



FILM: **LIFE ITSELF**

FDG RATING: 3.5 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Roger Ebert, Chaz Ebert (Roger's wife)
Steve James: *Director*

DATE: July 20, 2014

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **LIFE ITSELF**

The Roger Ebert documentary, *Life Itself*, is an emotional tribute to a man who thought of his own life as a movie, loved films, and changed the way audiences around the world think about films. Radically different from the analytic cerebral style of film critique, Ebert and his counter point reviewer Siskel, simplified film criticism to a thumbs up or thumbs down. We enjoyed seeing the behind the scenes bantering between the two, who had a somewhat childish, fiercely competitive relationship that crept into their onscreen interaction as well. Siskel's wife provided perhaps biased insights into the two personalities, describing Ebert, who came from a working class family, as "full of himself". In contrast, we saw the preppy, slightly arrogant, playboy side of Siskel who partied with the Hugh Hefner entourage. Martin Scorsese offered some funny commentary about his experiences with Ebert.

The most touching scenes showed the loving relationship between Ebert and his wife, Chaz, who he married at age 50. Her unwavering positive spirit kept Ebert going during his horrific battle with cancer that the film unflinchingly depicts. Our admiration for Ebert as a writer, and film critic grows exponentially as we see him continue to write, blog and thrive even when he no longer can speak and uses a computerized synthesizer to communicate. Many of us grew up watching Siskel and Ebert weekly, so we greatly appreciate this well-done documentary that is both entertaining and insightful. However, what was missing for many of us, was a deeper understanding of what Ebert thought about film, why it was so important to him, why it is such a powerful form of communication, what he saw as film's most vital contribution to humanity, and other meaningful contemplations from a man who was exceptionally perceptive and articulate. We wanted the film to dive deeper into his life before cancer. Instead the film unproportionately focuses on his debilitating condition, repeated hospitalization, and painful physical therapy. The fact that Ebert not only accepts and shares his life as it is, but also continues to preserve and be creatively productive until his last breath is immensely inspiring and overshadows the weaker aspects of the film.

On a scale of 1-5 (5 is the best), we cumulatively gave the film a solid 3.5 thumbs up with one ardent Ebert fan rating the film an exuberant 5.

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See you at the movies,

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Film Discussion Group (FDG) organizer