

# The Absence is Always Present

a deeply personal dramatic feature film  
by Jason Charnick



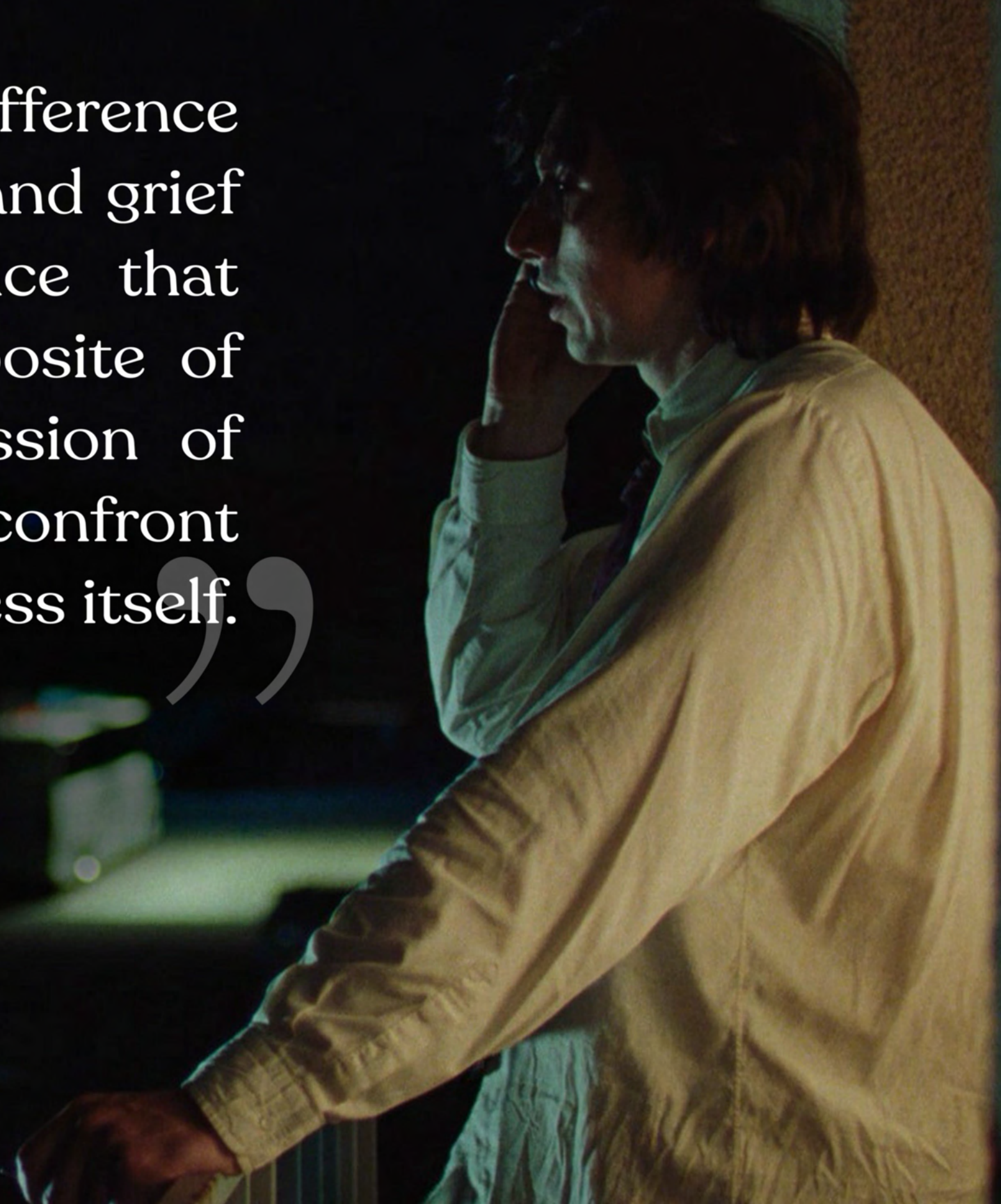


## **Log Line**

After an inexplicable tragedy results in the stillbirth of their daughter, a pair of would-be parents take opposite journeys processing the loss as they struggle to find new meaning and purpose in their lives.

“(And here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.”

JOAN DIDION



A woman with short brown hair, wearing a light-colored cardigan over a blue top and dark pants, is holding a young child in her arms. They are in a living room with a window in the background covered by white blinds. A coffee table is visible in the foreground. The overall mood is somber and intimate.

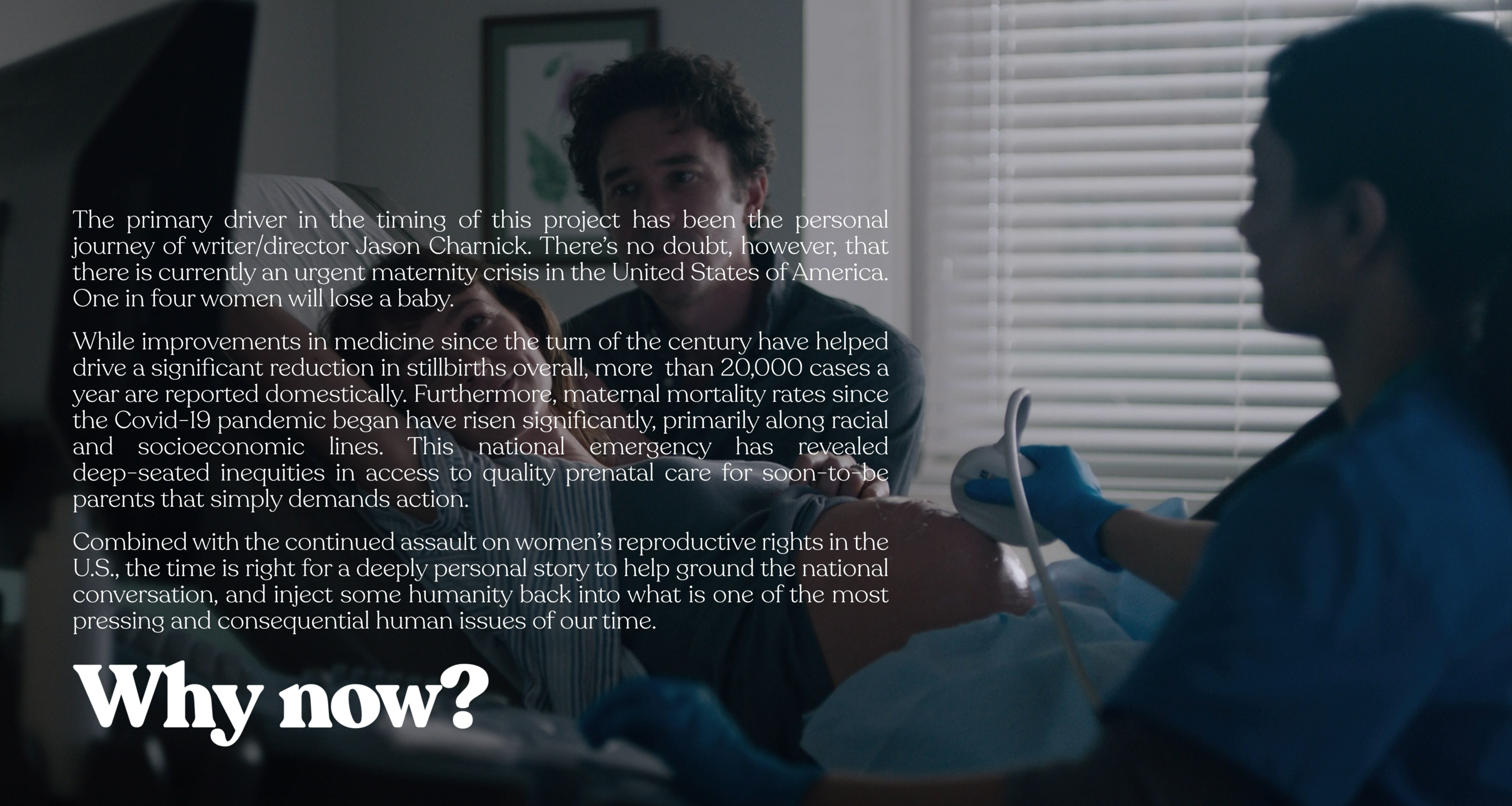
# Director's Statement

I can't tell you how difficult the development of this project has been. Each step an unfathomable journey in and of itself. Every keystroke, every Google search, even something as innocuous as a free web site trial, brings me back to that day in 2017, a gloomy June day much like today as I write this.

A week earlier, they were having trouble finding her heartbeat, she had gotten turned away from the ultrasound. But on that day they couldn't find one at all, and life as we knew it evaporated in an instant.

That was only a few months before the world premiere of my first feature *Getting Over* at SXSW 2018. In the interim, the path to peace has been anything but straight. I knew I needed to tell this story of a club no one wants to join, and I knew it would be an important aspect of my healing process. And another personal documentary was out of the question.

It took me 6 years to start, 6 months to write, and the loss of my maternal uncle to give me the perspective necessary to finish. I am beyond grateful to all those who have supported me to this point. After a ton of anxiety and anguish, I'm delighted, and a little nervous, to share the next stage in the evolution of *The Absence is Always Present*. For Shelby.

A woman is lying in a hospital bed, looking up at a doctor who is wearing blue gloves and holding a fetal Doppler. A man stands behind her, looking on with a concerned expression. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from a window with blinds in the background.

The primary driver in the timing of this project has been the personal journey of writer/director Jason Charnick. There's no doubt, however, that there is currently an urgent maternity crisis in the United States of America. One in four women will lose a baby.

While improvements in medicine since the turn of the century have helped drive a significant reduction in stillbirths overall, more than 20,000 cases a year are reported domestically. Furthermore, maternal mortality rates since the Covid-19 pandemic began have risen significantly, primarily along racial and socioeconomic lines. This national emergency has revealed deep-seated inequities in access to quality prenatal care for soon-to-be parents that simply demands action.

Combined with the continued assault on women's reproductive rights in the U.S., the time is right for a deeply personal story to help ground the national conversation, and inject some humanity back into what is one of the most pressing and consequential human issues of our time.

# Why now?

A man and a woman are sitting in a gym, looking somber. The man is on the right, looking towards the camera with a serious expression. The woman is on the left, looking away from the camera. In the background, there are other people and a sign that says "THE 30s".

# Story

Doug and Shelley Hensley are a happily married couple expecting their first child. On a routine obstetrician visit, they receive the devastating news that their daughter no longer has a heartbeat. Forced to endure the stillbirth of their first child, Doug and Shelley embark on conflicting journeys of grief and healing as they slowly drift apart.

Doug lets his mounting anger shatter every relationship he has. He becomes estranged from his brother Zach, leaving him unable to maintain a relationship with his young niece, Amy. Shelley meanwhile finds support and encouragement from Laurie Samuels, a popular online figure in the infertility and baby loss community.

When a series of increasingly violent outbursts leads to Doug's incarceration, Shelley returns to her childhood home to spend time with her mother. With Laurie's help, Shelley starts a foundation dedicated to supporting others experiencing all forms of pregnancy and infant loss, while Doug continues his unfortunate downward spiral.

Sharing one final moment alone before her first large-scale foundation event, Doug possibly finds a path toward peace while Shelley continues to flourish with her newfound purpose in life.

# Themes

Writer/Director Jason Charnick first learned of psychologist Erik Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development in college where he earned a psychology degree at Boston University. He found it to be a compelling analysis of humanity and he carried this framework with him through his adult life.

Erikson's theory built upon Sigmund Freud's earlier work by including biological and sociological components to human development. Erikson posited that as an individual advances through the eight stages of life, they need to successfully negotiate various conflicting forces in order to best navigate future stages. Stages that are not positively resolved may cause a person difficulty in overcoming future crises, increasing anxiety and cognitive dissonance as we age.

These conflicts between our own psychological needs and our social environment are universal, unfaltering and uniquely suited to dramatic exploration.

Generativity vs. Stagnation

Ego Integrity vs. Despair

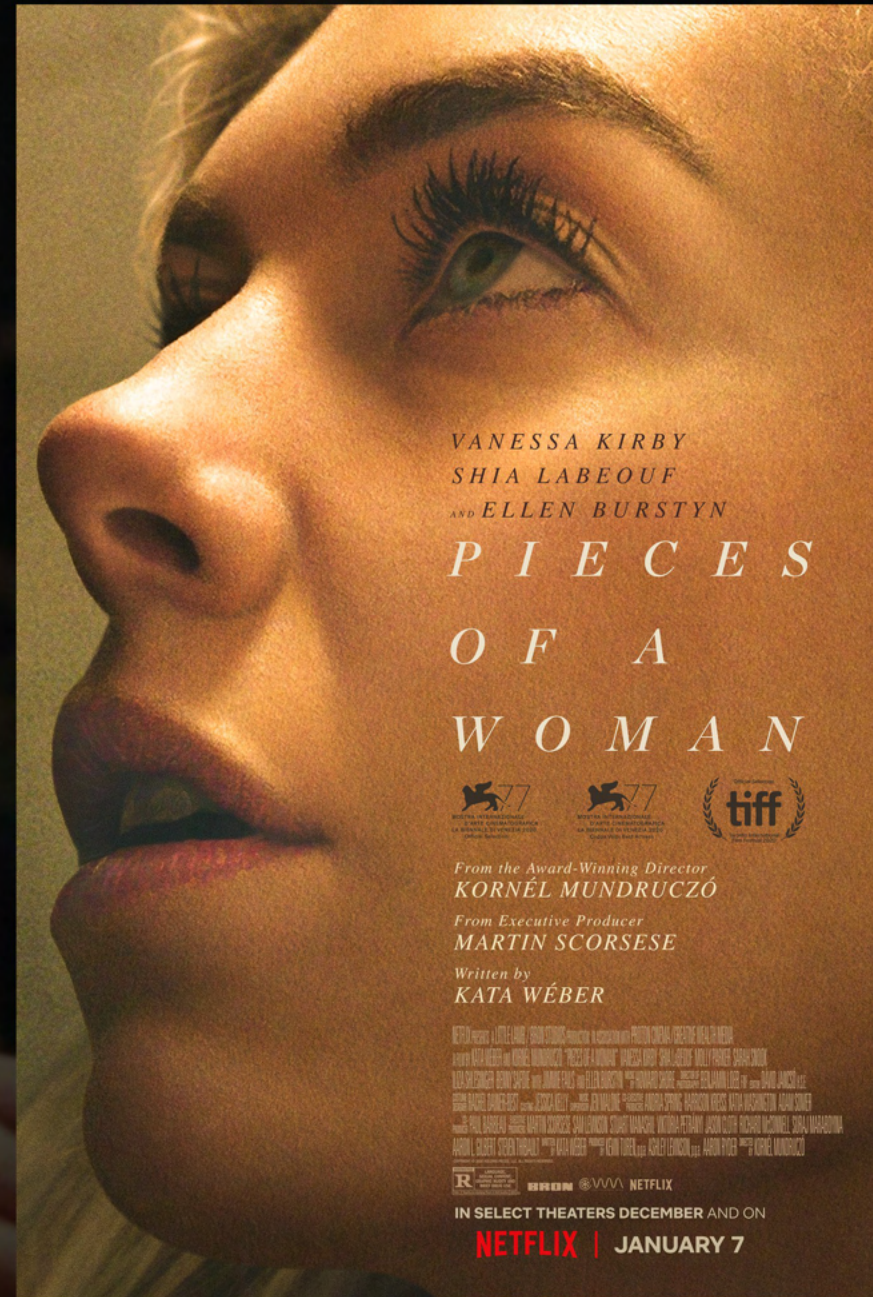
*(The last two of psychologist Erik Erikson's eight psychosocial stages of human development)*

- Grief & Loss
- Friendship & Parenthood
- Aging & Purpose
- Wellness & Healing

# Comps



**MARRIAGE STORY**  
dir. NOAH BAUMBACH



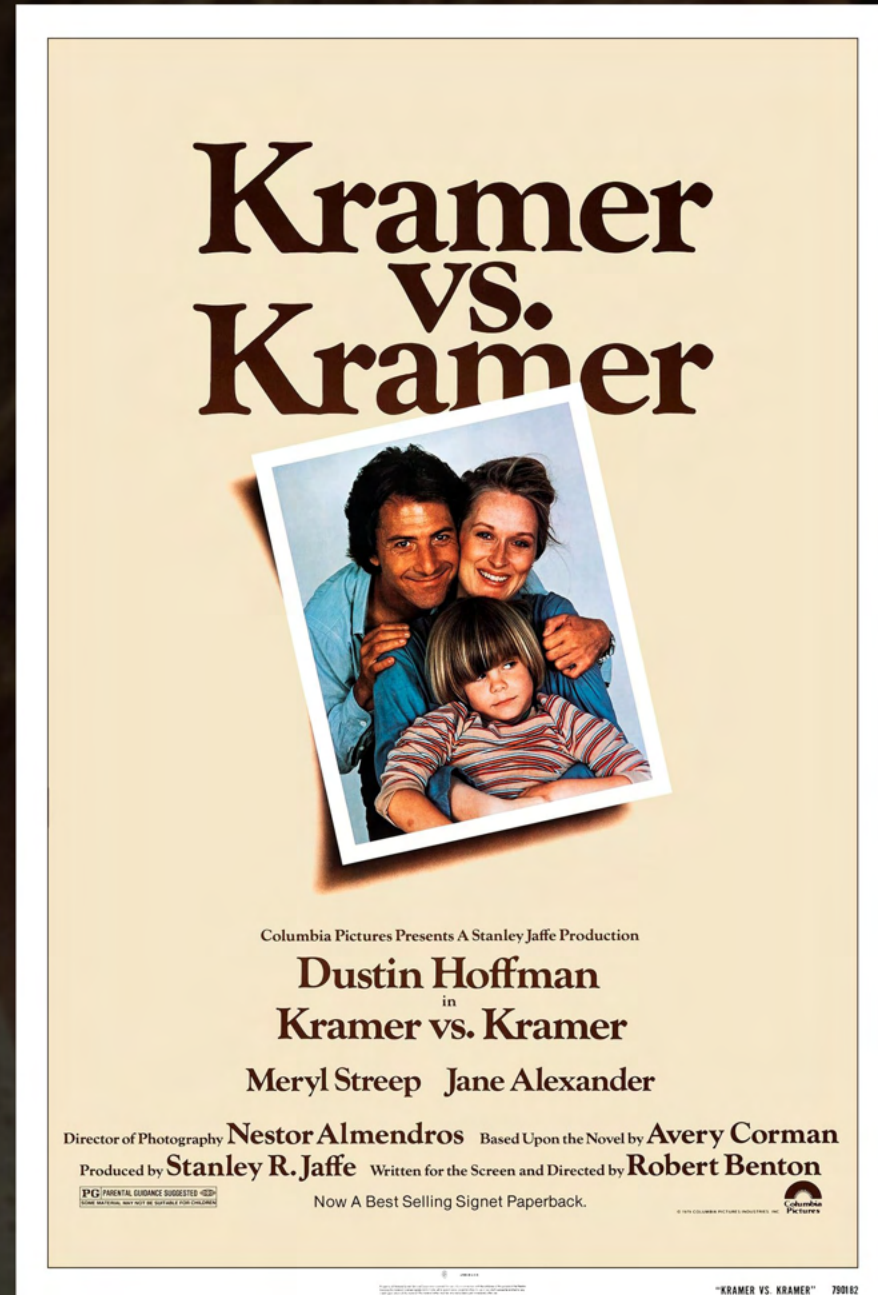
**PIECES OF A WOMAN**  
dir. KORNÉL MUNDRUCZÓ



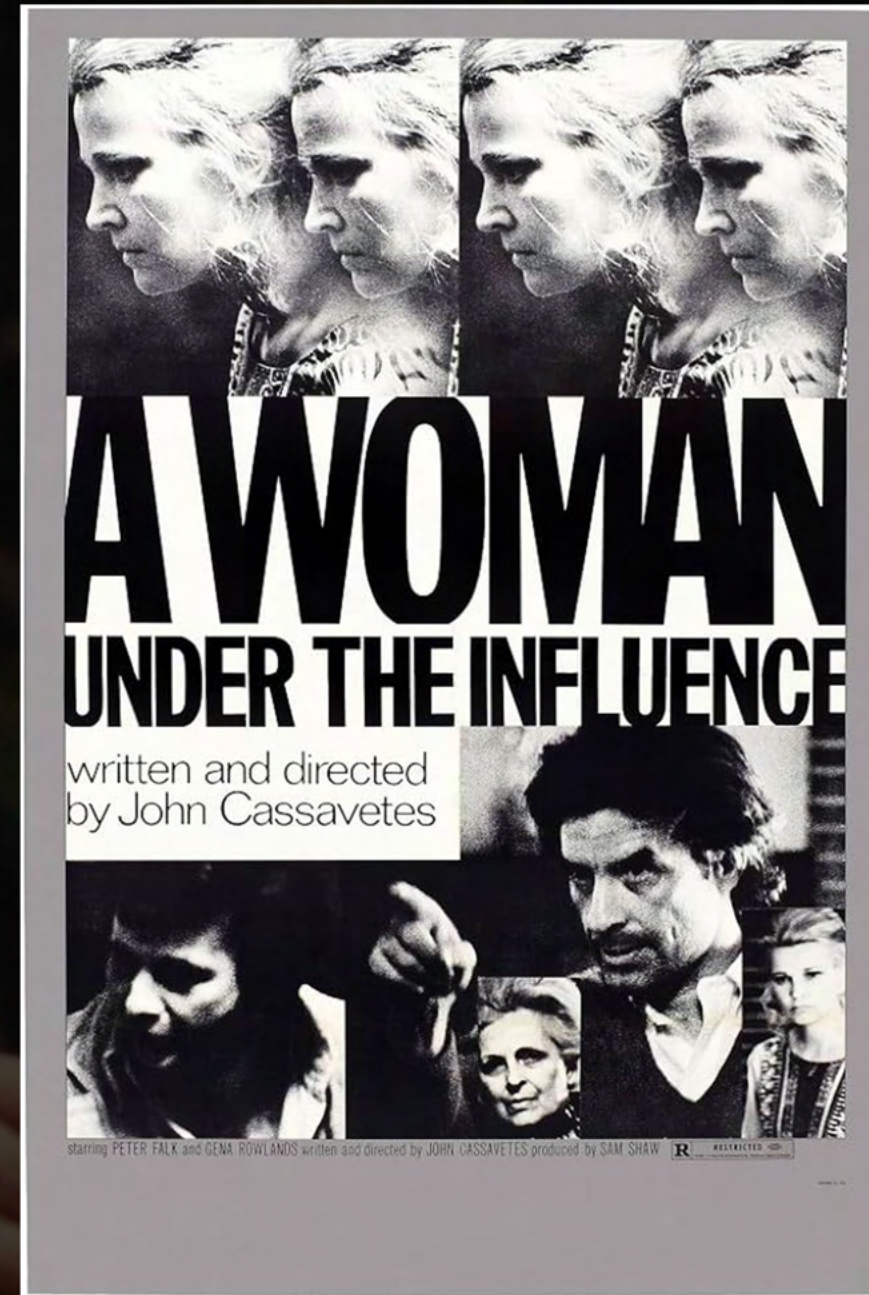
**MANCHESTER BY THE SEA**  
dir. KENNETH LONERGAN



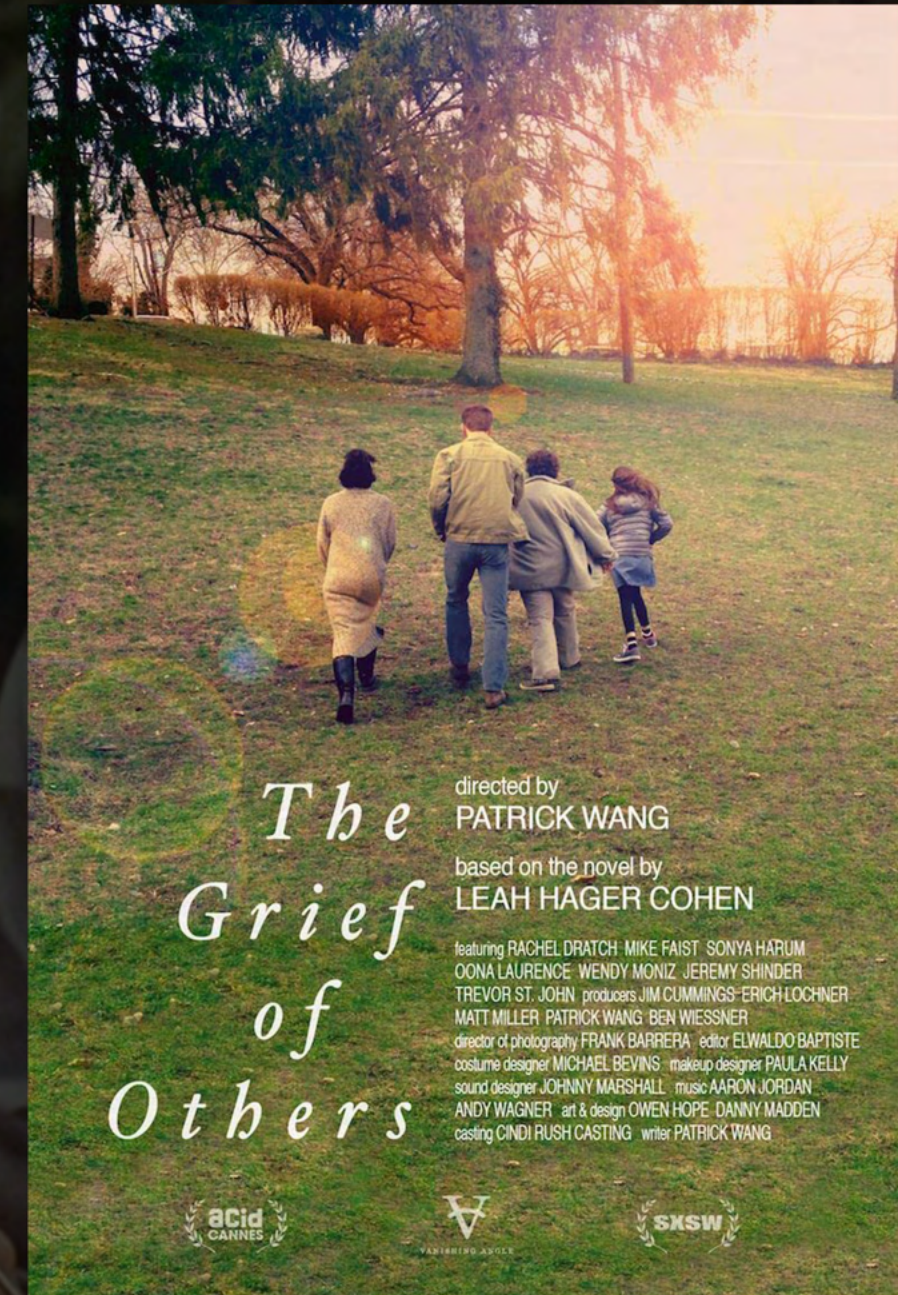
# Comps



**KRAMER VS. KRAMER**  
dir. ROBERT BENTON



**A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE**  
dir. JOHN CASSAVETES



**THE GRIEF OF OTHERS**  
dir. PATRICK WANG

# Team Absence

## JASON CHARNICK WRITER / DIRECTOR



Jason is a native of the Bronx, New York and a 25+ year veteran of the entertainment industry. Moving to Los Angeles in 1999, he cut his teeth in the post department on the early James Franco film, *AT ANY COST*. In 2002, he partnered up with writer/director Peter Sullivan (*SECRET OBSESSION*, *FATAL AFFAIR*) to produce the wildly successful short film, *NIGHT SURF*, one in a long line of Stephen King's Dollar Baby film projects.

In 2004, he was responsible for creating stop-motion post workflows for the popular TV show *ROBOT CHICKEN*. Working in branding and promotions since 2006, he's been involved with recent blockbusters *THE BATMAN*, *TOP GUN: MAVERICK*, *NOPE* and *BULLET TRAIN* as well as highly-rated TV shows *THE VOICE* and *THE PROBLEM WITH JON STEWART*. Jason has also post supervised main title sequences for multiple films with Happy Madison Productions including *GROWN UPS 1 & 2*, *YOU DON'T MESS WITH THE ZOHAN* and *CLICK*.

Never to stray far from his indie roots, he spent time during these blockbusters to write and direct his own shorts, as well as his debut feature, *GETTING OVER*, which had its World Premiere at SXSW 2018. It also won the Audience Award for Best Documentary at that year's Indigo Moon Film Festival in Fayetteville, NC and is in the top one-percent of independent films released in the last five years to make a profit.

More recently, Jason has already had multiple successful film projects including *THE 29 PALMS COLLECTION* and *LONG BEACH LIFTED*, a fully-licensed collaboration with the legendary hip-hop artist and Long Beach native, Snoop Dogg. Jason is committed to helping create sustainable careers for filmmakers and every project he develops, especially *THE ABSENCE IS ALWAYS PRESENT*, is dedicated to the memory of his daughter Shelby.

# LAUREN IUNGERICH

## EXECUTIVE PRODUCER



Lauren's journey to Netflix showrunner began as an assistant to producer Arnold Kopelson on *U.S. MARSHALS* and *A PERFECT MURDER*. She was eventually hired to the writing staff of ABC Family's *10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU*. In 2011, she created and helmed the MTV sitcom, *AWKWARD*. It ran for five full seasons and The New York Times called it "the smartest, freshest, most moving sitcom of 2011" and it won the 2013 People's Choice Award for Favorite Cable Comedy.

From 2018-2021, she was the showrunner, director, producer, and writer for the wildly popular Netflix show, *ON MY BLOCK*. In 2018, the show was announced to be Netflix's most binge-watched series and Google's tenth most top-trended search in all of television. The show also won the Teen Choice Award for the best "Breakout Show" of 2018. In 2020, Time Magazine called it one of TV's Ten Best Teen Dramas of All Time.

Lauren recently directed the pilot of the Netflix limited series *BOO, BITCH* that she co-created and executive produced. In 2023, she also executive produced, co-created and was showrunner for the Netflix series *FREERIDGE*, an *ON MY BLOCK* spin-off, directing the pilot episode as well.

# CHARLIE TYRELL

## TITLE ANIMATOR

Charlie is a Canadian filmmaker whose work has screened at festivals such as Sundance, SXSW, TIFF, Hot Docs, DOC NYC, Tribeca, and many more. Additionally, his work has been presented online on the New York Times' Op-Docs platform as well as The Atlantic, Vimeo Staff Picks, CBC Gem, Short of the Week, and Topic.

His autobiographical short, *MY DEAD DAD'S PORNO TAPES*, was shortlisted for the 2019 Academy Awards and won the Canadian Screen Award for best documentary short as well as the Cinema Eye Honors Award. His subsequent film, *BROKEN ORCHESTRA*, screened at Sundance 2020 and won awards at the Florida Film Festival and the Philadelphia Film Festival.

Recently, he completed work directing the Visual Segments for the upcoming HBO Documentary film, *GREAT PHOTO, LOVELY LIFE* from director Amanda Mustard. Friends have described his work as "funny with a bit of sadness on the fringes" and he has taken an oath not to eat another hot dog until the Toronto Blue Jays win the World Series.



# Director's Vision

*The Absence is Always Present* is an unvarnished depiction of real life with complex, adult situations that strike at the heart of the human condition. Shot in the shadows with a murky and subdued color palette, grief itself becomes a distinct character, while composition and a limited depth of field suggest a sense of perpetual isolation and despondency.

*Absence* holds a mirror up to current American society. The majority of the film is firmly rooted in reality, with natural dialogue, frank, honest conversations and an unapologetic authenticity. Animated opening titles and an elaborate dream sequence mid-film allows further exploration of the story's darker themes in more experimental terms.

*The Absence is Always Present* is a character-driven, actor dependent film that seeks to emulate the gritty, emotional dramas of the '70s American New Wave and the indie film renaissance of the '90s. Great care will be required in casting to find the right combination of players with the bravery to tackle the subject matter and the talent to fully immerse the viewer in the story.



A man with a beard and a woman are sitting in the front of a car. The man is on the left, looking towards the woman on the right. The woman is looking forward. The car's interior, including the steering wheel and dashboard, is visible. The background shows a road and some greenery.

# Extended Strategy

*The Absence is Always Present* as a concept goes further than the feature film. There are multitudes of possibilities available to accentuate and augment the primary film in new and exciting ways. Writer/director Jason Charnick's wife is currently writing a memoir as a companion piece to the movie, chronicling her real-life experiences from a uniquely female perspective.

Charnick has also been supplementing the feature film with photography, animation and micro-films, each illustrating his own personal journey with grief. These pieces are current available to collect and own across multiple popular blockchain networks with proceeds funding project development. And using his same personal filmmaking approach from his award-winning debut feature *Getting Over*, Charnick has been documenting his writing and development process in a series of online video blogs available across several popular social media platforms.

We also intend to activate the community for more than just emotional support. Through creative collaborations with other talented artists, we can offer personalized keepsakes to commemorate the loss of a loved one that can also benefit the project. There are other potential avenues for community engagement, including end credit sponsorships and other corporate support through grant opportunities.

There is also a strong charitable component to the project. In partnership with Forever Footprints, a southern California organization whose mission is to assist families who have suffered a pregnancy or infant loss, we can increase outreach and education on this deeply important issue. A portion of the proceeds of any crowdfunded effort will go to support Forever Footprints' mission.

“Well-written script that deals with sincere and affecting themes. The characters are well drawn and I'm hooked into knowing more about them and their story. These are the kind of movies we need to see being made.”

“I was immediately engrossed in the script; despite its complex subject matter, it's written with elegance, and filled with Jason's genuine life experience.”

“This resonates with such personal depth and sincerity. It's masterfully written, always engaging without becoming tedious, reflecting just how essential this story was for Jason to convey—his passion is evident throughout.”

“This film is beautifully written and has strong commercial viability as both a standalone short and a full length feature.”

“This seems like a deeply personal story that can only be told by the author. While complex in nature, I believe that Jason can add the type of heart and nuance that will make this project great!”

**Buzz**

“Parents and couples will connect with this in ways that are as painful as they are uplifting. There’s lots of great moments in this script I’d love to see on screen.”

“I was instantly drawn into the details of each moment and the roller coaster of emotions felt by each character. These types of stories are important and I appreciate seeing the vulnerability through the father's lens.”

“It's refreshing and unique to see this story told from a male point of view, as we often only hear women's points of view in situations of loss.”

“Excellent writing with a very real approach to life, it delivers not what the audience wants, but what reality actually feels like.”

“The power of telling stories that are close to your heart. I think this film is going to go places and deeply impact the heart of the audience, no doubt.”

“Such an important subject to give a real vision towards. These moments are so carefully hidden in so many lives. Bringing a light to these tragedies can be a gift to so many.”

# Characters





A man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a striped shirt, sits on a brown couch in a living room. He is looking thoughtfully out a large window that shows a cityscape and mountains. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from the window. A red blanket is on the couch to the left, and a colorful patterned pillow is to the right. A coffee table with a cup and some papers is in front of him.

**DOUG HENSLEY**  
*43 years old*

Doug grew up forever the little brother in Bellevue, WA. Originally from across Lake Washington in Seattle, his computer programmer parents moved the family when Microsoft relocated their headquarters to Redmond in 1986, when Doug was only 6 years old.

He stayed in Washington for almost a decade after college, building a successful career as a local ad agency executive. He had to give Los Angeles a shot after the opportunity to work with brands on the national stage presented itself. He met Shelley his first week on the job at an orientation event organized by her company.

Unable to return to the career he once loved after the death of his daughter, Doug has been self-destructive, erratic, and rapidly spiralling downward. In this new world where not much matters, he's fighting off hitting bottom.

A woman with long, wavy, light brown hair is sitting at a desk in a cluttered office. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and has a serious expression. The desk is covered with papers, a black desk lamp is lit, and there are stacks of books and papers around her. The background wall is covered with various photos and documents.

**SHELLEY HENSLEY**  
*37 years old*

Shelley has had to endure more than her fair share of hard times throughout her life. Hailing from Waltham, MA, she lost her father to throat cancer far too early, when she was just 5 years old. Currently living in Los Angeles, she also has a sister who lives in Chicago with her husband and son.

She used to be an event planner, and met Doug a dozen years ago at one of her earliest work functions. They had been happily married for seven when they finally got pregnant after an almost unfair amount of trying. She hadn't regretted putting her career first for that long, until she lost her daughter Hope to stillbirth.

After a couple years of allowing the emptiness to take hold, she is rebuilding her life, finding a new purpose by starting the non-profit charity, Hope On The Horizon.



## **LAURIE SAMUELS**

*42 years old*

Shelley's best friend and closest confidante, they actually met on Instagram. Originally from St. Louis, MO, Laurie moved to L.A. after she lost her son, and nearly her own life, during childbirth. Convinced her loss was due to substandard care, she turned to social media to tell her story. In the process, she has become a powerful voice in the community, providing a welcoming forum for all those who have suffered to find a path toward healing.

Shelley messaged her randomly once day and it led to a fast friendship. Laurie has been instrumental in helping Shelley find the strength to push forward with Hope On The Horizon but is not through processing her own trauma. In a community often steeped in sadness, Laurie continues to be a paragon of positivity.

A photograph of comedian Zach Hensley performing stand-up in a dimly lit club. He is smiling and holding a microphone. The background is filled with warm, out-of-focus lights.

**ZACH HENSLEY**  
*46 years old*

Zach grew up as the eldest child constantly asserting his dominance over his little brother, Doug. He was already 9 years old when his family moved from Seattle, Washington to Bellevue, so he was able to adjust a little easier than Doug, but he still misses some of his oldest friends from back home. A born performer, of course he moved to Los Angeles the first moment he could after school.

Bouncing around from job to job and career to career, Zach is still hopeful for that big break as a stand-up comedian, though he's never stopped enjoying the grind. Never to take any situation too seriously, he was really looking forward to being the "fun uncle" to Doug & Shelley's child. These days, the jokes don't always come as fast and furious as they used to.

A photograph of an elderly couple, Ben and Judith Hensley, standing in a computer lab. Ben is on the left, wearing glasses and a light-colored button-down shirt. Judith is on the right, also in a light-colored button-down shirt. They are both looking towards the camera. The background shows computer monitors, desks, and large windows.

**BEN HENSLEY**  
*71 years old*

**JUDITH HENSLEY**  
*68 years old*

Ben & Judith, Doug & Zach's parents, met as classmates at the University of California, Berkeley's College of Engineering in 1975. They got married shortly after her graduation in 1977 and stayed in northern California when Ben became one of the youngest adjunct professors in Berkeley's history.

They left the academic world behind for good in 1979 when they were offered the opportunity to help a small, upstart company called Microsoft open their new headquarters. They were key members of the original Microsoft Windows development team, and their hard work literally paid dividends when the company's IPO made them instant millionaires later in 1986.

Ben & Judith did all they could to provide a comfortable upbringing for their children. Being elite programmers at a rapidly expanding software company kept them from spending more quality time with them. This led to an emotional disconnect that makes deep communication difficult to this day.



**DIANE HARRINGTON**  
*63 years old*

Diane Harrington is a model of resiliency and emotional strength. Her husband, Shelley's father, died in 1992 from throat cancer and she was left to raise her two young daughters alone in Waltham, MA. Being a single parent couldn't stop Diane from working every day at a local Italian eatery while also being an involved and inspirational mother.

Diane started as a waitress and quickly worked her way up to general manager. Her dedication to the job for over 30 years paid dividends when her boss decided to gift her Café Perugia when he finally retired. A popular and beloved figure in the community, Diane never let go of her lifelong dream to own a restaurant.

With Shelley's help, she's now on the cusp of her own grand opening, but the shadow of her granddaughter's memory looms large during this special occasion.



**SHANNON ROTH**  
*32 years old*

Shelley's younger sister Shannon has even less memory of her deceased father than Shelley, having died only a few months after her birth. She grew up in as the youngest in a house of three women, and the lack of a consistent strong male figure during her most formative years left an indelible mark, often manifesting itself in selfish, impetuous behavior.

Growing up in a working class suburb of Boston gave her a thick skin however, along with the ability to juggle being an upwardly mobile young professional with the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood.

Currently living in Chicago with her husband Greg and their 6-year-old son Josh, Shannon works for a well-known Italian Beef restaurant chain, and was very eager to help her sister with catering as she tries to get her new foundation off the ground.

A man with a beard and a grey beanie sits in the center of a room, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a green jacket over a grey t-shirt. The room is filled with rows of black chairs, some of which are occupied by other people, though they are out of focus. The lighting is soft and even.

## CASEY SHERMAN

*34 years old*

Casey Sherman is a graduate psychology student trying to find the best way to console other men suffering from the loss of a child. Combining his personal and professional paths, Casey has started running a local support group, for his own healing as much as anyone, as he works toward his pre-doctoral licensing requirement.

Casey lost his son Connor a year ago, and it took him this long to summon the strength to start the group. Paying out of pocket to rent a monthly room at the local teen center, it's been a rocky start finding willing participants. Not one to give up easily, Casey is confident that he's found his life's work.



A man with grey hair, wearing a brown blazer over a brown button-down shirt, stands in a hallway. He is holding a white coffee cup in his left hand. The hallway has a wooden handrail on the left and a door on the right. The lighting is soft and even.

**FRANKLIN LLOYD**  
*51 years old*

Franklin Lloyd might be the unluckiest man alive, and quite possibly the loneliest. Franklin has suffered the loss of nearly every woman in his life, starting with his wife and second daughter a dozen years ago, when they both died during childbirth. Their second child was a welcome surprise, coming a full 17 years after their first daughter, Taylor.

Taylor headed off to college shortly after her mom and new sister passed away, but had a difficult time adjusting to life without them. She took her own life less than a month after leaving home, leaving Franklin alone with nothing but debilitating grief.

For years, he had no outlet to bond with others who had similarly traumatic experiences, until he discovered Casey Sherman's support group. He doesn't know what the future holds but for the first time in a long time, he feels a spark that helps him get out of bed in the morning.

# Casting



ZACH HENSLEY



DOUG HENSLEY



SHELLEY HENSLEY



LAURIE SAMUELS



RAINN WILSON



DAN FOGLER



BILL HADER



JOHN KRASINSKI



JESSICA CHASTAIN



AMY ADAMS



JENNIFER HUDSON



DANIELLE BROOKS



JASON SEGEL



BRENDAN HUNT



JAMES MARSDEN



PATRICK WILSON



MELANIE LYNKEY



CAREY MULLIGAN



LUPITA NYONG'O



ISSA RAE



**BEN HENSLEY**



**JUDITH HENSLEY**



**DIANE HARRINGTON**



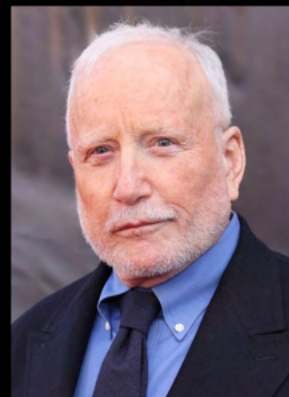
**SHANNON ROTH**



**CASEY SHERMAN**



**FRANKLIN LLOYD**



**RICHARD DREYFUSS**



**JAMIE LEE CURTIS**



**JULIANNE MOORE**



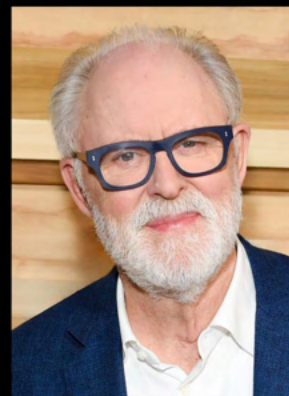
**SAOIRSE RONAN**



**DANIEL RADCLIFFE**



**BRENDAN FRASER**



**JOHN LITHGOW**



**SHARON STONE**



**DIANE LANE**



**RACHEL BROSNAHAN**



**PAUL WALTER HAUSER**



**BOB ODENKIRK**



**MICHAEL GASTON**



**JODIE FOSTER**



**GEENA DAVIS**



**SHAILENE WOODLEY**



**ZAC EFRON**



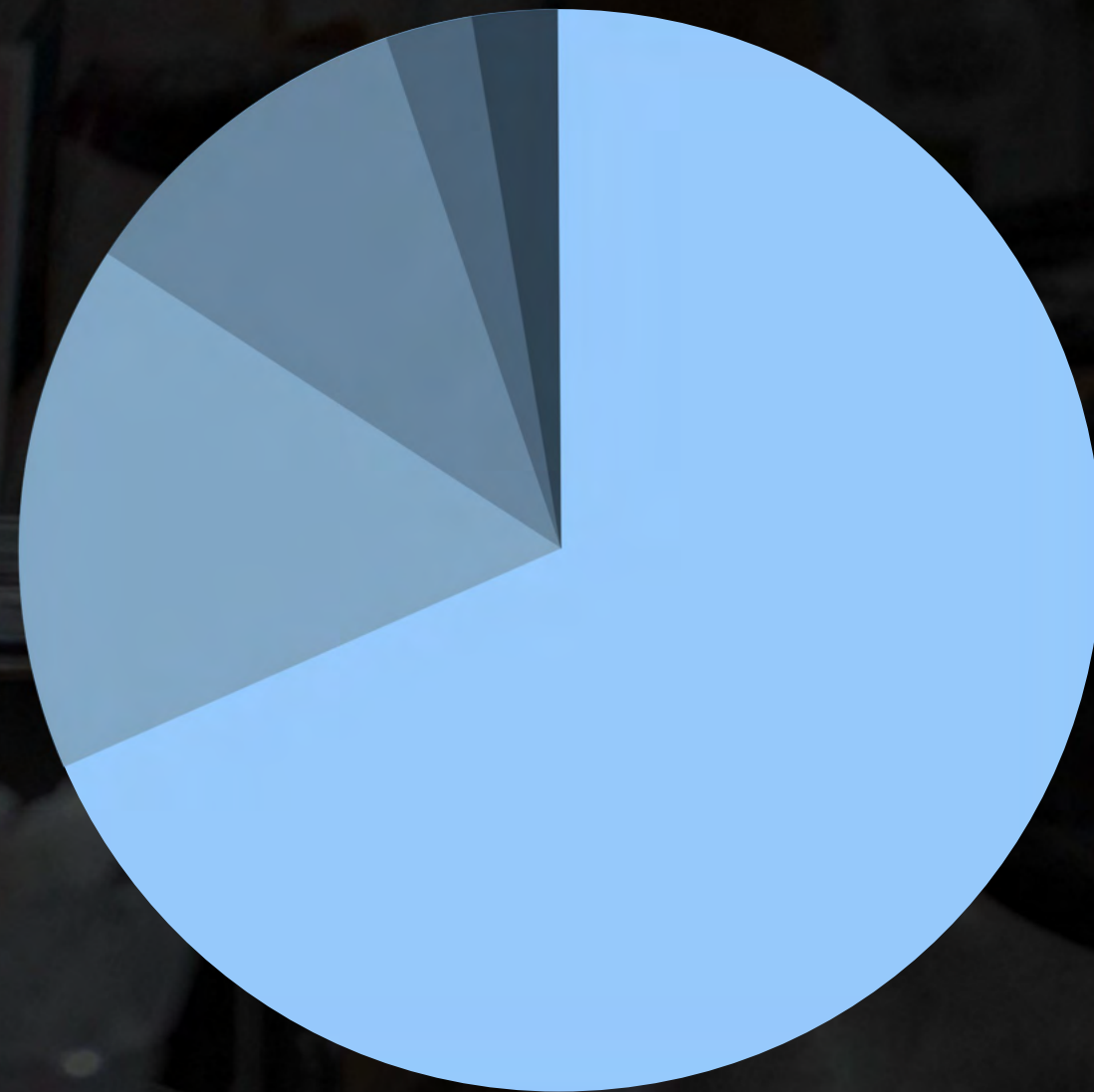
**THOMAS JANE**

# Inclusivity

The *Absence is Always Present* is an unflinching, realistic depiction of what it's like to live when your baby doesn't. Pregnancy and infant loss affects aspiring parents across all racial and socio-economic lines.

If the film is to be held up as a mirror to American society, then it needs to look like it, both in front of and behind the camera. The chart at the left breaks down the characters of the film along racial lines. While not an exact representation of the current makeup of the United States, it's a very close approximation of the actual population breakdown of the country.

Representation behind the camera is as important as what makes its way to the silver screen. While the film is based on the lived experience of writer/director Jason Charnick, having a diverse group of voices collaborating on the production is still paramount. We will continue to strive to build a balanced team of both men and women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds.



- **White 68%**
- **Black 16%**
- **Hispanic 11%**
- **Asian 3%**
- **Middle Eastern 3%**

# Location Concepts



**DOUG & SHELLEY'S HOUSE**  
*Private Residence*  
*Mar Vista, Calif.*



# MEDICAL CENTER BUILDING

*Prenatal Care Clinic  
Los Angeles, Calif.*





**GIGGLES ON GREEN**  
*Comedy Club  
Pasadena, Calif.*



**MASTERSON//McBRIDE**  
*Advertising Agency*  
*Santa Monica, Calif.*





**BEN & JUDITH'S HOUSE**  
*Private Residence*  
*Bellevue, Wash.*

**UNION STATION**  
*Los Angeles, Calif.*

**CENTRAL COAST**  
*Santa Barbara, Calif.*

**COAST STARLIGHT**  
*Scenic Railroad Route*  
*West Coast, United States*

**BAY AREA BREAKERS**  
*San Francisco, Calif.*

**OLYMPIC MOUNTAINS**  
*Pacific Northwest, Wash.*





**CAFÉ PERUGIA**  
*Neighborhood Restaurant*  
*Waltham, Mass.*



# Thank you.

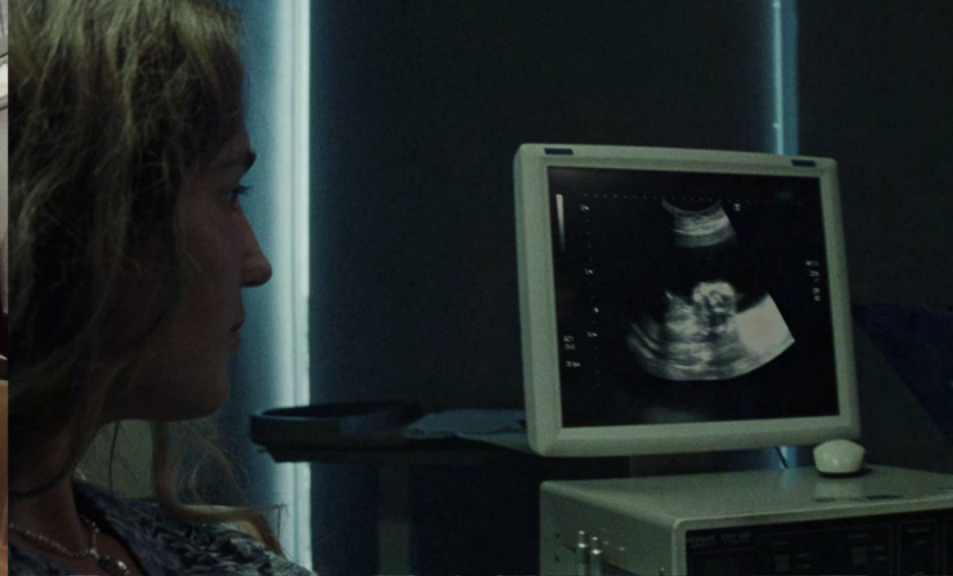
For more information, please contact:

**Jason Charnick**  
**[jason@upstartfilmcollective.com](mailto:jason@upstartfilmcollective.com)**



[niftyfilm.io](http://niftyfilm.io) // [upstartfilmcollective.com](http://upstartfilmcollective.com) // [absence.movie](http://absence.movie)





The films featured in this deck include *Amores Perros*, *Beautiful Boy*, *Blue Bayou*, *Dan in Real Life*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *The Girl on the Train*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Liberal Arts*, *The Lodge*, *Manchester by the Sea*, *Marriage Story*, *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, *Ozark*, *She Said*, *The Squid and the Whale*, & *The Worst Person in the World*.