

Beer, Nuts & Laughter



Most filmmakers rely on their ability to see in order to make films. But Australian filmmaker and author gough's vision doesn't rely on sight. Instead gough (pronounced "goff"), who is legally blind, writes, directs, edits and produces all of his films with the help of a well-curated crew. His eleven-year-old company, Beernuts Productions, makes pointed documentaries and entertaining short films, including an upcoming mockumentary on the environment. Irony and wit are all part of his gestalt, for he's a natural-born storyteller who cut his teeth in radio and on the stand-up comedy circuit before devoting himself full-time to filmmaking. He relishes slippery subjects — pornography, disability, mental illness, to name a few. *ABILITY*'s Lia Martirosyan chatted with gough about his creative process and his passion for showing the world that a disability needn't be a hindrance to doing what you love.

Lia: Where does gough originate?



gough: It's a nickname I had when I was young. It was given to me because of a musical band in Australia. I was a little bit obsessed with them when I was young, so I got the nickname "gough" from them, and I just started using it professionally because that's what everybody called me. It's a lot more interesting than my actual boring name, so I thought I'd go with "gough," you know?

Lia: Sure. Whatever makes you happy.

(laughter)

gough: Well, yes, it's just a nice point of difference as well.

Lia: Speaking of names, how did you come up with "Beernuts"?

gough: I think it sort of sums up our work well. I like to think that our films are fun and enjoyable, so beernuts—have a beer, eat some nuts, laugh, and have a good time watching our stuff.

Lia: Is beer big in Australia?

gough: Oh yes, yes, we drink a lot of it. Don't worry about that.

Lia: Cheers. So you were born in Australia?

gough: Yeah, I was born in Sydney but was raised on the Gold Coast. The Gold Coast is a little mini-Florida. I've been to the US quite a bit, so I know it well. If you packed Florida into a little tiny area, that's the Gold Coast, which is where I live. So it's reasonably tropical, like today, in the high 90s, as we're right in the middle of summer so it's very hot at the moment.

Lia: I like it, a lot of people don't like tropical humid weather.

gough: It does get hot out here. We've just been through a really big heat wave. Lots of bush fires out west.

Lia: Is most of your time spent on productions at Beernuts?

gough: Absolutely. Beernuts is my production company, which I started back in 2006. I write, direct, edit and produce the films. This is my full-time job; it's what I love to do. It's Beernuts Productions all the way with me. Onward and upward.

Lia: You have a team of people who are designated certain tasks, or are you doing everything?

gough: I can't see very well, so I have a guy named Simon who is sort of my sighted guide who helps me out. He's very, very good. He makes sure everybody—as in the actors—are giving me the facial expressions I



want them to give, and that the camera is choosing the angle that I want the camera to shoot, and all that sort of stuff. And when it comes to editing, Simon makes sure everything syncs up. I edit by audio, which is like doing a 90-minute radio play. He makes sure that the vision syncs up and how it should be.

Lia: Sounds like you have that figured out. Do you have any sight?

gough: Yes, I do. I have no vision in my right eye and very limited vision in my left eye. With my nose to the monitor, I can kind of see what's going on, but I have to get very, very close to the monitor and the screen to make sure that I can see things. Even then, I always like to have somebody back me up just in case I've missed something, which I do on occasion. But the interesting thing with film, of course, is that people don't really understand that it's 80 percent audio. If you take horror, for example, which isn't my genre, but it's a good example. The thing that scares people in horror films is very rarely what they see on the screen. It's what they hear and what they feel, very rarely what they actually see. So, film people think of film as a visual media, and it is, but it also isn't, if that makes sense. There are a lot of other aspects to film than just what you see on the screen.

Lia: Do you focus a lot on music as well?

gough: Well, my films are very dialogue-heavy, so when I write something, it is about the dialogue. I always make sure there are no big action sequences or stunts or anything like that. I focus more on the dialogue and making what the characters say interesting. But I find that stuff more interesting and entertaining anyway. When I direct my actors, I know how I want my lines delivered because I wrote them, so the number one thing for me is to make sure my actors are delivering the lines the way I want them delivered. And yes, music as well plays a big part in film because it helps convey what you want the audience to feel. I do try and incorporate music wherever I can. A couple of professional musicians who are very good help me out with that.

Lia: Very cool. What motivated you to get into movie production?

gough: I always enjoyed writing. When I first left high school, I started out as a stand-up comedian, and obviously stand-up requires a lot of writing and performance. Then I was always writing scripts during the daytime when I wasn't on stage. So I tried getting my scripts made, but of course when people found out I couldn't see, they didn't really want to invest money in a blind filmmaker's film project. They thought I wouldn't be able to do it. I thought, well, the best way to make my movies is to fund them and do them myself. So that is sort of how it all came about. I wanted to

make my own work. Like I say, I've always loved storytelling, and wanted to get my stories out there, so the only and best way to do it was to start up my own production company.

Lia: Wow. So you're funding the production company?

gough: Absolutely. I'm totally independent. Here's how it works: I make a film, which I fund; put it up on beernutsproductions.com, people download it, and then all the money I earn from that download goes into the next film. It's the circle of life kind of. Every cent I make from Beernuts Productions goes straight back into the company to make the next film. That's how it works at the moment. I fund everything myself. It's all fully independent.

Lia: That's great. If you have the means, I think it's one of the best ways to do it.

gough: I agree. It's great in that there is no third party interference. Don't have some guy in a suit telling me I can't do this or that. I can make the films I want and how I want. I get the actors, the crew, and make the kind of project I want to make. In that regard, it is fantastic because I'm fully independent—I have full control and full creative say.

Lia: Are you inclusive with your casting? Hiring actors with diverse abilities?

gough: Absolutely. Whatever the role requires is what I have to cast. I've worked with all kinds of shapes and sizes and colors and creeds. There is no discrimination here—we are fully inclusive.

Lia: Good. About your sight, is it a progressive condition?

gough: I was given the whooping cough immunization when I was 12 weeks old and ended up having a hemorrhagic stroke, which is a cross between a stroke and a brain hemorrhage. I was very, very ill, and it caused me to lose my sight. I'm a little bit paralyzed down the right side of my body, but that's due to the stroke.

Lia: You must have been a strong baby.

gough: Obviously I don't remember any of it, but I was in the hospital for a couple of weeks, and had a couple blood transfusions. By all reports I was close to dying, but didn't. Pulled through, and here to tell my story.

Lia: That's wonderful. Let's go back to the movies you've produced over the years. Which of your films have audiences been more drawn to? And what have you learned about yourself and your writing?

gough: Those are really good questions. The first film (*I Will Not Go Quietly*) I did was a documentary about disability and mental health, which was brought about





gough acts, writes and directs...



because of my frustrations with people not understanding my disability. There is a lot of ignorance in Australia about disability, but the film received a wonderful response, which I was really happy about. Since then I've gone on to do more comedy, because it's what I really love. I love making people laugh and entertaining people in that way. Obviously, being in film is different from stand-up comedy in that when you make a film, you're not in the person's lounge watching the film with them, so you don't have that sort of instant gratification. You can't tell if they like it or not unless they send you an email to let you know. With stand-up comedy you get the instant gratification. With film, I've been getting positive reactions, which has been fantastic. People do seem to really enjoy what I do.

What have I learned about myself? I'm trying to think, since I've never been asked that question before. I think I've learned that I'm a little bit more cynical than what I originally thought. When people watch my stuff, they laugh a lot, and they say there is a little bit of satire and cynicism in what I write. I just write what I think is funny. I didn't really think it was overly cynical, but apparently I'm more cynical than what I originally thought. But people seem to enjoy it, which is the main thing.

Lia: There you go! So just continue doing what you're doing.

gough: Absolutely. That's pretty much my theory, until people tell me, "I'm not enjoying what you're doing," I'm just going to continue to try to make every film better than the last one.

Lia: Are you still doing stand-up?

gough: No, I haven't done stand-up for about five or six years now. Once Beernuts Productions kicked into gear, I gave the stand-up away and focused 100 percent on the production company, because that's what I wanted to do ultimately anyway. Stand-up comedy was a gateway to the production company and also a way to hone my writing and performance skills as well. The production company was what I always wanted to do. It was always the goal.

Lia: There's a lot of hustle in stand-up comedy. I have friends who are in it, and they're constantly jumping from one venue to another. I know it helps with the writing, but what did you think about the hustle?

gough: Well, the one thing I really struggled with—and it's mainly because of my bad eyesight—is transport and getting from gig to gig. Comedy is a very competitive industry. Well, the whole entertainment industry is competitive, so there is not a lot of help and support. Other comics don't want to help a guy out, especially in Australia, because there are a





lot of comics and not enough venues, therefore if I needed a ride from one place to another, I've got to take a Greyhound bus, plane, or taxi. Transportation was costing me a lot of money, so that was another reason why I finally thought it wasn't worthwhile. I'm better off focusing on my actual passion, which is filmmaking.

Lia: Are you planning on submitting your films to any independent film festivals?

gough: Not really, there are too many rules and stuff like that, I'm not the kind of guy who is into rules. I just like to do my own thing. So I make my films, put them on the website, and people can just download them. With my documentary about disability and mental health, I did try to enter it into one or two film festivals, but there are a lot of politics when it comes to that sort of stuff. It just turned into a big hassle, to be honest, at the end of the day I just couldn't be bothered. So I thought, "You know what? I'm just going to release my own work, do my thing my own way, and hope for the best."

Lia: I saw some books on your website. What is your involvement? Are you writing them?

gough: Yeah. I like to be as diverse as possible, so on the website we've got four books, which I've written. We've got seven audio downloads, which I wrote and

produced, and that's with me and other actors doing the voiceovers, plus 12 films. With the films, there is the documentary, which I mentioned earlier, and then 11 short films. And of the short films, the last thing we've done is a series of seven mini chat shows with *The Tonight Show* kind of a setup where I interview a famous person. It's a fake person, but there is a famous rock star, a famous movie star, and a famous politician. Each episode runs for 20 minutes. That was the last project we finished.

Lia: That's fun. How often do you do that?

gough: As often as I can. I was joking with one of my production crew the other day saying, if I had the financing, we'd be doing one of these every two weeks, because I'd do as many as I absolutely can. The first thing I do after I finish writing the script is cast the film. So from the time we begin casting to finishing the final edit, is about an eight-week time frame.

Lia: Do you have any projects you're working on right now?

gough: Yeah, absolutely. We've started doing a mockumentary, I like that kind of style as well. A comedy mockumentary or a fake documentary about the environment, talking to fake scientists, journalists, conservationists, park rangers and sort of making fun of it all. I





have just finished writing that one now, so that will be our next project.

Lia: What's it called?

gough: It's called *The Environment: An Inside Look*. I do enjoy that sort of mockumentary sort of style, as they can be quite funny.

Lia: As long as you're clever with it!

gough: Yeah, I agree.

Lia: Do you travel a lot? I know you said you make it to the States quite a bit.

gough: Yeah, as much as I can. I love traveling. I think traveling is one of the great educations in life, because you meet so many diverse people, and you go to so many diverse places. At the moment, the production is based on the Gold Coast. But I have made it out to the States for many years. The last time I was there was 2009, a while ago now, but I'd gone quite a bit and had a great time. I was up in Canada as well and that was a lot of fun, too. I really enjoyed that—and over to the UK. I have traveled quite a bit, all for work. I only ever go where I'm working, and it's been really good.

Lia: Nice. How do you find traveling in terms of accessibility?

gough: Not too bad. The biggest problem I have is always getting there, but once I reach my destination, I'm usually fine. It's the airports, trains and bus stations. That's what I struggle with the most, just making sure I'm in the right place at the right time. I've found people are usually pretty cool. Once you explain to the ticket guy or whomever that you can't see very well, there is usually some kind of meet and assist kind of program they've got going on, so they usually help you out. But I don't have too many dramas. Haven't found myself lost in too many woodlands, so it's been alright.

I like to be as independent as possible, and not one to jump up and down and make a fuss. But when it comes to airports, that is probably the only place where I'm happy to jump up and down and make a fuss, because they kind of freak me out. People and luggage are everywhere, and the staff runs around trying to get help. But yeah, the biggest struggle when it comes to traveling is the actual traveling part itself.

Every country is different in how they handle these issues, some are fantastic. You've got to give credit where credit's due, and some places are terrific. Other places aren't so good. Also, a lot depends on the airline carrier you're traveling with. Some airlines are terrific and have great meet and assist programs where as soon as you get dropped off at the airport's front door, there is someone there to help you from the moment you step into the airport to the moment you get off the plane. They help you off the plane and get you to the luggage area and make sure that you pick up the right luggage because again, the baggage carousel, I mean, when the bags are going past, I've got no idea which one's mine. So I always need a bit of help with that kind of stuff. But a lot of it also depends on the person who's helping. If it's someone who has experience with disability, they understand and know what's going on, but if the person is new to the job or hasn't had a lot of experience with disability, you might encounter a few problems. A lot of it comes down to education and what people learn in the community about disability.

Lia: I traveled to Japan, and they were the best in terms of the transitions between platforms on train stations to the airports. They were wonderful, and that has a tremendous amount to do with their aging population.

gough: I think Japan would be a really interesting country to visit. Did you find it interesting culturally?

Lia: I did. They're incredibly interesting. From their organization to cleanliness—they're very friendly. I enjoyed it.

gough: It's a place I would love to go. I love Japanese food, so I reckon I would be happy over there with the food as well.

Lia: They have these incredible underground markets. There was one right below a train station that had an entire floor dedicated of various foods, especially sushi, which were delicious. So you would enjoy it.

gough: Actually, this is quite funny. Recently, it was my birthday...

Lia: Happy Birthday.

gough: ...Thank you. My friends took me to a teppanyaki restaurant, and the chef didn't know I couldn't see. One of his tricks is with prawns. He flings the prawns at you, and you're supposed to catch them in your mouth.



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I, of course, couldn't see the prawn coming at me until they were right in my face, so I kept missing, and he kept throwing them at me, thinking I was just uncoordinated or whatever. I ended up getting a few extra prawns before he gave up and realized this guy isn't going to catch any prawns.

(laughter)

gough: That kind of thing happens quite a bit, because I like to be independent, so people sometimes don't realize that I can't see very well.

Lia: That's a funny story. A skit in and of itself.

gough: *(laughs)* Yeah, I might try and incorporate it one day.

Lia: You should. Is there anything you want to add, put out into the universe?

gough: I want people to know that just because I can't see doesn't mean I can't make entertaining, engaging, fun and enjoyable films for people. That's my number one message. When I first started out, I faced a lot of doubters. But people have really enjoyed my work, and they find it funny and entertaining, which is great. I love entertaining people. I think it's a wonderful thing to help people forget about their problems, and know that you've helped someone forget their problems while they watch your movie. You make them feel good about

themselves, and it's a wonderful feeling. Just because you have a disability doesn't mean you can't be a constructive member of society, can't do the job you want to do, and can't live the life you want to live. The only person stopping you is you. You know what I mean? So you've got to just get out there and live the dream and do what you want to do. If that's being a filmmaker, then be a filmmaker. If you want to be the best mechanic or chef, then go out and do it. That's what's really important. That's my main message.

Another point of interest that enters my mind is the process of making films when you can't see. As I said earlier, when I edit a film, it's like editing a radio play, because I edit by audio. When I film, I know how I want my lines delivered, so there is a lot of trust with the cast and crew to make sure they're doing what I want them to do. After all, I'm paying their paychecks, so they've got to do what they're told, but I haven't had too many problems. I've got a lot of trust. It took me awhile to find a good team, there's no doubt about that. It took a few people coming and going to find a good group I could work with, but once I found them, they've been really good and supportive, and they do a fantastic job. I'm happy with the work we put out.

Lia: Well all right then, good luck to you! ■ ABILITY

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