

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Northumbria at Newcastle		
Unit of Assessment: 32 (Art and Design: History, Practice & Theory)		
Title of case study: Changing attitudes and the law for individuals with intellectual disabilities, through authentic casting in film production		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Nov 2014 – Dec 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Len Collin	Senior Lecturer	2014 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Nov 2015 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>There is a persistent and chronic absence of authentic representation of intellectual disability (ID) in TV and film. Portrayals that do appear are often regressive, reinforcing negative or inaccurate stereotypes. Practice-led research undertaken at Northumbria University by academic and film director Len Collin, led to the production of <i>Sanctuary</i> (2016), a critically acclaimed feature film employing a cast of actors with ID that has been shown on every continent and received 4 international awards. Through the making of <i>Sanctuary</i>, Collin's research has 1) played a significant role in raising awareness of the marginalised status of actors with ID across the film industry. This improved profile has 2) helped to increase the use of authentic casting in recent productions and empowered actors with ID in their career pursuits. Similar developments were replicated in a major UK care service, 3) who changed their practices in response to <i>Sanctuary</i>, creating new opportunities for individuals who use their service to enjoy a greater degree of autonomy and ability to shape the structure of their care provision. Finally, 4) Collin's work played an instrumental role in repealing Irish legislation that had restricted the rights of people with ID to intimacy, a vital contribution recognised by advocacy groups and Ireland's Minister for Disabilities.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Recent scholarly assessments of the importance of authentic casting in theatre and performance, as well as contemporary media industry debate about authentic casting in film and TV, have largely centred on non-white and non-trans actors in BAME and trans roles. Until recently, there was little focus on the authentic casting of disabled actors. The practice-based research activity of Collin, in making the feature film <i>Sanctuary</i> [R1a] addresses this gap. It pushes back at established industry norms, which customarily take the contentious route of telling stories about disability by casting actors without disabilities to play those roles. The best-known international examples include Dustin Hoffman in <i>Rain Man</i> (1988) and Tom Hanks in <i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994). Portrayal of characters with ID (also known as LD or learning disability) by actors with ID has not improved over time, and the Ruderman White Paper identified that film industry casting actors authentically was rare, at just 5% in 2016.</p> <p>Following Robert McRuer's work on 'crip theory', Collin has identified such practices as 'cripping up' (after Kaite O'Reilly) [R1b] by non-disabled actors. He has drawn upon insights from queer theory and disability studies to help create critically disabled spaces [R1c]. In particular, Collin's film <i>Sanctuary</i> addressed issues raised by those studies of the failure of progress in authentic casting and concluded that this has led to disability tropes and stereotypes being repeated in the industry, perpetuating poor on-screen representations of people with disabilities. In his subsequent film, <i>Altered Thinking</i> (2020) [R1c], Collin places the making of <i>Sanctuary</i> in critical relation to the legacy of 'cripping up' in film history.</p>		

Sanctuary [R1a] was directed and script-edited by Collin, based on the play by Christian O'Reilly. The film follows Larry, a man with Down's Syndrome, and Sophie, who has epilepsy, navigating the Irish law (Section 5 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act of 1993) that makes it illegal for them to have sex unless they are married. The film is set on a day out from the training centre they and the group attend, providing them with the opportunity to explore freedoms so often denied them, at the expense of well-meaning carer Tom. The film features a principal cast with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) – a term covering a range of conditions, including Autism and Down's Syndrome.

The research explored ethical changes to film production norms required when working directly with ID actors. Focusing on two specific areas of questioning, Collin asked (i) in what ways might authentic casting encourage paradigmatic change in the representation of people with ID in cinema, while (ii) interrogating what changes to the mechanics of production and improvisatory working methods might need to be considered to bring this about. In his 2020 book chapter *Shooting Actors Who Have Intellectual Disabilities* [R1b] Collin outlines the innovative practice-based methodologies of narrative feature-film production that were trialled to explore how the actors could develop greater agency in the filmmaking process, resulting in more accurate on-screen representations of ID.

The body of research constituting *Sanctuary* [R1] started in 2014, when Collin began to conduct workshops for camera with the Blue Teapot Theatre Company, Galway – a company of actors with intellectual disabilities who had already performed *Sanctuary* as a play. Collin filmed, edited, and screened the actors' work in the workshops. This enabled the actors to understand continuity editing, camera set-ups, and shot sizes. They could see themselves on screen and adapt their performances accordingly. Collin took the workshops into locations such as a park, cinema, and hotel room to familiarise the actors with the processes of filming [R1b]. Through the visual, spoken, and editorial language of documentary filmmaking, *Altered Thinking* [R1c] reveals the nuanced methodologies evolved by Collin. These enabled him to help move the ID cast from the paradigm of theatre to that of film, paying particular attention to the cast's welfare, as well as to the specific physical and psychological pressures that the filmmaking process placed on them.

Sanctuary was released in 2017 and awarded Best Film at Moscow's Breaking Barriers Film Festival (2018), Best Irish Film by the Dublin Film Critics Circle (2017), and Best Director at the Newport Beach Film Festival (2017). The cast won the Michael Dwyer Discovery Award at the Audi Dublin International Film Festival (2017). *Sanctuary* opened the ReelAbilities New York Film Festival and was further screened at: Camerimage, Poland; Geena Davis' Bentonville Film Festival; and the Irish Film Festival in Melbourne, Australia. Collin has been invited to speak about *Sanctuary* on international panels including What's The Diff? Deakin University Melbourne (2020) and the Sao Paulo XV Symposium of Irish Studies in South America (2020), as well as chairing a panel at Breaking Down Barriers International Film Festival, Moscow (2020).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1. Len Collin (2017-2020) *Sanctuary* A Collection of Creative and Critical Work Submitted to REF2021 comprising:

R1a. *Sanctuary* (2016) Feature Film Director: **Len Collin**; Writer: Christian O'Reilly; Editor: Julian Ulrichs. Starring: Kieran Coppinger, Charlene Kelly, Robert Doherty. Irish/UK general cinema release Dec 2017 (1hr 27mins). Worldwide release through TV and streaming outlets: Hulu, Sony UK, iTunes, AMC/Sundance, BskyB and Amazon URL: <https://vimeo.com/181475341>

R1b. **Len Collin (2020)** 'Shooting Actors who Have Intellectual Disabilities: A Reflexive Analysis on the Making of the Feature Film *Sanctuary*', in Katarzyna Ojrzyska & Maciej Wiczorek Koninklijke eds. *Strategies of Disability Representation and Inclusion in Contemporary Culture* (Netherlands, Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020)

R1c. *Altered Thinking* (2020) Director, Screen Writer, Editor: **Len Collin**. A film about the making of *Sanctuary*, including the contexts the film addresses, aspects of the process and the changes it has led to. 1hr 40mins URL:

<https://vimeo.com/user2823780/review/479650283/77e7d0d3ad>

Research funding

G1. Irish Film Board, 2015-16, EUR225,000*

G2. BAI, 2015-16, EUR300,000*

G3. Zanzibar Films, 2015-16, EUR9,560*

G4. Section 481 Tax Relief Scheme, 2015-16, EUR189,440*

*Grants awarded to Len Collin, in collaboration with Zanzibar Films.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Original practice-led research, which facilitated authentic casting of actors with intellectual disabilities (ID), allowed Collin to successfully translate *Sanctuary* from stage to screen. The film was a commercial and critical success, reaching millions of viewers with its compelling story, told through a cast of predominantly ID actors. By helping to promote and improve awareness of ID, Collin's work has become an effective advocacy tool, leading to changes in the film industry, as well as care services in Ireland and the UK. The film proved to be instrumental in supporting lobbying efforts to repeal Irish legislation that had prevented individuals with an ID from pursuing intimate relationships.

4.1 Improving awareness and promoting representation of ID

Sanctuary has toured every continent, receiving multiple awards and screenings at film festivals, as well as within educational and welfare settings. In July 2017 and December 2017, *Sanctuary* was released in cinemas across Ireland and the UK. The film was also made available to Access Cinema – an EU-funded company that takes cinema to remote and unusual locations. It won the Access Cinemas award for the film that made the most impact on their circuit for 2017 [E1]. Online, the film has been available on Sky, YouTube, iTunes, Hulu in the USA, and Volta in Ireland [E2]. Reviews on Amazon Prime Video for example, noted the power of the film's combination of comedy and pathos, the performances and the message of the film that encourages society to see people with ID as fully rounded human beings [E3, p1]. *The Guardian* described the film as 'valuable' [E3, p2] with a BFI review commenting on its 'radical' and 'powerful message [about casting] ... *Sanctuary* conforms to no stereotype; it is about people wanting to lead ordinary lives on their own terms' [E3, p3].

The success of *Sanctuary* helped to challenge conventional wisdom about the depiction of intellectual disability in film. The *London Evening Standard* – which gave the film five stars and rated it one of its films of the year – noted how the film 'is full of bodies rarely seen on the big screen' [E3, p4], while the *Irish Times* stated 'it remains unusual to see the ID on film, so a film starring nine such actors is exceptional even before the opening credits roll' [E3, p5]. *Film Ireland* saw Collin's work as 'one of the most ambitious, innovative and deeply moving Irish films of recent times... [an achievement] all the more impressive when one considers how rarely ID actors have featured prominently in fiction film' [E3, p6].

The discussions stimulated by *Sanctuary* in the UK entertainment industry led to new activity to support the film and casting of ID actors more broadly. Filmmaker-producer David Wilkinson, founder of distribution company Guerrilla Films confirmed that following his formal attendance at the film's premiere (Galway Film Festival, 2016), he was convinced to lead a UK-wide distribution [E4]. This decision was a result of a change in attitudes brought about by the film, 'I was expecting to be preached to ... [but realised] "Oh hang on a minute, this is interesting!" And then I began to laugh. And that may seem odd, but when you're a film professional, I've found that you look at a film in a different way, and so laughing is something that doesn't come easy,

particularly to distributors' [E4]. Wilkinson wrote a review praising *Sanctuary's* use of authentic casting, which had also challenged his prejudices and those of the broader film industry [E4].

Other filmmakers have approached Collin to discuss authentic casting and working with ID actors, empowering them to cast actors with ID when they might otherwise have employed non-ID actors. The writer and director of the BBC film *Ups and Downs* (2017) [E5, p1], discussed casting the lead character of his film who has Down's Syndrome [E5, p2]. More recently, another screenwriter-filmmaker worked with Collin on a new proposal for Screen Ireland, for a film about a woman with ID befriending a young girl and the misunderstandings that arise as a result. Collin advised the producer on the value of casting a lead with ID and was subsequently credited with strengthening the application that was successful [E6].

4.2 Empowering actors with an ID and supporting the promotion of authentic casting

The success of *Sanctuary* also resulted in significant benefits for the actors and the theatrical company they work with. Petal Pilley – CEO, Blue Teapot – noted the effect was *'absolutely massive, [they] are completely empowered ...that people interact [and say] "I've seen you", you know just to be met on the street [and be told] "I saw, you were wonderful" ...not many of us get that kind of interaction walking up our local high street, but they do'* [E7].

The film's success has seen the cast successfully audition for new roles, *'they are getting approached so that confidence is definitely shifted'* [E7]. Newfound confidence resulted in one of the lead actors requesting and moving into her own apartment, *'they're not afraid to say what they think and feel, and I think you know that's really priceless'* [E7]. Following the release of *Sanctuary*, *'the arts council sat up finally... [the film] completely elevated the status of [Blue Teapot] internationally [and] ...our capacity to carry a really important message, which is that the great artists, the great actors, they do great work'* [E7]. This has helped inspire younger/newer artists who want to develop as actors: *"there's me Oh! I might be able to do that" ...that encouragement is huge'* [E7]. Direct responses from actors were due to be collected in Summer 2020, through filmed in-person interviews but this was delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic and travel restrictions. Interviews were not conducted remotely for ethical and safeguarding reasons.

4.3 Supporting changes to health and care practices

Collin's work has initiated broader discussions about the need for changes in the Irish and UK care sectors to promote greater independence. Vivo Care Choices (Vivo) – the principal care provider for Cheshire West and Chester Council – is a case in point. MD Alistair Jeffs outlined how – typically for the care sector – Vivo has struggled to support service users wanting a more flexible approach to social relationships outside of the formal care environment, something Jeffs noted was often discouraged by family, friends, and care providers *'because it didn't quite fit in with their view of perhaps what was right or appropriate for the individuals or didn't fit into what they could afford to deliver'* [E8].

Vivo connected with Collin following the success of *Sanctuary*. As well as showing the film as part of the Chester Kaleidoscope festival – aiming to raise the profile of people with ID – Collin used the film to facilitate workshops with Vivo staff and service users [E8]. Jeffs confirms how these events were *'truly inspirational'* [E8]. As a result of engaging with Collin's work, Vivo has started to evolve the services it offers. This includes an initiative called 'Time Shared', a buddy system for individuals with common interests allowing them to socialise outside of the formal care environment [E8]. The scheme has given service users *'greater independence, freedom, happiness, and ...it starts to portray a much more positive view of individuals and what they can achieve'* [E8]. Working with Collin has encouraged *'professionals working with them, and family members to ...have greater aspirations and a stronger voice to say, actually, we would like a different range of support or we'd like a different range of opportunities'* [E8].

4.4 Contributing to repeal of the Sexual Offences Act 1993 (Republic of Ireland)

Canadian public broadcaster CBC/Radio-Canada noted how *'movies can have big impacts on people's lives, but not many films can say they've actually changed the law. Enter Sanctuary...'*

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[E3, p7]. Irish advocacy groups had been lobbying for a change to the Sexual Offences Act 1993 since its inception. The film adaptation of *Sanctuary* played a central role in bringing this issue to the attention of both the public and national legislators. At the 2017 screening at Dublin film festival, it was announced by Sarah Lennon, Inclusion Ireland CEO, that thanks to the popular and critical success of the film, Section 5 of the Criminal Law Act 1993 had been repealed in the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament). She explained why the film was of such crucial importance, *'the real difficulty we faced was getting people to connect and really understand what impact the law was having ... Sanctuary really did open up that storytelling door to us and to other campaigners at that time'* [E9, p1].

In galvanising the campaign for reform, *Sanctuary* helped to convince legislators to pass a new Bill in 2017, which no longer made it a criminal offence for consensual sexual relationships to take place between individuals who have an ID. This change benefited thousands of Irish citizens who would otherwise have been affected by the discriminatory law. Ireland's Minister for Disabilities, Finian McGrath who oversaw the passage of legislation through the parliament, confirmed that *Sanctuary* has *'led to a quiet revolution in relation to the sexuality of people with physical and intellectual disabilities'* [E10, p1]. Inclusion Ireland confirm that there are now positive examples of the law bringing benefits to families across the country, *'there was a lack of confidence or comfort with the idea of [family members with an ID] having intimate relationships or sexual relationships ... this film has helped break down a lot of those barriers'* [E9, p2].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Ref.	Source of corroboration	Link to claimed impact
E1	Webpage, Award Confirmation (Access Cinema)	Confirms distribution by and award from Access Cinema
E2	Sanctuary, Intl. Sales/Release figures	Confirms change in industry awareness, promoted ID actors
E3	Collated Media Coverage, 2016-19	Captured the effect of the film on audiences and reviewers and confirms change in public awareness, supported repeal of Irish legislation
E4	Interview, David Wilkinson (Founder, Guerrilla Films)	Confirms change in industry awareness, promoted ID actors
E5	Webpage and Correspondence from Director, 'Ups and Downs' (BBC Website)	Confirms influence on authentic casting
E6	Email from Sarah Aherne	Confirms influence on authentic casting
E7	Interview, Petal Pilley (CEO, Blue Teapot Theatre Co)	Confirms change in industry awareness, promoted ID actors
E8	Interview, Alistair Jeffs (Managing Director, Vivo Care Choices)	Confirms change in awareness in care sector which informed new practices
E9	Interview, Sarah Lennon (Director, Inclusion Ireland)	Confirms change in public awareness, supported repeal of Irish legislation
E10	Interview, Finian McGrath (Minister for Disabilities ROI)	Confirms change in public awareness, supported repeal of Irish legislation