

## What's Your Problem?

BBC Two is taking a bold and innovative approach to covering disability issues this autumn with a season of drama and documentaries which tackles head-on the complex subject of disability. These groundbreaking films give viewers a unique and provocative view of the world, through the eyes of a disparate group of disabled people.

This is also the first time that BBC Two will explore disability through drama, according to Jane Root, BBC Two Controller. “For the first time we are using drama – as well as documentaries – to tackle this often undiscussed subject, and the result is some really powerful voices, which I think will help us to confront our own fears and prejudices,” claims Jane.

“*What's Your Problem?* avoids the all-too-frequent approach of presenting disabled people as either heroes or villains and instead tries to reflect what it really means to people to be disabled now, in the 21st century.”

The programmes in the season include: *One In Seven*, in which the experiences of four people with disabilities paint a revealing insider's view of life in Britain today; *Surviving Thalidomide*, the story of three British people whose mothers were given the drug Thalidomide during pregnancy, but who survived; *The Man Who Learned To See*, the moving and funny documentary telling the extraordinary human story of Mike May and his struggle to see; *Twisted* (working title), the story of 12-year-old Krystie Maddox, diagnosed with Friedreichs Ataxia, a progressive disorder of the nervous

system which affects balance, co-ordination, movement and sensation; and the dramas *Flesh And Blood*, about a father whose world is turned upside down when he discovers the truth about his origins; and *North Face*, *The Egg* and *Urban Myth*, short 10-minute films by three of the UK's best-known writers, specifically written for three of the UK's best disabled actors.

*Thalidomide survivor Janette Cooke (centre) with her husband and daughter*

## Programming details

### One In Seven

*One In Seven* is a revealing, moving and sometimes comical insider's view of life in Britain today, through the experiences of four people with disabilities.



*Jamie, with cerebral palsy*

*Julian, who is deaf*

Julian has been profoundly deaf since birth. He can hear a little with an aid, but he usually prefers not to wear it. To him deafness is more an issue of language than disability – British Sign Language (BSL) is his first language and he manages with English much the same as anyone does in a foreign country. The deaf community is small and gossip is rife – try having an argument in BSL and everybody soon knows about it!

Jamie is an actor and theatre director and was born with cerebral palsy. As he says, he “walks funny and sounds odd” but apart from that, he’s an ordinary bloke. His passion is football and his Saturdays away with his mates at matches allow him be “a bit of a geezer”.

Penny has had epilepsy most of her life and she experiences different types of fits – some more serious than others – about once every two to four weeks. In many ways, her condition is more of a problem for her husband and two young daughters to cope with, as Penny is oblivious to things around her during a seizure.

Finally, Hugh has been blind since birth, but his disability has never stopped him from leading an active life, like the others in this film. Hugh is a regular rower, a part-time DJ in the evenings and enjoys going to art galleries, where he considers everything is art – from the pictures on the wall, to the reactions and sounds from others around him, everything holds its own fascination.

### Surviving Thalidomide

Forty years ago a drug prescribed for morning sickness during pregnancy was identified as the cause of a tenfold increase in babies born without arms or legs.

By the time Thalidomide was taken off the market, about eight thousand babies had been born throughout the developed world. About half died just after birth.

*Surviving Thalidomide* is the story of three out of the 456 British survivors: Janette Cooke, born without any limbs at all; Kevin Donellon, born with hands and feet directly attached to his torso; and Gary Skyner, born with short arms but normal legs. Gary and Kevin are both Scousers, while Janette lives in south Manchester.



(l-r) Janette Cooke, Gary Skyner and Kevin Donellon

When they were born, doctors thought they would only live a few months. They have confounded these dismal predictions to aspire to exactly the same goals as the rest of the population, and with a mixture of determination and sheer bloody-mindedness they have succeeded.

However, although attitudes have moved on considerably since the sixties, functioning in the outside world is still a challenge for all of them, and they all have different ways of addressing their problems.

Kevin has taken the path of militancy, Gary's making a living as a stand-up comic, and while Janette might appear to be completely helpless, the truth is that she is a woman who controls her environment mostly through sheer force of personality – everyone does what they're told as she whizzes around in a wheelchair controlled by her chin.

Kevin featured in several films while he was growing up, and this provides a powerful way of looking back at the expectations he and his mother had of a future condemned to helplessness and dependency. He now lives completely independently in a flat of his own.

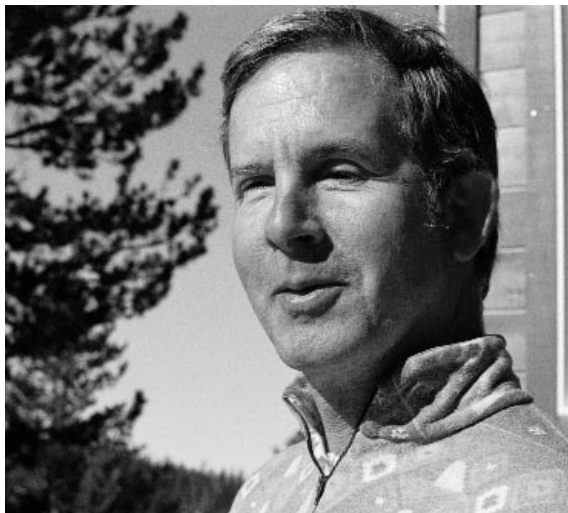
Gary's response to the preconceptions surrounding the disabled is to take off in a light aircraft, while Janette confounded the world by marrying and producing a baby at the age of 25 – a daughter who is now 16 and fiercely proud of her remarkable mother. We celebrate with her as she reaches her 40th birthday and throws a party for 150.

*Surviving Thalidomide* celebrates the success of a group whose determination not to conform to society's dismal expectations of them has often blazed the trail for all disabled people. "It might have been a tragedy in the Sixties," says Janette, "but that's no reason to treat it like a tragedy now."

### The Man Who Learned To See

“Excuse me. I just got my sight back last week after being totally blind for 43 years. Could you help me figure out what I am seeing?” There was a big pregnant pause while the lady next to me decided if I was a lunatic or a miracle.”

This moving and funny documentary tells the extraordinary human story of Mike May and his struggle to see. It is neither a tale of a medical breakthrough nor a story about a miraculous cure – but a fascinating exploration of how our brains visually and emotionally interpret the strange world we live in.



*Mike May*

Mike May was blinded by a chemical explosion at the age of three – but his drive and determination helped him overcome his disability and lead a full life. He worked for the CIA, became a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and holds the downhill ski-ing record for a totally blind person.

Then in March 2000, Mike underwent pioneering operations on the cornea in one eye. He had zero expectations for when the bandages came off, but found that he had regained low vision and was able to see his wife

and two young sons for the first time. He can now count fingers at two to five feet depending on the lighting, and gets most of his visual information from colours.

But Mike’s biggest problem is understanding what he is seeing. “I find it very distracting to look at people’s faces when I am having a conversation. I can see their lips moving, eye lashes flickering and hands gesturing. I tried looking down but with women, a low cut top was even more distracting...”

Sight for Mike is still uncertain. Last year, his body began to reject the transplant and although medication successfully saved his vision, it could still occur again. And Mike’s sight is not improving – the doctors think he should be able to see better than he does but the problem is with Mike’s inability to process what the eye is seeing.

### Twisted *(working title)*

Krystie Maddox is 12 years old and is going through a big life change. When she was nine she was diagnosed with Friedreichs Ataxia. It is an uncommon, inherited progressive disorder of the nervous system and affects balance, co-ordination, movement and sensation.

Over the past couple of years Krystie has had to adapt to her new life as her walking, hand movements and balance have all been affected. She knows she will eventually end up in a wheelchair but at the moment she and her mother are doing everything they can to keep her walking.

Friedreichs affects each person differently and life expectancy depends upon the individual and whether the condition is affecting their heart. Krystie’s condition has worsened over the summer but she has a very strong personality and this is helping her deal with her life change. She

has a wicked sense of humour and is determined to have a good life despite her condition.

George Crofton is 21. Ten months ago George's life changed dramatically when he was on holiday with friends from university. He dived into the water and broke his neck. George is now tetraplegic; he has no use of his legs and limited use of his arms and hands. He has spent the last 10 months of his life in rehabilitation in the spinal unit of Oddstock Hospital.

George's ambition was to finish university and follow in his father's footsteps by going into the army, but his plans have had to change. George has given up his place at Sandhurst but is determined to get back to Manchester University for the start of this year. It is vital that he gets back whilst his friends from the first year are still around but this depends on him being discharged from hospital and his health being up to it.

In the same spinal unit is Lucy Shuker. Lucy had just turned 21 when she bought herself a motorbike. She crashed and as a result is now paraplegic. She has no use of her legs but has full upper body movement. Lucy is just about to leave the unit where she has had ten months of rehabilitation and go back to living independently. She has bought her own flat and is determined to get on with the rest of her life.

### Flesh And Blood

*Flesh And Blood*, which is written by Peter Bowker, tells the story of a father whose world is turned upside down when he discovers the truth about his origins.

Adopted at birth, Joe Broughton (Christopher Eccleston) is overwhelmed by an obsessive desire to trace his real parents after the birth of his daughter Marie. When he discovers that his mother and father were patients at a mental hospital, and never knew they had a child, his world is blown apart. For Joe as well as his wife

Cath (Emma Cunniffe), it's the beginning of a rollercoaster journey which challenges not only his preconceptions about disability, but also his sense of his own identity.



*Christopher Eccleston as Joe Broughton*

The key roles of Joe's birth mother and father – Janet and Harry – are played by Dorothy Cockin and Peter Kirby, who were cast after an extensive search among people with learning disabilities in the north west of England. *Flesh And Blood* also features Barbara Marten (*Bob And Rose*) and Stephen Graham (*Snatch*, *Gangs Of New York*).

Christopher Eccleston's television credits include *Strumpet*, *Linda Green*, *Clocking Off*, *Our Friends In The North* and *Cracker*, as well as *The Others*, *Elizabeth* and *Shallow Grave* in the cinema. Emma Cunniffe's credits include *The Whistle-Blower*, *The Innocents*, *All The King's Men*, *Great Expectations* and *The Lakes*.

*Flesh And Blood* is a BBC/Red Production directed by Julian Farino (*Our Mutual Friend*, *Bob And Rose*, *7 Up 2000*) and produced by Derek Wax. It is funded by BBC Drama and the BBC's Disability Programme Unit. The executive producers are Nicola Shindler (Red Production Company) and Laura Mackie and Alex Holmes (BBC).

### North Face, The Egg, Urban Myth

In a new approach to portraying disabled characters on television, three of the UK's best-known writers were each asked to write a short 10-minute film specifically for three of the UK's best disabled actors.

*North Face* by Lizzie Mickery, directed by Marc Jobst starring Lisa Hammond and Ralf Little, explores a young disabled woman's reaction to a male neighbour's embarrassment after they become sexually entangled. After weeks of ignoring each other Paul is forced to face Cat after he is locked out and needs help, which only she can offer, to get back in.

*The Egg* by Patrick Marber, directed by Richard Wilson stars Jamie Beddard, Tim Healy, Frances de la Tour and Karl Johnson. When a distressed man enters a remote all night café and is served the perfect egg, it has an effect on him, the chef and the waitress that will change their lives forever.

*Urban Myth* by Simon Mirren, directed by Ewan Marshall stars Saffron Burrows and Mat Fraser as old school friends who bump into each other as adults. Max has always had feelings for Niki but because of his disability has never approached her. Now years later, Niki is leaving on a plane for New York in the morning so Max has only a few hours to grab his second chance of making love to the woman of his dreams.