

January 2010 Jacob Nossell Bio and Q&A by Helle Thilo

By Helle Thilo, <http://www.theredchapel.com/>

BACKGROUND/BIO, JACOB NOSSELL

22-year-old Jacob Nossell is a comedian and guest speaker. He's also studying to become a journalist at the University in Roskilde, Denmark. He was adopted from South Korea and came to Denmark only three months old. He suffers from spastic paralysis and can therefore be difficult to understand. On the other hand, he talks a lot and that's a big problem when you've got a speech impediment, as he says. He has performed with eloquence at the Roskilde Festival, in the hip-hop group Suspekt, and at Comedy Zoo in Copenhagen. Jacob Nossell had his TV debut with The Red Chapel, which was shown on the DR2 channel in 2006. The Red Chapel has been selected for the Sundance Film Festival in the USA, which is the most important festival for documentaries in the USA. Only 12 documentary films out of a total of 782 submitted films have been selected for the festival that takes place from the 21st to the 30th of January, 2010. In September, The Red Chapel won the award for "Best Nordic Documentary 2009" at Nordic Panorama (Iceland).

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THE RED CHAPEL CAST & CREW GOES TO SUNDANCE

22-year-old Jacob Nossell, who's suffering from spastic paralysis, journeyed to North Korea in 2006 to prove his worth in a country that is accused of killing all disabled at birth. It was both courageous and reckless. With him, he had a film crew that utilized his handicap to portray the terror regime in the documentary The Red Chapel. They succeeded so well that Jacob Nossell is now traveling with the film crew to the Sundance Film Festival in the USA, where The Red Chapel will be competing for the grand prize.

At the age of 18, Danish-Korean comedian and spastic Jacob Nossell traveled to North Korea with the actor Simon Jul and journalist Mads Brügger to investigate the situation in an inhumane regime that is accused of killing disabled children at birth. A regime where the population lives in eternal fear of the system and the country's despotic leader, Kim Jong Il.

The three Danes were allowed to enter the country under the pretense of being a theatre troupe on a cultural exchange. And during their stay, they found themselves in a surreal role play where it was impossible to tell who was tricking who. The fake theatre troupe put on an air of communism to play the intelligence service's game – and made use of Jacob Nossell's handicap as the x-factor that made it possible to expose the heartless and brutal regime in the documentary film The Red Chapel. The Danish film crew managed to trick the regime to such a degree that no Danish journalists have been granted access to the country since.

ACCUSED OF KILLING HANDICAPPED

Jacob Nossell is now on his way to the most important documentary film festival in the USA, the Sundance Film Festival in Utah, where The Red Chapel has been selected for the main competition along with 11 other films from all over the world.

This turns his thoughts on the time he was a young and inexperienced high school student with spastic paralysis and traveled to the world's most closed off country without any thought of the chilling consequences it could have: ***"They have a UN report hanging over their heads that accuses them of killing spazzes like me. I knew that it was a dictatorship when we left, but I hadn't imagined how severe and harsh it was. I was just 18 and very naïve in a lot of ways, so I didn't at all consider what I was actually signing up for. But that precisely ends up being one of the film's strong points – that I'm so open to everything and honest in relation to much of the terrible stuff we experienced."***

AN AIR OF FEAR

In the midst of this air of fear, in which the three Danes each played their roles as part of a survival strategy, Jacob Nossell met plenty of compassion – including from Mrs. Pak from the intelligence service, who was assigned to watch over the three Danes while they were in the country.

“Everybody was incredibly kind to me – but perhaps only because they wanted to disprove the accusations of killing the handicapped. We’ve discussed this so much within the film crew that I’m almost disqualified. Mrs. Pak wasn’t supposed to like me because of the system. But in small glimpses I actually think that she did, because behind the disdain, the hatred and the brainwashing, I experienced small rays of light and warmth.”

He was the only one able to speak freely in the completely state controlled country. Because even if the Koreans had understood Danish, they wouldn’t have been able to understand Jacob Nossell on account of his speech impediment. Perhaps this is why he wasn’t afraid of speaking his mind?

“I’m not one to get scared. But in North Korea, I probably reached a point where I thought it somewhat irrelevant and irrational to tell them what I considered right and wrong. Besides, I was more angry and frustrated than scared,” he says and adds that today he may have repressed remembering being scared: ***“I think my fear was drowned out by frustration because we lied so much. And I was also able to shed some of my fears because I broke down during the stay. It was more justifiable for me to break down because I’m handicapped.”***

HATE AND DESTRUCTION

That Jacob Nossell is spastic was the x-factor the crew used in shedding light on the conditions in the dictatorship. And the ‘handicap card’, as he calls it himself, was played many times – including during a demonstration of power aimed at the USA in which hundreds of thousands Koreans marched to honor ‘The Beloved Leader’, and in which Jacob Nossell as the only one didn’t salute him:

“There was an air of hate and destruction. Like in Hitler’s time. It was very overpowering and I didn’t feel like participating, to put it mildly,” he tells us. It was safest to play along as a supporter of the system, but he refused to take part in this insane worshipping of Kim Jong Il and thereby ended up being the unintended hero and freedom fighter in The Red Chapel. Speaking about his participation in the big parade:

“It wasn’t just brave of me. It was also reckless. Imagine if they had noticed how angry I was – we may not have been sitting here today. At that point, my limit had been reached. I felt that if I saluted, I would have lost everything I believed in and the last part of my integrity. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I just wanted to go back home.”

Jacob Nossell played his ‘handicap card’ and pretended to not understand what was going on. And precisely this – that he’s suffering from spastic paralysis – was one of the main reasons for him becoming part of The Red Chapel. Yet, he doesn’t feel exploited: ***“It’s not because I feel misled by Mads Brügger, who was the mastermind behind it all, but if I had known that it would end like that, I would probably have joined them on other terms.”***

THE KOREANS GENUINELY LAUGHED

Jacob Nossell still has his doubts as to who played who: ***“There was an incredible amount of politics and acting in it all, and we were definitely good propaganda for them. Two Korean comedians that had been given up for adoption that return – and one of them even being spastic. It was definitely a good story for them. Also because we chose North Korea over South Korea where both Simon Jul and I are originally from.”***

According to Jacob, it’s entirely valid to claim that the Koreans were cynical and were just making good propaganda. But in short moments, they were also sincere: ***“From time to time there were some pleasant moments. We were playing a role for them and they were playing a role for us. But if both parties accept that premise, it’s easier to experience good moments. Behind all the propaganda, Simon and I made them forget that they were North***

Koreans trapped in a dictatorship – that is, when we made them laugh genuinely. And if you can make North Koreans genuinely laugh, you’ve come a long way. Then there’s hope for all of us.”

HUMOR AND HANDICAP AS A WEAPON

Jacob made good use of both his handicap and his humor to get through the stay in North Korea in one piece.

“Seen in isolation, North Korea is a tragicomic country to stay in. The height of President Kim Jong Il is a government secret because the North Koreans consider him bigger than God, but in reality, he’s only 5’3”, so I’m actually taller than God. And on a basic level, it’s also fun that a handicapped person goes against hundreds of thousands goose-stepping North Koreans.” He adds that if he the crew hadn’t had their humor with them on the trip, they’d all have broken down. Because you can get ahead quicker with humor, as he says. But not very far.

“You have to take care not ending up as a parody of yourself. Which is why you have to take yourself seriously when you use humor. Otherwise you risk losing part of yourself. I have to be careful not to always just be that funny spaz guy, or I risk people never taking me seriously. And if there’s one thing you want when you’re handicapped, it’s to be taken seriously.”

THE WORLD’S HAPPIEST SPAZ

But can you even demand to be taken seriously when you refer to yourself as a spaz?

“Yes, because words only have the power we apply to them. Which is why I’m trying to demystify the word spaz by using it. And as long as I’m allowed to be who I am, I don’t care what people call me,” Jacob Nossell says. ***He even calls himself the happiest spaz in the world. For one thing, because he’s been in North Korea and witnessed what happiness isn’t.***

“It would be naïve to believe that I’m just happy all the time, because sometimes it’s really kinda annoying not being able to do the same things as everybody else. But when you’ve got hardship in your life and you manage to overcome it, you become very happy. You’re the real you all the time, which both has its pros and cons.”

He doesn’t define happiness as a mental state, but experiences joy and happiness pretty often because he, in his own words, has acknowledge a fundamental truth; that all people have weaknesses. ***“When you’ve accepted that you have a handicap and can never become a soccer player, that acceptance also brings joy. I’ve learned to think in possibilities instead of limits and all people should do that,”*** he explains.

THERE’S ONLY THE HARD WAY

One of the possibilities Jacob has set his eyes on is becoming a journalist, which he is currently studying to be. But why educate yourself in an area that is about communication when you have a speech impediment that makes it hard for people to understand you?

“I won’t be able to do live interviews or become a tv or radio host. So my goal is to become a producer and make documentaries where I can remain in the background. When you’ve got a handicap, you have to kick ass and believe that ‘now I’ll show them all’. I’ll never be able to leave my role of a handicapped in the job market. So I really have to make something for myself. Which is why I’ve set ambitious goals for myself. There’s only the hard way.”

If it can sometimes be difficult to prove your worth as a spastic at home, the stay in North Korea, where there are no handicapped, was a great victory:

“By simply being there, I proved to the North Koreans that not all people are completely normal. I used every opportunity to run around, dance and be enthusiastic. I always tried to show my worth – and prove that you can have a good life as a handicapped. But that didn’t succeed at all. And it was also naïve to think that I could convince the Koreans that they were wrong in such a short period of time.”

LEARNED TO LIE CONVINCINGLY

The official purpose of the stay was cultural exchange, but the only culture that was exchanged was North Korean. And their obvious disdain for handicapped resulted in Jacob Nossell having to hide his handicap under the performance of the fake theatre troupe.

“It was very uncomfortable to be told that I couldn’t be myself, but had to act out being handicapped. It was also humiliating, but back then, my mind was more focused on getting through the performance itself. Besides, I didn’t get the opportunity to tell them that I didn’t want to be part of it,” he explains. During the stay in North Korea, he not only learned to lie – he learned to lie convincingly. And he did it so well – along with Simon Jul and Mads Brügger – that The Red Chapel is now headed for the Sundance Film Festival in Utah.

WITH YOUR LIFE AND FILM REELS INTACT

The entire crew from The Red Chapel will participate in the festival, and according to Jacob Nossell, it will be somewhat of a ‘reunion’ trip.

“It’ll be good to see everybody again. It’s also incredible that we’ve been nominated and are going over there. When we were on the plane back from North Korea in 2006 with our lives and film reels intact, Mads Brügger half joked that now we were going to Sundance. And now we actually are,” he says and adds that there are great similarities between North Korea and large film festivals:

“Sundance will be North Korea on its head. In North Korea I saw hundreds of thousands North Koreans marching in tribute to their Beloved Leader. In Sundance, I’m looking forward to seeing thousands of drunken, ego tripping film producers tumbling about patting each other on the back. It’s almost the same,” he says with a laugh.

One thing is Sundance. There’s not much to fear there. But would he go back to North Korea?

“Yes, I’ve asked Mads if we shouldn’t go back and show them the movie. But he doesn’t think it’s a good idea. It’s just not an option. A no-go.”

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