

Breathe [12A] 2017|UK|118 min

UK release date **2nd October 2017**

Director **Andy Serkis**

Screenplay **William Nicholson**

Cinematographer **Robert Richardson**

Cast **Andrew Garfield** (Robin Cavendish); **Claire Foy** (Diana Cavendish); **Hugh Bonneville** (Teddy Hall); **Tom Hollander** (Bloggs Blacker / David Blacker)

Joy is a complicated emotion to capture on screen – particularly when your narrative deals with paralysis, imprisonment and a desire for death. Yet Andy Serkis’s directorial feature debut, about the life of pioneering polio survivor Robin Cavendish, is so full of laughter that one might easily forget its sombre subject matter. Part exuberant love story, part great escape adventure, this is an old-fashioned tale of triumph over adversity that refuses – like its protagonists – to succumb to confinement. I honestly can’t remember the last time I laughed and cried so much at the same movie.

We first meet Robin (Andrew Garfield) in a late-50s whirlwind of cricket and tennis, tea and travel, sweeping his new bride Diana (Claire Foy) off to Kenya where she announces that they are to be parents. The world is their oyster – until polio strikes and Robin is paralysed from the neck down, kept alive by a respirator. “We’re talking a couple of months,” Diana is told, while Robin demands: “Let me die”. Instead, Diana resolves to remove her husband from hospital (“You’ll be dead in two weeks!” insists a doctor) and take him home. Family and friends rally round, including eccentric professor Teddy Hall (Hugh Bonneville), who develops a Heath Robinson-style contraption combining a wheelchair with a respirator. Utilising a bicycle chain and a set of Sturmey-Archer gears, the device reignites Robin’s wanderlust, challenging the restrictive expectations placed on his condition by medicine – and by society at large.

Written by Shadowlands author William Nicholson, and co-produced by Jonathan Cavendish (son of Robin and Diana), Breathe is less a labour of love

than a celebration of life – a proudly upbeat work that isn't afraid to smile when disaster looms. Some sequences, such as the hospital breakout scene, are played almost like a Carry On... caper. "That was interesting," Robin deadpans after a dog unplugs his home respirator, leaving him writhing in suffocation. Later, a visit to a wealthy dowager (haughtily played by Diana Rigg) to request funding for more "Cavendish chairs" prompts the question: "Are we plucky or pitiful?"

None of which is to suggest that the harsh realities of Robin's situation are sidestepped. In the early stages of his illness, his silent cry to be allowed to die is heart-breaking. There's real terror in Garfield's eyes as Robin stares into the abyss, spitting in the face of a hospital chaplain who announces that his suffering is somehow part of God's great plan. Later, a visit to a sterile German hospital finds a room full of patients in neatly stacked iron lungs, waiting for death. It's a horrifying image that prompts Robin to ask: "Why do you keep your disabled people in prison?"

The excellent supporting cast includes Tom Hollander as Diana's twin brothers Blogs and David Blacker – a dual role that is niftily executed. Meanwhile, Nitin Sawhney's affecting score is augmented by Bing Crosby crooning about True Love, from which the haunting line "Oh, how lucky we are" strikes a particularly poignant note.

After: **Mark Kermode, The Observer, 29 Oct 17**

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