

# 'Special People' ready to hit the big screen

A feature about a group of young wheelchair users producing their own film that challenges the widespread notions of disability is now being offered for international distribution.

*Special People*, based on Justin Edgar's homonym short, was screened yesterday in the opening day of London UK Film Focus.

The event, which will be held in the BFI Southbank until Thursday, is an initiative launched in 2004 "for the export and promotion of new British Films and talent to the international marketplace", according to Film London.

Over a hundred buyers had the opportunity to see Edgar's new film in this business meeting supported by Film London, the UK Film Council, Film Export UK, The London Development Agency, The British Film Institute and UK Trade and Investment.

Justin Edgar, who runs film and video production company 104 Films with producer Alex Osborne, said that selling *Special People* would be "challenging".

"If it was a horror film it would be much easier to sell, but we love making interesting films", he explained.

Edgar also insisted in the need of making good films regardless of the topic. "People make allowances and they say 'it's not good but it's done by disabled people, so it's ok'. I don't believe in that".

"This feature is less about disability and more about reality, truth and the lies people tell to each other".

According to the British Film Institute (BFI), *Special People* is "smart, funny and subversive with just a hint of romance".

Comedy, which is one of the features' keys, begins when the filmmaker's and the students' ideas about the film clash.

For Justin Edgar, humour "helps to get the message across in the cynical age that we live in" but it also conveys the idea that "disability is not a drama".

Robyn Frampton, Sasha Hardway, David Proud and Jason Maza, all of them disabled, played characters built around their own personality and delivered improvised performances that were enhanced in the editing process.

**"Being disabled doesn't make you that different. That's why we show the characters falling in love, crying and laughing"** Justin Edgar

Both the performances and the script make it clear that "people with disability are normal, although they do have a distinctive identity", said Justin Edgar, who thinks that a lot of the misconceptions are caused by lack of contact with the disabled community.

"We want to make people realise that being disabled doesn't make you that different. That's why we show disabled people falling in love, crying and laughing", he added.

Justin Edgar, who is now working on a film about disabled people within the Nazi regime (*The Hunger House*), has been involved in community projects like the one that inspired *Special People* since he created his own production company in 2004.

"Making a film makes no sense if it doesn't have a social purpose", he asserted.

## A showcase for talent

*Special People* also opened the eight edition of London's International Disability Film Festival, held in February this year.

The festival was organised by the London Disability Arts Forum and co-directed by two of its members, screenwriter David Watson and producer Peter Kinkead.

When Watson and Kinkead took over the festival, they redefined some of the parameters set up in 1999 by the first director, Caglar Kimyoncu. "We decided to feature a lot less autobiographical stuff unless the director had an important point to make and we encouraged young filmmakers as much as possible", says Watson.

"We also tried to raise the quality threshold, because filmmaking has become more accessible as the technology has become cheaper, but that doesn't mean that anyone can make a film", explains the co-director.

For David Watson, "there is not the same mainstream appreciation of disability arts as there is for other minority groups", so the festival "allows disabled filmmakers to have their work seen and appreciated".

The event, which showcases dramas, documentaries, shorts, video diaries, animations and even dance and arts films from all over the world, "gives the non-disabled audience a taste of the disabled artists' life".

However, says Watson, some of the disabled filmmakers "don't see the need for the mainstream or non-disabled audience to see their work or understand it".

The London Disability Film Festival, one of the firsts of its kind, is also well known because

of the organisers' efforts to make it accessible for their target audience. In its eighth edition, all the films and events were subtitled, audio-described and translated into sign language.

Another aspect that made this year's edition special was the participation of film industry professionals in talks aimed at budding disabled filmmakers.

"We wanted to show them that there are jobs in the film industry that they can do", said Watson.

The co-director added that "if disabled people have opportunities for self-improvement, they can compete in a level playground".

## Lights off

From now on, that message will have to be conveyed by other organisations.

The London Disability Arts Forum (LDAF), previously regarded as a Regularly Funded Organisation (RFO), lost all its funding along with other 184 arts groups last December.

After months of "unsuccessful" fundraising efforts, LDAF has been forced to show its credits and has closed its doors after 22 years.

David Watson said that "the almost complete lack of financial support by major mainstream UK industry bodies" means not only that the magazine *Disability Arts Culture* will disappear, but also that this year's edition of the festival may be the last.

"If that happens, disabled filmmakers will find one more door closed to them", lamented the screenwriter and co-director of one of the world's first disability film festivals.