

# LIFE AFTER LIFE

A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT ART, AGING, AND ABILITY

## SYNOPSIS

When Sarah, Eneida, and Juanita join a dance outreach program for seniors, they catch the eye of a local choreographer who challenges them to create and perform an original modern dance in one week. As the recital approaches, the women struggle to overcome a range of mental and physical limitations. What they create, and their journey along the way, offers an intimate look at what happens to the creative process when every body dances. Life After Life is a poignant, surprising, and at times hilarious documentary about aging, ability, and artistic expression that shows it is never too late to explore the unknown.

## DIRECTOR

Dr. Christopher Boulton is an associate professor of communication at the University of Tampa where he's taken students to make documentaries in Ecuador, Morocco, and Thailand. He got his start at Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and has since written and produced for Discovery Channel, Travel Channel, and Court TV. He co-wrote and co-produced Not Just a Game: Power, Politics, & American Sports, a documentary about activist athletes that screened at the All Sports Los Angeles Film Festival and the ReelWorld Film Festival in Toronto. Boulton's first short film, Power Trip, a nostalgic voyage through space and time, won the art category at the 6th RATMA International Film Festival in Keighley, England and screened at the 32nd Filmwinter Festival for Expanded Media in Stuttgart, Germany, the 22nd Revelation Film Festival in Perth, Australia, and the 10th Besides the Screen Festival in São Paulo, Brazil. His short, Salvage, a film about aesthetics, inequality, and the consequences of taste, has shown at the 35<sup>th</sup> Fort Lauderdale Film Festival, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Dallas Video Fest, and the 32<sup>nd</sup> Girona Film Festival in Spain. His first feature, Life After Life, a documentary about art, aging, and ability, screened at the Sarasota, Santa Cruz, and Cinema on the Bayou film festivals.

*"Modern dance can be difficult to understand and appreciate, much less perform. What began as a rebellion against the formalism of ballet can now seem like an esoteric art reserved for young, athletic dancers and sophisticated audiences. But there is a growing movement to open up modern dance by including more mature and uniquely-abled performers not typically associated with physical prowess, but for whom the desire and ability to move is never taken for granted. I made this film as a way to better understand the creative process of modern dance choreography from the perspective of a novice with no formal training but a whole lifetime of experience. The result is a revealing look at an unlikely cast of characters overcoming obstacles to tell stories through movement and make modern dance more open to each and every body. It was an honor to work with these women and I can't wait for you to meet them."*

## **FILM SUMMARY**

After an opening sequence, the film begins in a dance studio. Juanita Seawright, a 68-year-old from Brooklyn, explains to Marion Baldeon Kampert (a dancer/choreographer in her 20's) how her dual-knee replacements cause swelling in her feet, prevent her from kneeling. Eneida Hernandez, a 67-year-old from Puerto Rico, tells Dwayne Scheuneman (a middle-aged choreographer in a wheelchair) that she's been fighting orbital lymphoma without the support of her family. Her granddaughter recounts how Eneida sometimes feels like she's "sitting around waiting to die" and worries that she'll give up.

Six months earlier, at the Ella Senior Residences in Tampa, Florida, Sarah Phillips, 88, attends a weekly modern dance outreach program led by students from the University of Tampa. Despite having scoliosis and being blind in one eye, Sarah begins expressing herself through creative movement and is soon joined by fellow Ella residents Eneida and Juanita. The three women become fast friends and Ella outreach program regulars, so Dwayne invites them to participate in a week-long intensive workshop to develop an original piece to perform in front of their peers. The women accept the challenge.

Sarah, Eneida, and Juanita take a field trip to the University of Tampa to visit some of the students from the Ella outreach program and attend an organ concert in Sykes Chapel. The women joke about their relative sizes ("small, medium, and large"), wonder what they will wear, and muse about performing modern dance for the first time. After marveling at the chapel's architecture and the organ's design, Juanita admits that she's worried she'll forget what she's supposed to do. Eneida jokes that she might have a bodily function accident. As the workshop approaches, Sarah's granddaughter explains that Sarah got shingles, was hospitalized, and had to drop out of the project.

## *THE WORKSHOP BEGINS*

Marion leads Eneida and Juanita through a series of exercises. Together, they let body parts guide them through space mixing together heavy, light, fast, and slow movements. Dwayne explains that the workshop will explore Eneida and Juanita's personal histories in order to create new choreography from the existing vocabulary of their lives. Dwayne asks Eneida to remember a place from her childhood, imagine it in the studio, and then move to it using one of her body parts. Eneida picks a bar in her Puerto Rico and moves to it with her butt. Recognizing that Eneida likes to play the clown, Dwayne resolves to dig deeper and bring out the more earnest and vulnerable sides of her personality. He then directs Eneida to run and hide by alternating between heavy and light movements and instructs Juanita to chase her in direct and indirect ways. Marion explains how Dwayne's impatient and demanding style helps to get things done. Dwayne inspires Juanita to think of her family members and invent a sequence of movements representing each one. Marion reflects on how rare it is to see older people creating and performing art. Eneida tells a funny story of hiding with her boyfriend during a bar fight when she was 12. Eneida's daughter and granddaughter describe Eneida's outrageous personality, life as a single mother with three kids, and experiences working multiple jobs. Eneida fondly remembers working for tips as a bathroom attendant in a nightclub. Her

daughter introduces Eneida's favorite dog and great granddaughter Amiya--the only one in the family with Eneida's curly hair.

### *OBSTACLES EMERGE*

Marion leads an exercise on round and straight shapes. Dwayne tells Juanita to pause during the chase to take a new shape every time she finds Eneida. He introduces the concept of transforming everyday, mundane tasks into more abstract movements and reviews zig-zagging and curving through space. Marion describes how integrated dance challenges her to create new forms that can accommodate performers' unique abilities. The dance is beginning to take shape. Driven by the beat of live drumming, Eneida develops a childlike movement that scurries between hiding places from her past. Juanita chases her letting her shoulders and hips lead the way. Dwayne stitches the chase together with Juanita's family movements then sits the women down to talk about physical limitations. He performs a dance interpretation of how he broke his neck and asks Eneida and Juanita to do the same with their own stories of struggle. Juanita's daughter describes her mother's love of bowling and how her teammates used to call her "The Claw" because of her strong grip. But, since Juanita was obese, bowling three times a week ruined her knees. Juanita grew up in a loving but strict household. As an adult, her marriage fell apart and food became her "best friend."

### *POETRY IN MOTION*

After the warm-up, Dwayne brings in a surprise guest, Pedro el Poeta, to add spoken-word to the dance. Juanita is thrilled and flirts with Pedro. As the poet speaks, the women rise to the occasion and impress Dwayne with a complete run-through. Things are going well until Dwayne brings the rehearsal to an abrupt halt. The women are playing charades--pantomiming tasks instead of abstracting the source material into new, original forms. Juanita has trouble understanding what Dwayne wants and gets discouraged, so he offers more examples and gently teases her. Dwayne describes growing up in a rough neighborhood, getting into trouble as a teenager, and joining the Navy as a way out. He laughs at how his wheelchair rugby teammates mock his "twinkle toes" dancing during practice but still can't knock him over. He also describes raising his niece and nephew while his brother is in prison. Dwayne teaches Eneida movements to represent her cancer and loneliness. As a child, Sarah rebelled against her stern father by wearing pants, grew up to be a seamstress, and continues to sew "walker totes" for her Ella neighbors. Juanita and Eneida decide to pay tribute to Sarah with a sewing motif inspired by pushing fabric and breaking thread. They modify the movement to expand the expression from literal to metaphorical.

### *COLD FEET*

Before rehearsal can even start, Eneida asks to remove the cancer choreography from her dance performance. Marion gently encourages her to bear witness to the challenges that she's faced, but Eneida refuses. Juanita leans in and presses Eneida to celebrate her survival, new life, and newly chosen family. Eneida cries. The women hug. The show goes on. Marion orients Eneida and Juanita to the Ella performance space, blocks out the choreography, and starts a dress rehearsal under the lights. Eneida bends down into her starting position, but hesitates

again. She stands up "just in case." As the tension builds, Eneida holds up a finger, backs into a corner, and farts. Hilarity ensues.

#### *A GRAND DEBUT*

Juanita worries about forgetting the dance and how her hip movements make people laugh. Her daughter explains that Juanita makes fun of herself to avoid ridicule, but the dance workshop reveals her in a new light: a woman who is not afraid and not ashamed to be taken seriously. Neida's granddaughter hopes that this new experience will show that there is "life after life." On the day of the final performance, the three grandmothers reunite. As Neida and Juanita take their places, they walk past their fellow Ella residents and Sarah, who is sitting in a wheelchair in the front row. The recital begins and the women perform all the choreography they developed in the workshop, including the sewing motif tribute to Sarah. Juanita panics towards the end, but recovers. The women bow. The audience applauds. Fade to black. Credits roll as students from the Ella outreach program re-interpret and perform Eneida and Juanita's original choreography.