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### **Introduction**

My name is Rick Randall and I am the Artistic Director and founder of *The Other Film Festival*, Australia's only disability film festival.

I am here because I believe in the transformational power of art and I believe in social change.

### **Communal Storytelling**

Let me start at the beginning: What is art and why is it important?

I'll be bold and tell you exactly what art is. It is the human act of communicating an experience or idea.

It arises from the human desire to express oneself. It arises from the desire to be known and it is linked with the urge to know the experience of the other.

It is a desire to be visible. It is a basic existential human need.

And by the way, human activities like shopping, voting and attending conferences have been around for less than 10,000 years!

Art. However, has been around for around 200,000 years

Why is art important? Well, it is an act. It is a fundamental act of communication. It is a communication of an experience. And as you know, the experience of another person is always hidden to you, except what they can convey to you. It is an attempt to connect with other, to be less alone, to be visible.

So, art in its many forms has been around for 200,000 years and the most powerful artforms are those that take place with a group. Not just for an individual, but for a group.

Think of your own experiences of being told a story around a campfire, or going to a rock concert or a drumming concert by Dulsori. Think of the last time you sat in a cinema with friends.

The most powerful form of story telling is where it is told to a group.

Why?

It is powerful because you know that story is being heard by others as you hear it. We are witnesses to each others experience. It connects us.

Cinema participates in the historic traditions of communal storytelling, this is why cinema has endured in the face of incredible technological developments (think of what YouTube offers!), because we have a communal experience.

We can access videos anytime night or day on our iPods, we watch DVD's on our laptops anywhere. But they do not have the power of sitting in a cinema, with other people in the darkness, sharing that story. It is group voyeurism.

It is a particularly powerful experience if you see your own experiences reflected back at you from the screen.

Why is this important?

It is particularly important that ALL members of a community can have this powerful experience.

### **The Other Film Festival**

Today, I would like to talk about how *The Other Film Festival* responds to the lack of visibility of people with a disability on our screens and to the barriers to inclusion and participation as consumers of screen culture. This is a festival with a clear agenda of pursuing social change. The festival is dedicated to addressing issues of exclusion by screening contemporary cinema concerned with the lived experience of disability.

By way of background, I am also a documentary director and community artist. Over the past 25 years I have worked with young people, residents of public housing, people with physical, intellectual and psychological disabilities, people in custodial settings, indigenous Australians and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

*The Other Film Festival* is presented by Arts Access Victoria and it screens contemporary cinema that explores the experience of disability and aims to provide a universally accessible experience of going to the cinema for all patrons.

Arts Access is one of Australia's leading arts and disability organisation and has 35 years experience managing community cultural development projects across metropolitan Melbourne, regional centres and remote areas of Victoria.

The organisation actively pursues an agenda of inclusion and participation in the arts for people with a disability.

*The Other Film Festival* celebrates the power of being able to see one's own experience represented on the screen in the presence of others. The festival is also unique in that it delivers all festival patrons exceptional access to the immersive pleasures of film.

The festival has four key aims:

*1. Disability on the screen*

Since 2004, The Other Film Festival has consistently and rigorously selected films concerned with disability that demonstrate both artistic merit and compelling depictions of the experience of disability.

*2. Accessible cinema for all*

By providing an increasing range of access services and venue modifications, the festival has made it possible for thousands of people with a disability to participate in screen culture events.

*3. Community Engagement and Inclusion*

The planning and production of the festival is informed at all levels by the recommendations of the Access Panel, the Community Reference Group and the Selection Panel. These bodies represent leading disability organisations representing members with specific disabilities and impairments, and interested individuals.

*4. Advocacy and Dissemination*

Since 2008, the festival has been working at a consultancy, advocacy and policy level to support improved access to all cinemas and film festivals. People with a disability have the right to be represented in screen culture but are largely absent from our cinema screens and audiences. This is unarguably social exclusion; invisibility is the most powerful form of disempowerment.

The 2010 festival will deliver the following outcomes:

- Produce a seven-day event in 2010 (increased from five days in 2008) with an artistically compelling and thematically relevant film screening program of Australian and international films including a program of contemporary Deaf cinema.
- Deliver an exemplary level of physical, sensory and experiential access to all patrons. The Access plan will encompass the development of marketing and promotional materials, producing alternative formats, ticketing, venue way-finding, staff training, venue modifications, provision of Auslan sign interpreters (for all spoken activities including social interpreting) and provision of Open Captioning and Audio Description for all films.
- Present *Cluster*, an installation of accessible terminals allowing access to all festival films and to disability video content on the internet. Bean bags, beds, mats and screens on flexible arms will accommodate the diverse physical or sensory needs of all patrons by providing a wide range of sitting, standing and lying viewing positions. The individual terminals will also offer access to disability video content on the Internet. The searchable database opens an infinite number of doors onto the expanding universe of disability dance, theatre, comedy, travel, politics and sexuality.
- Offer forums and Q&A sessions on issues relevant to cinema and people with disability. Activities will include Cinema Futura, the third high profile industry cinema access forum co-presented with the Office for Disability. In 2008, this forum attracted the participation of state and federal screen agencies, key industry players from the major exhibitors and the Human Rights Commission.
- Ensure that 50% of guests, presenters and staff are people with a disability and that Selection and Access Panels are comprised of at least 50% people with a disability.

Above all, The Other Film Festival is concerned with promoting positive social change in the way in which people with a disability are perceived and included in aspects of the cultural life of the community. The festival has demonstrated that there is a broad audience for films concerning disability.

### **What's the Problem?**

Although the cinema may be the most compelling medium to communicate experience and the single most popular entertainment venue, people with a disability rarely see their own lives reflected there.

The Other Film Festival is the only Australian film festival dedicated to addressing this issue of exclusion by screening contemporary cinema concerned

with the lived experience of disability. The festival is also unique in that it delivers all festival patrons exceptional access to the immersive pleasures of film.

The opportunity for all people to attend, participate and be represented in screen culture (and in arts and culture more widely) is as important as having access to employment or health services.

Films made by, with and about people with a disability empower and enrich the whole community. The community would be diminished in the absence of this festival.

Research reveals that the prevalence of disability in Australia and other western countries is set to rise as we begin to feel the impact of an ageing population this does not mean, however, that people will lose their desire for experiencing films.

Research also reveals that:

- people with disabilities have identified greater involvement in cultural activity as a high priority in creating a more inclusive society
- The average time spent on leisure activities per week by a person with a moderate to profound disability is 41.3 hours. (ABS, 1999)
- Cinema has the highest attendance of any art form in Victoria. (*Arts Count, Arts Victoria 2003*)

I have attended many Australian and international conferences and festivals on the themes of disability representation, cinema access, community arts practice and inclusion. At these conferences I have learned that every country and every culture has a unique way of dealing with disability.

One thing is, unfortunately, common, in every society. People with a disability experience various forms of exclusion, marginalization and invisibility. As I will explore with you, it is clear that meaningful cultural participation cannot take place without being fully visible.

### **Obstacles to Access**

Let us consider the cinema, in Australia it is the single most popular entertainment venue. It is also the most inaccessible. Seventeen years after the introduction of major legislation regarding disability access, the cinema remains highly inaccessible to the 20% of the population who have a disability.

Let me make some obvious points about cinema inaccessibility:

- Lack of physical access for people who use wheelchairs due to the rake of the cinema.

- If there is access, the places are limited to at the very front or at the very back, the places where most of us don't want to sit.
- No captions
- No audio description
- Can't get the information about the films and session times
- May not be able to use public transport to get to the cinema

Think for a moment about why YOU go to the cinema, what is the experience that YOU want to have.

You can safely assume that people with a disability want the same things you do:

- You want to get information about session times easily
- You want to go at a time that suits you
- You want to go with your friends and sit with your friends
- You want to sit where you choose
- You want to be able to leave easily if you don't enjoy the film
- You don't want to use a different entrance to everyone else or have attention drawn to you because, for example, a special lift needs to be used up the stairs

Inaccessible venues make people with disabilities invisible because they simply do not go places like the cinema. It's either impossible or simply not a pleasurable experience.

### **Current Campaign for Cinema Accessibility**

*(to be updated prior to presentation)*

### **Obstacles to visibility on screen**

People with disabilities are also rendered invisible by the fact that they are not represented on screen.

When I say represented, I mean authentic and entertaining characters with a disability. Disability is often used as a device or for symbolic reasons but I can tell you that people with a disability do not identify with these characters because it has nothing whatsoever to do with their own lived experience.

Why are there no authentic and compelling main characters with a disability on our TV and cinema screens?

This question touches broader questions of how people with a disability are valued by a community:

Remember that directors and producers and film distributors are members of the community like ourselves and carry the same sets of attitudes to their decisions about what characters will appeal to audiences and sell films.

There are many, many obstacles to getting stories concerning people with a disability onto our screens, let me give you some recent examples:

- Saddle Club is a popular Australian pre-teens TV series about girls and horses. The Canadian co-producer objected to the use of a young woman with Down syndrome and replaced her in the episode with a young woman who was overweight.
- A more absurd example took place in Britain last year. In 2008, when the British Board of Film Classification classified the low-budget film 'Special People', it tagged on a warning that the film contained "disabled people". The film's director, Justin Edgar, a previous guest of The Other Film Festival, told the 'Daily Mail', "The guidance that the film had a disability theme unfairly singled out a section of society". Censors in the UK have previously used the warning "disability themes" for its classification of the Australian comedy 'Summer Heights High', which carried the following consumer advice, "Contains moderate references to sex and disability".

### **Will Human rights solve the problem?**

What are human rights, and more importantly, what are they not.

Human rights are simply ideas. They are inspirational ideas about how we ought to treat each other. They are ideas based on other ideas of fairness, equity and equality and ideals. They represent an ideal of how some of us would like all people to be treated.

Australia has recently ratified the UN declaration of the Human Rights of People with Disability. This is good news, but what does it mean?

Let us now consider what human rights are not.

Human rights declarations are not some kind of universal law. You cannot go to a police officer and tell them that somebody has infringed upon your human rights and expect them to act. The police officer will only act if a specific law in South Korea that has been broken.

If we look around the world we can see that human rights declarations are clearly not an impediment to the ongoing systematic abuses that are taking place on a daily basis around the world.

However, it is only when they become laws of a country that they gain real power

In Australia, we do have laws and for people with a disability, the most important federal law is the Disability and Discrimination Act.

The Federal *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (D.D.A.) provides protection for everyone in Australia against discrimination based on disability. It encourages everyone to be involved in implementing the Act and to share in the overall benefits to the community and the economy that flow from participation by the widest range of people.

Disability discrimination happens when people with a disability are treated less fairly than people without a disability. Disability discrimination also occurs when people are treated less fairly because they are relatives, friends, carers, co-workers or associates of a person with a disability.

We also have the Human Rights Commission that deals with individual complaints. Some of these complaints concern access to the cinema.

The commission is a reactive body in that it responds to complaints; it does not initiate nor seek out cases where the legislation has not been followed.

Let me put this into perspective: Let us compare this to legislation around worker safety. To protect worker safety in all industries, there are government inspectors who are responsible to ensure that the working conditions are safe for all workers and that workplaces comply with the relevant legislation. If there is something wrong, they can enforce changes and they can issue fines and employers who breach the law may be charged and face serious penalties, including prison.

However, the legislation concerning disability discrimination is very different and much, much weaker. The legislation is designed so that it is the responsibility of the affected individual to seek a solution through the Human Rights Commission.

Note the word *individual* rather than *government* when it comes to the responsibility for detecting, responding and pursuing an outcome.

The Human Rights Commission is not part of the federal court system in that it does not have the power to make judgements, it cannot issue fines, it cannot pass a sentence on anyone, it does not have the power to award damages for infringements against a person's human rights and it does not have the power to insist on any change whatsoever, individual or systemic.

It simply offers a process of conciliation, which the parties may or may not agree to participate in. In short, it has the power to embarrass the respondent. Which is why most cases are settled in a way that includes a confidentiality clause.

As you can see from this brief overview, the fact that we can make declarations about Human rights and governments can pass legislation but we need to look at what is actually happening in the lived experience of disability.

What is the actual experience of people with a disability when it comes to participating in the cultural life of a community?

## **Conclusion**

I think that I have described a fairly bleak and pessimistic scenario:

- No people with a disability in the audience
- No authentic or credible people with a disability on the screen
- Deep seated negative community attitudes toward disability
- No laws with the power to enforce systemic change

However, I am not a pessimistic person. I am however, an impatient person. I want change and I want it now!

There are two human rights that have not been discovered by the United Nations yet, but I am sure they will get to hear of them.

The right of every person to be **VISIBLE** and the right to be **INCLUDED!**