



Film

Dying of the light

“Rage, rage against the dying of the light” commands Dylan Thomas in his poem *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*. “Old age should burn and rave at close of day.” The health industry pays remarkably little attention to the end of life, but it is a central subject at the 2022 Global Health Film Festival in London, UK, and online. Some of the film makers seem unconvinced by the value of burning and raving.

Leading us into the good night this year is Eleonora Nordquist (Ela), elegant in pearls and nail polish not just for her 100th birthday party, which we witness, but for the everyday fun and games of balloon tennis and cake baking. In *Live Till I Die*, which is directed by Gustav Ågerstrand, Åsa Ekman, Oscar Hedin Hetteberg, and Anders Teigen, Ela chats happily about impending death with similarly well groomed residents of an upmarket state-run home for older people in Sweden: “We’re being cremated.” “Are we?” “Yes, we won’t be buried in the ground..We’re going to be angels.” It is Monica, a young carer with a bit of a Jesus complex, who acts as chief rager. Another resident reaches out a papery hand to Ela as she draws her last breaths in front of an unblinking camera: “Farewell.” It is a moment of breathtaking dignity. Monica, meanwhile, streams tears. But when a life has been well lived, is the mourner’s rage not just a proxy outlet for their own private disappointments?

Hungarian restaurateur Herczog Tamás, the subject of the short film *Terminal Stage*, tries to engineer around end-of-life drama. Facing his own death from advanced cancer in his mid-60s, he moves himself from the family home to a hospice. “I plan my illness like I plan my menus”, he deadpans to camera from his hospital bed. At first, his daughter is enraged by her father’s decision. Ultimately, though, as the family grieve together with the towering figure not

yet completely removed from their lives, they arrive at a collective acceptance of this most inevitable part of life. A death accepted—and intimately recorded by directors Ilona Gaal and Balázs Wizner—

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elides into a life celebrated. Way to go.

It is harder to be sanguine about impending death if you feel you have a lot of living still to do. We learn this from Gordon Shaw, in *Long Live My Happy Head*, directed by Austen McCowan and Will Hewitt. Gordon—expansive, gentle, funny—was far from sanguine when diagnosed with a brain tumour he named Rick. He tried to tame his illness by pinning the tumour onto the page, writing a comic book about his co-existence with Rick, because, well “How else are you going to deal with finding out you are going to die when you are 32?” The film follows Gordon through many downs and the occasional up, to arrive at a relatively muffled rage at the dying of the light. Gordon’s American partner Shawn struggles to accept that the cancer cannot be “fixed”. The contrast with the reaction of the dying man’s brother—Scottish, silent, stoic—speaks volumes about the part that culture plays in shaping our approach to the end of life.

Other films examine medicine’s place in the social structures that shape lives. In Holly Hardman’s *As Prescribed*, we follow patients in the USA whose lives dissolved following long-term prescription of psychotropic benzodiazepines for anxiety. Patients take their Valium or Xanax as instructed by their doctors. Underexplored in the film is the mismatch of interests that arises when a profit-driven health system incentivises doctors to overprescribe medicines, rather than to address the causes of

their patients’ distress. The irresponsible prescription of controlled medicines is also central to Jennifer Redfern’s *Apart*, which examines the experience of mothers in the US prison system. The film follows incarcerated women, including Lydia, a soccer mum with a degree in criminal justice, who was prescribed hydrocodone (Vicodin) after a car accident. Cue addiction, descent into heroin use, theft, and jail. The film focuses on three women as they swap the follow-the-rules life of prison for a freedom that comes with resentful children, distrustful employers, reluctant landlords, and the constant risk of relapse into drug use. A single prescription rippling through multiple lives, over many years.

Children un-mothered by jail, addiction, or violence are among those most likely to end up as adolescents or adults on the streets, as we learn in *Someone’s Daughter, Someone’s Son*, Lorna Tucker’s humanising odyssey into homelessness in the UK. A tabloid-preachy start morphs into a blindsiding reveal that challenges us to recalibrate our assumptions about social documentaries, as well as people who are homeless. This year’s Global Health Film Festival overflows with well meaning story-telling, firmly centred on individuals. Go for the social heart, stay for the flashes of film-making genius.

Elizabeth Pisani
@ElizabethPisani

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Daily livestreamed screenings and discussions until Dec 4, 2022. All films also available for individual online viewing on the festival platform. Full online festival pass £55-00, five-ticket bundle £19-75, three-ticket bundle: £12-75
<https://www.globalhealthfilm.org/pages/4-global-health-film-festival>

