

WHAT'S THE DDIFF IN STAYING CONNECTED DURING A PANDEMIC?

ABSTRACT:

What's the DDIFF? is an initiative of the Disability and Inclusion team at Deakin University to provide a platform to gather and discuss the visibility of disability in the film industry. Each 'chapter' of the festival showcases a prominent disability related film which is then discussed in an online Q&A session, hosted by a community member with lived experience of disability. Our discussions have predominantly focussed on key themes of representation, inclusion, and diversity.

SUMMARY/KEY POINTS:

- *What's the DDIFF* has created a vehicle to connect people with disability, film buffs, film makers, producers, academics and students, at a time when social connection has been challenged like never before.
- Each Q & A session, co-hosted by someone with lived experience, involves people who produced and/or acted in the film.
- Featured films include *Deaf Jam*, *Sanctuary*, *Mary & Max*, and *Oddlands*. In this article we focus in on our discussion of *Sanctuary* which highlighted key themes of privacy, choice, representation and personhood for people with intellectual disability.
- If you would like to hear more about, or attend the next event, please email monica.wellington@deakin.edu.au

WHAT IS WHAT'S THE DDIFF?

What's the DDIFF? is a film festival initiated by the Disability and Inclusion team at Deakin University; providing an accessible platform to gather and discuss the visibility of disability in the film industry. The concept was raised at the beginning of the pandemic by Deakin post-graduate Disability and Inclusion students who were concerned about pandemic-related reductions in social connections. Highlighting the need to remain socially and professionally connected, *What's the DDIFF?* brings together like-minded people and encourages rich conversations about inclusion in media.

Each 'chapter' of the festival showcases a prominent disability related film, viewed by the audience in their own time (a link to the film is provided to those who register interest). Viewers are then invited to attend an online Q&A session. These sessions are hosted by a community member with lived experience of disability, who helps guide the discussion. The audience are encouraged to share thoughts and themes which emerged for them when watching the film. Deakin's Disability and Inclusion team have collaboratively organised and promoted each Q & A through professional networks, sharing via Twitter and with Deakin University staff and students. A tweet sparked the interest of Aneta Besecker, deaf

woman and lead actor from our first featured film, *Deaf Jam*. All the way from New York in the small hours of the morning, Aneta attended our first Q&A session. The insights shared by Aneta set a high bar for the events to follow! *Deaf Jam* was followed by *Sanctuary*, *Mary & Max*, and *Oddlands*. You can read more about each film below, however, in this article we focus on exclusively on *Sanctuary*, the second festival film.

Co-facilitation of the Q & A sessions by someone with lived experience has involved careful planning and preparation to ensure disability related access requirements for the co-host team are in place. As well as providing meaningful participation for guest presenters (film producers and actors), attention to accessible formats means a more inclusive environment for audience members from diverse backgrounds. Conversations about accessibility have also benefited Deakin students by providing examples of inclusion which complement their contemporary disability and inclusion studies.

A FOCUS IN ON SANCTUARY

Sanctuary is an original Irish stage-play turned film about relationships in the lives of people with intellectual disability. It features the story of Larry and Sophie, a couple who escape from a group outing for the privacy of a hotel room. *Sanctuary* explores themes of independence, choice, intimacy, relationships, consent, and control. The film is a stark exemplar of the lived experience of relationships for Irish people with intellectual disability before changes to the consent laws in 2017. Previous to then, it was illegal for Irish people with intellectual disability to be sexually active. The film played a key role in the successful campaign which resulted in this law being changed.

Our zoom discussion for *Sanctuary* was hosted by Linda Stokoe, a Deakin staff member with intellectual disability, and her colleague, Patsie Frawley, then Associate Professor in Disability and Inclusion at Deakin (now at Te Kura Toi Tangata School of Education University of Waikato New Zealand). Len Collin, *Sanctuary* director attended the zoom session in promotion of his relevant documentary, *Altered Thinking*, which looks at the representation of disability, in particular intellectual disability, from the perspective of those who see themselves represented on our screens. In our two hour post-film discussion, Len shared his experience portraying truthful themes about relationships for people with intellectual disability and working with actors with intellectual disability. The discussion covered themes of privacy, choice representation and personhood.

Firstly, in the discussion we reflected on the theoretical models of disability studies and how they facilitate the representation of disability in film. In both *Sanctuary* and his upcoming documentary, Len, an academic in the study of film and television, uses a social model of disability to facilitate empowerment and inclusion of people's personal stories and experiences. Len shared with us more about the development of the film, and the influence of the theory on his approach. For example, to ensure accessibility and inclusion, Len confirmed the scripts with the actors to make sure they were familiar and comfortable with the words used. The webinar audience were impressed with the seamless acting and acknowledged the actors and production team for adapting their approach to inclusion. The longevity and power of the film's themes are highlighted by the fact that Len continues to use *Sanctuary* in his academic work and he is particularly interested in learning about how the story of *Sanctuary* is used in educational approaches globally. Len believes that continuing to screen the film at social and professional events, is key to the continued promotion of social change related to the accurate representation of people with disability in the media.

Sanctuary encourages us to see the characters as humans, real people with friends, choices and desires. Len reflected that it was easy to see actors with disability playing characters with disability as therapy. Len challenged this assumption, noting that the actors with disability are actors first and foremost bringing individual strengths, traits, characteristics and nuances. True representation and casting allows film, and all those involved in its production, to tell their own story.

“When you look at what’s on our screens and you don’t see real people with real disabilities. That’s why people are scared, that’s why people laugh, that’s why they have issues. Because they don’t know how to react. And that’s why it’s so important that we have authentic casting, and that’s why it’s so important that we have more people with disability on our screen... We fear disability. We fear things which we can’t change and that’s why Hollywood has those easy answers, and life doesn’t have easy answers” – *Sanctuary* Director, Len Collin during webinar discussion.

Freedom, privacy, or lack of, is a clear theme of *Sanctuary*, which resonates with the experiences of many Australian people with intellectual disability (Goggin & Newell, 2005). Extending beyond the Irish and Australian contexts, Len often receives requests to screen the film abroad, including in Middle Eastern countries. The international interest shows that *Sanctuary*, as a representative film, and art more broadly, is a powerful method for creating connection, promoting freedom for expressing self-identity, and empowering minority groups (Ellis, Kent, Hollier, Burns, & Goggin, 2018). The film also highlights how carers and supporters have a role to facilitate freedom and privacy. The film’s conclusion prompts audiences to consider what more could be done in training support staff for people with intellectual disability to be good allies and promoters of rights, freedom, choice, and information, particularly in relation to privacy in intimate relationships.

Indicative of the previously mentioned role of art in law reform, one of the greatest achievements of the film was its use as a story-telling tool for the campaign to reform Irish law prohibiting sexual relationships for people with intellectual disability. While Australian laws no longer limit sexual relationships for people with intellectual disability, gatekeeping by support staff and family members in relation to people’s privacy and right to relationships, often results in people’s right to intimacy being denied, despite clear expressions of desire (O’Shea & Frawley, 2020). The current Disability Royal Commission has questioned the role of media and its power in influencing attitudes, policy and law. We reflect that media has had a

role in stimulating stigma and discriminatory behaviour, internalised and externalised. This film provides a powerful vehicle for people with intellectual disability to portray their own stories around these important topics.

Within the disability rights movement, the mantra “Nothing about us without us” has been a key driver in social change. The experience of minority is similarly encapsulated by the well-known phrase “if you can’t see it, you can’t be it”. This film *Sanctuary* debunks commonly held stereotypes about the sexuality of people with intellectual disability by representing on the screen people who, just like all of us, have dreams, desires and want opportunities to express these. *Sanctuary* shows us that there is a role for film to be an important driver of social change by representing the experiences and real life issues encountered by people with intellectual disability, beyond the stereotypes.

Despite the film’s serious themes, you can’t watch *Sanctuary* without laughing, and quite a lot. Humour is used in the film to simultaneously make and break moments of tension. Much of this humour was developed through improvisation drawing on the actors’ natural comedy. Production of *Sanctuary* allowed space and flexibility for the actors to create their own stories, another example of inclusive practice in creating the film. [Spoiler alert] The film ends in tragedy, comparable to real life for people with intellectual disability, where Larry and Sophie, despite loving each other, are forced apart. The ending shifts the feel of the film to a more morbid reality. Nonetheless, the film captures themes of humour and fun alongside systemic oppression, themes true for the lives of people with intellectual disability, poignantly shown from their perspective, and prompting us to challenge our views of “normal”.

OTHER WHAT’S THE DDIFF? FESTIVAL FILMS

Deaf Jam is a documentary set in 2011 Queens, New York which tells the story of deaf teens who shake up the world of spoken Slam Poetry. The film highlights the experiences of two women, Aneta and Tahani, who capture the nuance and simplicities of communication in their Slam Poetry duet in simultaneous ASL and verbal English. *Deaf Jam* can be streamed through Kanopy. We were lucky to be joined for the post film discussion by the film’s star Aneta Besecker and the discussion was captioned and translated between American Sign Language (ASL), Auslan and English.

Mary & Max is a Claymation production about two pen-pals, Autistic New Yorker, Max and Mary a girl from suburban Melbourne. Through



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the evolution of their friendship across years, the film encourages the viewer to reflect on the true meaning of friendship between two people, one of whom has a disability and the other who doesn't. *Mary & Max* can be streamed via SBS on Demand. We were delighted to be joined for the post film discussion by Oscar winner, Adam Elliot, the film's creator from his home in Melbourne.

Oddlands is a short film by Geelong based Back to Back Theatre and Matchbox Productions about Des and Tam who are members of a clean-up crew in a strange toxic wasteland. This dystopian film depicts Des and Tam's struggles between the opportunity to save humanity or save themselves. *Oddlands* is a story about two unlikely heroes who manage to find a little hope in the strangest of places, providing analogies for living with a disability in modern Australia. For the post film discussion we were joined by Director, Bruce Gladwin, and lead actor, Simon Laherty.

CONCLUSION

What's the DDIFF? has created a vehicle to connect people with disability, film buffs, film makers, producers, academics and students, at a time when social connection has been challenged like never before. Beyond this connection it is our hope that through *What's the DDIFF?* we continue to showcase and discuss authentic representation of disability on our screens.

Moving forward we plan to continue the festival post-pandemic. In the meantime, while we wait for our COVID free lives, *What's the DDIFF?* will continue to bring us together socially and professionally in the virtual space. If you would like to hear more about, or attend the next event, please email monica.wellington@deakin.edu.au and ask to be added to the mailing list.

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