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## ReelAbilities Celebrates the Art of Ability and Experience

BY TT STERN-ENZI · MARCH 6TH, 2013 · MOVIES



*Shameless: The Art of Disability - Courtesy Publicity Plus Event Marketing*

Besides appreciating film as escapist entertainment, we all long to see multi-faceted representations of ourselves. We want to engage with larger than life reflections depicting who we are or who we imagine we could be. So often, though, traditional media fails to give us these kinds of frames of reference.

ReelAbilities: Cincinnati Disabilities Film Festival (March 9-16, 2013), in its second year of programming, continues to offer alternative stories featuring performers and characters with disabilities actively and artfully engaged with mainstream society. Originally founded in New York in 2007, ReelAbilities now hosts events in 13 cities throughout the United States. Produced locally by Living Arrangements for the Developmentally Disabled (LADD) and Visionaries+Voices (V+V), ReelAbilities: Cincinnati events will take place throughout the city and will address the true diversity within the disabled community.

Seeking to distance itself from the magical abilities of Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*, the *Zelig*-like innocence of Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks), and the pure vengeance of Billy Bob Thornton in *Sling Blade*, the festival lineup runs the gamut from documentary explorations of the spiritual life of a young man with Down Syndrome (*Praying with Lior*) and wounded Iraq War veterans training to realize Olympic dreams (*Warrior Champions*) to a claymation feature film (*Mary & Max*) about a pen-pal relationship between a chubby 8-year old girl in Melbourne and a 44-year old Jewish New Yorker with Asperger Syndrome. Taken as a whole, what emerges is a complex portrait rooted in common humanity rather than a largely sentimental collection of one-dimensional stereotypes.

David Roche, one of the featured subjects of director Bonnie Sherr Klein's *Shameless: The ART of Disability*, the pre-movie night kickoff, will be on-hand along with film and television star, pro-athlete and model Kurt Yaeger (*Sons of Anarchy*) for a keynote address following the film's screening.

In his essay, "The Metaphor of Disfigurement," Roche defines himself "as a performer with facial difference, I am a one-man show, both on stage and off. I was born with 'an extensive cavernous hemangioma'— a benign tumor consisting of blood vessels — on the left side of my face and neck. As an infant, I had numerous operations. Radiation therapy caused the lower part of my face to stop growing and left burns on my temple and eyelid."

The unfortunate reality for Roche is that physical disfigurement often becomes visual shorthand for stereotypical villainy. Disney's Scar (from *The Lion King*), *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*'s Freddy Krueger are just a few of the obvious examples of this insidious use of physical difference.

"My face does not belong to me," he goes on in the piece. "It belongs in a catalog of symbols. The face is commonly considered to be the locus of the human persona. When it is scarred, it is a reminder that the entire human experience is one of being flawed."

I spoke with him briefly the day after the Academy Awards, and he spoke candidly about the somewhat overwhelming situation, even offering a bit of credit to Hollywood. "Interestingly enough," he pointed out, "in *Elephant Man*, John Merri was an object of pity, which is the other side of it, there was some empathy involved. He was more of a human being and not just an evil person."

An exciting aspect of ReelAbilities: Cincinnati, targeting this very concern, is the focus on the presentation of people with disabilities as artists, a notion embedded in the missions of the two organizations behind the festival. In fact, it is what attracted Christa Zielke, marketing director with V+V, to her group initially.

"V+V is first and foremost an arts agency — a studio and gallery — serving and promoting artists and connecting them to audiences, just like any other gallery or arts agency," she says. "However, our artists also happen to have disabilities. But that's not relevant to their work, is it? Yet it can have a powerful impact in terms of promoting inclusion and equality with the arts community and our community at large."

And the partnership with LADD just made sense because Zielke says, "LADD strives for similar goals. They provide the means for an individual to realize the same dreams and work towards some of the same goals that you and I may have to be independent. LADD does this by helping adults with developmental disabilities to rent and own their own homes, and offers programming to help get to that goal."

Moving from the reel to the real, seeing life experiences such as these captured on the big screen can certainly entertain but it can also inspire and empower an entire community to strive for even bigger dreams.

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**REELABILITIES** runs Saturday through March 16. For tickets and more information, visit [cincinnati.reelabilities.org](http://cincinnati.reelabilities.org).

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