

## **If I Can't Do It**

Walter Brock

56 minutes, color with black and white, video, 1998

Fanlight Productions

### **Description**

The film opens with a look at Arthur Campbell, Jr. in the bathroom mirror, as he is shaving. His jerky movements make the shaving look perilous. He then listens to the phone on a speakerphone; he smiles at the sound of Happy Birthday being sung, and answers questions in a spastic style that requires subtitles to understand. He smiles happily.

Over the image of a family photo from some time ago when Arthur was already adult, being kissed by a small child, we hear the voice of his mother. She says, seated in a living room, that she never thought he would live on his own, since he couldn't walk or talk. But she says he tried to starve himself in order to force them to leave. The camera focuses on the plaque on the back of his motorized wheelchair: *If I Can't Do It--It Ain't Worth Doing*. She says she knows he feared the day his parents would die, and that his siblings had volunteered to take him. Over a family photo of the six children, camera closing in on Arthur, she says that all the kids have their own families.

Over photos of the filmmaker and Arthur, the filmmaker says that at his first encounter with Arthur, whom he met as a subject for a documentary series on disability, he was so appalled by the sight of him that he felt he might be better off dead. Today this response of his still shocks the filmmaker. Arthur says (and a voice-over translates) *Don't you know that people don't want to watch a film about someone like me, because of my speech and disability?* Over footage of another disabled person typing his remarks, he says he is writing a biography. He begins telling his story, over photos of the family when Arthur was a child. He praises his parents, from the impoverished hills of Tennessee.

Over images of him typing laboriously, he tells the story of his prolonged breech birth, two months premature, in a Kentucky cabin; his father, filmed outdoors of a house, recalls that the coal company doctor tried to leave after 24 hours, and that he threatened to kill him if he left. A voiceover narrator for Arthur, who reads from the autobiography that we see Arthur typing, says they said the skin had been scraped off his face and that he wasn't breathing. His mother says everyone thought he would die, and that the father went into the Army when he was eight days old, leaving her with two children. Arthur's memoir continues (still read by an actor), over images of hospitals and interviews, praising his mother for her courage in leaving the mountains to seek help for him; she recalls how painful the many tests were for him, in the process of being diagnosed with cerebral palsy. He Says (in the voice of the narrator) of Crippled Children's Hospital, *What a name*. Doctors recommended institutionalizing him. He recalls (we see him typing, and see black and white images of country roads) periodically visiting the doctors, carried for lack of a wheelchair. *It was the only time I ever got out.*

His sister Sue, in a trailer office, says she didn't really think of him as disabled. He says,

over a family photo of the two, that Sue was the only one who understood him. Over black, then an image of his father in a hospital bed, Arthur says his father was gravely wounded in the war, his leg nearly blown off. From a lawn swing, the parents recall how angry and afraid the son was of his father when he finally came home. Sue recalls that her father would regularly yell at his son as much as I wanted a son and you had to be born like this, you little bastard. The mother, from the living room couch, says they almost separated over that. Over black and white family photos--father in a convalescent chair, son morosely hiding behind mother, kids in a group--Arthur's memoir says that because his father had managed to recover better than doctors' best hopes, he believed his son could too, and was only lacking willpower. Over images of Arthur typing, he recalls his father yelling at him for spilling a glass. Parents argue, and threaten separation. This is the first time I remember feeling guilty.

Arthur talks about a church of Holy Rollers, over black and white images of faith healers in a church. He recalls the time his parents took him for a faith healing. His mother in the living room chair says she had faith, but they said she didn't have enough faith to heal her son. Arthur says in voiceover, What a low down dirty burden to lay on a human being. He talks himself about the faith healer, in full front in his house, with subtitles: If I met him walking down the street, I would spit in his face. The image of the son shyly hiding behind the mother returns.

Arthur in voiceover says, over family snapshots of a house and street, that the family moved to Louisville, to a house with indoor plumbing for the first time. He says he was around people; his mother says he would be silent, and then when people would leave he would say, They think I'm crazy in the head. Arthur in his living quarters says himself that he can see tension and fear when people try to understand him. His memoir continues, over pictures of a 50s suburban tract; his brother started selling soda pop to construction workers, and he would sell with a sign. He was excited to work, he says, and have some independence; his parents were embarrassed, humiliated. He himself says, full front, I needed to be around pretty women without my family watching me.

Over images of the Jehovah Witness publications, Arthur's memoir in voiceover recalls Jehovah's Witness neighbors who set up weekly Bible study. About eight months later, I think they noticed I had a brain. Up to this point, I don't remember anyone ever paying me attention because they thought I was intelligent. The neighbors taught him to read, when he was 17. Sue recalls him demanding help learning key words; she laughs affectionately at how irritated she would be. He recalls being able to leave the house with the neighbors, over pictures of him as a young man, in a suit. Getting dressed required help, his memoir voiceover explains, and this always Caused a ruckus. His sister Kathy, in a kitchen, recalls that the parents never wanted him to go out; she says they probably thought it was like letting a five-year-old out on his own, while he wanted some freedom. His voiceover says he wanted to participate; footage of him typing accompanies the memoir. He says he prepared diligently for his part of the service, but he was disgusted when others didn't. He also felt he had failed the church, for having sexual feelings. Sue recalls he went into a deep depression. His memoir says he spent the days reading and listening to Paul Harvey. Kathy says she recalls coming home from school, having the

door to his room open and then slam closed. She says only now does she think about what he must have gone through.

The memoir tells how embarrassed Arthur was to have to go to the bathroom, by rolling a chair over. His father, he says, would yell at him for Messing up my life, over photos of the father. In slow motion, we see the Arthur's feet slowly and laboriously moving a wheeled office chair along. Kathy says eventually Junior would refuse to come out when her father was home. The memoir says Arthur eats messily, and this irritated his father. He recounts an incident at supper, when he got angry with his father; images from a basketball game accompany the story. Kathy recalls how furious Junior was. The father says he went to the police, who told him to go home and try to get along with his son, since he was over ten. Over photos of his father, at work and then in a hospital, the memoir recounts that his father had a completely disabling work accident, and that his mother (we see a clip from a newsletter) had sought out help to build a ramp to the house. At the Center for Accessible Living, Julie Shaw Cole says she was astonished to find, when getting the call, that there was a 37-year-old disabled person in the house, for whom the family had never considered a ramp. Why haven't you considered putting in a ramp before? There was silence, silence...

The memoir says, over an old photo of the family's house, that Arthur tried to force his parents to institutionalize him, and went on a hunger strike. Sue and Kathy talk about trying to convince him to eat, but finding him completely immovable in his conviction. In his wheelchair, Arthur moves from a bedroom to a living room; his memoir says in an institution he hoped he would be around people. Sue took him to a hospital. Over the image of Arthur as a young man, in the midst of his siblings smiling, Kathy recalls his parents were horrified, and that his mother had loved having Her crippled son at home with her. The only way he could have gotten out would be for him to be carried out the way he was. He was a prisoner, and there was not any of his family members who knew how to let him go, she says as the camera closes in on an extreme closeup of Arthur's smile in the family photo.

Over a black and white image of a hospital seen from the parking lot, a doctor's report of his admission is read. He is moved to a psychiatric ward. The memoir narrates that a doctor came in with an alphabet board and said, There's a communication problem, which gave him hope. Another staffer from the Center says he was lucky because as a result of the disability rights movement, there were services at the Center. The memoir says he was excited by the new ideas that the psychiatrist introduced him to by telling him about the disability rights movement; we see images of newsletters. When the doctor tells the parents he is not Crazy and can live on his own, there was more anger and conflict. This is confirmed by the Center's Cole. A news report shows Arthur using a wheelchair and using a speech board. Buddy Lawson says he knew he would be his best friend. Lawson, the memoir says, was in rehab with him, and he became his best friend. They move in together. We see the entrance to the apartments, with three big steps; Arthur says the landlord promised a ramp but there was none. Lawson reminds the interviewer that Arthur had never done anything on his own. It had to be like freeing the slaves, he said. We see Arthur struggling to get a blob of margarine into a saucepan with some

canned beans. He adds salt. His memoir recounts how he learned the basics of how to live on his own. The Center's Cole says disabled people miss life milestones that teach them skills, but she says he went from 13 to 23 in six months. Lawson, at home, says he began to talk personally after a few months, and he said Arthur thought he was abnormal for fantasizing about women. We see a bar with lapdancing; Arthur is grinning with pleasure at the sight of the women on display. His memoir says at 39 he struck up a friendship with a dancer, to whom he loaned money. A male psychologist says that he loaned her money. Arthur's memoir, over images from the bar, says that she broke his heart and left with \$650.

News footage recounts a demonstration by disabled people to insist on disabled access at McDonald's. The memoir recounts, over photos from the demonstration that include Arthur, that the center flew him to an institute run by a disabled rights group, A.D.A.P.T. The institute, a trainer says, encourages people to get angry and insist on rights. The memoir recalls how indignant abled people were at being stopped from buying a hamburger; he recalls insults of customers. Photos from the demonstration accompany the story. Organizers recall the struggle. One is moved to tears recalling that after they demanded disabled representation in advertising, he saw such an ad. Another organizer says corporations finally realized that disabled people buy things. Over Arthur typing, the memoir says he loved activism. I realized that I didn't need to be changed or healed, society did. A Center spokesperson and Buddy say Arthur was transformed. Over images of Arthur getting on a bus, the memoir talks about the struggle to get lifts on the busses. Over images of the mayor from news footage, and newspaper clips, and images of Arthur riding the bus, his memoir says he argued that without transportation disabled people were deprived of a constitutional right of assembly. The editor of The Disability Rag says he convinced her. She describes him as a leader.

His memoir recalls more media-friendly tactics, over images of him on a bus, news clips and newspaper clippings. A demonstration in which wheelchair-bound activists tied up traffic in downtown Louisville was the turning point. The memoir says he considers himself the leader, having worked for 60 hours a week for years on the issue. Over news footage, he says he learned that people respect you when you take a stand. Arthur continues to type at home.

We see footage from a demonstration over transit. The memoir says he had thought his problems were unique until he left home and started activism. Then he saw how similar his problems were to other disabled people's. Their voices, with subtitles, share stories that echo with Arthur's. All say they want independence. Over pictures of Arthur being taken off a bus to be arrested, Arthur's memoir says he was arrested 29 times in 12 cities. He cites to the Bible; Jesus built an organization on 12 foundation stones, and he saw himself as a foundation stone. A.D.A.P.T. organizers say he is not a traditional leader because of his speech disability. The memoir says he always thought of himself as a leader, and was frustrated. We see the police chasing him in a motorized wheelchair, and him in a march on Washington for the Americans with Disabilities Act. We see disabled people climbing the Capitol steps laboriously. We see activists in Congress, chanting. We see Arthur in the group. He is being taken away, arrested again for failing to leave the

Rotunda until the act is passed. His memoir says six months later he came back for the signing.

The psychologist returns to say he knew he was a leader now. The memoir, over footage of Arthur on a street, says Kentucky hired him to be an advocate for the disabled. He was thrilled to be employed. His sister became his translator and assistant. The editor and Sue say Arthur didn't understand he couldn't challenge the system from within. The memoir says there's working within and outside of the system. The editor says that the insiders do not understand what social change is. Sue says they taught him to be quiet and fill out time slips. Sue says for her it was like being a guide dog. She quit after four weeks, the memoir says; in fact, he says, they don't get along and don't even speak now. The memoir, over images of Arthur typing, says he was fired after four years. He was broken hearted at losing the job he says, over footage of him on a winter street in a wheel chair. A Center staffer says it is terrible to lose a position of authority. He also quit A.D.A.P.T. The filmmaker interviews Arthur, asking him why he retreated. Arthur says, It's eating me up alive. That's why sometimes I think, well, I did my bit for the movement, now I'll go back to my back bedroom and be what I'm programmed to be.

Arthur is shown typing. His memoir narration says he's a Showboat and that it's true, as criticism says, that he doesn't have a personal life. His caregiver, who we see dressing him, says he should cut his hair. He asks why he doesn't have an 18-year-old girl to take care of him, and she says, You don't deserve it, joking, and pointing out she's been taking care of him for eight years.

His memoir goes on, saying he broke his shoulder falling out of a chair. In the hospital, we see his mother saying she worries all the time about him. "He can't cut her off," she says. The memoir says he honors her, and believes he has hurt her too much, so he can't leave. As she spoons food into his mouth in the hospital bed, the memoir says he knows she doesn't believe he can live alone. He can hear her voice every night, he says: "You'll never make it out on your own." The camera settles on Arthur in the hospital bed.

A slow pan of the cluttered office space in his apartment accompanies his memoir speculations on what he should do next. He asks the camera if he has delusions of grandeur. "Maybe so," he says, "but where would I be without my ego?" The credits run over the sight of Arthur wheeling down a pier and sitting there meditatively.

### **Style/Structure**

This work represents a complex collaboration between the filmmaker and the subject, in which both voices are featured, in order to tell Campbell's story. The script is by Arthur Campbell, Jr., with large chunks of it composed of the text of his memoir. The composition, technical execution and structure is that of Brock, with whom Campbell had a decade-long relationship. Interviews with others--a psychologist, disabilities activists, the family--are done by the filmmaker, not by Campbell. The subject directly addresses the filmmaker within the film, saying, You've making a film about a has-been, at one point, showing that Campbell believes Brock is the creator. At the same time, Campbell also asserts authorial control in his first-person script, in the extended use of his memoir

as narration, and also in his monitoring of the theme of independence as a right won through organizing with others, and of independence as a valuable pleasure because it permits interaction with society. The very nature of the relationship between subject and filmmaker testifies to one of Campbell's central points, that leadership in the disabled community necessarily involves collaboration with abled people to execute the task.

The film showcases Campbell's coming to an awareness of himself as a full-fledged, rights-bearing member of society through disability rights; this is also his coming of age story and his personal life story. The highly crafted narrative establishes a dramatic and conflict-rich dynamic between the central character and his parents. His mother wants to keep him a dependent child; his father wants him to become an independent man; and the ensuing struggles involve all three. The narrative consistently attempts to describe those conflicts from the vantage point of the mature, independent Campbell. Thus, he pre-emptively forgives his mother's refusal to let him leave the house, and explains his father's abuse. He expresses outrage that the faith healers made his mother feel guilty. He consistently turns his anger toward institutions and abstractions. The images support his perspective, but sometimes comment on it as well. The photos of his mother as an appealing young woman support his recollection of her as admirable and resourceful. The return to certain photos--of him a half-step back from his mother, partly obscured, of him surrounded by his abled siblings--is punctuation that reminds the viewer of the position he had been placed in by his family.

Brock chooses to let the viewer see how profoundly disabling Campbell's cerebral palsy is, with extended interviews that require subtitling. But each time his speech quickly moves from or to narration in which his thoughts flow more freely; narrator Nick Stump's voice is nicely matched for light regional accent and age. Thus, viewers briefly visit the depth of Campbell's disability but are not required to struggle with it for more than a few seconds.

News clips from local television are used to transmit events rapidly, but also to give a sense of the political impact and success of the activism that transformed Campbell's life.

### **Background on Director/Film**

Brock was an acclaimed documentary producer/director when he made this film, for works such as *Writing in Water* (1984, producer), *Other Prisoners* (1986) and *A Season in Hell* (1992, which he directed, was shown on P.O.V. and won several awards). He met Campbell when the Kentucky Board of Education contracted Brock to make a series on disability. As he confesses in the film, he even doubted whether Campbell's life was worth leading. However, his mind was changed when he returned to interview Campbell with Sue for a translator, and grasped that Campbell not only had something to say but that people could learn to understand him.

There was a certain degree of suspicion in making this project, Brock told the *Washington Post*. Arthur, in breaking out of the system that existed in his parents' home, has siblings who don't approve of what he's done. The parents, however, both professed themselves happy with the result.

The film was primarily funded by Independent Television Service. Additional funding included Kentucky Educational Television, the Paul Robeson Fund, National Endowments for the Arts, Cumland Gap Productions, The Kentucky Arts Council, the Mary Bingham Foundation, the Louisville Board of Aldermen, The Lexington Fayette Urban County Council, and the Community Bank of Lexington.

### **Film Production Context**

This project was powerfully shaped by several forces. Without activism that resulted in state resources for disability concerns, Campbell and Brock would never have met. It was a state project that funded the series that Brock was commissioned to do. Activism long preceded the current generation of disability rights. Disabled veterans had pressured for resources and consideration from the federal government after every war and war veterans and relatives created a powerful push during World War II to recognize disabilities. Activist national government with the New Deal had already spurred national interest organizations. The National Federation of the Blind for instance was formed in 1940. (The American Council of the Blind was formed in 1961). Cerebral palsy associations began forming in the U.S. with a New York association in 1946. State and federal disability-sensitive policy developed from the 1960s onward, with the development of civil rights and interest groups representing an increasing number of rights-claiming groups. Civil rights movements, both for desegregation and for women's rights, set a powerful example for disabled people, and civil rights laws set important precedents. Disability rights entered national law with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, in a highly limited form; even so, it took an Aggressive national campaign by disability rights activists (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), including occupying of U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare offices in San Francisco for four weeks. Constant activism from that point was focused on legal policies to promote independent living. The movement's demands were made visible in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, promoted from the start by the National Council on Disability and passed after only two years of negotiating and in the context of other civil rights legislation for disabled people passed with Democratic support in a Congress opposed to the Reagan administration's attempt to gut civil rights clauses for disabled people in existing law.

Production-related resources include the formation of Independent Television Service in 1989. Independent Television Service was the project of independent producers over a decade, with a mandate to serve underserved audiences and produce innovative programming. Independent Television Service as the creature in part of independent producers who had fought hard for its existence, preferred to fund the bulk of production costs, and in its first decade often favored personal-voice documentary. Other production-related resources included P.O.V., the documentary series with foundation backing that featured point-of-view documentary and encouraged outreach and feedback.

### **Reception/Distribution**

The work debuted strategically on the week of the July 4th Independence Day holiday on P.O.V. in 1998, to uniformly positive reviews. The Toronto Star's review was typical: "At once inspiring and depressing, it is an in,your,face look at the last frontier of civil rights activism." And thanks to Campbell's feistiness, it's eminently watchable. The

film created media space for discussion of disability; for instance, The Disability Rag editor featured in the film, Mary Johnson, wrote an impassioned article published in the New York Times. It also spurred many to get in touch with Campbell directly. P.O.V. as then-executive director Lisa Heller described the viewer response to the series about the program as Staggering. Disabled people in particular praised the program for eschewing Pity or paternalistic attention, and some abled people expressed their chagrin at finding themselves moved from Brock's first reaction when confronted with Campbell to a realization of their own prejudices. Some of the feedback was showcased in the series' Talk Back segment, which featured viewers' videotaped commentaries. Among the speakers were two developmentally disabled adults, one of whom said, Arthur does it better for all of us. A deaf lawyer spoke about the importance of Working within the system. A man in a wheelchair said, we want to be treated like people.

For off-broadcast screenings and for outreach that could alert constituencies to the broadcast, the series partnered with disability rights groups nationwide, including A.D.A.P.T. The American Library Association worked with the series to promote screenings and discussions in libraries on the topic of discrimination and disability. In some towns, libraries coordinated with other local agencies with disabilities involvement, to co-sponsor screenings. When the film was shown on Kentucky Educational Television in December 1998, the state public TV network also produced an hour-long live, interactive panel discussion called If Kentucky Can't Do It, on disability issues in Kentucky. (Activists were striking by their absence, to the disappointment of Brock; the producers chose only administrators of disability programs.) The University of Louisville law school used the film in a disability awareness program as well. Other professional associations have used it, and some corporations including United Parcel Service have considered its use for their own disability awareness programs. Arthur Campbell, Jr. used the film in various conference presentations in which he continued to insist on disabled activism.

After several regional awards, including the Directors Choice Award at the Charlotte International Film Festival and the Special Jury Award at the Louisville Film Festival, the video a won the Silver Baton, duPont, Columbia Journalism Awards, 1999.

### **Discussion**

Arthur Campbell works hard in the film not to be seen blaming his mother or father, but he also wants to show that their approach was part of a wider problem. How did you understand the family relationships from the film? Did you think that all the parties were fairly treated?

The creation of this film was partly in the hands of the filmmaker, and partly in the hands of the subject. Did you think that if you were the subject, you would be happy with the film? Why or why not?

This film argues that people need to have control over their lives to be able to be truly free. Arthur Campbell is profoundly disabled. Can he have that control? Should he have that control?

## **Further Reading**

Consult the Americans with Disabilities Act Technical Assistance website, <http://www.adata.org>, for a wealth of resources on the law, its history, implications, and for links to disability organizations.

In particular, look at: U.S. Department of Education. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. ADA Technical Assistance Program. (2000). Historical Context of the Americans with Disabilities Act. [http://www.adata.org/index\\_pubs.html](http://www.adata.org/index_pubs.html), accessed June 13, 2000.

On the history of Independent Television Service, consult:

Aufderheide, Patricia. (2000). Public television and the public sphere. The Daily Planet. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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