

# A Wider Angle: the evolution and future of disability film festivals

By David on December 4, 2017

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UK-based disabled journalist and Agent of Change at Theatre Royal Stratford East, Kate Lovell explores the development and international outlook of disability film festivals from around the world, considering issues of access, agency and representation.



Oska Bright Film Festival. Photograph: Paul Mansfield

November is an exciting month for disability arts: disability history month means there are often performances and exhibitions by disabled artists. But there is one feature on the calendar which grows in name, popularity and reach with each iteration. Every other November brings us the [Oska Bright Film Festival](#). Now in its eighth incarnation, the festival is produced by Carousel and showcases films created by learning disabled artists from across the globe. Although a relative infant compared to long-running festivals such as [Superfest in San Francisco](#), which has been running since 1970, it is fast becoming highly regarded and hotly anticipated in disability film circuits.

Filmmaker and disability film festival connoisseur, [Ray Jacobs](#), reflects on what makes Oska Bright such a strong presence on the scene in such a short space of time:

“Despite visiting festivals all around the world I am yet to be involved with a festival that is so inclusive, that is led so well by a team of learning-disabled producers, presenters and artists. The festival under the umbrella of Carousel works tirelessly all year round to share its festival films with audiences all across the UK and beyond. Its current focus on films that explore sexuality and gender from a learning disability perspective is ground breaking.”

The question of perspective and who is leading on the curation of a film festival is crucial to its reception by disabled artists, and furthermore, how non-disabled people perceive disability focused films. Jacobs elaborates on the importance of this:

“A festival is a mouthpiece for my films. My films are collaborations with disabled people about their lives and the stories that fill them. When a festival is led by disabled people there is an immediacy and purpose in the selection, programming and presentation driving towards both strong messages and open considered questions. Lots of disabled people at a festival, shows that strong connections with local disability community is being made and access issues are a priority and being met.”

Oska Bright is especially significant in its commitment to giving a genuine platform for learning-disabled filmmakers to showcase their work, and with a global reach, with work from Europe and North America in the 2017 festival. Learning disabled voices are perhaps most at risk of being manipulated by non-disabled film-makers with a medical model agenda. This is what makes Carousel and Junk TV's commitment to ensuring the festival is entirely curated by a learning disabled artistic team crucial to its authenticity and success.



Sell out crowds at this year's Oska Bright Festival. Photograph: Paul Mansfield

Hollywood's misappropriation of disabled stories continues en force, most recently with films such as *Wonder* and the vehemently protested *Me Before You*, where disability is used as a tool to elicit feelings of pity, or the long-loathed inspiration porn of films like *The Theory of Everything*, where the audience are invited to be voyeurs to the miseries of a disabled life. Disability film festivals are crucial to counter the mainstream hijacking of disabled culture.

Michael Achtman, artist for [disabled-led production company, filmpro](#) recalls his best fest:

"My favourite festival experience was Superfest in San Francisco / Berkeley. They've been at it for 30+ years – they have a strong disabled-led focus, a fantastic connection with their savvy local audience, and a political outlook that they call Disability 2.0, which goes beyond traditional pity-inspiration modes of representation and into stories that offer a more sophisticated and authentic look at Deaf and disabled people's lives. The

majority of festivals in Europe still seem to be focused on films about disability (rather than work by disabled filmmakers) and can sometimes slip into charity model.”

What makes California’s Superfest especially stand out is its commitment not just to disabled artists, but the disabled audience experience, which Jacobs gives testament to:

“This festival is unique in its partnership with Lighthouse for the Blind and its commitment to accessibility in experiencing the films. All films are shown with audio description to the whole audience. This really gets filmmakers thinking more about audio description and the best ways to use it as part of a film rather than just an add on. It is perhaps one of the most radical disability film festivals and a true celebration of diversity.”

There are also some strong representatives of the European disability film festival scene, as Achtman notes:

“The best I’ve experienced is [Look and Roll in Basel](#). Gerhard Protschka, the artistic director, is an avid and discerning curator – he’s developed a network of screenings and festivals across German-speaking Europe to promote disability film and access. This year, he coordinated the first sidebar programme of disability film at [FilmFest Dresden](#), and in that way is making inroads into the mainstream.”

The cinematic landscape is ever shifting in the world of disability film festivals, as some open, others close. But there is no doubt that the up-and-coming festivals are building on the shoulders of disability arts veterans, such as [Julie McNamara](#), co-founder of one of the most prominent festivals, London Disability Film Festival:

“There were 55 disability festivals engaged in screening films created by Deaf/disabled artists in 2008, when our London Disability Film Festival (co-founded with Caglar Kimyoncu) closed 10 years after it was created. Many of those festivals were brief stars that burned brightly and swiftly died. Nowadays, I would choose Oska Bright film festival as one of my all-time favourites alongside [Picture This...International Disability Film Festival](#), in its 17th year in Calgary. **As one of the most creative in both context and programming I’d highlight [Movie Monday, based at Eric Martin Hospital, Vancouver Island](#) run by Bruce Saunders.”**

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Award-winning [visually-impaired writer and actor, Alex Bulmer](#), reflects on her experiences in film:

“I have been involved with disability film festivals for twenty years, starting with London International Disability Film Festival in 1997, Melbourne Australia, and the Toronto International Film Festival, called Abilities Festival, in 1998. Simply from my non-academic or effectively researched perspective, I think the form is more accessible than some other forms of performance, and lends itself better to emerging talent. In order to reach as wide an audience as film can achieve, a live performance would need to travel the world: both costly and extremely challenging in terms of access for a disabled performer.

Canada continues its history of disability film festivals with [ReelAbilities in Toronto](#), which will have its next festival in May 2018, with submissions now open. Bulmer also discusses the importance of disabled-led film work in a wider context, of its benefits for working disabled artists, as well as the message it conveys to the world outside of disability arts:

“As a blind actor myself, I am far more comfortable on a film set shooting scenes than managing the issues presented by stages with small exits and entrances and four foot drops to the audience. Cinema art is more flexible in terms of form (outside of commercial feature forms); it welcomes short pieces of work and respects this as a legitimate art form. And let’s not underestimate the sensorial impact of cinema – larger than life: wheelchair users, sign language centre screen, blind characters with canes and big voices sends quite a powerful message, doesn’t it?”

In London this month, the sixth edition of the [Together! Disability Film Festival](#) takes place, with a number of UK, European and world premieres. Together! 2017 Film Festival has a large international focus, despite retaining a grass-roots feel. In contrast to Oska Bright, Together! prides itself on being a cross-impairment film festival.

Intersectionality is, potentially, a useful way forward for disability film festivals to find their feet with a wider audience, but without compromising on artistic intention. The LGBTQ+ strand of this year’s Oska Bright is a notable example of this innovation. By opening up to a wider angle, disability film festivals can, hopefully, discover routes that allow them to find funding and audiences beyond the inner circles of the disability arts scene and allow them to grow, rather than fade away before they have time to flourish.