



AGING GRACEFULLY

“YOU CAN GET OLDER, but don’t be old,” quips Estelle Craig, the elegant and spirited 103-year old who is the subject of the new PBS documentary *Stella & Co: A Romantic Musical Comedy Documentary About Aging*. Created and directed by her daughter, filmmaker Robin Baker Leacock, the documentary celebrates the extraordinary life of her mother, Stella, and a group of vibrant seniors—ages 75 to 105—living their best lives. What ensues is a joyful and thought-provoking exploration of what it means to age in modern times, using humor, music, and storytelling.

Set in a senior residence in Palm Beach, Stella’s story is an inspirational one. When most of her peers were happily retired, at 100, Stella hunkered down to write five books. In her early years, she had an extraordinary career as entrepreneur, radio interviewer, and writer. In her 90’s, she revived a neighborhood park and, at 95, became a playwright and director.

“What does it really mean to age well?” asks Leacock of her film’s audience. “I truly believe that quality of life in advanced age is driven by one’s positive outlook, community, and relationships. And living in the moment.”

It makes sense that long after one’s physical faculties have started to fade, their spirit can continue to thrive and propel

them forward. Staying positive and active is the common thread among the residents of Stella’s community and none of them claim to feel “old” despite being well past 90. They may have mobility issues, but they are as enthusiastic about life as they were when they were in their teens.

Leacock was inspired to create *Stella & Co* and its prequel, *Stella* is 95, after spending long swaths of time with her mother. In younger years, she travelled the world with Stella and began videotaping her because of her quick wit and expansive world view. Eventually she began to include Stella’s friends, who were sharp, articulate and wise.

“Our aged population is an “invisible” generation, regarded as “less-than” by a youth-obsessed society,” says Robin. “They often go by the wayside because they are perceived as not being able to contribute in a meaningful or visible way. I realized when an older person leaves this world, a library is destroyed,” comments Robin. Now more than ever, when our seniors are vulnerable to the ravages of Coronavirus, we have a responsibility to advocate for them.”

Living to see your 103rd birthday is surely an accomplishment unto itself. Stella showed us that it’s what you do with those years that counts. “My philosophy for life is to stay busy and



make the most of every day,” commented Stella in her last book. Stella witnessed remarkable societal changes in her lifetime and rubbed elbows with such illustrious characters as Sir Edmund Hillary, former British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, the Duke of Bedford, and the Grand Duchess Olga of Russia.

Leacock’s films about aging have made an indelible impression. With the common thread of positivity and community, Leacock has used the medium of documentary film to adjust the lens through which we view the aging process. It helps to be surrounded by an illustrious filmmaking family. Robin is married to filmmaker Robert Leacock, commercial director & cinematographer on Madonna’s Truth or Dare, Al Pacino’s Looking For Richard & director of Christy Turlington’s Catwalk. His father, the late legendary Richard (Ricky) Leacock, was a pioneer in cinema vérité documentary films. In addition to Stella & Co. and Stella is 95, Robin created and directed It Girls (2002), A Passion For Giving (PBS 2009), and I’ll Take Manhattan. ♦



**To watch the full documentary, visit www.stelladocumentary.com.
This page, from above: Robin Baker Leacock and Estelle Craig; Myra Goldick; Gerson Fabe; Lila Fagenson and Larry Mosse. Opposite page: Estelle Craig, world traveler.**