



## Creation

**Director:** John Amiel

**Country:** UK

**Date:** 2009

*A review by Philip French for **The Observer**:*

In the year in which we're celebrating the bicentenary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of the first edition of *On the Origin of Species*, it's a pity that no one has mounted a season of movies touching on his life and work. The centrepiece would be Jon Amiel's admirable if somewhat mistitled *Creation*, adapted by the novelist, doctor and former *Observer* medical correspondent John Collee from Randal

It could begin in a lighthearted vein with the Marx Brothers' movie *Horse Feathers* (1932), which starts with Groucho being appointed president of Huxley College and ends with him playing in a survival-of-the-fittest football match with the rival Darwin College. Then there would be the simple but ambitious British movie *The Darwin Adventure* (1972) that in a breathtaking 90 minutes takes in Darwin's career-shaping, five-year voyage on the *Beagle* to South America and the Galapagos Islands, the seminal discoveries that lead to his theory of evolution, his conflict with Captain Fitzroy, the *Beagle*'s God-fearing skipper, his marriage to his cousin, Emma Wedgwood, his problems in producing his classic book and the epoch-making debate it provoked.



This could be followed by the excellent film version of AS Byatt's novella *Angels & Insects* (1995), about the effect of the industrial revolution and the ideas of Darwin on the inhabitants of a grand Victorian country household. The next film would be *Inherit the Wind* (1960), Stanley Kramer's earnest, heavy film of the Broadway play currently being revived at the Old Vic, centring on the Dayton Monkey Trial in backwoods Tennessee in 1925. In this courtroom where a schoolmaster is on trial for teaching evolution, the agnostic lawyer Clarence Darrow confronts the fundamentalist politician and one-time presidential candidate

William Jennings Bryan, virtually replaying the Oxford debate between Darwin's chief 1860 advocate TH Huxley and the Church of England's stalwart Bishop Wilberforce.

After *Inherit the Wind*, a little intelligent levity might be introduced by a screening of Peter Weir's nautical adventure *Master and Commander* (2003) featuring Paul Bettany as the naturalist and cerebral surgeon of the HMS *Surprise*, Stephen Maturin, who managed while fighting the French in 1805 to put into the Galapagos, the film's only landfall, and conduct research that wittily and cheekily foreshadows Darwin's discoveries there some 30 years later. This would bring us to *Creation*, a quiet, subtle chamber work starring a persuasively inward-looking Bettany as Darwin and largely set in Darwin's fine country home in Kent in the late 1850s.

He's not the archetypal, heavily bearded Victorian sage he became in his later years. He's a clean-shaven man in his late 40s, neurotic, melancholic, guilt-ridden, troubled in mind and body as so many intelligent,

sensitive, middle-class professional people were in a time supposedly devoted to the idea of robust, muscular Christianity preached by Dr Arnold of Rugby.

He feels guilty over what the propagation of his ideas may do to conventional beliefs and organised society, over the rift they're creating with his protective, deeply Christian wife (Jennifer Connelly) and what he sees, absurdly, as his responsibility for the death seven years earlier of their bright 10-year-old daughter Annie (a sparkling performance of intellectual eagerness and filial devotion by Martha West).

Annie is a central figure in the process by which Darwin comes to terms with his ideas, their delivery to the world and their likely consequences. She's untainted by social conventions and received beliefs and closer to him than to her mother. In flashbacks, he turns his work during the Beagle expedition and with the orang-utan Jenny into bedtime stories for her and later for her brothers and sisters. Annie understands his revolutionary interpretation of existence, because she looks clearly at the world around her. When she returns to him as a ghost, this is not that traditionally consoling Hollywood figure, the heavenly visitor, but the embodiment of the humanistic notion of the dead remaining alive in the minds of the living.



There is a lively intervention from the outside world when his allies, the aggressive Thomas Huxley (Toby Jones) and the diplomatic Joseph Hooker (Benedict Cumberbatch), drop in on Darwin to stir him into publishing his book. Apart from the moment when the family cook knocks on the great man's study door saying: "Come along, Mr Darwin, your dinner's getting cold", this is the closest the film comes to a 1930s Warner Brothers type of conventional biopic.

Otherwise, it's a complex, truthful work that does justice to Darwin's theories and their implications. Particular attention is given to books and learned papers at a time when scientific advance came from individual research conducted privately, rather than, as now, done by teams working for institutions.

Seeing Darwin writing with pen and ink and his loving wife eventually sending off his manuscript to the publisher, we think of the power of the word and the individual mind, an activity examined by Stanley Edgar Hyman in his neglected classic 'The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers. It was ultimately through the power of their prose that those great thinkers impressed their ideas upon a larger public.

But the battle of ideas goes on. We entered the 21st century with a British prime minister who came to countenance creationism and he was joined by a US president who endorsed it. Creation, a carefully reasoned movie that places close to its centre an intelligent, reasoning child, struggled to find an American distributor.

From: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/sep/27/creation-review>