

Going In Blind: How the First Legally Blind Person to Write, Produce, Edit, Direct and Star in a Feature Built His Career

By *gough* on July 17, 2017



My name is gough, and I founded Beernuts Productions, a film production company based in Australia. I am also the first blind person in the world to write, produce, edit, direct and star in a feature film.

I had a hemorrhagic stroke when I was an infant which caused me to lose most of my eye sight. I have no clear vision in my right eye and very limited vision in my left. Therefore, in Australia, I am classified as being legally blind. I suppose my career choice would be somewhat surprising, for those who don't know me.

I've always been involved in the entertainment industry and I have always loved storytelling. Public speaking has never been something that frightened me. (Maybe not being able to see the audience helps... I'm not sure.)

Back when I finished high school, I worked in radio as an audio producer, making commercials and promos. Working in radio taught me much of my skills that would later be transferable to filmmaking —among them, editing and directing voice-over talent. By night, I was busy writing and performing stand-up comedy at local comedy clubs and bars, which, also being a writing and performance-based skill, taught me a lot in regard to acting and getting your desired reaction from your audience. I then quit my job at the radio station so I could focus more on stand-up and start touring—not just around Australia, but around the world, in the U.K., U.S.A. and Canada. The experience taught me more life, cultural and business skills than anything else, but in the background I kept writing and the goal was always to get my scripts produced.

When I first approached film producers, television executives and the like about producing my work, none of them were interested. They couldn't understand how a blind guy could do this kind of work.



Writer-director gough with actor Jacqui Story recording audio for the short film “Small Mercies.”

Photograph courtesy of gough and Beernuts Productions

I thought, and still think, that it was very sad that people were not taking me and my work seriously, based purely on my disability. I naively felt that if I started up my own production company, that may show people that I should be taken more seriously. So, in 2006, Beernuts Productions was born. Still, the negative stereotypes that people have about disability did not go away, so the only thing left to do was to go it alone and produce my work myself through my newly formed company. Here are just some of the things I've learned during that eye-opening process.

Making a Movie Blind Is Simple—It's Industry People Who Overcomplicate Things

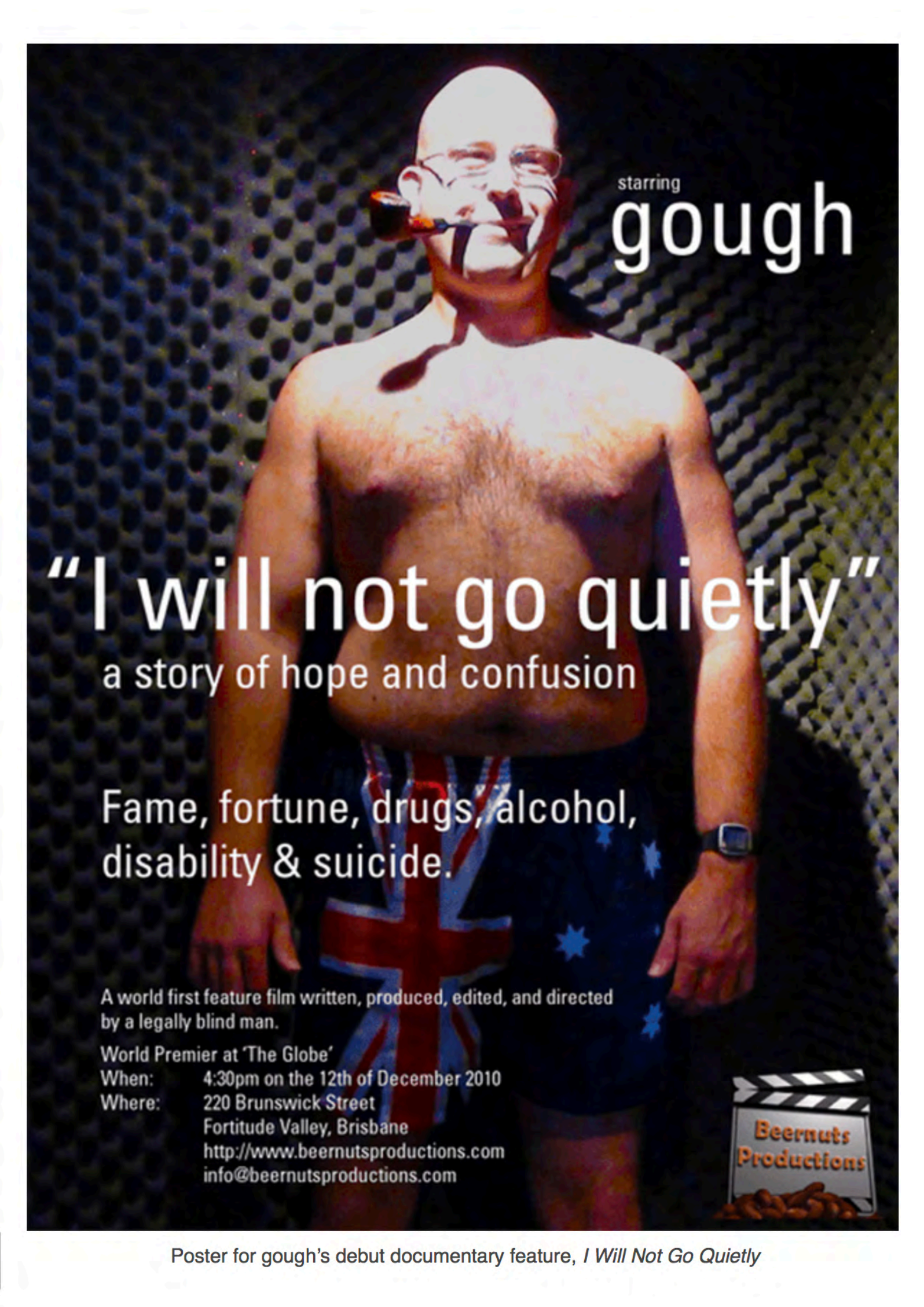
People have said that I make it sound so simple. But what I think is, people—especially in the film industry—tend to overcomplicate things. My thought process was thus: If external production houses and producers didn't want to assist in getting my films off the ground, then I'd have to find a way to do it myself. It would have been a tragedy to let my hard work go to waste.

I won't say there was no risk involved. After all, my first project was funded with my own money. But I was prepared to back myself in, believing in myself and my work, believing that it was of quality that it would be successful. Some may have thought it was a foolish move, putting all my eggs in one basket, but I believed in myself and my work and still do, which is why I continue to fund and distribute my own work.

As hard as funding and distributing my own work can be—because my survival depends on website downloads of my work—a positive has come from it, in that I get to produce what I want to produce without any third party interference, people saying what I can and can't do, tinkering with a script or getting final cut on a project. That total freedom leads not only to better productions, but it also means that all the money made from the productions goes straight back into making the next great project, whatever that maybe.

Make a First Feature That Doesn't Require Bells and Whistles

My first project, *I Will Not Go Quietly*, was a documentary about disability and mental health. The reason I chose this as my first project was simple: I was growing increasingly frustrated with attitudes and lack of understanding when it came to my disability, and people's perception of what I can and cannot do—not just in my work, but in all aspects of my life. Exposing these misconceptions required shining a light on a very discriminatory education system that we have in place here in Australia—one that promotes segregation rather than inclusion, which in turn leads to a lack of employment opportunities for those with a disability.



starring

gough

"I will not go quietly"

a story of hope and confusion

Fame, fortune, drugs, alcohol,
disability & suicide.

A world first feature film written, produced, edited, and directed
by a legally blind man.

World Premier at 'The Globe'

When: 4:30pm on the 12th of December 2010

Where: 220 Brunswick Street
Fortitude Valley, Brisbane
<http://www.beernutsproductions.com>
info@beernutsproductions.com



Poster for gough's debut documentary feature, *I Will Not Go Quietly*

As I found in my research, a lot of people who have a disability can go on to battle depression and other types of mental illness, mainly due to the fact they have found themselves victims of discrimination. The film was made for those without a disability, to educate them and dispel some of the negative stereotypes that can go along with all disabilities, not just vision impairment.

Shooting *I Will Not Go Quietly* was my biggest challenge and I freely admit, the framing etc. of the shots isn't first-class, but everyone is on the screen, so that's all that really matters. Editing my doc was fairly easy and straightforward, as it consistently mostly of talking head footage, so I could just pretend I was editing a 90-minute radio commercial.

I used very basic equipment: a handy-cam to shoot on and editing software which only gave me eight tracks to play with. Again, for a documentary, you don't really need a lot of the bells and whistles, which was another key factor in my decision to use this project to begin my filmmaking journey. Documentaries may not be box-office popular, but they are a lot easier to make than a stunt-heavy action film.

To make things a lot easier for me, I edited as I went. The process went like this: I'd organize an interview with someone, go out and get the footage, come back and cut out the six, seven or however many quotes I thought I'd end up using and put them to one side. Then, when I'd finished all the interviews, it was about placing them in and around the narrative of the story, kind of like putting a jigsaw puzzle together.

Most documentary filmmakers would do a heap of research before starting a film, but because I lived it, I didn't have to do that much. For me, the key was finding a wide range of interesting people to interview. I managed to attach 24 people to the project, including psychologists, school teachers, a neurosurgeon and even comedians. (After all, I don't want to depress people, and it's important to bring a bit of humour to any issue, no matter how confronting it may be.)



gough (in the Santa suit) with cast and crew during the shoot of their mockumentary feature *The War on Drugs*

If Potential Investors Can't Understand You, They Probably Won't Understand Your Work

Although I did approach some distributors to see if I could get a deal for a wide-spread cinema or television release, some found the subject matter too confrontational. Disability is not a subject people enjoy discussing. It makes them feel uncomfortable, for the simple reason they don't understand it. Even after watching a full-length feature made solely by a blind person, they did not know how to react. So, they did what is the go-to human thing to do when you don't know how to react to something: They ignored it. The notion of a blind person making this film without any external assistance was something they couldn't get their heads around, even though it was right in front of them. I was, however, able to get the film played at an independent cinema up in Brisbane which was pleasing.

After years of dealing with executives and producers and the demoralizing nature of having your work judged not on its content, but on the person behind the content, I made the decision to no longer put myself in a situation where people who don't seem to have a proper understanding of me have a say in what I produce and how I produce it. I turned the Beernuts Productions website into its own entity, where people can download and stream my entertainment.

Since that first film release, I have gone onto make 12 short films, produce seven audio downloads and write four books. One piece of equipment I have which helps me to do all this is a computer that speaks to me. It also helps my writing, because when you have your script read back to you, even if it's a generic computer voice, you can get a better idea of flow, rhythm and timing. In fact, based on this experience, even if I was fully sighted, I'd still get actors in to read the script out loud and make sure jokes and dialogue are sounding the way you want them to.

You Must Trust Your Cast and Crew To Execute Your (Literal and Figurative) Vision

Being legally blind means I have to have a crew around me who I can trust. If I want a certain shot, I need to know that my cinematographer will do that shot, and not just go off on his own tangent. I do have very limited vision, so in the editing booth I can make sure the shots are what I'm after. But by then, it's too late to change anything, as the vision has already been shot and we don't have the budget to re-shoot. In this regard, making sure I have a supportive crew who share my vision is vital.

The same goes for the actors. I can't see facial expressions, so I need to trust that they are giving me the looks I am after. This comes down to me being able to communicate to them what the character is feeling, and making sure they understand what it is I want. I also have a sighted guide on-set who tells me whether the actors are giving me the facial expressions I'm after, and that the scene looks good and we are good to move on.



gough shoots a scene from his short film "The Advertising Meeting" with cast and crew

The More You Listen, the Better You'll Write Dialogue and Direct Delivery

Being legally blind actually does help with writing and directing. Because I can't see things like facial expressions, I'm not distracted by the small things and can focus on the delivery of lines. At the end of the day, if a line of dialogue isn't delivered by an actor just right, the joke won't be funny or the emotional moment won't be captured. Spending a lifetime *really* listening to people—mainly because I have no choice, as I can't see body language—is a huge asset to my writing. When you spend so much time intently listening, you begin to pick up on funny ways people say things and the way the tone or inflection of someone's voice can change the meaning of an entire sentence. Because of this, most of my scripts are dialogue-based, and that is where the comedy and drama comes from.

Overplan to Avoid Time-Wasting Distractions and Keep Cast and Crew Performances Strong On-Set

When you are blind, organization is key. I'm not just meaning in work, but in life in general. For example, I can't just jump in the car and drive down to the shop if I forget to pick up some milk or bread—I have to make sure my kitchen is well-stocked for any situation. This carries through to my filmmaking work—knowing how long a shot will take to film, making sure people aren't waiting around, etc. I don't like keeping actors waiting, as they can easily become bored or distracted. Keep their performance as fresh as possible, making sure the crew know exactly how they're shooting the action... all of this comes down to meticulous preparation.

Film Engages More Senses Than Just Sight

A major misconception about film is that it's all visual. Just because you're sitting and watching a film play on a screen doesn't mean that your other senses are not being utilized. What gives you the creeps in, for example, a great horror film, is very rarely what you see, but rather what you don't see. It's the sound of creaking timber, a knife scraping along glass. It's the music used and the feeling the film gives you. A great comedy film has witty dialogue that leaves you gasping for breath, and a musical is just that—all about the music, something that gets your foot tapping. It is wrong to assume that a film is all about the visual. A great film can awaken all your senses.

There is no doubt I face more struggles than others in my industry. It's incredibly frustrating not being able to see a shot properly while filming and having to rely on others to convey my ideas. But I love what I do and have no intention of stopping now. It's so important in life to find your passion and follow your dreams, whatever they may be. That's exactly what I've done, and intend to keep on doing. **MM**