

Midwest Film Festival Screening Opening Remarks with Tribute to Susan Nussbaum  
June 2022, Salome Chasnoff

It makes me so happy to see all of you here! This has been a really really long time coming. If there's one thing I hope we've learned from the pandemic, it's that community is everything.

I want to first and foremost thank the Gene Siskel Film Center – my true home theatre, where I've had so many unforgettable experiences – and Rebecca Fons, a wonderful collaborator who I first worked with long ago in another era through a partnership between Beyondmedia and the Chicago International Film Festival. We are so grateful to you and your terrific team. And I want to thank Erica Duffy and Carlos Diaz of the Midwest Film Festival. It's a real pleasure to work with you both and I have so much appreciation for your efforts to shine a light on filmmakers in the Midwest. We're thrilled you've chosen to feature Code of the Freaks. I also want to thank Riva Lehrer for sharing her brilliant portrait of Susan to watch over us for this event, and to Michael and Cheryl Ross Mitchell for generously lending us the painting for tonight.

This first-ever in-person screening is so exciting but also so hard for me and my co-producers, Carrie Sandahl and Aly Patsavas, because our beloved collaborator, comrade, co-conspirator, sister-friend for life, Susan Nussbaum, is not with us to share this moment. She was looking forward to it so much. Code of the Freaks would not be a movie if not for her. I know she'd have plenty to say in the Q+A as well as on the phone tomorrow morning. Right now, I can only imagine her running commentary about these very words as I speak them, and that makes me smile.

Susan is widely known and celebrated as an award-winning novelist, playwright, actor, director, activist, cultural critic, and all-around charismatic personality – the queen of wit, snark, and bullshit detection. Her unique contributions to disability culture were significant and transformative because she loved the disability community with her

whole tender heart. Few know, however, of her pathbreaking work with girls. This is what I want to lift up tonight.

As the founder and coordinator of the Empowered Fe Fes of Access Living, in 2008 Susan was recognized by the Utne Reader as one of 50 Visionaries Who Are Changing Your World. Besides creating a powerful space for girls with disabilities to find friendship, education, support, and advocacy, she also created the opportunity for them to make movies with Beyondmedia, the media organization I worked with. Together we made 3 short videos (2003-2008) in what was an unbelievably joyful and satisfying experience for all of us. I still remember like it was yesterday - the first day when I and other Beyondmedia teaching artists came to the old Access Living building on Roosevelt dragging cameras, tripods, microphones, and god knows what else. The girls were beside themselves with wonder and excitement. They had no idea what lay ahead. After many months of planning, production, and postproduction, we finally premiered their first film, which you will see tonight, about growing up disabled – "Beyond Disability: The Fe Fe Stories" – and the room that night at the premiere felt like it would implode with pride. Parents in the audience were crying. We soon saw the Fe Fes, most still teenagers, leading discussions on disability with educators across Chicago. The movie went on to win scores of awards including the top prizes at Superfest, the premiere disability festival, as well as to screen and be used as a teaching tool all over the world – even here at the Siskel as part of Conversations at the Edge in 2005. A side story on Superfest: Susan volunteered to take 2 of the girls to Berkeley to receive the awards in person –a decision she quickly came to regret when one of the girls went out on the town after the awards ceremony and didn't come back to the hotel until morning. Thankfully, Susan didn't call me until after they found her.

Sometime during that yearlong workshop that resulted in "Beyond Disability," we learned that only one girl in the entire group of about 20 had ever heard the word clitoris because they weren't deemed worthy of sex ed in school, and we immediately knew what our next project would be. We facilitated a sex and sexuality workshop over many months, offering everything from a field trip to the Early to Bed sex shop to learn about

sex toys, to a lesson in how to put a condom on a banana (or was it a zucchini?) using only their mouths, to the wonders of masturbation and the horrors of domestic violence and eugenics. The workshop was documented in "Doin' It: Sex, Disability and Videotape," which you can access on my Vimeo page.

Susan often recalled her experience of becoming disabled as a young woman in her 20s and knowing nothing about disability except what she'd seen in movies, replete with characters choosing to die rather than live with a disability. So, the future she envisioned for herself at this point in her life was very bleak. It was not until she became involved in the disability rights movement that her life changed, and she could see through the toxic messaging embedded in Hollywood representations of disability. She had this burning desire to make a documentary that would expose the many ways Hollywood cinema exploits disabled characters for the benefit of the nondisabled protagonists and audiences. After years of talking about it, we finally did it – and we fell down down down into the "Code of the Freaks" rabbit hole, dragging our co-producers Carrie Sandahl, Aly Patsavas, and Jerzy Rose down with us. We remained there for more than a decade. We feared we'd never emerge. But, led by the brilliant Susan Nussbaum, we had the education of a lifetime in critique, collaboration, fidelity, and following a thread no matter how long and circuitous. 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 – some of whom you'll hear from tonight in the Q+A after the screening - to confront the dilemma of the disabled body onscreen, and to present real-life alternatives to the stock characters and tired plots that exoticize, idealize, ridicule, or demonize disabled characters.

Thank you for coming to the show. Please stay for the discussion.