CHRISTMAS 2022: ETERNAL FLAME

Doctors on film

Medicine is surprisingly under-represented in the world of cinema, considering how intensely emotional and gripping the life and death dramas of the practice can be. The leading film critic Anna Smith discusses the films that have impressed on her the plight of patients and physicians, while our BMJ columnists (and editor) have their say.

Anna Smith, film critic

Doctors have been the heroes of action films, disaster movies, and thrillers—think Harrison Ford in The Fugitive, Naomi Watts in The Impossible, or Tom Cruise in Eyes Wide Shut—but when it comes to films set in hospitals or surgeries, most fall into one of three genres: comedies, psychological chiller, or true life dramas. The last of these is particularly rich picking ground, and it’s the subject of my first choice of favourite films about health and medicine.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (1997) is a creative adaptation of the memoirs of Jean-Dominique Bauby (played by Mathieu Amalric), a journalist who had locked-in syndrome after a stroke. It’s an emotive insight into the power of the imagination and the inventiveness of speech and language therapists.

My second pick is Awakenings (1990). Penny Marshall’s drama is based on the neurologist Oliver Sacks’s work with catatonic patients and features heartwarming turns from Robin Williams and Robert De Niro. It’s commercial and teeters on the brink of melodrama, but to a layperson it’s effective in highlighting the power of innovative medicine.

The Oscar winning Dallas Buyers Club (2013) is based on a true story focusing on a rebellious character outside the system. After having HIV diagnosed, Ron Woodroof (Matthew McConaughey) finds out about experimental drugs from a doctor (Jennifer Garner) and begins smuggling them into the US and petitioning for his right to take the HIV entry inhibitor peptide T.

Doctors don’t always come off well in movies featuring psychiatric hospitals or wards, but the setting can provide rich ground for psychologically unsettling dramas, such as The Mad Women’s Ball (2021). It’s set in the Pitié Salpêtrière Hospital during the 19th century, focusing on the clinic run by the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, and weaves fictional characters into his feminist narrative. And, of course, you’ll be familiar with One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975), the five Oscar winner filmed in Oregon State Hospital, where Jack Nicholson’s Randle McMurphy fakes insanity and stirs up trouble, much to the fury of the tyrannical Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher). Let’s face it, watching the patients take over the institution can be rather satisfying.

The BMJ view

We asked our editor in chief and columnists for their perspectives.

Kamran Abbasi, editor in chief, The BMJ

Awakenings was released while I was a medical student, and I watched it mostly because Robert De Niro starred in it. I’d also developed an unexpected and brief interest in R D Laing—although that didn’t put me off beginning a career in psychiatry before switching to hospital medicine. I was also grappling with mastering the neurological examination, which made the film even more relevant. Importantly, Awakenings is based on real events and shows us the limits of medicine, as well as that health professionals can care even though we can’t always cure.

John Launer, GP educator and writer

Akira Kurosawa made three movies on medical themes, and they are all masterpieces. One is Drunken Angel, about a dedicated community doctor who has an alcohol problem (as Kurosawa himself did). Another is The Quiet Duel, about a war surgeon who acquires syphilis from a scalpel injury during an operation.

My favourite, however, is Red Beard, a portrait of the relationship between a gruff traditional physician and his new trainee, who is impossibly haughty and arrogant at first but gradually comes to recognise why his teacher is respected and adored by his patients.

David Oliver, consultant in geriatrics and acute general medicine

I would pick The Best of Men (2012), about the pioneering work of Ludwig Guttmann with disabled servicemen at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, which in turn led to the creation of the Paralympic Games.

Rachel Clarke, specialty doctor in palliative medicine

My absolute favourite medical movie is Wit, a feature length drama based on the play of the same name. It stars Emma Thompson as a brilliant professor and John Donne scholar with advanced ovarian cancer. She submits to brutal and essentially experimental hardcore chemotherapy, using caustic wit to deflect the cruelties of her treatment at the hands of her doctors. I was shown it on day one of medical school and wish that every medical student could watch it too—it’s stunning on what matters in medicine.

I’m one of those infuriating viewers who audibly grinds my teeth at medical inaccuracies. I can’t bear to watch ludicrous resuscitation attempts, impossible
physiology, and every diagnostic conundrum ending up being lupus.

Helen Salisbury, GP

I’ve discovered that I have watched very few medical films but did recently see the 1970s classic *M*A*S*H*, set in a surgical unit just behind the front line in the Korean war. There’s lots not to like about it—the sexism in particular has not aged well—but it’s still brilliant. The surgery is grim and gory, a commentary on the Vietnam war at the time, and the surgeons are insubordinate and heroic. The film is very funny: a dark humour that most doctors will recognise from their worst night shifts when, if you didn’t laugh, you would have to cry.

Anna Smith is former president of the UK Critics’ Circle, host of the Girls On Film podcast, and a regular film critic for BBC News, Sky News, BBC radio, Deadline Hollywood, Time Out, Metro, the Guardian, Sight and Sound, and more. She has spent over a decade interviewing major actors and directors on stage, on screen, and in print.

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