



Sure footed – Model Aimee Mullins confounds stereotypes

## Emotion Pictures – Films that celebrate the ability in disability

40 year-old Gerda König has spent most of her adult life in a wheelchair. Severely challenged by the debilitating impact of muscular dystrophy, it's a long time since she's been able to move any part of her body.

This would be challenging enough for most. But to her, a dancer and choreographer by vocation, it could have meant a bereavement of opportunities to practice the art form she's loved since childhood. Gerda, however, has not ever paused long enough to even consider the option: today, she is one of the busiest international choreographers in contemporary dance. Having formed her own dance company, DIN A 13, she tours the world, choreographing cutting edge innovative spectacles which express her vision of life, its struggles and the grace of ordinary folk.

In 2005, Gerda König went to Kenya to stage and perform the boldly provocative *Countercircles*. The show's inventive choreography played on the contrasts and harmonies between able and disabled dancers and featured many non-professionals recruited from the slums of Nairobi.



Able-spirited – the cast of *Countercircles* perform

German documentary director Gerhard Schick followed Gerda to Nairobi and the result was a compelling film, documenting her unique creative process, the intense interaction with her mixed cast and the resulting performance.

The film, *Invitation to the Dance – Body and Taboo*, will be remembered vividly by Maria Hatzimichali-Papaliou, the creator and director of Emotion Pictures, an international documentary film festival on disability located in Athens. 2007 was the festival's first year and *Invitation to the Dance* won its first prize.

For Maria, the disabled do not live in a world separate from the rest of us and where that discrimination exists, it should be challenged, simply because those of us with disability have much to offer others in the way we deal with, and overcome, adversity. "From those people we learn what the power of life is, we learn to live fully. After all, where the big problems are there is also a positive attitude towards life, something that our society should not forget. This is the big lesson that the people with disability can teach us. As Helen Keller mentioned, 'we are born with restrictions, but what we can do is infinite'."

Her own life and career also attest to Maria's belief in the power of the film medium to challenge us all out of our comfort zones and take action to address social inequality and oppression. In 1977, she directed the documentary, *O Agonas Ton Tyflon (The Struggle of the Blind)*, denouncing the appalling lack of social welfare in her country for people with blindness.

Unfazed by police intimidation at home (Greece was still under the grip of a repressive military regime), she toured Europe with the film, in a successful bid to shame the regime into taking action through international pressure. In France, she visited the star-philosopher Jean Paul Sartre and his very public support for her cause garnered her 3,000 signatures from some of the country's most influential artists and intellectuals of the era. These included Yves Montand and Simone Signoret, two of Greek dissident director Costa Gavras' most cherished actors.

Since this troubled era, Maria has directed many documentaries and television series which received prizes in Greece and internationally, including the prestigious Academy of Athens, FIPRESCI and Henry Ford awards.

From 2008, Maria Papaliou and her team want to widen the scope of Emotion Pictures to encompass broader humanitarian concerns. "We do not want to be labelled as the festival of the 'shattered bodies', to be reined in by a narrow definition of disability," she argues. "People suffering in silence inside an intact body, those with the emotional trauma of war, or the dislocation of madness, they are just as deserving of being depicted in film and the resulting films are just as deserving of being celebrated through our festival." One Emotion Pictures 2008 guest of honour was the South Indian child prodigy Kishan Shrikhandt who, aged only eleven, has directed his first feature, a realistic depiction of the life of Indian street kids.

Maria sees Emotion Pictures as an all-purpose facilitator for the circulation of these important films and not just a one-off annual festival. She and her team do a lot of work in between the festival to foster opportunities for the films to circulate and be seen elsewhere. Through their work with 800 of Greece's municipalities, they ensure some of the festival's selection secures local screenings. The outreach work also stretches outside of Greece; in the past year, films selected by Emotion Pictures were also

programmed by the Cairo International Film Festival, the Festival of Mediterranean Films in Rome and the International Film Festival for Children in San Francisco.