

KINO LORBER

*presents*

# CODE OF THE FREAKS

Directed by Salome Chasnoff

U.S. / 69 min / 1:85:1 / DCP / Color  
In English

**\*\*Opening Night – 2020 ReelAbilities Film Festival\*\***

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## Synopsis

*Code of the Freaks* presents a radical reframing of the use of disabled characters in film. Using hundreds of clips spanning over 100 years of moviemaking, and a cast of disabled artists, scholars and activists, it's a scorching critique of some of Hollywood's most beloved characters. This revelatory documentary investigates the power of movie imagery to shape the beliefs and behaviors of the general public toward disabled people and of disabled people toward themselves. Drawing its title from a line from Tod Browning's notorious 1932 film, *Freaks*, *Code of the Freaks* debunks well-worn tropes – the miracle cure, the blind guy driving a car, the magical little people, the face-feelers, the sexless, the better off dead – and brings an entirely fresh perspective. It dares to imagine a cinematic landscape that centers the voices of disabled people.

## Long Synopsis

*Code of the Freaks* presents a radical reframing of the use of disabled characters in film.

From *The Fake Beggar* (1895), *Of Mice and Men* (1939) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962) to more contemporary films like *Million Dollar Baby*, *Forrest Gump*, *Avatar*, *Fences* and *Me Before You*, Hollywood continues to crank out all the old disability clichés and hollow inspirational narratives – what disability activists call “inspiration porn” – that carry actors straight to the Oscars. *Code of the Freaks* (the title is a line from Tod Browning's 1932 classic, *Freaks*) counters these formulaic entertainments with a powerful corrective: it dares to imagine a cinematic landscape that centers the voices of disabled people.

*Code of the Freaks* is well timed to intervene in an emerging international conversation about inclusion and representation. Social media has elevated the disability community's critique of Hollywood's casting decisions and exclusion of disabled people from the industry. John Krasinski's recent insistence on casting a Deaf actor in *A Quiet Place* (2018) shows that some in the industry have begun to take heed. *Code of the Freaks* extends the conversation beyond the largely superficial issue of casting to the stories themselves.

The 13 unprecedented voices and perspectives featured in *Code of the Freaks* include actor and writer Mat Fraser, best known for his role in *American Horror Story*; Lawrence Carter-Long, host of *Turner Classics Presents - The Projected Image: A History of Disability in Film*; painter and writer Riva Lehrer; novelist and playwright Susan Nussbaum; and writer Mike Ervin, whose blog *Smart Ass Cripple* was once dubbed by the late film critic Roger Ebert “some of the fiercest and most useful satire on the web.”

In addition to better known voices, *Code of the Freaks* showcases totally new on-the-ground disability activists and educators to advance a compelling argument: when it comes to disability on-screen, whether the fate of the disabled character is a

miracle cure, institutionalization, death, or “overcoming,” it’s all aimed at inspiring a mainstream audience.

### **Director’s Statement**

Just about everyone in the disability community knows that the quickest way to an Oscar is to play a disabled character. Even my hairdresser observed this just the other day as we were discussing Joaquin Phoenix’s recent win for *Joker*. While the Academy and Hollywood audiences may find these movies and their lead actors worthy of the highest artistic honors, many in the disability community feel they can tell more accurate stories about how society, media and government view and treat disabled people—and for them, these stories are generally not so celebratory.

These are the stories we capture in *Code of the Freaks*. More than a decade in the making, the film grew out of writer-producer Susan Nussbaum’s desire to spark a conversation in the disability community about the portrayal of disabled characters in Hollywood movies. Years before, as a young woman, Susan became disabled suddenly as the result of an accident. At the time, she knew nothing about disability and had no models except those she’d seen in the movies, like Quasimodo, Baby Jane, and Tiny Tim. Fortunately, Susan soon discovered the disability rights movement and met real disabled people. Yet she continued to witness and experience the harmful effects of media representation of disability. When together we made a series of short documentaries with disabled girls, I came to understand how dual consciousness – the conflict between how others saw them and how they saw themselves – affected their self-image.

To launch our conversation, the group that was to become the *Code of the Freaks*’ creative team hosted a salon series in community settings around Chicago, presenting montages of Hollywood clips featuring disabled characters organized in themes – blind men and women, magical creatures, the kill or cure option – and filmed the discussions. The impassioned reactions of our audiences encouraged us to develop this film.

We wanted to make a movie that would give viewers tools to better understand what they’re watching. We called upon disabled artists, writers, scholars and activists to confront the dilemma of the disabled body onscreen, and present real-life alternatives to the stock characters and tired plots that exoticize, idealize, ridicule or demonize disabled characters.

Movies have the power to shape the beliefs and behaviors of non-disabled people toward people with disabilities, and of disabled people toward themselves. Movies build astonishing fictional worlds where they hold us captive on two-hour journeys, worming their way into our psyches. They shape our expectations in ways we’re not always aware of – especially in cases where the films provide our only references for unfamiliar experiences. We love movies and it’s a powerful love that can be mesmerizing. But the consequences can be toxic. -- *Salome Chasnoff*

### **Writers' Statement:**

When we first started working on *Code of the Freaks*, none of us imagined a decade-long project that would put us in conversation with so many amazing artists, activists, and scholars. We set out to make a film by disabled people, for disabled people to capture the conversations that we and those within our communities were so desperate to have, hoping that these conversations could also have a wider audience and reach. As writers, educators, and activists, our aims were simple: to curate a collection of mainstream disability representations and raise the voices of the crip community's critique. We spent countless hours in Susan's living room, Carrie's office, and on the phone from our respective couches when we were too sick, tired, and/or pained to meet in person imagining what this film could be. The final product is more than our individual and collective imaginings, and we hope that it sparks the kinds of animated discussions that gave birth to it.

*Code of the Freaks* enters a conversation about media representations that is, in many ways, much different from when we started the project. Activism around inclusion has begun to reach the mainstream film and television industry, with high profile actors from Bryan Cranston, Edward Norton, and Mark Ruffalo recently endorsing demands to hire more disabled actors, writers, and directors. At the same time, frustratingly little has changed in the types of disability storylines that mainstream film and television produce. With few exceptions, disability still functions as a storytelling device, an inspirational trope, and a vehicle for a non-disabled character development. These images, in turn, continue to perpetuate disability oppression in their erasure of the full lives disabled people live and their propagation of harmful stereotypes that disabled lives are less valuable and/or less worthy of living. *Code of the Freaks*, then, extends conversations about representational authenticity to provide audiences tools through which to critically engage with past, present, and future depictions of disability on screen in order to put these images within the context of the structural oppression that disabled people face. It is our sincere hope that as the media landscape continues to change, the complex and sometimes contradictory voices captured within our film offer insights through which to understand, evaluate, and challenge these representations in ways that fight for the liberation of disabled people and that make room for more depictions of the uniqueness and vibrancy of disabled people's lives.

-- Susan Nussbaum, Alyson Patsavas, Carrie Sandahl

BIOS - KEY CREATIVE PERSONNEL

**Salome Chasnoff** (Director, Producer) is a Chicago-based filmmaker and installation artist who maintains a collaborative social practice and exhibition career that centers the voices of under-recognized or misrepresented communities. Her work has shown across the US and internationally in film festivals, galleries, and museums including National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC; Theaster Gates' Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago; Frameline Film Festival, San Francisco; Creative Time's Democracy in America; Chicago Humanities Festival; Superfest Best of the Fest, Berkeley CA; Black Harvest International Film and Video Festival; Toronto Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival; and the United Nations. Awards include Purpose Prize Fellow, Women's eNews Ida B Wells Bravery in Journalism Award and 21 Leaders for the 21st Century, Chicago Foundation for Women Impact Award, and the Illinois Humanities Council Towner Award. She was the founder and director of the celebrated community media organization, Beyondmedia Education, and a founding member of the PO Box Collective, a multi-generational social practice center. Chasnoff teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she also directs the BFA in Art Education program.

**Susan Nussbaum** (Writer, Producer, Interviewee) is a Chicago-based playwright, novelist and longtime disability rights and culture activist. She won Barbara Kingsolver's 2012 PEN/Bellwether Prize for her novel *Good Kings Bad Kings*, also a 2013 Indie Best Pick and one of Booklist's Top Ten First Novels of 2013. Her work as a playwright has been seen in many Chicago theaters, including Victory Gardens, Second City, Steppenwolf, the Goodman Theater as well as theaters around the U.S. Her play *Mishuganismo* was published in *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out* and Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights published her play *No One As Nasty*. Nussbaum worked for many years at Access Living, a disability rights organization. For her innovative work with disabled teenage girls, Nussbaum was chosen for the 2007 Chicago Girls Coalition Woman in the Field Award, by the 2008 *Utne Reader* as one of 50 Visionaries Who are Changing Your World, and for the Chicago Foundation for Women's Impact Award in 2015.

**Alyson Patsavas** (Writer, Producer, Interviewee) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research brings together disability studies, feminist theory and queer theory, and focuses on the cultural politics of pain, health and illness as well as representations of disability in film, television, and popular culture. Her current book project maps contemporary North American cultural discourses of pain and proposes a crip analytic of pain. Her work appears in *Crip Magazine Vol 2*, *Sick Time*, *Crip Time*, *Caring Time*, *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television*, *The Feminist Wire*, *Somatechnics*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*.

**Carrie Sandahl** (Writer, Producer, Interviewee) is an artist/scholar and Associate Professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is also the director Chicago's Bodies of Work, an organization that promotes disability arts and culture year-round through partnerships with cultural institutions and producing original work. Her own research and creative activity focus on disability and gender identities in live performance, including theatre, dance, and performance art. Sandahl has published numerous research articles and an anthology she co-edited with Philip Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion*:

*Disability and Performance* (University of Michigan Press), garnered the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's award for Outstanding Book in Theatre Practice and Pedagogy.

**Jerzy Rose** (Director of Photography, Editor, Producer) is a film director and editor. His films have shown at the Telluride Film Festival, Slamdance Film Festival, Palm Springs International Film Festival, Fantastic Fest, La Cinémathèque Française, and in-flight on Virgin American Airlines. He hopes to one day show his work on transatlantic and transpacific airlines. He teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

### **BIOS – CAST (ALPHABETICAL ORDER)**

**Candace Coleman**, a black disabled woman from the South Side of Chicago, is the Racial Justice Community Organizer at Access Living. She works closely with disabled people affected by the criminal justice system to spearhead community organizing around the intersection of racial and disability justice including anti-bullying, the school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice, police brutality, and deinstitutionalization. Coleman remains dedicated to teaching disabled youth of color to take pride in all aspects of their identity, so they can become leaders themselves. She believes that young people will shape our future and change our world.

**Lawrence Carter-Long** is a respected authority on media and disability, and curator of the pioneering disTHIS! film series as well as Turner Classic's *The Projected Image: A History of Disability in Film*, which broke new ground by captioning and audio describing all 21 films – a first for cable television. Additional credits include *Ready to Ride: A Homecoming Musical* (actor/adviser) and adviser for *Crip Camp*, *Push Girls*, and Sundance Institute New Filmmaker Intensive. Publications include “Where Have You Gone, Stephen Dwoskin? A Disability Film Manifesto” (Film Quarterly, Spring 2019), “How ABC's 'Speechless' is changing attitudes about disability” (Upworthy, October 2016), and “Grindhouse, Arthouse and the Wacky, Wonderful World of Underground Disability Cinema” (Library of Congress lecture, December 2013). Carter-Long is a founding steering committee member of *ReelAbilities: Disabilities Film Festival*.

**Mike Ervin** is a writer and disability rights activist living in Chicago. His play *The History of Bowling* has been produced by theatres across the country. As a free-lance journalist, he has published over 1,300 articles and essays, mostly on disability topics. He is author of the blog, *Smart Ass Cripple*, and two books, *Smart Ass Cripple's Little Red Book* and *Smart Ass Cripple's Little Yellow Book*. From 1992 to 2019, Mike directed the Access Project, a comprehensive initiative to make live theater accessible for people with disabilities. He is a founding member of the Chicago chapter of the direct-action disability rights organization ADAPT. He is proud to have been arrested over a dozen times for civil disobedience. Mike is also founder of Jerry's Orphans, which organized annual protests against the Jerry Lewis telethon.

**Mat Fraser** is an Internationally renowned disabled actor & writer. Known for screen work, including the BBC/HBO series “His Dark Materials”, US TV comedy “Loudermilk”, and

“American Horror Story: Freak Show”, in 2020 he curated a series of 6 Monologues around Disability for the BBC & BBC America, also writing & acting one of the pieces.

Mat’s writing has been widely recognized and awarded. His museum show “Cabinet of Curiosities: How Disability Was Kept in a Box” won the UK’s Observer Ethical Award for Arts & Entertainment 2014. [www.matfraser.co.uk](http://www.matfraser.co.uk), Instagram: @mflidfraser, Twitter: @mat\_fraser

**Timotheus “T.J.” Gordon, Jr.** is a research assistant at the Institute for Disability and Human Development (IDHD) at the University of Illinois at Chicago. As a research assistant, he supports advocacy projects on disability pride in communities of color and providing resources to families of people with disabilities in marginalized communities in the Chicagoland area. He is also an autistic self-advocate and creator of *the Black Autist*, a blog that centers on autism and disability acceptance in the African diaspora. Gordon is a co-leader of the Chicagoland Disabled People of Color Coalition (Chicagoland DPOCC), a group that promotes disability acceptance and inclusion in marginalized communities throughout the Chicagoland area.

**Tsehaye Geralyn Hébert** is an ADA 25 Advancing Leadership ambassador, a member of the Chicago Cultural Accessibility Coalition committee, and Artistic Associate at eta Creative Arts Foundation. She is a nationally acclaimed citizen playwright and cultural architect. Recognition includes: Alliance Keneda National Graduate Playwright Award; Sundance Theatre Lab, Frank McCourt Memoir, and Cultural DC/SourceFest finalist; Voices Rising Fellow, Vermont Studio Center; The Guild Literary Complex 30 Writers to Watch; Midwest Black Playwrights Project winner, RhinoFest; Native Voices and Visions Louisiana State University.

**Tommy Heffron** is an award-winning film/video artist and an Assistant Professor in the Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications at Hampton University. In Chicago, he taught filmmaking and media studies to youth and digital video production to adults. He brought a storytelling and scene building workshops to incarcerated youth at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center and founded LitLAB@1512, a creative writing and design program for teens in the North Lawndale Community. At CAN TV, Chicago’s Public Access station, he designed and managed the station’s training department and directed a monthly half-hour show for Special Olympics Chicago. His immersive films, videos, and performances explore the sensory-bound minefields of communication and understanding.

**Riva Lehrer** is an artist, writer and curator who focuses on the socially challenged body. She is best known for representations of people with impairments, and those whose sexuality or gender identity has long been stigmatized. Her work has been seen at the National Portrait Gallery, Yale University, the United Nations, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the Arnot Museum, the DeCordova Museum, the Frye Museum, the Chicago Cultural Center, and the State of Illinois Museum. Awards include the 3Arts MacDowell Fellowship for writing, 3Arts Residency Fellowship, the Carnegie Mellon Fellowship, and the Prairie Fellowship. Her memoir, “Golem Girl,” will be published in 2020. Lehrer teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and in the Medical Humanities Departments of Northwestern University.

**Tekki Lomnicki** is the founder and Artistic Director of Tellin’ Tales Theatre, a 23-year-old company dedicated to shattering the barriers between the disabled and

non-disabled worlds through the power of personal story. She has written and performed 26 solo performance pieces including two full-length plays, *When Heck Was a Puppy* and *Blurred Vision*, and starred in the award-winning film, *The Miracle* by Jeffrey Jon Smith. She taught youth at Chicago's Gallery 37 and After School Matters, and adults at the Victory Gardens Training Center. She is a recipient of an Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowship in New Performance Forms, the 3Arts Award in Theater, and the Grigsby Award for Excellence in Solo Performance, the Dan Van Hecke Award for outstanding leadership and service to the disability community.

**Susan Nussbaum** (see above)

**Alyson Patsavas** (see above)

**Carrie Sandahl** (see above)

**Crom Saunders** is a tenured professor at Columbia College Chicago, where he is currently Director of the Deaf Studies B.A. degree program. Crom also works as a theatre interpreter and ASL master/director for several notable theater companies, including Steppenwolf Theatre and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, with nearly two decades of experience under his belt. In addition to his teaching and theatre work, Crom also presents workshops, and performs improv and his one-person show, "Cromania!" internationally. To see his work: <http://thecromsaunders.com>, <http://writercrom.blogspot.com>, or "Ink-Stained Fingertips" on Facebook and YouTube.

## DISCUSSION / WRITING GUIDES & LANGUAGE

*Code of the Freaks* speaks from a disability community and disability cultural position. As such, the interviewees in the film use disability identity language reflective of this position: include disabled people, crips, autistic, and Deaf people. This is also the language that should be used when discussing the film and voices that it captures. While not everyone prefers or feels comfortable with these terms, these language choices should be respected and used when speaking about *Code of the Freaks* and the voices it captures.

Please avoid euphemistic terms such as "differently-abled," "people with different abilities," "special," or any derivation of these phrases.

A helpful discussion with one of the film's interviewees, Lawrence Carter Long, on his campaign: *Disabled: Just #Say the Word*:  
<https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/02/25/468073722/disabled-just-saytheword>.

In addition, Lydia X. Z. Brown's discussion of Ableism/Language on their website, *Autistic Hoya*, includes a full, detailed discussion of words to avoid and words to use



carefully and with context:

<https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html>.

### **KINO LORBER**

With a library of over 2,800 titles, Kino Lorber Inc. has been a leader in independent art house distribution for 35 years, releasing 30 films per year theatrically under its Kino Lorber, Kino Repertory and Alive Mind Cinema banners, garnering seven Academy Award® nominations in nine years. Recent theatrical releases include Cannes-winners Kantemir Balagov's *Beanpole*, Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne's *Young Ahmed*, and Kleber Mendonça Filho & Juliano Dornelles's *Bacurau*. In addition, the company brings over 350 titles yearly to the home entertainment and educational markets through physical and digital media releases. With an expanding family of distributed labels, Kino Lorber handles releases in ancillary media for Zeitgeist Films, Carlotta USA, Adopt Films, Greenwich Entertainment, Raro Video, and others, placing physical titles through all wholesale, retail, and direct to consumer channels, as well as direct digital distribution through over 40 OTT services including all major TVOD and SVOD platforms. In 2019, the company launched its new art house digital channel Kino Now which features over 1000 titles from the acclaimed Kino Lorber library.