**A Beautiful Mind**

OPENING: Dec. 21  
NATIONWIDE: Jan. 4

DIRECTOR RON HOWARD IS APPROACH to the problem of the biopic is totally different from "Alis" Michael Mann. How do you make a mainstream movie out of the life of a man whose activity is almost entirely mental-the brilliant, Nobel Prize-winning, schizophrenic mathematician John Nash? Screenwriter Akiva Goldsman's clever solution is to turn the story of a troubled academic into a Hollywood thriller. How? He makes things up.

I have to be vague here, or I'll spoil the big twist of Howard's movie, which uses every trick in the book to keep you in your seat. It succeeds, but at a cost. We meet Nash (Russell Crowe) at Princeton in 1947. "I don't like people much, and they don't like me," he explains, accurately, in his deep West Virginia drawl. (The timbre of Crowe's voice eerily resembles Jerry Falwell's.) He's prickly, arrogant and antisocial, but he happens to be a genius. His overactive mind captures the heart of his future wife, Alicia (Jennifer Connelly), one of his students. But his life takes a dramatic turn when he's recruited by a CIA agent (Ed Harris) to do top-secret work breaking Russian codes.

Nash's increasingly dangerous cold-war adventures keep things lively, but they prove to be a mere diversionary tactic. The real story is how Nash's mind is engulfed in madness, and his and Alicia's struggle to rebuild his shattered career. Howard knows how to make a difficult subject go down easy. Maybe too easy. Though Crowe proves again what a gifted chameleon he can be, and Connelly is outstanding, "A Beautiful Mind" is too facile to resonate deeply.

Shouldn't a movie celebrating Nash give you some idea what his mathematical work is about? Fishier still is the suggestion that the cure for paranoid schizophrenia is love. Howard's movie is being touted as an Oscar contender-Hollywood loves these "triumph of the spirit" sagas-but in "solving" the dilemma of the biopic, it's turned a
fascinating life into formula.