



AbilityFest 2013: The Power of Films

Description

The students of Dept. of Electronic Media and Mass Communication attended the AbilityFest 2013 at Sathyam Cinemas, Chennai from 23 to 26 September, 2013. The following is a report as well as the experiences of being part of AbilityFest 2013, India International Disability Film Festival.



(From left to right): Mr. Hariharan, Ms. Jayshree, Mr. P. K. Nair and Ms. Revathy Menon at the Inauguration ceremony of AbilityFest 2013

Late night packing, last minute confirmations, and after a lot of planning between 16 students, the journey from Pondicherry to Chennai began on Monday, 23rd September early morning, even before the sun woke up! The new city welcomed us with open arms and after exploring its many lanes and bridges, albeit not intentionally, we finally reached the Youth Hostel in Adyar, our home for the next four days. After a quick refreshment, we were right on time at the Sathyam Cinemas for the fifth edition of AbilityFest 2013, India International Disability Film Festival. As a person who is not very fascinated by the film medium itself, I will say I did not have many expectations about the festival. To me it was just another study tour, where I was hoping to add something to my academic learning. I wasn't very

enthusiastic about being confined to a dark hall all day, watching one film after another. For me watching two or three films on a single day, in itself is a daunting task.

And here I am in a film festival solely dedicated to disability, about which I have little or no awareness. It was a herculean task. At one point of time, just before entering the hall, there was a lingering doubt in my mind, is this really cut out for me? It did not take me much time to realize how much I would have missed had I given into my apprehensions. I was literally glued to my seat all day watching one film after the other. Each of them portraying something new, different and entertaining. The AbilityFest opened a fresh new vista which brought me closer to the world of films. Each film captured a different facet of people living with disabilities. True to life, it neither made them out be heroes, nor the martyrs of the social structure. The films had protagonists having their share of happiness, sorrow, and all the challenges that come with life.

It was the French film *Left Foot Cinderella*, by Benjamin Lehrer that hooked me on and from then, there was no looking back. The story is about Lea, who has a 'plastic leg. She is getting fluttery over what to wear for a party where she was setup for a blind date by her friend. As the day unravels, it is filled with catastrophes and her road to finding her Prince Charming becomes more and more treacherous. After a disastrous night with a young man she met at the party, she finds herself in a police station. Battered and bruised after the interrogation where she is asked to leave her plastic leg behind, she begins to feel helpless. In her state of distress, she meets one of the cops from the police station who promises to get her leg back, with her new shoe intact. Lea sees a glimmer of hope for a future with this man beside her, who is ready to hop with her all the way to the end.

A humorous yet a charming take on disability was portrayed by the UK film *Deaf Mugger*. The film was screened more than a couple of times and it never failed to elicit laughter each and every time. A sign language interpreter is brought in as an assistant by a deaf mugger on his daily job. This 2 minute long film evokes the ordinariness of a mugger who robs people with an interpreter if that is what it takes for him to get the job done.



Janaki (left) making announcements before screening and Vijaya (right) translating it in sign language

As I stepped out of the theater during a break, there was a flurry of activity all around me, people gesturing to each other in sign language, enthusiastically describing their experiences so far. All around me there was a buzz of energy with innumerable animated conversations flying around and I sat at one corner just looking at them. As I failed to understand what was being communicated, I also had the sense of how it would feel to be excluded. If I knew sign language, I wouldn't have felt left out. And I wondered, in their world, am I not the one who is not normal? So what is "normal"?

As it would happen, a film, 46/47 by Nadine Heinze and Marc Dietschreit touched this particular note. In a world of people with Down's syndrome (having 47 chromosomes), there is this one person Daniel who has only 46 chromosomes which is perceived by us to be normal. Towards the end, somebody asks him if he has found his extra chromosome. By turning the tables, this short film of over 8 minutes beautifully brings out the experience of social exclusion.

As the festival progressed, I felt myself growing more aware of the world and space that belongs to everybody. Where everybody has the right to live the way they want with the abilities that they have. As Ms.Revathy Menon, actor, film maker, activist and vice-chairperson of AbilityFest said at the beginning, "The world is for everybody. We are not trying to make space for anybody. We are not trying to give space to anybody. Everybody has space, and everybody has the right to their space."

When it ended, I was overwhelmed with a sense of satisfaction of having been a part of this study tour which sensitized me to disability. Along with a wholesome selection of a wide range of films, the way the festival was organized was itself an education. AbilityFest demonstrated the commitment to access by providing a barrier free environment; audio description, closed captioning and subtitling of films for the visually challenged and hearing impaired. "Celebrate Inclusion; Celebrate Life" was not only the theme of the competition of "60 Seconds to Fame" this year but also the underlying spirit of the entire festival.



Students of PU with Janaki

Furthermore, the informal sessions conducted by AbilityFest volunteers on teaching sign language to all of us who were there was also truly inspiring. I hope a day would soon come, when sign language would be taught as a second or third language in all schools across India so that we all can discover the joy of communicating with this beautiful language. I also hope to harness the power of media (radio, television, film making, print and web journalism) to sensitize many more about disability, through my own work as a young media professional. My 15 friends who joined me from Pondicherry University would also hopefully walk this path with me...

This article was also published in [Success and Ability](#)

Photos: Sree Vishnu, Sumon Datta and Yukthiraj

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1. Abled (Differently)

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