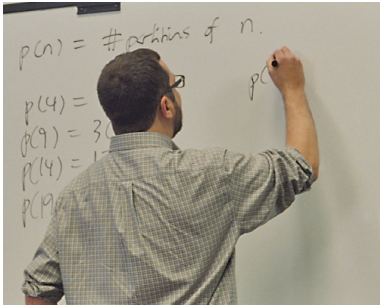# Ellenberg in Movie *Gifted*

Allyn Jackson

EDITOR'S NOTE. See also Anna Haensch's AMS blog post on "Growing Up Gifted"[2] and Frank Morgan's short review in this issue of the *Notices* [p. 716].

Ellenberg lectures on Ramanujan and the partition function. From the movie trailer.[1]

The movie *Gifted*, released in April of this year, features a mathematical prodigy, Mary, as protagonist. In the movie University of Wisconsin's Jordan Ellenberg has a cameo role playing himself—that is, playing a mathematician. The movie trailer[1] on YouTube shows a split-second glimpse of Ellenberg at the whiteboard (Figure 1). Known for his conversational and eloquent popularizations, including the best-selling *How Not to be Wrong*, Ellenberg has become well known to the general public as a demystifier of math. He responded e-mail to a few questions from the *Notices* about his new acting gig.

Notices: How did it come about that you were asked to act in Gifted*?*

Ellenberg: It was a lucky series of coincidences! The producers ran across a piece[3] I wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* about child prodigies and set up a phone call with me and the director to talk about my own experience, which was both similar to and different from that of Mary, the character in the movie. Once we'd talked, they asked me if I could be a consultant to be on set during the big blackboard scene to check whether everything was on the level, and then, since they were filming a math professor scene on the same day of shooting, they figured they might as well use a real math professor!

Notices: What part did you play, and how long did your scene last?

Ellenberg: I played "Professor." So, as you can imagine, I don't have much of a backstory. I'm supposed to represent Mary's exposure to upper-level math. There's one other math professor character, who has a substantially bigger role and is a bit high-and-mighty towards Mary. I met the actor who played that role and, by way of small talk, told him, "So I guess you're the mean professor and I'm the nice professor!" He immediately grew very cold. It seemed he was already to some extent in character and was really a bit hurt that I called him "mean."

Notices: What kind of directions did you get for the scene?

Ellenberg: Minimal. In fact, I worked quite hard to learn the lines I was given, and when I got there, the director, Marc Webb, told me, "Don't worry about the lines; just talk about it the way you really would in class." So in one way, it was hardly acting at all; I was just being myself. But I had to do that little piece of exposition about thirty times in a row, and it had to be pretty much identical so they could cut from different takes. It's an interesting experience to try to "just be yourself" in exactly the same way again and again and again!

Notices: Was it fun to do, or boring, or scary, or…?

Ellenberg: Very fun. Boring at moments—there's a lot of sitting around and setting up! But it's pretty amazing to see how many people and how much work go into producing a minute or two of final product.

Notices: How did it feel to see yourself on the big screen?

Ellenberg: It's a very strange feeling. Imagine you were in the middle of watching a movie, and then suddenly it cut to footage of yourself giving a math talk! But I think for the audience it mostly plays as seamless. Your own voice sounds very strange to you. I accused the director of making my voice sound more hyperstimulated in post-production, and he said, "No, you just sound like that."

Photo Credit

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tI01wBXGHUs *(fast-forward to 1:31)*

[2] *Blog on Math Blogs* blogs.ams.org/blogonmath-blogs/2017/04/25/growing-up-gifted/

[3] https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-wrong-way-to-treat-child-geniuses-1401484790