

50/50

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [December 13, 2011](#) issue

50/50 is a delicate balancing act: a comedy-drama about a 27-year-old man named Adam (the amazing Joseph Gordon-Levitt) who learns he has a malignant spinal tumor and a 50 percent chance of surviving it. The lovely surprise is that writer Will Reiser and director Jonathan Levine pull off twin feats: they sustain a tone pitched midway between ironic and poignant, and they touch the audience without pushing pathos at us.

The movie aims to steer clear of the first-you-laugh-and-then-you-cry agenda of *Terms of Endearment*, in which Debra Winger plays the young woman whose cancer foregrounds her dysfunctional relationship with her difficult mother (Shirley MacLaine). The idea is instead to present the cancer and chemotherapy as "Adam's Adventures in Wonderland." Everything he experiences is brand new and bizarre, and he has to figure out how to thread his way through this obstacle course of the unexpected.

There's the party that his co-worker and best pal Kyle (Seth Rogen) insists on throwing for him, at which friends and colleagues embarrass Adam with sentimentality and make it painfully clear that they assume they're saying goodbye to him. There's the chemo regimen, which throws him into a camaraderie with two older patients (Philip Baker Hall and Matt Frewer) who are on the same schedule. Adam discovers the pleasures of marijuana for the first time, which negotiates the effects of the chemo while keeping him cozy and remote in his newly found corner of the world.

Both his girlfriend (Bryce Dallas Howard) and his mother (Anjelica Huston) turn his illness into melodrama in which they're the stars. And Adam lands in the office of a novice therapist named Katherine (Anna Kendrick) who's even younger than he is and who scrambles to figure out how to help him.

The movie is sure-footed enough to get away with introducing a romantic-comedy element. Adam and Katherine are an unconventional twist on the rom-com premise

that the couple begins in an adversarial relationship that they eventually transcend. Here they're in a situation that imposes limitations on their interaction, but they tug gently at the blurry line that separates them. She is determined to guide him through his ordeal, despite the acknowledged inadequacy of the tools at her disposal and his increasingly angry challenges to her arsenal of professional responses. This struggle stands in for the tests thrown at a conventional romantic-comedy couple to prove they deserve each other.

Kendrick manages the trick of being completely grounded while keeping her performer's footprint light. And Gordon-Levitt creates a character whose emotional spectrum is so distinctly circumscribed by the demands of the script that he doesn't seem like any of the other distraught young heroes of recent American movies or like any of the other characters he's played.

The filmmakers slip up only once: about to undergo surgery, Adam is given a Lifetime Movie moment. Otherwise this offbeat and character-driven picture is reminiscent of the small movies that dropped into movie houses regularly in the early 1970s.