

Awakening death

By Ruth Ostrow

MY favourite scene in the fabulous movie *The Weather Man* is where one of the lead characters, played by Michael Caine, throws a wake while he is still alive.

Told he has a terminal condition and will be dead within months, the ageing novelist agrees to his family's request that he gathers together his nearest and dearest and joins them at his own mock funeral service. He sits wiping his eyes as his loved ones praise his life's achievements, and hundreds of people come to pay their respects as he watches on.

I have just witnessed Hollywood in reality. Former president of the Byron Bay Chamber of Commerce, Tony Narracott, showed that often life – or in this case, death – can imitate art.

A large group of people gathered recently to celebrate Tony's "a-wake-ning" following news that he is dying of cancer.

More than 300 colleagues and friends, dressed as angels, devils or just as dear supporters, came to watch what seemed to be a cross between a wake and a roast.

There were comedians on stage giving the man a hard time, there were old friends paying homage, there was one fellow dressed as God on the podium calculating good and bad deeds and finally deciding Tony was doomed, whereupon two scantily dressed women with devil's horns escorted him to another room where they pole-danced for him.

But, given that proceeds from the night were going to charity, I think he scored a few brownie points "up there".

Tony, a youngish 72, was beaming as people approached him during the evening, offering thanks and telling him how much he meant to them. One man, a filmmaker who was recording the event for an international documentary on alternative ways to experience death, said it was one of the most profound and important nights he had ever gone to.

Unlike in the East, where death is celebrated and acknowledged from birth, we in the West are death-denying.

I heard a sad story about a cancer victim who died recently in total denial – not even seeing her family near the end, for fear of admitting the truth; leaving loved ones in considerable trauma for the enforced silence.

In stark contrast, a joyful Tony Narracott said: "I can't begin to describe how amazing it all was!" as he lapped up a lifetime of love and laughter. Given that we've all got to go sometime, this may be the start of a brave new trend.

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