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# Curtain Call

BY BRAD MARIANO · AUGUST 3, 2014



RECOMMENDED

*“Actors don’t retire, they just keep waiting for the phone to ring.”*

In one of the local stories making its world premiere, Justin Olstein and Eleanor Sharpe’s *Curtain Call* is a real-life version of the story that’s as old as the movies and theatre itself; of actors and performers coming to terms with the reality that they can’t

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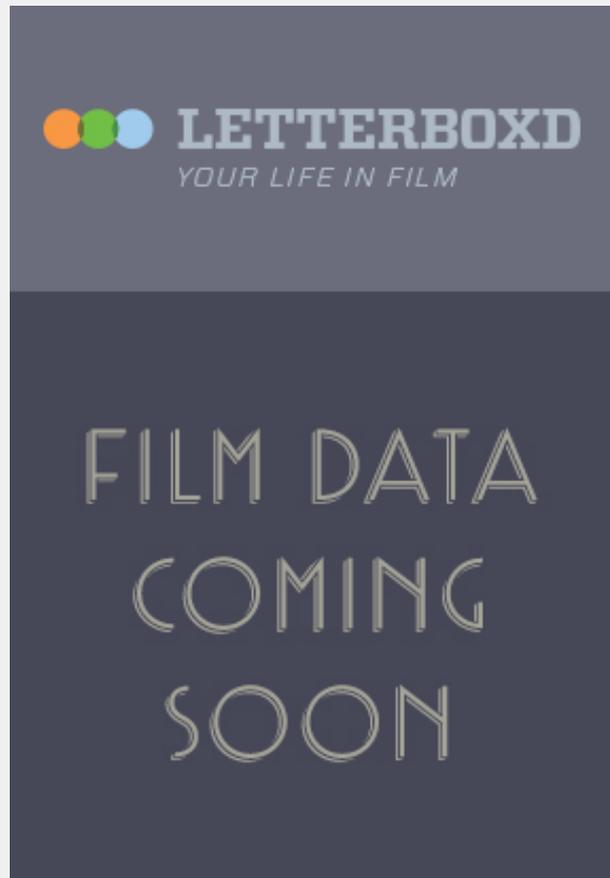
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do what they love to do forever, and more often than not then proceeding to give that reality the middle finger and do exactly that. Often foraying into exaggerated grotesquery (*Sunset Boulevard*, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*) or other non-subtle outings (*The Wrestler*) there's an innate attraction in that story, drawing from the (perhaps not misguided) cultural myth that performers are a special type of people. The subjects of *Curtain Call*, Terry and Carol-Ann Gill, are performers – not rich or famous (though they have – both figuratively and literally – flirted with that side of acting) but good at what they do and believe in the work they do. Their story resonates because the sadness at the heart of their story arises because their forced retirement from children's theatre is not an attack on their vanity so much as their identity.

More affecting still is their story overall – of a genuinely touching relationship, looking back at a shared history over decades that, as British expats, taps into a particularly familiar Australian narrative while keeping their own unique personalities. Where the filmmakers really strike gold is their choice of subjects – I knew this film worked because when thinking over the film preparing for this review, Carol-Ann and Terry feel like old



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friends I've known forever, there's a warmth they exude that feels genuine and is central to the documentary. True to their work, in real life they feel like a double act out of vaudeville days, with a Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello odd couple chemistry – Carol-Ann's livewire charisma and downright Pomeranzian sense of style perfectly complementing Terry's laidback demeanour. The way they talk about one another, or even smaller gestures like rolling their eyes when their partner says something they've no doubt heard a million times before, it's their relationship over the course of the documentary that sticks with you. It's not sugar-coated completely – they both freely admit (sometimes with a tinge of regret) the compromises and sacrifices they've made for one another – but the honesty and chemistry between them is captured so well in a very short runtime.

*Curtain Call* works primarily because of its direction and editing. Only at the end do you realize there's been no voiceover, no talking heads (aside from Carol-Ann and Terry) or any other authorial intrusion from the filmmakers, and this invisibility of direction is a show of admirable restraint and understanding of the story they're telling. Instead of the filmmakers imposing threads or ideas on us, we make our own



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judgements: we hear both had difficult relationships with their parents, and rather than the film making direct suggestions about this, we wonder if that does affect the relationships they have with the children who perform and see their shows, and with each other.

What pulls the film together is swift and seamless editing; the documentary intermittently switching from the Gills recounting their history and their current work, from head-on interviews to fly-on-the-wall observances of their pantomime shows and preparation. The story of their lives and careers comes together in an easily digestible and interesting way as all these fabrics are woven together in punchy, well paced and ordered chaos rather than the A to B approach you might expect. And while the overarching narrative of the Tivoli theatre being under threat is there, it's the small moments that shine through. The historical anecdotes, the shared memories, lives lived before our eyes in photos and home video which make this charming viewing. Similarly in the present, snippets of their shows or backstage capture the importance of what they're doing – the wonder on a kid's face seeing a performance, or the beaming pride or confidence when one the kids performing is complimented by

Terry or Carol-Ann; we clearly come to appreciate the Tivoli theatre in all its charming kitsch. Its pantomime props, run-down but well-used stage and backdrops and mountains of fairy bread evoke such a great brand of completely unpretentious charm.

The filmmakers realise the potential in their subjects, as the Gills are natural and charismatic storytellers. Enough of their faults, like Terry continually accidentally swearing in front of young children, as well as their own insecurities, such as Carol-Ann talking candidly and freely about plastic surgery – are shown to keep them as interesting figures, all while allowing them to tell their own tale. Occasionally this free reign might be over-stepped into hiccups like Terry saying he left the police force in acrimonious circumstances, but then refusing to go into detail, or Carol-Ann (albeit facetiously) comparing their landlord to Hitler. These could have been edited down more than they have been, but even then they end up as pretty illustrative moments.

As I've hinted at, *Curtain Call* is a very pared-down film, telling a story honestly and on a small scale. The only qualms I'd have are that sometimes because of nonintrusive documentary style there are strange omissions or vague moments you'd

like explored slightly further. We know the Gills have children, but their absence in the film strikes as slightly odd, considering we spend so long talking about their own parents, the sacrifices of family and their obvious work with children. The exact operations of the Tivoli are also vague, but these are mostly superficial issues and only small casualties from the honest and refreshingly minimalist filmmaking on offer. It's also great and reassuring that Melbourne International Film Festival programs these local stories and smaller films – among the prestige retrospectives, Cannes heavyweights and four hour arthouse epics, at the end of film festivals these voices and stories are often some of the ones that stay with you.

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*Curtain Call screens again at 6:45pm on Tuesday 12 August, and tickets can be bought [here](#). Justin Olstein, Eleanor Sharpe and the Gills are also Festival Guests.*

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