

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Sex and Sexability

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I have the honor of being a part of the selection committee for ReelAbilities: NY Disabilities Film Festival. As the country's leading disability film festival, we receive submissions of hundreds of premiere films from around the world, many of which have been overlooked for American distribution. Every year I notice a certain theme, or topic that is popular in a good number of films. This year I noticed a growing trend of films dealing with sexuality and disability.

The topic has been there before and we always reserved the late night slot on Saturday night for the steamier films. But never has there been close to as many as in this year's submissions - and many of them were great films, (though definitely not all of them.) At some point we realized that every night could now be a steamy night, as we had films on diverse topics that all had an element of sexuality. Ultimately, not all the films on this topic were selected, but enough to highlight the trend.

We were never afraid of pushing the envelope with edgy films on disability, such as *The Red Chapel*, about a self proclaimed "spastic" who travels to North Korea to expose the regime's treatment of people with disabilities, but still, ReelAbilities at its nature was guided as a family friendly festival and prides itself on its inclusivity by making films available to all, even the blind. But I'm afraid not all the films this year will be accessible to kids.

Our opening night film, *Come As You Are*, directed by Geoffrey Enthoven, a Belgium film, that won major recognition at the European Film Awards. Although ultimately it is a story of friendship and not heavily erotic in its content, it is a tale about three friends with a variety of disabilities off on a road trip to lose their virginity at a Spanish brothel that caters to people with disabilities. *Six Points About Emma*, By Roberto Perez Toledo from Spain, follows the story of a beautiful blind woman trying desperately (and graphically) to be impregnated. While in the Australian documentary *Scarlet Road* by Catherine Scott, we learn about Australia's sex workers who specialize in clientele with disabilities. Despite the theme of sex, these three films are very different from one another and each stands alone as a great film.

Still, I wonder what is bringing about this phenomenon? A theme so strong that it has even entered the mainstream, with films like Ben Lewin's *The Sessions*, about a man in an iron lung attempting to lose his virginity with a surrogate played by Helen Hunt, with great graphic display and fabulous realism. This film broke taboos for the American audience, both in its honest display of sexuality and its trailblazing approach to disabilities. Sexuality in all these films comes in a sincere form, and not in a kinky manner such as in the subculture of "devotees," the common term used for able bodied individuals who are sexually attracted to people with disabilities.

ReelAbilities presents films that highlight the human experience, and what is more human than sex? It is the most basic human act. I have noticed over the years, that people shy away from films about people with disabilities. People openly tell me that it makes them uncomfortable. They will come to films that deal with many tough topics, but when it comes to disabilities they suddenly become very protected. In a world that is getting smaller and more accessible every day, one should be able to embrace difference and not fear it.

Television and cinema feed us images often setting an inhuman standard of beauty. Imperfections are airbrushed out and erased from the public's purview. Filmmakers making movies about people with disabilities and sexuality are leading the way for changing the image of what is considered beautiful and sexy. This phenomenon is putting people with disabilities in the mainstream spotlight and opening doors to hidden visions. It presents these characters not simply as objects of pity, but of fully active sexual beings. It presents humanity in all of its beauty and all of our perfect-imperfections. It truly humanizes the characters like never before. Perhaps this appearance of sex and disability is our world becoming a little less shy.

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