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# Life Itself – Roger Ebert, In Memoriam: Two Thumbs Up

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, July 2nd, 2014

*Life Itself* is such a poetic and fitting way to honor Pulitzer-Prize winning film critic Roger Ebert, a man whose life was the movies and who brought the pleasure and power of the movies to so many of us. The phenomenal documentary is directed by Steve James (*Hoop Dreams*), with executive producers Steve Zillian (*Moneyball*) and Martin Scorsese (*The Departed*) at the helm. With such an accomplished core creative team interpreting his memoir, life and death, Roger Ebert is in great hands.

The film offers insights about the function of cinema, the symbiotic relationship between artists and critics, the cut-throat professional competitiveness, the transformative power of love at any age, and how to stare death in the eye and meet that final curtain call at the end of the "third act" with acceptance and grace. "The movies are like a machine that generates empathy," Roger instructs. It is impossible to leave the cinema without feeling such deep empathy, respect and appreciation for this luminary. Roger's passion for cinema was infectious, and thanks to him, we all caught the cinema bug.

I felt privileged to have seen the film for the first time during its premiere at Sundance Film Festival earlier this year. I took the opportunity to watch it a second time, just before conversing by phone with Roger's equally brilliant wife, Chaz Ebert. Chaz spoke of how much she is looking forward to seeing the film in a theatre with a regular audience finally! — this Friday, July 4. If you head out to see *Life Itself* at the Landmark in Chicago, you just may cross paths with her.

*Chaz Ebert and Roger Ebert, "LIFE ITSELF." Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.*

**Sophia: This film is such a powerful love story. Chaz, Roger claimed about you: "She saved me from the fate of living out my life alone." What do you remember about your first encounter with Roger Ebert?**

**Chaz Ebert:** What I remember about our very first meeting is that he seemed so shy. Probably the first time that he had laid eyes on me was at an AA meeting. I went to a restaurant with some friends afterwards. Roger had taken his friend Ann Landers [Eppie Lederer] to the same restaurant. We didn't know that one another were going to be at that particular restaurant. Roger said he looked across the room, saw me and just wanted to meet me. He felt so shy that he asked Ann Landers to walk across the room to make the introduction. Ann said that she always loved putting us together. "Honey, I've gone to a lot of weddings but yours was a real fairytale," she claimed. When I look at this movie, it just makes me fall in love with him all over again.

**Sophia: Roger has such a great sense of humor. Do you remember the first time he made you laugh?**

**Chaz:** At our very first meeting he was telling me about a trip he took to Glorious Goodwood racetrack. At first that he seemed kind of shy, and then he sort of took over the table with his stories that very first night. He was very funny. He made me laugh right up until the end.

**Sophia: Did you share a love of films with Roger?**

**Chaz:** I did, and that's one thing, I guess, that is not widely known. I was a cinephile even before I met him. He thought I had such good taste in films because I liked independent films, I liked foreign films, I also liked blockbusters. I just had eclectic taste in film. The only thing is … Roger didn't share my love of *A Clockwork Orange*. Over the years, I tried to get him to change his mind about that film, but he never did. He is a big, big fan of Stanley Kubrick. He said that he recognized the cinematic greatness, he just didn't understand it. I explained that the violence in the film wasn't just gratuitous, it was tied to the psychological story, the Big Brother story, the mind control, all of that was tied together in a package. Not a neat little package, but a package nonetheless. Roger said that something about the film just left him cold. It just didn't resonate with him.

**Sophia: Did you share any favorite films?**

**Chaz:** We used to have date nights where sometimes we would go to the movies to see a film that he didn't have to review. We were in Venice, Italy once and saw Henry Jaglom's *Déjà Vu*. Shortly after that we found ourselves in Venice, California, and we went to see that same film again — *Déjà vu*. We both loved it! It's about this couple falling in love, and there is some magical realism to it, and everything. Maybe we loved movies about love. We saw a lot of films together after we got married because at one point I became the Vice President of the Ebert Company, so it was part of my job to go see movies. I saw a lot of great movies with Roger.

**Sophia: You vowed to Roger: "I promise to make life for you as interesting as possible. So that every day you have something to look forward to." That seems to me, the true definition of love. Where did you learn how to love like that?**

**Chaz:** I grew up in a very secure family. I was the second youngest of nine children, and I had mother who loved us all so very much. We each thought we were her favorite child. My father didn't show love as openly and warmly as my mother, but we knew he loved us. We felt secure with each other. When you are loved like that, you learn to love like that. But there was something different about Roger's and my relationship. Sometimes I say it came from the heavens. It is just the way I describe it — because the bond that we shared was almost tighter than one can develop in one lifetime.

**Sophia: What was the inception for the documentary film project? It was offered to director Steve James by the producers. How did the whole thing begin?**

**Chaz:** Well, Garrett Basch who is business partners with Steve Zaillian — you know the brilliant screenwriter of *Schindler's List*, who directed *Moneyball* and *Searching for Bobby Fischer* — Garrett read Roger's memoir, *Life Itself*, and took it to Steve. Steve read it and immediately said, "This could make a great documentary!" So he wanted to put the deal together. They called in Steve James (*Hoop Dreams*) to direct and Martin Scorsese as executive producer, and then they

approached Roger's literary agent. Once we saw that team together, I mean, how could you say no to that team?!

**Sophia: Did Roger provide Steve James with a list of films and clips to include in the documentary?**

**Chaz:** Steve said that he found some of the clips in films that Roger talked about in his memoir. Steve noted that Roger's memoir was not a full autobiography; it was an episodic recounting of certain events in Roger's life, certain films, certain observations about growing up. Steve decided to use that episodic structure to make the film. So there are vignettes of Roger as a young man, some vignettes of Roger as a family man with our grandchildren, some vignettes of films that Roger talked about. Roger started as a film critic in 1967. That was the year of *Bonnie and Clyde*. It was also the year of Scorsese's first feature, *Whose That Knocking at My Door*. So that's how Steve selected some of the film clips to include.

**Sophia: Was Roger ever able to see a version of the film or any scenes before his death?**

**Chaz:** Steve had planned to shoot for a whole year, but Roger passed away four months into the shooting of the film. So Steve hadn't started editing yet. In March of 2013, Roger was beginning to get a little down about something, and we didn't know what. We didn't know that he was close to transitioning out of this world. I was telling Steve that Roger was a little down, and Steve responded, "I wonder if I could cheer him up. Some people have said some very good things about him. Could I send you something?" He sent me some of those interviews, and it really did brighten Roger's day in the hospital. I am so grateful to Steve for doing that. But really seeing the film, no, Roger never got a chance to see it.

**Sophia: I was so surprised to learn in the documentary that Roger was a screenwriter and had written *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*.**

**Chaz:** "Bee-yond. Bee-yond," as Martin Scorsese says. "Bee-yond."

[We share a big laugh.]

**Sophia: A film that Richard Corliss actually named as one of 10 great films of the 1960's —**

**Chaz:** Yes, and Richard meant that, and he still means it. I love hearing Richard talk about *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. I actually loved the movie too! I just never knew that Roger wrote it. Even when Roger and I started dating, I didn't realize he wrote that movie. I was still practicing law and one of my colleagues told me, "You know you're dating the guy who wrote *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, don't you?" And I said, "What?! No, I didn't know that!" I had to go back and watch it again just to make sure that there was nothing that I found truly objectionable in it. And there wasn't. It was a great, camp classic.

**Sophia: Did Roger ever confide to you about his ambitions as a screenwriter? About why he did not continue to pursue screenwriting?**

**Chaz:** He had never really intended to be a screenwriter. It was happenstance in meeting Russ Meyer. Russ Meyer recruited him to do this. Roger was a quick writer, a good writer, a funny writer. There are some other screenplays that he wrote under a pseudonym. Another Russ Meyer picture, *Beneath the Valley of the Ultra-Vixens*, was also written by Roger Ebert, but he used the

pseudonym R. Hyde. Roger said that he knew firmly that he was more interested in still being a newspaper man and writing about the movies, rather than writing movies. He did write a play that was performed here in Chicago at Victory Gardens Theater. It is about some friends who try to sell a film at the Cannes Film Festival. It was called *Sex, Lies and Theatrical*.

*Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, "LIFE ITSELF." Photo by Kevin Horan, courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.*

**Sophia: In the film, someone describes *Sneak Previews* as a sit-com about two guys who lived in a movie theatre — Laurel & Hardy, Oscar & Felix.**

**Chaz:** I think it was A.O. Scott of the *New York Times*. I like that description.

**Sophia: For me, the television show was all about how the art of conversation elevates the experience of seeing a film. Talking about films became an integral part of the movie-going experience for all of us. We became participants mirroring their impassioned dialogue. How many years had you been watching the show before you started dating Roger?**

**Chaz:** The show came on TV in Chicago in 1975. When it first came on, it played monthly. In 1976, I think it started coming on weekly. It was first called *Opening Soon at a Theater Near You*, and it later became *Sneak Previews*. In Chicago, it was a phenomenon from the start. Even before it went into syndication, it was one of the highest rated shows in public television. So we all watched it. I never thought that I would end up meeting Roger Ebert — and certainly never imagined marrying him! Our first date was in 1989. I know that when we first started dating, I thought it was a local show. I did not know it was in syndication.

**Sophia: "The cockpit story" that Gene Siskel's wife, Marlene, narrates about the joke that Gene played on Roger is quite mean-spirited and painful to hear. I was struck by how much discomfort Roger and Gene tolerated to persevere in creating something so meaningful together. I love the way the documentary paints that portrait, because a lot of people don't realize that great art often comes out of these very difficult relationships.**

**Chaz:** They used to tape the show on Wednesdays, and I remember that sometimes I couldn't go into the studio because I didn't want to see Roger get upset like that. I didn't know if it was worth it, to have his blood pressure elevated when they fought. And I don't mean that they just fought about the movies — it would start on screen and continue off-screen, as you saw in some of the outtakes, that are now very funny. They would fight!

In later years, when Roger and I were married, I would teach him to leave it there. I think that he felt so secure in our love, that he stopped letting Gene get to him so much. The show still was just as good as ever, and they still had very good, spirited discussions, but Roger didn't carry that with him outside the studio. It didn't raise his blood pressure. His health was more important to me. I know that you do a lot of things for art, but you don't have to kill yourself for it.

*Martin Scorsese speaks to director Steve James on the set of "LIFE ITSELF."*
*Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.*

**Sophia: Roger Ebert gave life to so many new voices and visions. Last year, I interviewed**

**Ramin Bahrani about *At Any Price* just a couple of days after Roger's passing, and Ramin was just effusive in his praise for Roger. Without Roger, he claimed that he would not have had a directing career. And Errol Morris and Martin Scorsese –**

**Chaz:** I can't believe it, there are so many. Steve was saying that he could have interviewed a hundred filmmakers, directors, actors, producers — that he has talked to so many people who say that Roger did have a very positive influence on their lives and careers. So that is gratifying to see in the movie.

**Sophia: Werner Herzog dedicated *Encounters at the End of the World*, his documentary about the people living and working in Antarctica, to Roger –**

**Chaz:** I saw it at a movie theatre and at the end, it said "For Roger Ebert," and that just moved me to tears. There is a scene in the Antarctica movie — the scene where the guy is going way out, he's at the end of the Earth, and he is either swimming through a cave alone, or walking through a big ice cave of stalactites and stalagmites. There is something about that scene that reminds me of Roger. I don't know why that scene reminded me of Roger, but it did — before I even knew that the film was dedicated to Roger. And that scene made it into this movie. Steve James didn't even know that.

**Sophia: Ava DuVernay tells a story about how she was really taking a risk as a black woman giving her story to the white male gaze to dictate if it had value, but because Roger was 'an honorary brother,' with a black wife, she trusted that he had a different understanding of black women.**

**Chaz:** Werner Herzog, Ava DuVernay, and Scorsese also, all speak so movingly about Roger in the film and the effect that his caring and his film reviews had, not only on their careers, but on them, at a particular stage in their development in life. Scorsese because of some circumstances where he found himself divorced and broke, really. Ava and her 8-year old self, where she was trying to learn to be open and to have this faith in other human beings. They say how he really fostered that, and he helped them.

**Sophia: Roger was a peer of the people that he wrote about. Did you socialize with the filmmakers together?**

**Chaz:** It is not really socializing in a sense because, of course, there was still that professional wall that separates us. But Roger was a peer, and if we were going to a movie screening, maybe he would see someone if there was a dinner afterwards. What Roger loved to do was talk to the filmmakers who were passionate about the movies. That's how that happened. You know, Martin Scorsese, he knows everything about movies. He watches every movie, knows everything about film preservation, it's near and dear to his heart. Plus Marty's first film was the same year that Roger got started as a film critic. So they sort of grew up in the industry together. But as you see in the movie, it didn't stop Roger from being objective when giving out his review of a Scorsese film.

*Roger Ebert (6/18/42-4/4/13), "LIFE ITSELF." Photo by Kevin Horan, courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.*

**Sophia: The film also shows how Roger approaches the end of his life and his encroaching**

**death. Ramin Bahrani is visiting him on Christmas, and observes: "Roger is in pain physically but he ends up being the happiest guy around." I had this sense that Roger did not waste one moment. He went to extraordinary lengths to keep contributing.**

**Chaz:** You know, he did, and he loved it. Roger said when he was working, it put him a zone where he felt like he was as he always had been. He wasn't in illness, he wasn't in pain. The thing that I also love about the movie, you know, is that it's very joyous, it's very life-affirming, it's very entertaining, and it also causes us to look at death as a part of life. After the experience with Roger that I've had and after seeing *Life Itself*, I have zero fear of death. Zero. Wiped away. Completely. And to me that's a big, big gift.

**Sophia: Wow … absolutely. Roger confesses in the film: "I have no fear of death. This is the third act and I would feel cheated if I missed out." I thought that was such a profound insight. Roger didn't know about Gene Siskel's impending death and his cancer. Gene hid the truth from everybody except his wife. I can imagine the deep sense of betrayal that Roger would have felt because I have had similar experiences with loved ones. This profoundly impacted the way Roger chose to handle his own death –**

**Chaz:** He was devastated that he didn't get to tell his brother goodbye. He did say, "If anything like this ever happens to me, make sure that we handle it differently. Let people, at least the people closest to us" – I don't think that he meant that it had to be this public – "but at least the people closest to us, let them know," he told me.

**Sophia: What did you learn about Roger from seeing the documentary film that you did not already know?**

**Chaz:** I was so impressed by the presence of mind that he had as that young student who was the editor of *The Daily Illini* when those four girls were killed in the Birmingham bombing. The words that he wrote were so beautiful, so mature. ["The blood is on so many hands that history will weep."] I knew that Roger was a precocious kid, it is apparent that he was smart, but I understood in that moment that his yearnings for social justice were formed very early in his life.

*Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel, "LIFE ITSELF." Photo by Kevin Horan, courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.*

*Top Image: Roger Ebert, "LIFE ITSELF." Photo by Art Shay, courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.*

***"LIFE ITSELF" Official Website.***

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