

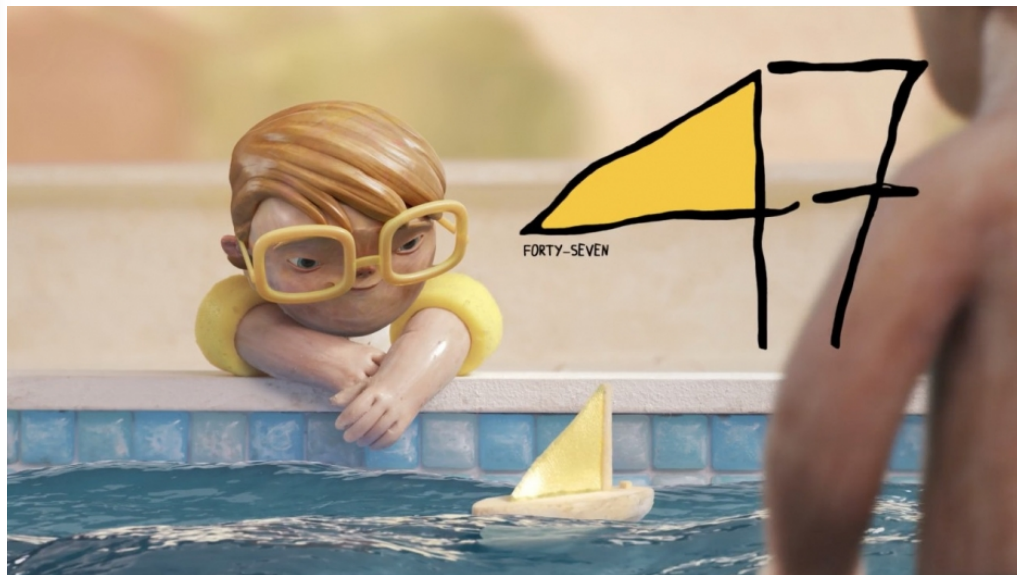


From Struggle to Strength: How '47' Was Made For and With the Down Syndrome Community

On their stop-motion short, Amy Fortunato and Andrea Bistany worked with artists from the Down syndrome community, drawing from real life experiences, to craft a compelling story of a man's journey to overcome obstacles and find his place in the world.

By **Victoria Davis** | Friday, August 23, 2024 at 3:46pm

In **Community Outreach, Digital Media, Diversity and Inclusion, People, Short Films, Stop-Motion** | **ANIMATIONWorld** | Geographic Region: All



In the history of animated film, there are only a few projects that center on characters with Down syndrome.

Among them are Eduardo Rivero's feature *A Costume for Nicholas*, Chelo Loureiro's *Valentina* and Michael McDonald's 2021 short film *Freebird*, created and directed by actor and LGBTQ activist Nicholas Herd, who also has Down syndrome. This year, the stop-motion and music-driven short *47*, the four-time Cannes Lions winner from creators Amy Fortunato and Andrea Bistany of the wellness marketing group Klick Health, joins the tiny but mighty gambit of Down syndrome stories produced not only by allies of those with the disorder, but those who are themselves part of the Trisomy 21 community.

47's music, "Carry On" by Fun, was re-recorded by Sujeet Desai with sound design from Jose Omar Davila. Both men have Down syndrome and worked with Canja Audio Culture to give the film an emotional voice. And the film's character designer, Bruno Jacob from Zombie Studio, has a daughter with Down syndrome, Luna, who regularly was allowed sneak peeks of the film's character models and was even given a character design credit with her father at the end of the film.

Take a quick look at how the short was made before reading about the production:



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"We always said that we were making this film not for the Down syndrome community, but with the Down syndrome community," says Bistany, creative director with Fortunato at Klick Health.

Paulo Garcia, founder and director of Zombie Studio, the animation team behind the film's stop-motion and computer graphics, adds, "I believe that is the best thing and the most beautiful thing behind this project. This is a partnership between us and the Down syndrome community. We wanted to bring them in on this story because it is their story, after all."



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Down syndrome, also referred to as Trisomy 21, is a genetic disorder caused by the presence of all or part of a third copy of chromosome 21. Individuals are typically born with 46 chromosomes. Those with Down syndrome have 47.

But the title of Fortunato and Bistany's film isn't an homage to chromosome count. It's much more personal than that.

"Our story's main character, Robert, is inspired by a real person with Down syndrome who got his first job at the age of 47," explains Fortunato. "That's what the title mainly represents. But there's a ton of symbolism and metaphor in our story as well. The boat sail, for example, represents Robert's mother's wisdom and her belief in him, supporting him on his journey."

The number four in "47" resembles the boat sail the film's main character makes from the scarf his mother gives him in an attempt to comfort her son after he's been bullied by children at the community pool. This scarf-made sail takes Robert on an epic odyssey through his imagination as he ventures on the sea of life. Facing basketball-playing giants, bedazzled prom sirens and gangly Italian restaurant owner puppets all chanting "Not you" and "Not for you." Robert passes by one harbor after another as his sail becomes increasingly tattered.

Eventually, the sail is blown away by the wind. While our leading man continues to row through his odyssey with whatever remaining strength he has, he is eventually assisted by the members of Café Joyeux, who offer Robert a new scarf, his first job, and a new place to call home.

47, now a six-time Gold Clios winner for excellence in advertising, began as a promotional project for Café Joyeux, a French-born restaurant started in 2017 with a mission to promote inclusion in the workplace and correct the 80 percent unemployment rate for those with mental and cognitive disabilities, like Down syndrome, by offering them a place to work. Today, there are over 20 Café Joyeux locations in Europe, and the first American Café Joyeux recently opened in New York at the beginning of 2024.



The film, available to watch on the [cafe's website](#), celebrates their North American expansion. But that's just one part of the film's much larger reach and purpose.

"47 perfectly describes the life challenges and hurdles encountered by most individuals with Down syndrome or Autism," says Cafe Joyeux US CEO Sylvie Giret. "It's beautiful and subtle, and we feel it both educates the public and demonstrates that differences can be strengths, as we do every day in our 24 cafés around the world. We trust and hope it will contribute to change the perception of disabilities and bring more people to join us in creating a more inclusive society."

It's not every day that a PR push elicits the art of tedious, time-consuming stop-motion and musical talent from around the world. But after Kick Health's first Zoom call with Café Joyeux, Fortunato and Bistany saw even more potential in Robert's story.

"Café Joyeux came to Klick with a desire to create some PR for the New York City opening and as we were having that first discussion with the client team, the founder of the café, Yann Bucaille-Lanrezac, mentioned the story about one of their first employees who hadn't gotten his first job until the age of 47," recalls Bistany. "We were on Zoom, all in different places, and were so moved that we immediately started to message one another, 'Oh my god. This is an incredible story. We have to create something out of this.' In that moment, it went from just creating PR to developing this really beautiful story out of an experience that represents all Café Joyeux's employees as well as all those in the Down syndrome community."



Desai, who can play seven instruments, from electric violin and piano to bass clarinet and drums, notes he actually pursued music as a way to combat his own everyday challenges and negative social experiences at school.

"As a baby, Indian classical and peaceful instrumental music were always playing at my home," he shares. "My mom wanted me to learn different instruments for therapeutic reasons, like Suzuki violin music has a lot of repetition, which helps memory, eye-hand coordination, and socialization. At age 9, I started taking violin and piano lessons. Around age 13, I started playing clarinet and Bass clarinet. Horn instruments help my breathing and lung health, and it improved my face muscle tone and my speech. I started playing in school ensembles, where my fellow students were surprised and slowly stopped bullying me."

The musician – who has worked on music for documentaries, PSA messages and commercials – also shared how seen he felt as he watched the opening sequence of *47*, where the other kids at the pool do not want Robert to play in the water with them.

"His mom ties a scarf around this neck and, with a pat of love, encouraged him and sent him back to go by himself," notes Desai, referring to Robert's character. "That is what my mom used to do every time I came home crying from school. Kids bullied me and my mom would hug me and give me the courage to go back. Like Robert, it continued throughout my school years. Without listening to my music, I used to be denied from school orchestra or band, until my mom used to meet the teacher to show my work. After I graduated, I was also denied many jobs. Watching Robert's story touched my heart. It was an honor for me to be selected by the international Brazilian audio agency Canja among all the musicians in the world. They trusted me to do the music, and I did not want to disappoint them."





Canja Audio Culture founder and creative director Filipe Resende, who also worked with music director and partner at Canja Eduardo Karas, says he was anything but disappointed with Desai's work.

"When Klick came to us, our first thought was that we wanted those in the Down syndrome community to do the music with us," says Resende. "We started searching and found Sujeet. He's a very impressive guy. We're based in Brazil but actually flew to Buffalo, New York to direct him on the re-recording and piano playing. In the end, I think he wound up directing me. It was an amazing time. It changed my life to be there with him."

He continues, "And then we found a percussionist and sound effects guy from the Down syndrome community in Venezuela, Jose Omar, who is just a very happy and great guy. We weren't sure how directing these two was going to go but they are so talented and so engaged with the music and the work. It was easy."

Meanwhile, at Zombie, Garcia says his team also lucked out having designer Bruno Jacob on character design for Robert. Jacob's child Luna has Down syndrome and her father was very aware of how to lovingly and accurately construct a character that would be recognized as having Down syndrome but also bridge a connection with viewers who are unfamiliar with the disorder.

"As soon as this project arrived at the studio, Bruno told me, 'I will quit everything else. I need to work on that project,'" shares Garcia. "He nailed the character design in two weeks and was a huge help in finding the right movements for the character, the way they'd grab things and react to things at certain moments. It was quite an easy process for us to get that down because of Bruno and Luna."

Jacob adds, "It was truly very emotional. I caught myself in tears in several stages of the process, from the script read to the first animations, from the music choice until the final animation. But they were tears of joy. Today, with 20 years spent in this career, I see 47 as the most important project I participated in. It speaks to the daily battle my daughter Luna fights, and the battle we, as her family, fight by her side."



Luna, only five years old, has seen the film a couple times with her father, who says that his daughter's face is always inches from the screen. And when Luna was able to touch and hold close the physical character models – made of steel and aluminum, coated in foam and silicon, and then finished with 3D-printed resin – for different versions of Robert, Jacob says there was an instant connection.

"She'd always come to the office to peek at the characters and when she saw the puppet of adult Robert in his apron, she said it looked like me," shares Bruno. "Then she looked at the child version of Robert with the swimwear saying it looked like her. I hope

the film shows everyone that we're all equal. We're all the same and we all deserve the same opportunities and experiences. We all deserve trust, affection and companionship."

"And I can say this," he adds, "not only for Luna, but for everyone I met who has a person in the family with Down syndrome, that having a person with Trisomy near to you is a blessing. I think I began to give more value to the everyday small things: a hug, a kiss, a simple 'Hello.' Luna just recently began speaking the words 'Dad' and 'Mom.' Every day we coexist with an inexplicable purity."

That purity, that blessing, the way someone with Down syndrome grew up seeing the world, is what Bistany and Fortunato wanted highlighted in Robert's story. That imaginative, fantastical point of view, fueled by determination and not hate or malice, needed to be at the heart of 47, and it's why, though it would be time-consuming, Bistany and Fortunato felt stop-motion was the right course to chart.

"This story is one of aspiration and courage," says Bistany. "We thought of Disney and Pixar, but this had to look different. It had to be special. It wasn't that Robert wasn't ready for the world. The world wasn't ready for Robert. So, we needed to depict those different scenes, the real world, as it looked inside of Robert's imagination. When we approached Paulo's team at Zombie, their expertise and ability to bring characters and scenes to life through mixed media, through CGI and puppetry, is the reason why we knew the partnership was going to be perfect."

Klick Health also used all true stories to inspire each scenario Robert's character goes through, from being made a mascot on the basketball team rather than a player, to being rejected by the girls at prom and not being allowed to work in jobs where he'd be seen by customers.





“All of those scenarios Robert goes through offered him a surface-level inclusion,” says Fortunato. “But Café Joyeux has their employees at the front of the house, interacting with customers, representing the company, being the faces of the company. We had Robert being told “Not you” frequently in the film because we had parents of those with Down syndrome saying to us, ‘Our children have heard that their entire lives.’ So, like Café Joyeux, we wanted to be truly inclusive with this film as well and have that inclusivity woven into the fabric of the film.”

Bistany adds, “This is something we talked about at Klick, ‘How can we continue to create a platform for diversity and inclusion in bringing that community into the workforce? We hope, through all of the different outlets that this film has been able to touch, it just further amplifies that mission.”



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.

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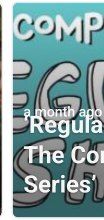
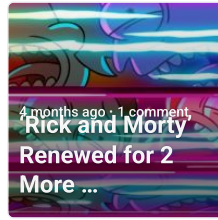
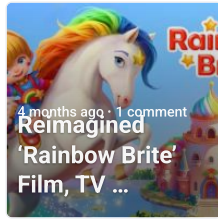
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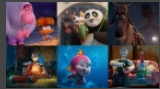
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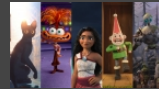
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