

Living

By MICHAEL GILTZ

The two people whose real-life story inspired "At First Sight," the new romantic drama that opens tomorrow, were excited about flying from Georgia to Los Angeles to attend the premiere — even though the movie is dramatically different from their own story.

"We really liked it," said Barbara Jennings, who lives with her husband, Shirl, in Conyers, Ga., about 40 minutes from Atlanta. The two are portrayed in the movie by Val Kilmer and Mira Sorvino.

For Shirl and Barbara, the hoopla of a movie premiere is small potatoes compared with the life-changing events they faced in the fall of 1991, right before their marriage. Shirl, who had spent most of his life in blindness, underwent an operation and could finally see.

"One thinks it will be a great gift to give sight or hearing or a new sense to someone. But it's certainly a tremendous challenge and a sort of terror," explained Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and writer whose account of Shirl Jennings' experience was the source material for "At First Sight."

Liberties were taken with the Jennings story. In the movie, Virgil (Kilmer) is completely blind, while Shirl always had a very minimal ability to sense light or motion — the same as when a sighted person closes his eyes and still is vaguely aware of

THE TRUE STORY BEHIND 'AT FIRST SIGHT'

Real-life vision quest more upbeat than movie

a hand passing in front of his face. Also, Shirl's passion for baseball has been switched to hockey.

And while Hollywood usually prefers happy endings, "At First Sight" follows a sweetly tragic

arc that is less complex and positive than the true condition of Shirl and his eyesight.

These differences don't seem to bother Shirl and Barbara, who have only positive things to say about the movie. Both were excited about meeting the stars who portrayed them in the movie.

"That Mira really is sweet," draws Shirl. "And I really liked the scene where they first took off Val Kilmer's bandages after the operation." Of course, only Shirl can know the strangeness and terror of that first moment when he could see, something the movie tries to hint at with lurid camera effects and Kilmer's confused, scared reaction.

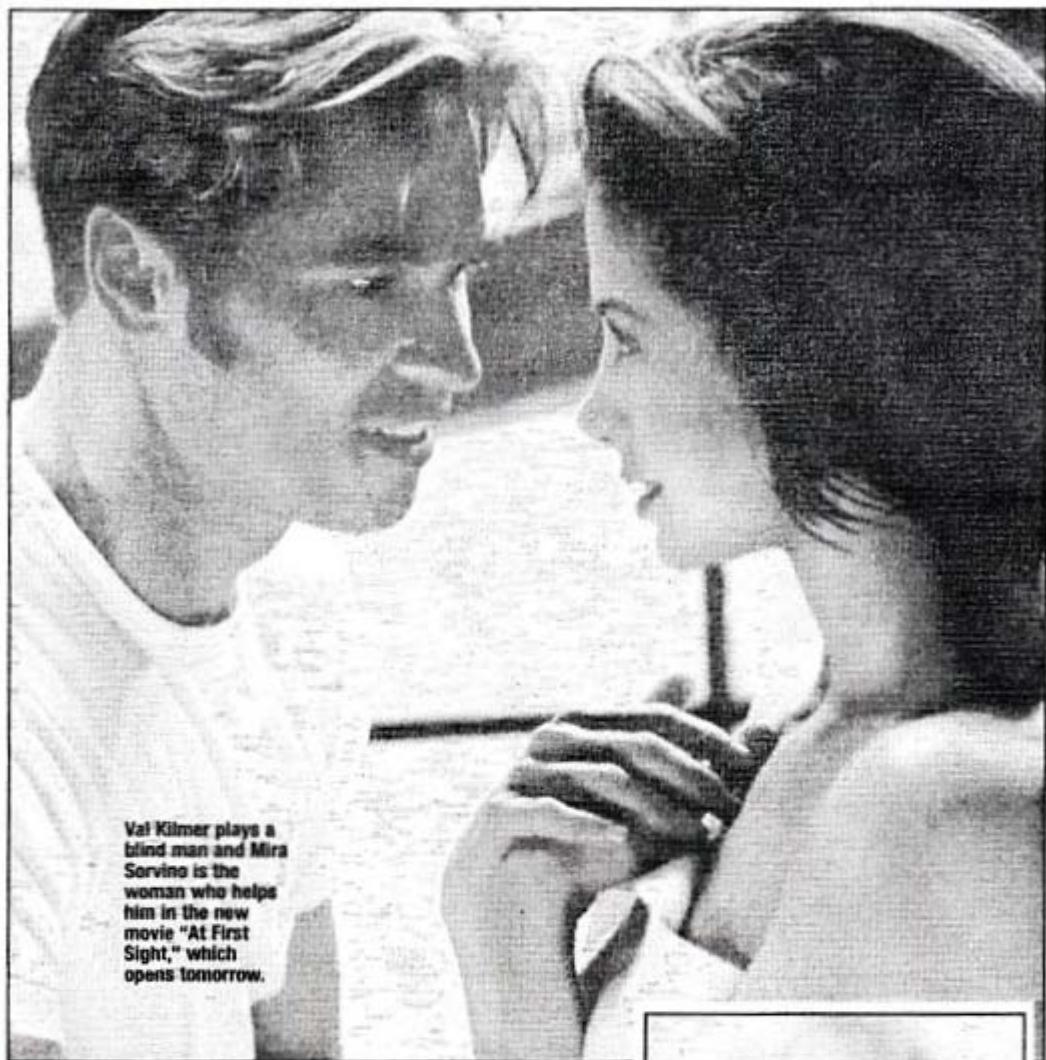
Said Sacks, who was portrayed by Robin Williams in the 1988 movie "Awakenings": "It's certainly a tremendous challenge and a sort of terror. Some of the 'Awakenings' patients weren't terribly pleased about being awakened, and there's certainly an analogy to what happened here."

Only a handful of cases exist in which someone who hasn't seen for most of his life is given some sight, and most of them — as detailed in Sacks' case study — end very poorly, with the person unable or unwilling to adapt.

The Jenningses, as well as Sacks, feel the movie captures

Barbara (left) and Shirl Jennings, the real-life couple portrayed in the movie, got to meet Sorvino while in Los Angeles recently for the premiere.





Val Kilmer plays a blind man and Mira Sorvino is the woman who helps him in the new movie "At First Sight," which opens tomorrow.

the tension and conflicting motivations between them and other family members. Remarkably, Shirl's family at first simply refused to believe the operation had worked. "It wasn't until we were driving," Barbara said, "and Shirl began picking out objects we were passing that they finally believed he could see."

His eyesight later deteriorated dramatically after an illness, and that's where Sacks' story ends.

But, today, Shirl's health is strong, and he has even regained a degree of sightedness. In fact, he and Barbara attend an art class several times a week.

"I was dumbfounded when I got a parcel containing paintings by the man who'd been virtually blind when I last saw him," Sacks said. "The paintings are predominantly dots of color, which I think is, to some extent, how he sees the world. He also sees some clouds and other shapes.

"I think he's still basically a nonvisual person," Sacks said, "but there is some vision there, though not so momentous as to change his life. But there was virtually nothing at one point."

Sacks hopes to include some of Shirl's drawings in a future edition of his book, "An Anthropologist on Mars," and the Jenningses hope the movie will boost their profile.

Barbara said, "We were really surprised" to see their names included in the movie's credits. (Sacks had used pseudonyms.) But, later, she and Shirl acknowledged that the studio or someone probably had asked their permission, or informed them that their names might appear. In any case, "we think it'll make it easier to sell some of Shirl's paintings," Barbara said.

Being able to sell the paintings of a man who was virtually blind for most of his life? Remarkable as it seems, that's one opportunity no longer beyond comprehension.



"At First Sight" is based on the book "An Anthropologist on Mars," by Dr. Oliver Sacks.