

# Stockbridge Community Cinema

## Programme Notes 10 February 2017

### Life Animated (PG)

**Director:** Roger Ross Williams

2016

1hr 29mins



Roger Ross Williams (born September 16, 1973) is an American television news, documentary and entertainment director, producer and writer. He directed most notably *Music by Prudence* that won the Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject), about a 21-year-old Zimbabwean singer-songwriter Prudence Mabhena, who was born severely disabled and has struggled to overcome poverty and discrimination. All other seven members of Prudence's band "Liyana" are also disabled. Williams recently directed *God Loves Uganda*, which premiered at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival to enormous critical acclaim. It was shortlisted for a 2014 Academy Award, has won over a dozen awards and screened at over 60 film festivals worldwide.

His most recent film is *Life, Animated* co-produced by Williams with Julie Goldman, Carolyn Hepburn and Christopher Clements. *Life, Animated* is based on Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ron Suskind's 2014 book **Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism**, which tells the story of his son, Owen Suskind who struggled with autism and learned how to communicate with the outside world through his love of Disney films. Upon its release the film received rave reviews from critics and won numerous awards including National Board of Review award for Best Documentary and the Sundance Film Festival award for Best Direction, and is nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature category at the 89th Academy Awards.

At age seven, Owen Suskind was essentially non-verbal – living with such crippling autism that he could only express himself in squeaks and babbling. Then salvation arrived from an unlikely source: Disney cartoons. Owen's all-encompassing Disney obsession gave him a framework not just for understanding the world but for communicating with his own family. This sweet, sympathetic documentary follows Owen, now 23, as he prepares to graduate from high school and move out of the family home. He's heading off, like Simba and Dumbo, to find his own place in the world.

Director Roger Ross Williams is granted unrestricted access to Owen and his family (Ron, his wife Cornelia and their older son Walt) and his unflinching interviews with all four of them form the heart of the film. There are also, as the title implies, a handful of animated sequences, inspired by Owen's own stories set in the imaginary Land of Lost Sidekicks where the supporting characters from Disney movies live in fear of the evil Lord Fuzzbutch – and only Owen can save them. The film's depiction of autism is honest and unsentimental (though you do wonder about the kids who don't have the family and financial support Owen's been blessed with). But where 'Life, Animated' gets really fascinating is in exploring Owen's bone-deep connection with the cartoons. This is fandom taken to an extreme, but it's still reflective of the way many of us form attachments to created worlds: Owen's sense of comfort, of wanting to exist inside a fake universe, is highly relatable in this escapist age. Williams celebrates the unpredictable impact of fiction and fantasy; you simply never know what's going to change someone's life. But he also takes a few affectionate potshots at the limitations of Disney's world: how, for instance, is Owen ever going to learn about sex?

This is a terrifically watchable, heartfelt documentary and a valuable glimpse into a singular life.