All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 2 Episode 14: Tabitha Jackson
How Sundance Sausage is Made
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Abby Disney: Can I say hello now? Hi Tabitha!

Tabitha Jackson: Hi! So nice to talk to talk to you.

Abby Disney: I know it could not be a harder moment for you to do it, so I really appreciate you making the time.

Tabitha Jackson: So shall I press “new audio recording” now?

Abby Disney: Yes, yes, please do.

Tabitha Jackson: Alright.

Abby Disney: Okay then, let’s do this thing.

I’m Abigail Disney, welcome to All Ears, my Podcast where I get to go deep with some super smart people. This season I’m talking to good trouble makers. Artists, activists, politicians and others who aren’t afraid to shake up the status quo. We’ll talk about their work, how they came to do what they do, and why it’s so important in hard times to think big. You can’t think about solutions without being a little optimistic, and man oh man I think we need some optimism right now.

Now I have always loved film, always. It was never not part of my world. Films can climb deep into your heart and change you forever. They can also change the world around you. My father made films for The Wonderful World of Disney and in 1969 made a film about how the Peregrine Falcon was in danger of extinction because of DDT.

And it was not long after that that the DDT was banned and his film was a big reason for that happening. So the stories we tell and the stories we hear shape who we are and how we think, and the best films reach into us and change us forever.

No one is more thoughtful about film than like us today Tabitha Jackson. She has consistently challenged the industry to broaden the scope of what stories and whose stories get made and seen. As a commissioner at Channel Four in the UK, and then at the helm of the Sundance Documentary Program she championed artists and movies that push the boundaries of form and content.

Now, as Director of the Sundance Film Festival, she's bringing those ideas to an even larger audience. This year is her first festival in the position. And yikes, what a year to get started. Sundance 2021 kicks off today, January 28th and suffice to say that the experience will be a little bit different than it has in the past.

This year, the festival is mostly virtual with smaller lineup, only 71 features and is packed with first-time and BIPOC directors. And I for one am very excited to hear all about it.

So thank you, Tabitha, for joining me.

Tabitha Jackson: Abigail Disney, what an absolutely beautiful introduction, which I'm completely undeserving of. But I remember hearing you talk about documentary, film about film in general, and you said something which has always stayed with me, which is this moment when you are transported when you cease to remember who you are, where you are, what ethnicity you claim, what gender you claim. And you're just lifted into the work. And that's the moment I think we all strive for both as filmmakers and also audience members. So you're not so shabby yourself when it comes to thoughtfulness.

Abby Disney: Thank you. I mean, I do think that there's no other word for that other than magic, you know, it really is. So, the film festival is opening today and so I just gotta ask where are you on the continuum from happy to terrified to just wanting to go sleep somewhere. I mean, like, how are you feeling?

Tabitha Jackson: It's amazing, you know I've gone through many different conditions from being, you know, sad at the loss caused by the pandemic, not just in the world, which was enormous, but also in our little world of putting on the festival. Then to a kind of liberation, actually, Abby, to think that, that this festival has been going for 36 editions, and that was a great responsibility for me not to not to mess it up. And this year has kind of liberated me because I have to mess with it. And then it went into the very challenging, um, taking the festival apart piece by piece and trying to put it back together in a different form that was fit for the moment, while navigating a global pandemic, which we knew-- racial uprising, which we wanted, but we didn't see that coming. Assault on the Capitol. Didn't see that coming. And, and so I have at moments been in the fetal position, but now I'm up and excited for all this new work to meet the world.

Abby Disney: So I'm going to go backwards, cause I'm always interested in how a person comes to film to start with and where film fit in for them in their childhood. So do you remember the first film you ever saw in a theater?

Tabitha Jackson: I do actually. I remember it because--for a couple of reasons. My dog, I think I was about seven. My dog had just died. And so my dad, I was raised by my dad in a little village, the local cinema was about a 30 minute drive away. And I hadn't been there before. And he said, I'm going to take you to the cinema, to the pictures as we call it.

I'm going to take you the pictures to cheer you up. And he took me to see this lovely animated film which traumatized me for life. The film was *Watership Down*. And it's about rabbits, rabbit warfare, rabbit violence, and death. One of the main characters dies. And so in that moment I learned a couple of things.

I learned about cinema, because I remember distinctly being in the same room as a lot of people feeling the same thing that they were feeling all at the same time. So that was pretty amazing. And, you know, side note, my dad was a vicar so I'd been used to going to places with lots of people and, and engaging in something. Some people talk about cinema as their religion and, and it was very close to me in that sense. But it also taught me about death. You know, that, that there is a way I was processing what had happened to my dog, through what was happening to the rabbit. And later on, my dad died actually shortly after I started work at Sundance.

And I remember when he died thinking back to that film of *Watership Down*. So there was some crazy circle of meaning going on, but yeah, that was my first film.

Abby Disney: Wow. And so that partly answers a question for me, which was, what role did film play in your childhood?

Tabitha Jackson: I didn't go to the cinema very often because it was a ride away and we didn't have that much money. And also I couldn't get there in a tiny village, but I watched an enormous amount of television and on television that's where I saw all the films. And, there's something about, watching TV late at night, watching things you're not supposed to watch.

And there's a feeling of intimacy that is different from the complete immersion that you get in a cinema. But in a cinema, I am also until that moment we just spoke about, of being transported or transcendent. I'm also very aware of other people around me and eating popcorn or coughing or whatever it is they were doing.

So there is an immediacy with television and I think sometimes we forget the symbiotic relationship between television and film in that sense. And that's how I experienced it all.

Abby Disney: And of course, every new technology, when television came along, it was like, Oh my God, that's the end of the theater. When DVDs came along, Oh, that's the end of the theater. And the theater never dies because as great as all the other forms are, people still want to gather. And we're so hungry to gather again.

Tabitha Jackson: It's going to be so interesting seeing how we emerge from this pandemic and how comfortable people feel about going back to the cinema. It's an interesting moment. I mean, more threatening than all of those technological advances.

Abby Disney: I think so. So I know you started at Channel Four. What's the road to Channel Four look like?

Tabitha Jackson: The road to Channel Four was a philosophy degree, followed by working at the BBC, you know, the great public broadcaster that was such a feature of my dad listened to the radio all the time, slightly too loudly. And it was always on BBC Radio Four, which was a talk radio station. And I loved the BBC so much, so that was my first job.

And I was very proud to, I kind of understood what public service broadcasting was from the get-go. And so that's-- I started there, worked in documentaries at the BBC and fell in love with it instantly. Actually.

Abby Disney: So you never considered any other kind of life or career?

Tabitha Jackson: No, no. I think the fact of doing a philosophy degree pretty much…

Abby Disney: It does make you pretty useless.

Tabitha Jackson: That's like Steve Martin said, what am I going to do? Open a philosophy shop.

Abby Disney: I'd love to go to Steve Martin's philosophy shop though. That would be an interesting place to be.

Tabitha Jackson: Absolutely.

Abby Disney: So I inhabit planet documentary for the most part. And there is a perception that a documentary should always be important. And funders are always looking for impact and

unfortunately, impact that can be measured. Do you think that the documentary has to be important or valuable, or do we have to explain why a documentary is from a utilitarian standpoint?

Tabitha Jackson: No, I mean, I think if you are, if you are asking someone for money, then it is your role to explain why they should give it to you. And that can be, that can include why you think it's important to tell this story, but it kind of makes me sigh when someone describes a film as an important film. I mean, sometimes it definitely is, but what does that, what does that mean and how do you know it's important?

I mean, these things have a long tail of meaning and there are films--I don't know if I think of a film that has had an impact on so many people, a film like *Grey Gardens*. I mean, you wouldn't think that was an important film when it first came out. It's a wonderful film and it has grown to have a cultural importance. Often the word important means that it has a kind of instrumental value in moving the needle on a social issue. And I think it is vital that we are clear about how we value films and how we value art. That certainly is one measure for some films, if that is the intention, or sometimes even if it's not the intention.

Abby Disney: Well, you know, I once heard you make this distinction between transformational and transactional films. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Tabitha Jackson: Well, it goes to something we were talking about earlier, which is that the role of art in providing transformation that we are left changed and that's not specific to cinema. It happens with music. It happens with literature. It gives a certain timeless lasting quality to something, and it is, I think, one of the powers of art. The transactional quality is more that you go and tell other people about this social issue.

Again, that's a kind of legitimate way of using some kind of film that often results in a diminishment of that first quality, because the intent is so clear from the get go. And often it can be counterproductive because if it is wearing it's heart or its social agenda so clearly on its sleeve, often it will only reach an audience who already agree with it. However, there has been incredibly transformational non-fiction work that has changed the way we think about certain things whether it's LGBTQ rights, whether it's SeaWorld, *Blackfish*. So, you know, there is where they do that. I'm not trying to set up a division, work can be both transformational and socially engaged and meaningful.

Abby Disney: You know how I think of it? For my purposes, as I think of it as the difference between a question mark and an exclamation point, you know?

Tabitha Jackson: That's wonderful.

Abby Disney: This is a culture full of exclamation points. You know, we just are so flummoxed by a question mark, and something like, I mean, I thought *The Truffle Hunters* was just a mind-blowingly great film.

Tabitha Jackson: Mm Hmm.

Abby Disney: And what was that except a long series of question marks one after the other. And I just felt like I was transported.

Tabitha Jackson: I love that. I love that. I mean, I love that film, but I also love the way you just described it because a question mark implies listening. It implies curiosity, and it implies the presence of another. It's an act of communication. The exclamation mark is kind of just about an individual stating their response to something. I love that question mark.

Abby Disney: So a lot of the news around your first year as director pointed to the fact that you're a woman of color in a field that's dominated by white men. I mean, is that annoying?

Tabitha Jackson: It's not annoying, but I mean, I, as an individual, I have a complicated relationship to my own identity and I'm sure we all do the labels that other people put on you don't necessarily conform to how you see yourself in the world.

Abby Disney: I would say I don't enjoy heiress very much but anyway, go on.

Tabitha Jackson: I love to have heiress appended to my name. Anyway. Uh, yeah. I mean the question of identity, I think the most useful thing I can do with them is to remember that there is a responsibility that goes with this gatekeeping privilege, the power of the resources and attention that I currently have my hands on.

There is a responsibility with that. And I take that very seriously. And then beyond that, I just have to put those descriptions in a box and just do the work. It might be relevant in the story of Sundance, but it's not relevant to the work at hand. It's the values that dictate that rather than the labels.

Abby Disney: Yeah. Yeah. But do you feel pressure at all that maybe your decisions and choices might be more closely scrutinized or might be chalked up to motivations that aren't actually there.

Tabitha Jackson: No, and I don't feel pressured because I won't allow myself to do that. I think through all of my career and, in fact, in just the way I've lived, you know, I'm this kind of pat description of a mixed raced adopted child of divorced parents, everything about me and where I lived and how I was raised was I was always the different one.

And that could either be something that was going to define me or something that I could just put aside, and move forward. And now actually having said that, I do quite enjoy the difference. So I enjoy being the only British person at Sundance, and having a sense of kind of contrarianism being able to see what feels like the prevailing orthodoxy makes me want to question it. And I think that can be quite useful in an organization that stands for independence.

Abby Disney: So when John Cooper left and there was this wide search, 700 applications came in for the director position.

Tabitha Jackson: Really? I had no idea.

Abby Disney: Yes! So this is a little self-esteem moment for you. So you weren't really sure if you wanted to throw your hat into the ring. Why was that?

Tabitha Jackson: I don't know how you can read my mind in that way, but yes, that was absolutely true. I loved what I was doing. So I was running the Documentary Film Program. And as I had been doing through all my career had been engaged in that messy, wonderful thing we call the creative

process. So I was making films and television quite badly, and then I became a commissioning editor and then I came to Sundance and it was all about, what is this person trying to say and why, and how can I help them say it in a way that expresses what they're trying to do?

So that, that the making of work has always been thrilling to me and the the meaning making and being alongside that process. The festival seemed like a big, scary thing that wasn't about the process. It was about the completed thing, which is exciting.

Abby Disney: The product.

Tabitha Jackson: But it was all-- I would never call it a product, but it was also all about tickets and sponsors and everybody having a stake in it. And just a lot of stuff that I didn't really want to deal with. So that was my hesitation. That was my hesitation. And then I slept on it quite a lot and talked to lots of friends about it.

And you know, the thing that has kind of got me up in the morning about this work is that I think it matters and it matters because these voices are really important to the fabric of how we understand our existence. If that doesn't sound too pompous. And so if I think it matters, then why wouldn't I engage with this incredibly powerful, cultural tool that is the festival and for 10 days at the start of each year, a lot of eyes are on it, it's an incredible thing to be able to direct attention to voices or work that otherwise may not be seen. So that's, that's why I said, yes.

Abby Disney: So do you have a vision for Sundance or somewhere you want to take it?

Tabitha Jackson: Yes, I mean, it's still founded in the values of the Sundance Institute, a non-profit organization founded by Robert Redford in 1981 in response to what he saw as a restriction of creative freedom by the studio system. And so he thought, all right, well, I have some land. I have friends who are directors and writers, and I know that there are emerging voices who will never get their work funded. So let's get together and try and develop it. That was the beginning of the Sundance Institute.

Those founding values of independent voice championing of a diversity of voices and approaches and perspectives are still key. But, I do want my passions, I suppose, are diversity and by diversity, I do mean a diversity of perspectives and also forms, and also language, particularly around non-fiction. And I'm learning a lot about fiction and what's possible there. And also as we see the landscape changing and the advent of the streamers and the difficulties that the independent artists are finding with sustainability and getting their work made in the scene. I think there is a really important role for festivals there.

Abby Disney: Right. Well, you know, I mean, we are all blue in the face from talking about COVID, all the things that were thwarted and changed and didn't happen, or, you know. But, do you think that the interruption has been a blessing for Sundance in some way? Yes.

Tabitha Jackson: You know, it's hard to say that. I think we're all the same in thinking whenever one talks about the good things that have happened as a result of this pandemic, it seems to diminish the really terrible things that have happened to so many people. So even on that level of a good thing for Sundance, I mean, we, as a nonprofit, we had to lay off a bunch of our staff. That was, that was awful.

And you know, also our staff and the artists that we serve have gone through just the most awful things, whether it's actually the loss of people or the loss of livelihood or the loss of kind of creative momentum, if not being able to do the thing that they, that they want to do anymore.

But against all that, yes. I think it proved this moment of pause, interruption, was a moment where we were forced to reconsider the value of everything we were doing and how we were doing it because it was all threatened. And even to just contemplate putting on a festival means you have to ask yourself, why would you do this in this moment where you've just laid off staff, you're really going to spend money on a film festival?

Well, the answer is yes, because of our mission and what we think the importance of--what we think the stakes are in this moment in the independent voice. And the fact that artists have, you know, for those artists who are able to make work against the odds, they've done it. So it's our responsibility to lift up that work and get it to audiences in the way that we can.

Abby Disney: Right. So what do you think will never return to normal?

Tabitha Jackson: Ooh, what will never return to normal? I don't know because you know, I think a return to normal, to me, isn't in all aspects a good thing. So there are things I hope we don't return to normal. I hope we don't return to normal in the way that we just, I definitely include myself in this kind of unthinkingly jumped on a plane to go to all kinds of places and that the toll that takes environmentally, and the worry is that it's so easy for us to revert back to the old ways.

As it pertains to our own festival, I hope that we never go back to normal in that only the people who are financially able or physically able to get to Park City, it's only those people that get to experience the festival. I don't want to go back to that now that we know there is another way it doesn't mean I want to replace an in-person festival with a virtual festival, but one can have both. I think one can have the best of both worlds.

Abby Disney: Well, that was going to be my next question, actually, because it's both the best and worst thing about Sundance is that it's exclusive and jam packed with important people. And you feel like you're at the center of the universe and that is fantastic, but I mean, I've always been very conscious of who's not there and why?

Tabitha Jackson: Yes.

Abby Disney: How are you going to make it more accessible?

Tabitha Jackson: Well, this year just provided us an opportunity to really, there were no constraints really on how accessible this festival could be. So whether it's geographically accessible because people from anywhere around the world can encounter them just by, you know, logging onto the website, to accessibility on screen, using widgets that help people with visual impairments we want to be a more accessible festival and that means not just physically, but it means financially.

And so, one of the things we committed to was that whoever came to this festival, 20% of them would be subsidized. We wanted to subsidize 20% of the tickets and passes so that we could welcome more people and different kinds of people in. And that includes things like, press inclusion initiative that enables different people to be writing about the work and experiencing it and getting it to, again, to different kinds of audiences.

Abby Disney: Now this festival has, uh, 57% of all the projects have a BIPOC director, 26% of all projects have a woman of color director and more than half of them are first-time directors, which is kind of extraordinary. So did you do anything differently to land on that result?

Tabitha Jackson: Well, it's my first time. So I just did what I did for the first time. But we know from, particularly coming from the documentary world, the nonfiction world, this question of authorship is really key. Who is telling the stories about whom and why. And so, in discussions of the films with, of course, talking about who has made these and what does it represent and what are they bringing to it?

We absolutely were not curating to, to quotas or benchmarks. It just was the case that we saw a lot of strong work which has ended up in the program. But I'm very pleased about it. I think that's a great direction for us.

Abby Disney: No, it's, it's thrilling. It's really thrilling. Especially the first time directors. It's just so exciting to hear new voices. Are you allowed to tell me about films you're really excited about or do you have to seem neutral?

Tabitha Jackson: I, there are so many, it's very hard because we, we--can I firstly, tell you a bit, a little bit about the process of how we get the films?

Abby Disney: Oh, I was going to ask you about it.

Tabitha Jackson: Ah, well, okay. Because this is my first year. It's the first time I've seen how the sausage is made and say, Oh, I see. So when people submit their films, they submit them through an online system.

There's a team of screeners who watch every single film all the way through and write notes all the way through. No film goes unwatched or partially watched. So they write lots of notes and coverage and then the full-time programmers come in and they all watch it. And then they determine which films are going to move up to the next level.

And at that next level, everybody fiction and nonfiction are all in the room discussing these films.

Abby Disney: Wait, so how many submissions sear?

Tabitha Jackson: There were about, and I don't have the numbers off the top of my head, but, somewhere around 13,000 submissions, but that includes about almost 10,000 shorts. Well, you say few, but the shorts programmers, that's still a lot of that is a lot of viewing to do a 10,000 films and they to watch every single film all the way through.

So what that means is there are lots of perspectives in the room and lots of argument and lots of going backwards and forwards.

I think it makes for a kind of very dimensional discussion. And yes, we began at the individual film level and then where we get to is programming at a festival and how these films talk to each other. So when it gets to this and the question, like what are the films you're particularly excited about?

I've kind of, I've kind of gone beyond that, into these all work together in a festival sense. So that was a very long-winded answer to your question.

Abby Disney: Do themes emerge?

Tabitha Jackson: Themes certainly emerge. We saw lots of films about empowered women fighting against systems that were built by and for males. We saw a lot of films as you might expect either about the pandemic or made during the pandemic. So the form of them reflects the conditions in which they were made.

So distanced casting, lots of themes about kind of dystopian or there's something out there that's going to get us. And then, you know, we wondered what we might see about the uprising for racial justice that happened in June. And then we reminded ourselves that actually films have been being made about racial, injustice and violence.

Abby Disney: ...for a long time.

Tabitha Jackson: That would be since the beginning of cinema.

Abby Disney: Exactly. And until recently not much paid attention to.

Tabitha Jackson: Exactly.

Abby Disney: For a long time, BIPOC filmmakers were told that, well, there's just no audience, women filmmakers, no audience for that. No audience, we can't sell that. Has the market changed and do you think it's changing still?

Tabitha Jackson: I think the market has changed, partly through organizations like Sundance and the growth of the independent film movement. There was a prevailing orthodoxy about what was marketable and what wasn't. And then through festivals like ours that work became beloved and sought after and, you know, for good or ill commodified.

That feels a very healthy expansion of the marketplace. I think, what we must never do is to chase the marketplace and for that to affect our curation. What we should be doing is constantly looking for things that have perhaps been kept in the margins and bring them where they have value to the center and shine a light on them.

Abby Disney: Yeah. Give them their chance.

Tabitha Jackson: Yes, exactly. Exactly! You know, for me, what the market represents, what the industry represents is the ability to get this work to audiences. So that is in itself an incredible value. And yet what the festival can also do is, is to elevate work that we think is just worth seeing. And even if it doesn't have a lot of commercial viability about it, that's fine because it can have a life on the festival circuit and be meaningful because of that.

Abby Disney: I as a filmmaker and especially as a funder and producer, think about that all of the time, because I see lots of films that just have zero chance of ever seeing a deal or getting a chance to be seen besides at festivals.

Tabitha Jackson: Right. And I think, you know, we're in a much better position because of the democratization of technology. And also because of, you know, the rise of the internet, that is,it's actually very rare that things never get seen anymore. I mean, they can get lost in the noise, which is a different kind of problem.

But if I think that, you know, to your earlier question, I think we just should never second guess an audience, we should never assume things. And so I think of a wonderful film, like, RaMell Ross' *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*, which is such a beautiful, intentional thoughtful piece of work

that wouldn't necessarily get into Sundance Film Festival, but it did. Wouldn't necessarily get picked up, but it did.

Almost definitely wouldn't be in the part of the Oscar race and it was, and ended up being nominated. And that it isn't just like, oh, because the work was so good, it just happened. There were a lot of people carrying that work.

It takes writers to write about it. It takes people who've seen it to tweet about it, to carry this work through more towards the kind of bloodstream of the culture, but it happens. And then suddenly, you know, a door has been opened.

Abby Disney: You know, ingroups form around powerful people and powerful festivals and decision-makers and things. That's just the nature of things.

And then you take Sundance and that's like, it's just putting that dynamic on amphetamines. Because the access is so expensive and the spot, in the festivals is so, career making. So how do you -- I think of it as a wall of social equity. So how do you set yourself up in that kind of a context?

Tabitha Jackson: It's such an important question Abby. I'm learning in this, my first year as festival director, the whole independent community, we pride ourselves on the fact that we're built on relationships. But then when it comes to access to, you know, real estate, as it were a place in the festival or, or some funding, how do those relationships not become a kind of downside when it comes to equity? Oh, this person knows that there is an extension to the deadline so that they can ring you up and call and ask for one, or they just know to ask for it. It's really difficult to get that, to get that balance right. And so I think just constantly being aware of it, that these constant little things that can lead to inequity, we just have to be calling ourselves to account as frequently. And as often as we can and hope that there are constructive critics who will do the same for us. And in pretty much every job where I've had resources, you have this short window of time where people will tell you the truth because you're new to the system and then you become part of the system and they don't tell you the truth in the way that they would have done, because it's a risk for them.

I think it's a real problem and probably more so in a community-based relationship driven field, like independent cinema.

Abby Disney: You know, one of the hardest balancing acts is what to do with flattery or how to know the difference between praise and flattery, because it's a dangerous thing, it gets into your skin and then it gets into your bloodstream and suddenly you're thinking about yourself in a certain kind of way. So I see every compliment as something I have to bat away, but then I don't know how to keep a positive sense of self-esteem either.

Tabitha Jackson: Definitely. Definitely. I mean, when I was a commissioning editor, so I had money and I had real estate, you know, broadcast hours. At that point, never was I funnier, never was I more attractive and, one became very, very suspicious of any compliment as you're saying, but totally believed every criticism.

And so that's the danger of it, but yeah, I am aware that I don't know what is behind many of the relationships again, because this field is social and it's professional because it's mission driven. Most of us have the work-life balance completely askew because the work is so much fun and also we believe in it.

So I just think a healthy skepticism, which in itself is not necessarily a healthy thing, but a healthy skepticism for any compliment is probably what's going to save us from being completely monstrous egomaniacs when we come out the other side of whatever it is that we're doing.

Abby Disney: For sure. For sure. So, the marketplace aspect of Sundance was already a little bit changing but of course, with the pandemic, the deals have all, but gone away, especially for documentary filmmakers. What do you think that means for us? And do you think Sundance's market role will ever become as robust as it once was.

Tabitha Jackson: I don't know. And I'm totally fine with saying that because so much is up in the air and up for grabs. And it was already, even before the pandemic, it felt like the old structures had been upended. And the question was what were the new structures going to be? There was an opportunity and still is to write the next chapter. We know that not least because of the advent of the streaming platforms and production having shut down because of the pandemic, we know that there is a huge appetite for what some people might call content.

So I'm not despondent about that, but I think you're right, that the changes that we were seeing were things like, streamers wanting to make their own content rather than acquire things at a festival like ours. You know, that's still a problem. What are we going to do with that? Because I think one of the strengths about the independent sector has been the kind of by any means necessary approach and that also results in creative freedom. If you can keep your budgets low, then you're less dependent on other people having to put money into it and having a say and more likely to get the work done that you want to get done. But it's a complicated landscape now. And so, there is the financial aspect and the structures and the distribution, and those structures weren't necessarily equitable.

So it's not like we need to mourn the old ways, but we need to take what was good from that and see how we can form a new landscape with the values that we now hold.

Abby Disney: You mentioned earlier, you talked a little bit about coming out of BBC and then Channel Four. And this is, you know, publicly minded broadcasting. Obviously the United States has a whole different sensibility about what, you know, what the government, what role the government should play in the arts and so forth.

Tabitha Jackson: Well, yes, absolutely. So what, what we, what is left often, certainly, in the field that I'm most familiar with, are a lot of people telling stories who can afford to tell the stories even when there is a lack of funding. And so it reduces the dimensionality of the endeavor. It excludes many voices, and so it excludes a kind of truth about our condition because there's only a certain kind of person who can frame it narratively, so that huge amount of blind spots. And it's an ironic thing in documentary, isn't it Abby? Because we are, it is a field that is so closely associated with social justice, doing good and pointing out inequity and we ourselves are riddled with it.

But at least it's a live conversation. We're aware of it and we just, we need to address it somehow.

Abby Disney: Yeah, but, how do we get that in place?

Tabitha Jackson: So for example, healthy development funding for artists. And we have to make sure that the kind of artists we are giving development funding to are beyond the range of those who are familiar to us, and so that we can think very carefully about what questions we ask when we're about to give you know, money or resources or access, and hold ourselves to account about what patterns we are falling into and what our blind spots are.

I mean, I think that's just a kind of internal reckoning that we need to do. And we've started doing. What questions are we asking, um, on the submission forms, what questions is it appropriate and not appropriate to ask? There is, uh, there has been a kind of, I would describe it as a kind of purism about don't distract us with any biographical details. We simply are interested in the work.

Well, that doesn't feel right to this moment. And you know, if you just look at the work and this, this big piece of work is glossy and well-produced and beautiful accomplished, and this piece of work is scrappy and doesn't have the production values, there might be a reason for that, which has nothing to do with the filmmaking prowess, but everything to do with access to resources.

And so that's, I think, a relevant consideration. It's one of the reasons why we have such an imbalance in the field and a huge range of perspectives that we're not hearing from.

Abby Disney: Yeah. So one last question. Are there one or maybe two films that you're most proud of having champions and why?

Tabitha Jackson: I am not going to answer that question because I think the engagement with the makers of the work is the thing that I have most valued and cherished. And so, no, I would just say as a complete non-answer to that, I would say we talk so often about the power of story. Which is a thing. But what we are really talking about is the power of storytellers and they don't just spring, fully formed from the womb.

They need sustainability and they need attention and they need a creative space in which to flourish and to fail. You know, before they enter the culture. And so I think the system, rather than the individual success stories is what we should make ourselves proud of and do that together.

Abby Disney: Okay, that's beautiful. That's a perfect answer. I'm going to stop you there.

Tabitha Jackson: Thank you so much for having me, Abby. I really appreciate it.

Abby Disney: And thank you for being so generous about your time.

Tabitha Jackson: Pleasure, pleasure.

Abby Disney: Thank you. Take care.

Tabitha Jackson: All right. You too. Buh-bye

Abby Disney: Bye.

The Sundance Film Festival opens today, January 28th and runs through February 3rd. To find out if there are screenings in your area or to watch some of the films virtually check out sundance.org and follow Tabitha on Twitter @tabula4.

All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show was produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Lauren Wimbush is our Associate Producer. Sabrina Yates is our Production Coordinator. Our engineer is Veronica Rodriguez, Bob Golden composed our theme music. The podcast team also includes the VP of production Aideen Kane. Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website. forkfilms.com. And don't forget to subscribe, rate, and review All Ears wherever you get your podcasts.