My Way to Olympia: Berlin Review

11:10 AM PST 2/17/2013 by Stephen Dalton

The Bottom Line

*Fresh, funny, uplifting documentary about disabled athletes*

German director Niko von Glasow shares the personal stories of Paralympic champions.

BERLIN - Premiering at the Berlinale last week, this highly personal and surprisingly funny documentary follows a group of disabled athletes preparing to compete in the Paralympic Games in London last summer. The German director **Niko von Glasow**, a former assistant to **Rainer Werner Fassbinder**, was himself born with short arms because his mother took the notorious sedative Thalidomide during pregnancy.

An agreeably disheveled and shambling presence on screen, von Glasow comes across like a less preachy **Michael Moore**. By making himself part of the story, he enriches the film with his own life experience, but also with deadpan charm and irreverent humor. Combining high production values, majority English dialogue and a Paralympic theme that remains newsworthy – for good and bad reasons – *My Way to Olympia*has readymade appeal on the festival circuit. With theatrical release already lined up in Germany, overseas distributors may see niche potential here. But television sales look more likely.

Von Glasow travels the world to meet his subjects. The most severely disabled is Greek boccia champion **Greg Polychronidis,**paralyzed from the neck down by spinal muscular atrophy. Others he meets lost limbs in war zones, including the Rwandan sitting basketball team and the one-armed table tennis player **Aida Husic Dahlen**, a Bosnian refugee raised in Norway. The US archer **Matt Stutzman** was born with a similar birth defect to the director, allowing them to trade competitive displays of manual dexterity. Slow-motion footage of Stutzman in action, using his feet to operate a specially adapted bow, is stunning.

The director lays his cards on the table from the opening. “Basically I think sports suck,” he proclaims, “and the Paralympics is a stupid idea.” This deliberately provocative position softens a little over the course of the film, but von Glasow never succumbs to the sentimental boosterism that some media commentators heaped on last year’s London games. He shows us triumph and euphoria, but also the hard sacrifices made by Olympians and their families, and the harrowing emotional cost of failure. Nor does he shy away from touchy questions about sex, depression, anger and - in the case of Polychronidis – the strong possibility of early death.

All the same, *My Way to Olympia* is a much stronger film for addressing these uncomfortable themes. They throw the scenes of sporting success into sharper relief, and lend extra force to the overall celebratory sense of victory over steep odds. It is no spoiler to reveal that, while some of these athletes leave London tearful and empty-handed, others go home with medals. Von Glasow is never quite converted to the Paralympic cause, but his mischievous sense of humor remains intact. His working title for the film, he quips as the credits roll, is *Triumph of the Will Part 2.*

*Production company: If… Productions, Palladio Film, Senator Film, WDR, NDR, SWR*

*Producer: Ingo Fleiss*

*Cast: Niko von Glasow, Aida Husic Dahlen, Greg Polychronidis, Christiane Reppe, Matt Stutzman*

*Director: Niko von Glasow*

*Cinematographer: Hajo Schomerus*

*Editors: Mechthild Barth, Bernhard Reddig*

*Editor: Falk Moller*

*Sales company: If… Productions, Munich*

*Rating: TBC, 85 minutes*