

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2022/23 SEASON



SUPERNOVA
(Language: English)

Director: Harry Macqueen, 2021. Running time: 93 minutes
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 8th March, 2023.

“While all awards-season eyes were on Anthony Hopkins’s showy turn in the psychological melodrama *The Father* [presented by **DFS** 7th February, 2022] Colin Firth and Stanley Tucci received scant attention for their more underplayed roles in this similarly dementia-themed drama. It’s easy to see why *Supernova* got overlooked; for all its awards-friendly subject matter, this is more of a bittersweet breakup movie than a hot-topic picture. It’s a love story that lifts its entertaining riffs from romcoms and odd-couple, end-of-the-road movies to melancholic effect. While the result may occasionally get bogged down by dramatic contrivance, it’s generally buoyed up by a pair of likably bickering performances from the two leads.

Long-time partners Sam (Firth) and Tusker (Tucci) are “back on the road again”, steering their ageing but functional camper van across the country, revisiting old haunts, with their faithful dog, Ruby, in tow. Having been diagnosed with early-onset dementia, novelist Tusker has neglected to pack his meds, exasperating Sam, who seems to be in denial about his partner’s deteriorating condition. A respected musician, Sam has a recital ahead of him, after which he plans to call it a day, dedicating his every waking moment to Tusker. But Tusker has other plans, determined to be the master of his fate, taking matters of life and death into his own hands.

Actor turned writer-director Harry Macqueen, who made 2014’s *Hinterland*, describes *Supernova* as an attempt to make a film about “what we are willing to do for the people we love”, and “how we live and love and laugh, even as we near the end of our time”. That may sound toe-curlingly trite, but the film has plenty of low-key charm and humour, not least in Sam and Tusker’s believable, tetchy in-car interactions. As the road ahead beckons, the pair swap sardonic barbs about everything from gear changes (“How about just exploring the outer regions of fifth gear?”) to map-reading skills and the fact that their satnav sounds like Margaret Thatcher (“First it’s section 28, now she’s going to tell us where to go on holiday”). Arriving among friends and family, Tusker makes light of his condition (“I’m fit as a fiddle. What’s your name again?”), while

Sam declares himself to be “strong enough” to handle whatever lies ahead. Yet even he concedes that the future scares him.

There are clear echoes of the Oscar-winning *Still Alice*, not least in a scene in which Tusker is told: “You’re still you, the guy he fell in love with”, to which he drily replies: “No, I’m not, I just look like him. Which is a shame.” But it’s in the more incidental moments that *Supernova* hits home, such as a brief but beautifully observed exchange in which Tusker politely agrees that he’d love to see news clippings about new research into his illness, his weary face and generous words telling utterly different stories.

Taking its title from a gentle subplot about astronomy (a key speech concerns the death of stars and the curiously regenerative fate of their fragmented dust), Macqueen’s script can at times be a touch too declarative for its own good. When Tusker tells Sam: “I want to be remembered for who I was and not who I am about to become”, there’s a sense that the film doesn’t quite trust the audience to figure this out for themselves. Yet Tucci wisely keeps his foot off the stagey gas, allowing us instead to focus on Firth’s reaction – a mixture of love, anger, refusal and regret, all filtered through an underlying fear of being alone, of facing life without the one he loves. Watching *Supernova*, I was reminded that one of my favourite Firth performances came in Marc Evans’s 2004 psychological drama *Trauma*, a sorely underrated gem that first showcased Firth’s uncanny ability to express repressed pain through tiny gestures.

Handsome cinematography by Dick Pope effectively contrasts the rolling vistas through which the camper van travels with the cramped intimacy of the couple’s relationship, with starscapes bookending the drama to lyrical effect.

Mark Kermode, *The Observer*, 27th June, 2021.

“*Supernova* is a film of landscapes – the painterly ones the pair pass through (you will want to visit the Lake District asap), and roiling internal ones as they wrestle with their fears. Macqueen’s script smartly identifies that it’s as much Tusker looking after Sam as the other way around. It’s one of the relatable truths in a film full of them.”

Phil de Semlyen, *Time Out*, 16th June 2021.

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“Lovely, heartfelt performances from Stanley Tucci and Colin Firth carry this intimate movie from actor-turned-film-maker Harry Macqueen, whose 2014 debut, *Hinterland*, was also a two-hander about love. Tucci and Firth play Tusker and Sam, a couple who have been together for decades: Tusker is a respected novelist and Sam a musician. (Firth gives his own perfectly serviceable piano performance of Elgar’s *Salut d’Amour*, all the more of a lump-in-the-throat moment for its unflashiness.) The careers of both have been put on hold because Tusker has been diagnosed with early-onset dementia.

The couple have decided to take their camper van for a trip north, to drop in on Sam’s sister and her family, to have some alone time together and, perhaps, to come to terms with the fact that this holiday may be their last together while Tusker is still well. He is still working on a new book but is increasingly preoccupied with astronomy, gazing into the night skies, perhaps soothed by the unimaginable vastness of space, in comparison with which his problems are nothing. Is this new hobby therapeutic, or something that is accelerating his slide into enigmatic blankness?

Supernova at first reminded me very uneasily of *The Leisure Seeker*, a syrupy picture in which Helen Mirren and Donald Sutherland play a squabbling old married couple taking a last Winnebago road-trip in the shadow of dementia and mortality. But that was hammy and sugary: *Supernova*, for all its occasional heartstring-plucking and button-pushing, is much more restrained, both in the relative calm of the performances and in the unadorned way the countryside is shot. Its bucolic loveliness is not forced on us and there is no obvious pathetic fallacy. There is a nice moment when Sam and Tusker unsentimentally park up for the night in a supermarket car park, whose logo is at least as prominent as the rolling hills.

Tucci and Firth have a sweet and gentle chemistry, their best moment coming when they have to share a single bed in Sam’s old room in the family home where his sister still lives. They have an almost Eric-and-Ernie rapport. Elsewhere, Macqueen interestingly builds on the established personae of his leading men to show how their various mannerisms have been brought into play to deflect or neutralise difficult topics. Firth’s Sam is dry, reticent and pretty English; Tucci’s Tusker is quizzically amused and amusing in ways we have seen from him many times before – which makes a key scene, when his voice quivers on the verge of tears, even more affecting.

The key issue, as with all movies about dementia, is the exit strategy: this was famously an agonising moment in Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland's *Still Alice*, with Julianne Moore, and even more agonising in Michael Haneke's *Amour*, with Emmanuelle Riva dwindling into immobility and silence after a stroke.

For Tusker and Sam, it is the great unsayable – or unknowable or unthinkable – and when they do have to confront the issue it is painful in ways that none of their shared jokes or shared love can really anaesthetise. Whether the film itself fully confronts what it is like for the surviving partner to live, moment-by-moment, through the terrible ending, is another question. I'm not sure that it does. But it is a sincere and affecting portrait of two people stoically accepting mortality.”

Peter Bradshaw, *the Guardian*, Friday 25th June, 2021.