

Dying To Do Letterman Premieres at Cinequest

Liver cancer and comedy prove a perfect match.

Live Your Dream Or Die Trying

At 35, comedian Steve Mazan learned he was dying of liver cancer. So he did what any sane person would do: he dedicated the next year of his life to earning an appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman*.

Five years later, last night, the story of that one year quest had its premiere at the 2011 [Cinequest film festival](#) as [Dying To Do Letterman](#). And I was lucky enough to be there.

THE SHOW

Before the show, the line ran through the lobby and down the stairs of San Jose's Cinema 12... 300 attendees sold out the house, forcing the film's star and producers, Steve Mazan, Joke Fincioen, and Biagio Messina, to witness their own premiere sitting on the stairs.

During the show, the audience was completely engaged, applauding, laughing, and yes, even crying, as cameras followed Mazan and his wife Denise on their quest for Letterman nirvana.

At the end of the show, 300 attendees gave a minutes-long standing ovation, and 297 people (the 3 who left will never know what they missed) stayed for 30 minutes of QandA until they were all reluctantly ushered out, as the festival staff had to start the next film.

And 297 people choked the lobby for another thirty minutes, crowding around a very deserving Mazan, Fincioen, and Messina looking for autographs and pictures.

But wait... this is a documentary about liver cancer, right? Um, Yawn. What's with the rock star reception?

THE STORY

This is not a documentary about cancer. It's not about disease, it's not about the failing health care system, and it's not about lost opportunities. It's about Mazan pursuing his passion in the face of all that... and it's about inspiring audiences to pursue the passions in their own lives.

Mazan insists that he wants to be on Letterman because he's good at what he does, not because he's sick. Already a successful professional comic when he receives the news of his illness, he re-dedicates himself to honing his craft in a bid to ensure he earns his spot. Early historical footage of an embarrassingly uncomfortable first performance proves Mazan's ability to challenge himself and grow as an artist – and that he's not afraid to share his less shining moments. And plenty of footage of Mazan's current stand-up proves that he is good... laugh out loud good... and so we, as the audience, root for the show to recognize and reward that talent.

But it's not all happy fuzzy puppies. We see the toll the illness (and its mounting financial consequences) take on his marriage, we see Denise's efforts to find room in their lives for her own dreams, and we see their partnership blossom in spite of (or maybe because of) all of this.

Mazan practically dares his disease to stop him... he plans for the future, lives like a healthy guy, writes new bits, refines his delivery, and seeks the advice of former Letterman veterans (Ray Romano, Kevin Nealon, Brian Regan, Jim Gaffigan, Arj Barker, and others). What he learns from them (that television is fickle, and you can't second-

guess what they might be looking for, so just do the work you love and all else will follow), and what he learns about himself from his own introspection, takes him on a journey of self-discovery and personal empowerment that resonates and inspires.

WHAT IT'S REALLY ABOUT

And that's the heart and soul of *Dying To Do Letterman*. The film is a love letter to perseverance, a celebration of pursuing one's passions. The Street Team played the queue before the show, handing out "I'm Dying To..." buttons that they customized for each recipient (mine said "I'm dying to meet my second grandbaby"... awwwww), challenging us to put a name to our dreams right there on the spot. The T-Shirts read "Live Your Dream", and Co-Producer Joke says that if one person walks out of the theater inspired to pursue his or her dreams, the film's done its job.

Though Cinequest has proven to be a great partner and champion of the film, *Dying To Do Letterman* is otherwise struggling to gain acceptance by some fest programmers in its initial festival bid. Not issue-focused enough for some doc aficionados, it walks a fascinating line between documentary and narrative.

You couldn't script a better story, or craft a more empathetic set of characters. Mazan has a quest, and with his incredibly supportive wife Denise at his side, he's presented with seemingly insurmountable challenges; he suffers more than one disappointing reversal; he has to take on a Rocky-esque challenge of facing his weaknesses and improving his skills; and ultimately he has to recognize that perhaps the journey, and the lessons it brings, are more important than the lifelong goal he thought he was striving for. So though it's a documentary, it plays like a scripted narrative film, and as a result, it's utterly engaging and entertaining in a way no documentary has been (for me at least) in a long, long time.

And you know, it's great to have things work out well for good people. You won't meet two nicer producers (or people) than Joke Productions' Joke Fincioen and Biagio Messina, and Mazan and Denise are equally great. This film deserves its audience... the audience deserves this film. If it's playing at a film fest anywhere near you, don't miss it.

Follow Joke and Biagio at [Joke Productions](#), and on twitter [@jokeandbiagio](#)

Keep up with Steve Mazan at [SteveMazan.com](#), and get his tweets [@Steve_Mazan](#)

And check out the [Dying To Do Letterman](#) website, and the tweets at [@D2DLthemovie](#)