

# 'Freud's Last Session' Review: Anthony Hopkins And Matthew Goode Deliver Sterling Performances In Intelligent And Heady Drama – AFI Film Fest

[Pete Hammond](#)




Freud's Last Session Anthony Hopkins, Matthew Goode Sony Pictures Classics

On the heels of the wonderful 2019 *The Two Popes*, in which [Anthony Hopkins](#) starred as Pope Benedict XVI in an imagined conversation with Jonathan Pryce's future Pope Francis, Hopkins is once again involved in the same kind of cinematic historical fictional meeting as founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, who is engaged in a private debate with *The Chronicles of Narnia* author and theologian C.S. Lewis (played by [Matthew Goode](#)) on the existence of God. As with *The Two Popes*, there is no proof

whatsoever that any meeting ever took place, but it clearly provides lots of material to wrap your head around. That is exactly what Mark St. Germain did in creating his 2009 play *Freud's Last Session*, which was built on the 1967 Harvard lectures of Dr. Armond M. Nicholi Jr in his presentation "The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life."

Now St. Germain has adapted his play to the screen in collaboration with director Matthew Brown, who has the task of opening up a largely talky and intellectual exercise to make it all work as a *movie* rather than a filmed stage play. Thus we have flashbacks to sequences of war, love, family conflict, etc., but still at its heart are the words, and if you are game for it there is much to chew on here, especially as it relates not just to the period in 1939 the story takes place — three weeks before Freud's suicide at age 83 — but also eerily to right now in a world scarily divided where people choose sides in their dug-in beliefs and refuse to really communicate with those with whom they disagree. It is also a period where the winds of war are brewing (Hitler has invaded Poland, Britain has declared war on Germany), and other depressing signs that the world is falling apart.

*Freud's Last Session* has its world premiere today at [AFI Fest](#).



Against this background we are invited to this meeting of these brilliant minds as they gather to talk about their core religious belief: the scientist Freud, a confirmed non-believer in God, versus the writer and theologian Lewis taking a more hopeful and spiritual approach completely at odds with his host. Brown weaves in images of the forests running through Lewis' mind, as well as Freud's studies into darker visions and dream imagery.

We learn about each man through their lived experiences. There is Freud's childhood, life in Vienna, and difficult relationship with daughter Anna (an excellent Liv Lisa Fries), who actually followed dad into the family business but quietly has taken up with Dorothy Burlingham (a fine Jodi Balfour) in a romantic relationship that managed to span 40 years after her father's death, even as it was repressed during his lifetime due to his stringent beliefs on the order of male and female couplings.

As for Lewis, there are protracted flashbacks to his time on the battlefield in

World War I and friendship with best friend Paddy Moore. They make a vow that whichever one of them makes it out alive they must go back and make sure the single parent of each is taken care of. Paddy dies during the war, and Lewis more than lives up to that vow, rather shockingly entering into a complicated sexual partnership with Paddy's mom, Janie Moore (*Star Trek's* Orla Brady). His close friendship with other literary giants is explored via his membership in The Inklings. There are other excursions, but the film always returns to the centerpiece of its idea of an open dialogue between two very disparate men, one of whom knows he is about to die (Freud actually suffered from painful jaw cancer).

What makes this an event for serious (and you better be in this instance) filmgoers are the performances, particularly Hopkins who has always added a entertaining, often playful tone to his portrayal of real figures in our history (well maybe not Nixon). Here he seems to relish digging into all the nooks and crannies of Freud (previously played most memorably but quite differently by a late-career Montgomery Clift in John Huston's flawed 1962 drama *Freud*). As in his most recent Oscar-winning performance in *The Father*, this portrait of a man with a still vital mind in his final days is riveting to watch as it builds to a crescendo.

Hopkins is once again, you guessed it, awards worthy. What a complete pleasure it continues to be to watch this great actor at the top of his game. Goode is equally fine, even with the less showy role as he perfectly balances Hopkins as well as Moore, his frustrated lover.

Brown (*The Man Who Knew Infinity*) does his darnedest to make this all visually interesting and succeeds to a decent extent in doing so, a difficult task in an enterprise focused on words and ideas. Those filmgoers who are up to submitting to this fascinating fictional meeting will find much to think about.

Producers are Alan Griesman, Hannah Leader, Tristan Orpen Lynch, Rick Nicita, Robert Stillman and Meg Thomson.

**Title:** Freud's Last Session

**Festival:** AFI Fest

**Distributor:** [Sony Pictures Classics](#)

**Release date:** December 22, 2023

**Director:** Matthew Brown

**Screenwriters:** Matthew Brown, Mark St. Germain (based on his play)

**Cast:** Anthony Hopkins, Matthew Goode, Liv Lisa Fries, Jodi Balfour, Orla Brady

**Running time:** 2 hr 1 min

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