

Beernuts – the Movie! –disability, discrimination and independence

Gough, an independent film producer from Australia, gives a view into the joys and risks of life on the cutting edge of film production for a person with a disability.

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Blind film-maker David "Gough" Gray talks about his work for Qweekend. Pics Adam Head

My name is gough, from Beernuts Productions, a predominantly film production company, based in Australia. I say predominantly, because we also produce audio downloads and books. I am also legally blind, making me the first blind person in the world to write, produce, edit, direct and star in a feature film unassisted.

I had a haemorrhagic stroke when I was an infant, which caused me to lose most of my eyesight. 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. So, 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. Even when I was a kid, I loved writing scripts, plays, books etc. Public speaking has never been something that frightened me. Maybe not being able to see the audience helps, I'm not sure.

When I was at school I studied all the arts, film and TV, drama etc. and enjoyed it all. I did work experience at TV stations and radio stations, I wanted to immerse myself in the entertainment industry any way I could. I'm 35 years of age, so reality TV wasn't around back then, so I wasn't a - Paris Hilton type - I just wanted to be famous. I truly enjoyed the craft of entertaining people and the reaction you get.

Back when I finished high school I worked in radio as an audio producer, making their commercials and promos and at night time I was busy writing and performing stand-up comedy at local comedy clubs and bars etc. I then quit the radio station so I could focus more on the stand-up comedy and started touring. Not just around Australia, but all over the world (UK, USA and Canada). It was a wonderful experience and taught me a lot, more life skills than anything else, but also cultural and business skills too. But in the background, I kept writing and the goal was always to get my scripts produced.

Working in radio as an audio producer was a great experience for what I am doing now as it taught me editing and also directing (of the voiceover talent) and of course the stand-up comedy, being a writing and performance-based skill, taught me a lot as well, in regards to acting and getting the right reaction from your audience.

When I first approached film producers, TV executives and the like, about producing my work/scripts, none of them were interested; due to the fact they couldn't understand how a blind guy could do this kind of work.

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 felt that showed a lot of ignorance on their part. I naively felt that if I started up my own production company (Beernuts Productions) that might show people that I was serious and that I should be taken more seriously. So in 2006, Beernuts Productions was born.

However, the negative stereotypes that people have in regards to disability did not go away. So I felt the only thing left to do was to go it alone and produce my work myself through my newly-formed production company.

People have said that I make it sound so simple. But I think it is, I think people (especially in the film industry) tend to over-complicate 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 as I think it would be a tragedy to let all my hard work, in writing these scripts (which I think are hilarious and would give people a lot of joy), 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 it was of good enough quality to 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.



Beernuts Productions is proudly an independent production company. As hard as this is to do, because my survival depends on website downloads of my work, a positive has come from it, in that I get to produce the work 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 edit on a project. It gives Beernuts Productions total freedom to produce whatever it wants too, which is great and (I believe) leads to better productions being made. It also means that all the money made from the productions goes straight back into making the next great project, whatever that may be.

My first project was a documentary about disability and mental health, a subject close to my heart. It's called "I Will Not Go Quietly." The reason I chose this as my first project was a simple one. I was growing increasingly frustrated with people's attitudes and lack of understanding when it came to my disability and what I can and can't do. Not just in my work, but in all aspects of my life. For example, shining a light on the discriminatory education system that we have in place here in Australia, which promotes segregation not inclusion. That of course, carries on to a lack of employment opportunities for those with a disability. So I thought that if I get a range of experts to discuss the very important topics of disability and mental health using myself as a template, this would go some way to educating folks.

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 the victim of discrimination – this is unacceptable and needs to change. The film was predominantly made for those without a disability in order to educate them and dispel some of the negative stereotypes that can go along with all disabilities, not just vision impairment.

I was very proud of that film as I wrote, directed, shot, edited, produced – basically did it all myself. Again hopefully proving my point, that even though I might be legally blind, it does not mean I can't produce quality, entertaining work.

Shooting it 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 a doco is fairly easy and straight forward as they are all talking heads and so therefore I could just pretend I was editing a 90-minute radio commercial, cutting from clip to clip.

With regard to equipment, I just used the very basic. A handy-cam to shoot on and editing software which only gave me 8 tracks to play with. But again, for a documentary you don't really need a lot of the bells and whistles, which was another key reason in my decision to start my film making journey with a documentary. They may not be "box office" popular, but they are a lot easier to make than a stunt-heavy action film.

Also to make things a lot easier for me, I edited as I went. So the process went like this: I'd organize an interview with someone, go out, get the footage, come back and cut out the six or 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. It was more about finding a wide range of interesting people to interview. Which I think I did. I managed to get 24 people 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 maybe.



I did approach some distributors to see if I could get a deal for a wide-spread cinema or TV release. Some found the subject matter too confronting. 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.

So after years of dealing with executives and producers who clearly couldn't understand how a blind guy could make movies and the demoralising nature of having your work judged not on its content, but on the person behind the content, I made the decision to solely produce and distribute my own work. No longer putting myself in a situation

where people who don't seem to have a proper understanding of me and my work and what I want to achieve, will no longer have a say in what I produce and how I produce it. So 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 13 short films, produce 7 audio downloads and write 4 books. Most of these are comedy-based, as that is my favourite genre. I have always loved writing and performing comedy and when given the choice (when going to watch a film), I'll always lean towards the comedy. It's a wonderful feeling making someone laugh, knowing that you are responsible for them (if only for a brief moment) forgetting their problems, and making them smile.

I really enjoy the writing process of every film that I do. After all, writing is my first love and how I got started in this industry. One piece of equipment I do have which helps me tremendously is my computer that speaks to me. It makes the writing process a lot easier. I think it also helps my writing, because when you have your script read back to you, even if it is a generic computer voice, you can get a better idea of flow and rhythm and timing. In fact even if I was fully sighted, I think through the writing process I'd get actors in to read the script out loud, make sure the jokes etc. are sounding how you want them to sound.

Being legally blind does mean I have to have a crew around me who I can trust. So if I want a certain shot, I know that my cinematographer will do this 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 is too late to change anything as the vision has already been shot and we don't have the budget to reshoot. So 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 etc. 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 do have a sighted guide on set who does tell me that, yes, the actors are giving me the facial expressions I'm after, and that the scene looks good and we are good to move on. But making sure you have a cast and crew you can trust and work with is key.

I do however think that being legally blind does help in 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 my lines. Because 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. I also think it helps me with my writing in that I have spent a lifetime really listening to people, mainly because I have no choice as I can't see body language. So when you spend so much time listening, you can really 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, which I quite like as I feel it makes my work unique.

When you are blind, organisation is key. Not just in work, but in general life. For example I can't just jump in the car and drive down to the shops if I forget to pick up some milk or bread. I have to make sure I'm well organised in all aspects of my life and so this carries through to my work. And in film, I think being well organised is a must. Knowing how long a shot will take to film, making sure people aren't waiting around. I don't like keeping actors waiting as they can easily become bored/distracted etc. I like to keep them as fresh as possible so you get a better performance out of them. Making sure the crew know exactly what they are doing and how you want them to do it. And all of this comes down to good organisation and meticulous preparation.

A major misconception about film is that it's all visual. Just because you sit and you watch a screen does not mean your other senses are not being utilised. For example what gives you the creeps in a great horror film is very rarely what you see, it's 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. So I think it is wrong to assume that a film is all about the visual, because there is so much more to it. A great film can awaken all your senses.



Beernuts Productions latest film is a mockumentary called “The Environment – The Real Truth”. It’s all about the precarious state of the environment. I talk to an Academic and Climate Change Expert, a Conservationist, a Park Ranger and even an Environmental Scientist and Researcher to learn all I can about what state our magnificent Earth is really in. But also, what we, as the general public, can do to help our fragile, but beautiful planet. However this is a Beernuts Production, so all the experts, facts and advice is hilariously ridiculous and will have you rolling with laughter.

It was a fun film to make, taking a subject like that, which can be quite controversial at times and just ripping it apart. It made for some great comedy. The film runs for 23 minutes and I believe it’s some of our best work yet.

There is no doubt I face more struggles than others in my industry and it is incredibly frustrating at times 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. I think it’s so important in life to find your passion and follow your dreams, whatever they may be, and that is exactly what I have done and intend to keep doing.

To view all my work just head on over to the Beernuts Productions website www.beernutsproductions.com and I truly hope you enjoy and are entertained by my work.



Gough, an Australian stand-up comic, writer and independent film producer, founded Beernuts Productions in 2006.

Beernuts Productions is a prolific producer of contemporary and cutting edge cinema, television, downloads, books and other forms of creative media.