

Film review for

1,2,3, Once Again

Dir. Vasco Diogo

One in ten people over the age of 65 suffers from Alzheimer's. While it remains on the list of diseases for which there is no known cure, there has been great progress with prevention and lessening of the effects. The greatest thing to do is to keep the mind active. Art has always played a big part in rehabilitation, both physical and mental. Therapies based around music and painting have long been proven to increase the recovery from degenerative diseases.

In Vasco Diogo's experimental documentary, we follow a class of older patients who are overcoming Alzheimer's by learning the songs of a musical. Over the space of a few days we see them tackle the task of remembering the lyrics, a difficult endeavour for the sharpest mind. But it's through this repetition that they grow stronger, honing the ability to recall information. The need to be constantly active and to be stimulated by the world around you is essential and we soon get a sense that these rehearsals are of great benefit.

Men and women of a mix of ages, though none younger than 60, sit in an unremarkable room, the clock hanging behind them, ticking away the moments. But it's in the faces of our singers in which the drama lies. Early on in the film, we are introduced to Nativade, a witty and engaging woman who captures the camera with her charm. With no ulterior motive at all, she innocently steals the limelight with her smile. There's no wonder that she is often front-and-centre in the film, the de facto star of the film. When she reminisces about her children, momentarily confusing the director standing just off-camera, for her own son, she becomes animated. We'll see similar bursts of activity from her throughout the film's duration and each time we can only wish for more. When, late in the film, she is brought to tears after a seemingly innocuous comment, we truly feel for her and are relieved when she is swiftly brought round to her usual talkative and cheery self.

The camera often takes up the position of the audience, passively watching the rehearsals from a fixed perspective. Each time we return to the room over the several days that are covered, the layout of the chairs in the room changes. Sometimes they are in a horseshoe configuration, at other times they become staggered or maybe even in a line. Whether an unconscious effect or not, there arises a kind of choreography as our otherwise sedentary subjects are moved around the frame.

Diogo uses jarring editing techniques throughout, transforming the image to stark black and white and slowed down as if being run through treacle. Sometimes, for extended periods, the action will play out in reverse, the oddly warped audio becoming alien and dissociative. This does more than break up the inherently repetitive nature of the film which otherwise would be an unflinching chronicle of the sessions. By punctuating the film with these subjective moments we're taken into the often-confusing world that Nativade and her friends must live through on a daily basis. Suddenly nothing makes sense. We can see something familiar but don't immediately recognise it. In addition to this, there is no internal logic to when these episodes will occur. For long stretches, we'll be in the room with the singers as they recite a well-worn lyric, or noisily rattle their percussion instruments only to have the logical flow of what we're seeing interrupted by a heavily processed contortion of their world. This break with normalcy may not happen again for another fifteen minutes or may happen very shortly after. The cumulative effect over the documentary's fifty-minute running time is one of building unease. Just when we get into a comfortable pattern of performance, we quickly learn to dread the upending of everything we see.

Whether or not this accurately reflects the experiences of an Alzheimer's sufferer is unclear. If it does anything, it is to get the audience to consider that possibility and in so doing gain more empathy for Nativade and the other performers.