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Wellness PROFILE

Director Darren Aronofsky

A New Film Ponders the "Fountain of Youth"

By Philip Smith



Immortality. The Fountain of Youth. Humanity has pursued these goals since the beginning of time.

Every culture has had its ideas, myths, and methodologies for pursuing eternal life. Ancient civilizations used rituals and magic in their attempts to live forever. The ancient Egyptians created an entire culture devoted to preparing the body for travel to the next life. One of the central tenets of Christianity is resurrection from the dead.

Now, for the first time in history, science is on the verge of making significant strides toward overcoming death and dramatically extending the healthy human life span. Medical science, genetic therapy, and cryonics are at the forefront of these extraordinary breakthroughs.

Drawing on this fundamental human desire for eternal life, director Darren Aronofsky has created an epic new Warner Brothers film, "The Fountain." Obsessed with the concept of immortality, in 1999 Aronofsky began scribbling notes for the film on a restaurant napkin.

"The desire to live forever is deeply imbedded in our culture," he explains. "Every day, people are looking for ways to extend life or feel younger. I started wondering why Hollywood had never tackled a film about the search for the Fountain of Youth."

According to Aronofsky, "This concept has been present in every culture, starting with the Garden of Eden, extending through Gilgamesh and Ponce De Leon, right up to today with medical advances, plastic surgery, and all the areas of life extension that your magazine covers. I thought it was great subject matter on which to base a film. I know readers of Life Extension will be very interested in the content and story line of this film."

The film takes place over the span of a thousand years, during which the characters use the technology at hand in their efforts to overcome death and achieve immortality. Ingeniously set in three different time periods that blend mythology, present-day drama, and futuristic science fiction seamlessly in one film, "The Fountain" tells of the quest for eternal life as seen through these different cultures and eras.

Of most interest to Life Extension readers may be the section set in the twenty-first century, which takes place in a laboratory where a scientist, played by Hugh Jackman, desperately seeks to develop a cellular cure for brain cancer to save his wife from dying. For the actor, preparing for the film raised profound questions about the nature of death.



Hugh Jackman as scientist Tommy Creo seeking a cure for cancer.

Jackman describes the scientist he plays as someone "who looks at death as a disease that can be cured. His wife is dying, he loves her, and he wants to be with her, so he must eradicate death. Hundreds of years ago, the average human life expectancy was 40; now it's 80, so why can't it become 200 or 400? Why can't we solve this problem of life ending with death?"

This philosophical question about eradicating death drives the film. Similarly profound and visionary questions permeate all of Aronofsky's films. He is best known for his radical film, "Pi" (π), which was followed by "Requiem for a Dream." Both films have garnered multiple awards and a strong following.

For "The Fountain," Aronofsky teamed up with Ari Handel, who holds a PhD in neuroscience,



to write this science-based epic. Handel was able to provide much of the research and

scientific veracity that underlie the movie's portrayal of the quest for immortality. "We examined all the cutting-edge life extension research, because the central story in the film takes place in a twenty-first century lab," he notes.

To create an accurate portrayal of a scientist seeking to cure cancer, Handel researched the latest data on aging and life extension. "Throughout various cultures, people have always searched for ways to create life extension—that's just part of the human condition," Handel says. "We did a lot of research into modern science on the sources of aging. We wanted to understand how scientists view aging. It is not necessarily obvious that the body should age, because it is always cleaning itself and rejuvenating cells. In a way, aging doesn't quite make sense."

Handel adds, "What we learned is how over time, the body's processes begin to gum-up and slow down. Additionally, small errors begin to amass, creating larger errors or replication. These tiny changes begin to add up. A lot of what people who are interested in life extension do is try to avoid or at least minimize these changes. Our research made us realize that it would be very difficult to design a single anti-aging 'wonder pill,' because there are a million little things that go wrong in the aging process."

The next step in Handel's research led him to investigate nanotechnology as part of a potential cure for cancer and aging. "If you have a million little problems, then you need a million little fixes," he says. "This led us to look into nanotechnology. We needed to understand the latest thinking about aging, so we would know how best to present it in the film. The kind of research we did to educate ourselves probably covers all the topics that people who read your magazine already know about. Once we had a better understanding of the range of today's thinking about aging, we could move forward in writing the story."

Even though the subject matter of "The Fountain" is highly unusual for a major Hollywood release, the film's cast is a stellar, award-winning ensemble capable of tackling such a thought-provoking script. The actors include Rachel Weisz, winner of an Academy Award for "The Constant Gardener," in which she portrays a tragic victim of the lethal greed of pharmaceutical companies; Hugh Jackman, who won a Tony Award for his Broadway performance in "The Boy from Oz" and appeared in "X-Men"; and Ellen Burstyn, who has received Oscar, Golden Globe, and Tony awards for her various performances.



Behind the scenes: Director Darren Aronofsky (left) discusses a scene featuring actors Rachel Weisz and Hugh Jackman in "The Fountain."



Searching in space for immortality.

While making a film about the quest for immortality is one thing, Aronofsky knows that a long life starts with one's own health habits and lifestyle choices. "I'm intrigued by the information in Life Extension magazine," he says. "I do a lot of yoga, swimming, and biking, though biking in Manhattan is one of the worst things you can do for life extension. However, I'm largely a vegetarian, and eat organic meat once in a while. I used to eat a lot of seafood. Unfortunately, I found that I had a lot of mercury in my body as a result, so I'm in the process of revising my supplementation program to make the appropriate adjustments."

Never one to tackle an easy subject as the basis of his filmmaking, Aronofsky continues his legacy of intriguing movies. "I'm hoping that 'The Fountain' takes people to places they've never seen," he says. "But most of all, I hope they're entertained."

"The Fountain" will be released on November 22, 2006. For more information, please visit <http://thefountainmovie.warnerbros.com>.

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