

Edinburgh Festival Fringe Review – Ping Pong



Never too old for gold.

When it comes to vitality, sportsmanship, strength, fitness, not to mention just the sheer fun of being alive, I have just been put to shame by a man three times my age. Les D'Arcy is the seven-time World Singles Table Tennis Champion, as well as European and doubles champion many times over. In 2010, at age 89, he travelled to China to join 2075 other players from 51 countries in the Veterans' Table Tennis World Championship. Following the progress of Les and seven other international competitors in the tournament and at home, this film is a master class in how to grow old with style.

Ping Pong opens six months after the tournament, with Terry Donlon in a hospital bed. With his 81-year-old body wracked by several cancers, his doctors had given him barely a week to live. [Spoiler: As it turns out, the doctors were a bit premature; he was sitting next to me at the screening last night.] Director Hugh Hartford then takes us back to see Terry and his partner Sylvia in the run-up to China, where he will be defending his gold medal from the previous championship. In a fictional narrative, book-ending the story this way would have seemed like shameful manipulation on the part of the filmmakers, but in a documentary the fact that it's true makes it genuinely affecting.

The Hartford brothers – the opening credits name Anson as producer and Hugh as director, but the closing credits show that they shared these roles as well as that of camera operator – spend time introducing us to their other subjects, including Austrian-born American Lisa Modlich, a rookie at age

85, Germany's Ursula Bihl and Inge Hermann, both 89, and Sun Yon Qing, age 80 from China. Sweden's Rune Forsberg (87) and Australian centenarian Dorothy deLow round out the cast. The eight of them are of various fitness and mobility levels but they all have a couple of things in common: some great stories, and a competitive streak a mile wide.

Once the film moves to the tournament itself, it becomes as much of a traditional sports movie as a documentary, helped by Anson Hartford's tight editing and an excellent soundtrack – something documentary filmmakers haven't always paid too much attention to. The movie has intrigue (the case of the missing bat) and trash talk aplenty, with Mrs Modlich being a particularly vocal opponent to square off against. By following eight competitors, the brothers cleverly increased their odds of featuring a finalist or two, though with only an 80 minute running time they can't give everyone the same attention. By necessity, those that get knocked out of the tournament in the earlier stages make little impact as the film progresses.

"Inspirational" is a word that is so overused these days it has become almost meaningless; an empty platitude trotted out for X Factor sob stories and movies-of-the-week. If there is one place that word deserves to be used, it is to describe this movie. Stephen King once said that no matter how aged they become, you can always recognise a fantasy or horror writer by the sparkle of childhood in their eyes. After watching *Ping Pong*, I can tell you that the same holds true for these sportsmen and women. Their attitude to life and refusal to just sit down in the corner and quietly die is, yes, inspirational.

Thought-provoking, hopeful, philosophical and hilarious, *Ping Pong* is a worthy story told with class. Producer Anson Hartford and two of the cast were attending a free screening at 1pm today at the BBC On The Fringe arena on Potterow. If you missed it, the film is also available to download from

[their website](#) and iTunes.