Byrd

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Byrd
A documentary by Maya Dangerfield
In April 2015, William Byrd Wilkins or ‘Byrd’, 50, a theatre and television actor, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In August, his friends crowd-funded an all expense paid trip to New York for Byrd who was undergoing chemotherapy in his rural hometown of Louisburg, North Carolina. Originally described as ‘an opportunity to reconnect’ the trip soon developed into a ‘living funeral’ as Byrd and his friends grappled with Byrd’s terminal prognosis. As he visited his favorite New York haunts and met with friends, Byrd wrestled with the decision to end his chemotherapy upon his return home.
Byrd’s trip to New York was arranged and coordinated by his friend Michelle Best. They met in 1999 and graduated from the Actor’s Studio in New York in 2011. When learning about his diagnosis in April 2015, Michelle wanted to reunite Byrd with the city he loved. Crowdfunding over $5,000 from family and friends, Michelle planned a weekend trip for Byrd in New York, the city where he spent years as a stage actor before moving abroad to perform in the Lion King and Dr. Who.
The fundraising was announced on Indiegogo. I approached Michelle and asked if I could accompany and document her and Byrd’s seven-day travels around New York City. Although he looked forward to the trip Byrd was anxious. By August he had already undergone one round of cancer and was halfway through his second round. By then he had lost nearly 100lbs. In order to help him navigate the city Byrd invited his sister Rosie to join him.
Over the course of the trip met friends that he’d hadn’t seen in years, eaten food he’s never experienced before and saw the newest Broadway plays like Hamilton. However, Byrd’s trip wasn’t all he hoped it would be. Throughout the trip Byrd complained of exhaustion. Although he finished his second chemotherapy session, he was still feeling the after effects. A ferry excursion to Brooklyn left him sick. Throughout the course of the trip Byrd wrestled with a decision to not continue his chemotherapy.
During the trip Byrd spoke about his hopes and dreams, his missed opportunities, his biggest regrets. Byrd was very open about his depression. He was particularly depressed about returning home to North Carolina. His return home wasn’t in his original plans. After living abroad for years and performing on stage in Germany and The United Kingdom, Byrd returned home broke and divorced in 2010. Byrd called the trip a welcome distraction. As Byrd and Michelle said their goodbyes they promised that they’d keep in touch. Byrd ultimately decided not to continue chemotherapy. He died in November 2015.