only watch as the opposing romantic machines he has put into motion smash into each other. His mistress refuses to see him, claiming, with faux nobility, that she wishes to remember him as he was. In stark contrast, the mother of his children uncomplainingly switches from one thankless life of service to another. In a beautiful long shot towards the end of the film our attention is drawn to her summer dress fluttering gracefully in the breeze, a simple freedom denied every character.

Lacking as I do the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' illogically maudlin penchants, I reject the notion of giving extra points for portrayals of disability. Like any other human condition,

impediment can be acted well or acted badly. Mathieu Amalric as Bauby gives a performance of his usual brilliance in the flashback sections, but by almost any definition he is not acting in his motionless scenes; he is simply representing. For the performance to succeed it is the audience that must do the work, a transaction that inevitably yields proximity.

It is this total lack of indulgence that makes *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* a quiet, aching film that will haunt you. As unflinching a study of suffering as one could imagine, the film nevertheless offers the thought that when a human is eroded to nothing but a sliver, humanity is the last thing to depart. ☉

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