

MOVIES

At SXSW, a Woman Who Had a Stroke Turns Director

By SIMONE S. OLIVER MARCH 17, 2016

AUSTIN, Tex. — Having a stroke of any kind is not uncommon, but few patients turn on their iPhones and start recording their experience seven days after waking up from an induced coma. Lotje Sodderland did.

“My Beautiful Broken Brain,” a documentary that had its debut here at SXSW last weekend and will be showing on Netflix starting Friday, takes viewers through Ms. Sodderland’s recovery from a brain hemorrhage four years ago when she was 34. Her language impaired, she found herself living in a surreal reality straight out of a David Lynch movie. The paradox is, Ms. Sodderland is a loyal Lynch fan.

As she sees the world through her left eye as it was, the right, however, seems like another dimension. The colors are bright and swirling; the audio is amplified and sometimes distorted.

Ms. Sodderland and Sophie Robinson directed and produced this 83-minute documentary, which functions as a visual metaphor of Ms. Sodderland’s altered, often bizarre perception.

Throughout the film, Ms. Sodderland records imaginary chats with Mr. Lynch in the form of video messages. Eventually, she sends him one. And in an unexpected subplot, the two connect, form a bond, and, after the film was completed, Mr. Lynch, the “Twin Peaks” creator, becomes executive producer.

In an interview Ms. Sodderland spoke about her dual role as subject and director. Here are edited excerpts from that conversation.

What made you start recording when you were in the hospital?

I wasn't thinking of making a film. I was just trying to understand, basically. I was just recording everything because it was something to do. Things were really difficult and it was a way to remember. I was so afraid of forgetting.

What was your role in the editing process?

We shot for a year, and then we didn't get the money together to do the editing until about a year later.

So when I went in, I was in shock. I was like, I cannot believe what I've been through. And I just thought, I'm not sure I can do this editing because it's very, very intense.

It's almost like confrontational therapy. But then I thought if I remove myself, disembody myself from the story, and say this is a film about a woman and look at it as a separate entity to myself, I will be able to do it.

So I did get quite heavily involved. And of course I really wanted ownership over the story. If I saw something in the edit, I was like, no, that's not what it was like.

In the edit, you can really form an attachment to the narrative, especially because of the problem with communication, having lost the ability to speak and tell my own story. By that time, having regained some of that ability, I was really keen to tell the story myself, so it was really collaborative.

Was that in itself empowering?

Absolutely. The making of the film was the regaining of the storytelling faculty. Telling stories, being able to communicate is such a central element of being a human being. Being able to think and express yourself in a linear way is important, so when you lose that ability, you lose your sense of self. The making of the film really is the expression of the regaining of that fundamental human ability.

What role did film play in your life before the stroke and now, during your recovery?

Before, it was more like a means to an end. I earned a living as a producer.

So it wasn't as creative. It was more a highly cognitive, multitasking kind of job. I always wanted to make documentaries, but ended up producing other people's docs, which was fine.

But now, I actually make my own films, as a result of what happened. So because I can't do those things anymore — I still can't read I'm forced to look at things differently. I look at my abilities and limitations and assess what I can do and how I can function as a professional.

Also, the world looks so different. It's really intense because of the damage to my cerebral cortex. It was like the perfect solution. So now I'm much more creatively active.

What about your experience connected you to David Lynch's films?

I started liking David Lynch's work when I was a teenager and I watched "Twin Peaks." I was one of those people who got really into it. And like many people, I started following his work. It has this kind of magical, ethereal, weird kind of addictive quality. So when I had the stroke, I just kept thinking it felt like a Lynchian kind of world, where nothing really made sense. The enormity of the weirdness made me think, if only David Lynch were here, he'd know what I'm talking about.

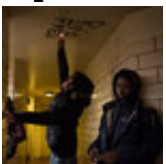
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