

Interview with Sharon Greytak

Sharon Greytak's documentary *Losing It* is about losing preconceptions—yours, mine and hers—about living with disabilities. Greytak, who uses a wheelchair to compensate for the limitations imposed by her severe rheumatoid arthritis, decided to explore how disabilities are understood in other places and cultures. A veteran director of one documentary (*Weirded Out* and *Blown Away*, 1986) and two fiction features (*Hearing Voices*, 1991; *The Love Lesson*, 1996), she decided to take a digital camera and a two person crew along.

Losing It introduces us to disabled people in Siberia; Hong Kong; São Paulo, Brazil; Vicenza, Italy; and her own home, New York. More, it introduces us to the world they live in, from their perspective. Fyodr in Siberia soberly describes how guys in town don't even see him, while Larisa has overheard women in church tell her she should hide herself. Edna in São Paulo recalls how a frail elderly woman offered to take care of Edna's child, as if her age and frailty meant less risk than Edna's impaired mobility. You might dismiss that as other cultures' attitude problems, until you hear New Yorker Carol's story, of the social worker who offered to put Carol's newborn up for adoption, even though Carol was a job-holding married woman.

In each place, as she establishes relationships with each new subject, Greytak explores her own assumptions and misunderstandings. She snoops around enough to find out what social resources the disabled people she meets can draw on, and how they solve the daily problems she also knows. As a result, *Losing It* is not only an exploration of what it means to live disabled in different places, but a highly personal saga of cross-cultural curiosity.

Sharon Greytak spoke with Pat Aufderheide from her New York apartment in April, 2001.

How did you get the idea for the film, and how long did it take to come to fruition?

It was just completed at the end of September, but it's been in the works since mid-1996, when I had the idea and began writing a synopsis. I have a disability myself, as you see in the film, and I began to think about how other people with disabilities try to find contentment in their lives, with physical limitations. In the U.S., we have a way of thinking about this, based on our economic environment, and it's conditioned by the history of the civil rights movement.

How did you choose your itinerary and how did you find your subjects?

Travel wasn't new to me. I had traveled for film festivals with my films over the years, never thinking that much about that issue. I wanted a wide cultural and geographic range as well. I knew I wanted to go to Russia. For the other countries a lot of it was word of mouth. I was in touch with disabilities and other social organizations internationally, and since I was not a part of the organization I didn't get much help in terms of contacts. I would get spokespeople, but I really needed to get human stories. The most important support came from arts organizations and word of mouth.

Was it difficult to work internationally?

It was always touch and go bringing in equipment at customs. We always had tourist visas and had letters from arts organizations. Official looking papers are important. With digital cameras, we could take the stuff as personal baggage. In Russia we looked at the equipment and said, No, this is professional. We weren't clear if they wanted money or what they really wanted. They

wanted to keep the equipment for several days, and we didn't want to separate ourselves from the equipment. We showed them all the letters. Three or four hours later it magically cleared up. Getting into Brazil we schmoozed our way.

Who traveled with you?

I traveled with my DP and one production assistant. I had made two dramatic feature films prior to this, on an indie budget, but the crews were 26 or 28 people on those features. So that's another thing I wanted to do, to reset the compass and pare down. I really loved it as well.

You're a major character in the film, but the film usually shows you as a solitary figure, not the head of a production.

I didn't show the crew, because I have traveled around the world without a crew. I wanted to use myself as a linking element of the story. Whatever I decide to do, I have to problem solve on the spot. In a funny way it's a metaphor for filmmaking. You go so far and you hit a staircase and you have to collaborate and assign someone to get over that hurdle, whatever it is. One would think disability is a limitation, but making an independent film is a limitation too. You problem solve as you go along.

How did you fund the film?

I've always made my work on impossible budgets. The first bit of funding came from ArtsLink, a consortium of several organizations that funds collaborative projects for U.S. artists working in Eastern European countries. I proposed that three of us would go for two weeks and collaborate with an organization there. I thought I would go to Moscow or St. Petersburg, but you need an organization in place and a letter of support. I went to Siberia because the most enthusiastic response came from the Open Society Institute organization there. Then the Soros Documentary Fund and the New York State Council on the Arts came in. Even so the whole budget was very low budget.

Was it significant that you moved back to documentary from fiction?

Not really. Whatever project I'm passionate about, that's what drives me to make film. The genre doesn't drive me. Whatever can sustain me for three or four years, that's what I follow.

What technical choices did you make?

I wanted to shoot this in 16mm, but with the project involving foreign languages and interpreters, it was impossible monetarily. Then we thought digital, and considered renting. But we were shooting for two week periods, and then gearing up for the next country. To rent would have tripled or quadrupled the budget, so we bought the camera. The film was shot on DVC Pro, the larger digital tapes. It was a quarter the cost of renting. Also insurance for rental would have been impossible. You can't tell a rental house you're taking their camera to Siberia. As for editing, we put an Avid in my apartment, and that was the least expensive way to go.

What's your distribution strategy?

The film has been doing festivals. It had a world premiere at the Santa Barbara Film Festival. That was terrific. I got a rave review in the Hollywood Reporter. It's going to USA Film Festival

in Dallas, and DoubleTake. I'm looking forward to TV sales; that's realistic for this piece. Internationally, I think the story is also for TV. I have an offer of distribution, but I've been mostly focusing on getting it out and doing the festivals. Festivals get you word of mouth and press. It helps you to do the next project, because it helps with your reputation, your credentials.

You structured this as a personal memoir. Was it always obvious that that was the way to go?

One thing I thought about was the fact you've got five countries, and there's the potential for randomness. So I decided I would be the thread; it was a search structure, it was a journey. It was also an ethical decision to include myself, it's not just pointing my finger and saying tell me about your life as a disabled person, but to subject myself to the same line of questions my subjects were on the other end of.

This is your second documentary featuring disabled people. Was your approach different the second time?

In *Weirded Out* and *Blown Away*, I was not willing to show a person with a disability having trouble doing something. The shift for me over the years has been to be a little daring, asserting the right to show disabled people the same way you would abled people—walking down the street, for instance. I'm claiming for disabled people the same right to be looked at as with abled people. And then you're pulled into the person and their story.

Maybe the novelty or the shock will wear off for viewers. This is akin to any minority group. Until we normalize it more there'll be that kind of shock.

I think it is important to that a disabled person made the film. Aabled people sometimes say to me, Oh, I'd love to make a film about you, but I steer clear because I know it would always be about me being courageous. You have to be extremely careful about the image you represent.

What kind of image did you want to represent?

More than anything else I wanted people to see through to the person. You take someone like Fyodr, the Russian guy, or Marino in Italy. Film has this wonderful property of presenting people you couldn't meet that way. If you met them socially you'd probably make assumptions based on their other characteristics, and not be able to see their intelligence or how much they've thought about the world. Film has this wonderful ability to strip away your assumptions and get right at the heart of what's being said.

I was very concerned about being exploitative. There's a shot of Edna in Brazil walking in her house on crutches, at mid-height. I was worried that someone could say, poor woman, when what I wanted was to show her independence. In solving these problems, I try to be intuitive. It can be about how long you hold a shot, about limiting the audience's engagement with pity. Some of the shooting is done at my level in the wheelchair, and that's a choice. Sometimes films that feature people in wheelchairs are shot from a walking person's point of view, and it hovers above them.

You go beyond the individuals in the movie; you explore their world.

That's because it's not just about courageous disabled people, it's about economics, it's about the things that attach to one's identity and make for the life you have. In Russia, there are Russians without disabilities who can't get work, so it just pushes disabled people down further the priority

list.

Do you see yourself as a disability activist?

Things disability advocates have fought for I've benefited from, but I'd rather just be in life. I do whatever it takes to make my films, rather than waiting for society to look at me and give me opportunities.

You are a rare example of a disabled film director. Does that label you?

I can't tell you how many people come up to me at a party and will say, Have you seen this film? And it's inevitably about a disabled character, as if that's the only kind of film I want to see. It was at the Director's Guild in Los Angeles that an older, well-known producer did that in front of other people who knew me very well. I was cordial, but it struck me that this assumption is really rampant. It's like what Carol says in the film, it happens about race as well.

In the film, you note that abled people are often uncomfortable around the disabled. Did you think about how to make your audience comfortable in this film?

I hope I alleviate the nervousness of abled audiences by showing the complexity of disability. It isn't that someone is courageous or sick or getting better, but about the context. The country, the family, the economic circumstances, access to education. When you realize that, it doesn't allow you to fall into the same routine of sympathy or guilt, of them and us. You realize we're all vulnerable, at any point in life. It's not about compassion for others; this is a group anyone can join. I made myself a kind of bridge character. I've always been that way. I became disabled when I was seven. I straddled two worlds from the start. I can see both sides very well and I feel fortunate for that.

What's next?

I'm writing a fiction piece right now. I've got a draft of the script; we'll see what happens.