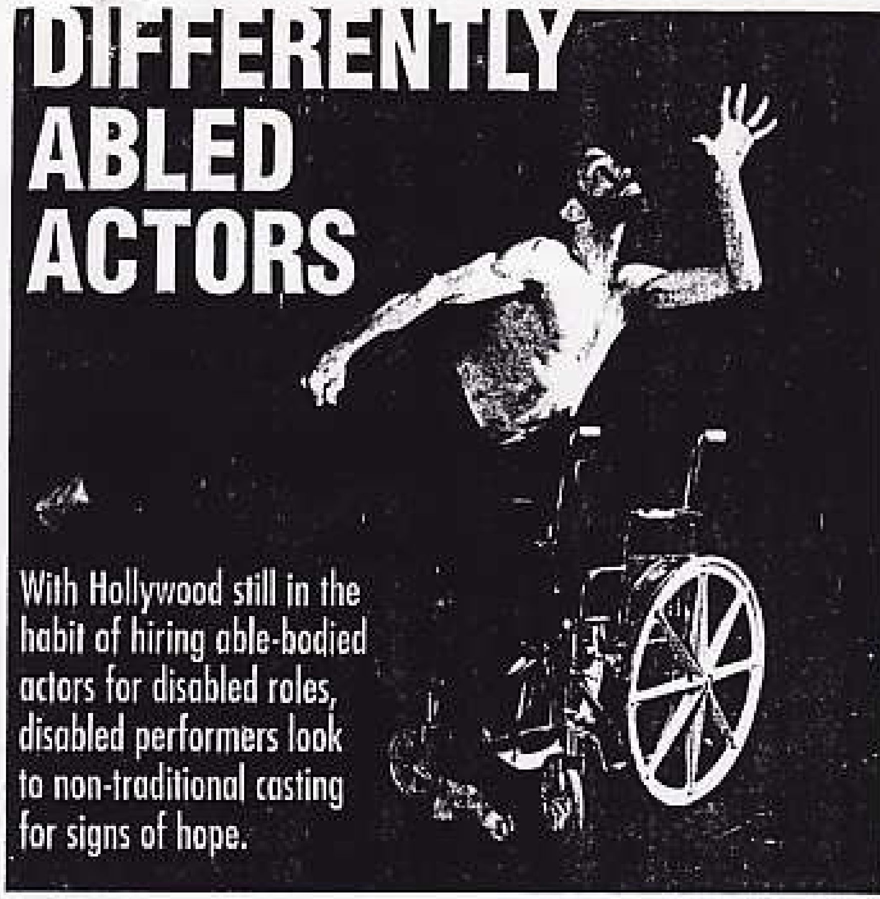
DIFFERENTLY ABLED ACTORS



With Hollywood still in the habit of hiring able-bodied actors for disabled roles, disabled performers look to non-traditional casting for signs of hope.

by Cindy Mulkern

Why don't they get it? Executive Producer Jack Grossbart and producer Joel Rice took a lot of heat a few weeks ago when they cast Kellie Martin in the lead for an upcoming movie of the week about a deaf Hispanic woman. The producers insist that ABC Television would only greenlight with a "name" attached.

The Hollywood Reporter reported that an offer for the role initially went out to deaf star Marlee Matlin, who declined—so the producers then approached Kellie Martin. Of course, that's business as usual for star-driven projects, in which the lead roles often aren't auditioned at all but simply offered to known commodities.

The problem is, with disability-specific roles, there are Screen Actors Guild rules that apply—and the producers of the ABC MOW had signed a union contract. As SAG president Richard Masur reminded them, the SAG contract clause pertaining to the auditioning of disabled actors clearly requires producers to "make every effort to include minorities, women, and performers with disabilities in the casting of motion pictures, thereby creating fair and equal employment opportunities and eliminating stereotyping."

ABC received several protests from the deaf performing community. As a result of these efforts—which included a list of all deaf SAG performers arriving on the producers' desks—the project has supposedly taken steps to cast four supporting roles with deaf actors. At presstime, the jury was still out.

Linda Bove.

For deaf performers, this story sounded all too familiar, and their protests echo the complaint of disabled performers industry-wide: that Hollywood needs to wake up to an under-used talent pool and give it a fighting chance to compete for roles its members are especially qualified to play. And increasingly, there's an added hope: that the industry make non-traditional casting the rule and consider disabled performers alongside able-bodied actors for roles that are non-disability-specific.

Linda Bove, a 20-year cast member of *Sesame Street* and the first deaf actress cast as a regular on episodic television (in *Search for Tomorrow*), knows this territory well. Bove performed on Broadway in *Children of a Lesser God*, and has worked on both coasts with the National Theatre of the Deaf and Deaf West Theatre. In short, she is a very established actress working within both deaf and hearing performance settings, and she's heard the "same old story" from the industry too many times.

"Everyone always points the finger up—to the office upstairs or the network," Bove said. "This is a typical excuse. 'Needing a star' is also a typical response. But when the film version of *Children of a Lesser God* came along, they were willing to go with only one star name and to cast an unknown (Matlin) in the other lead. She became a star as a result, so please tell me how producers can ignore the potential of any deaf performer?"

Bove feels that different industry areas have progressed at different rates. "I do think theatrical motion pictures have improved over the years. The producers of *Mr. Holland's Opus*, for example, really committed to hiring deaf actors, and I applaud them for that. The soaps seem to have made good use of deaf and hard-of-hearing talent. Theatre is more and more sensitive. But episodic television has been limited. And it seems to me that the network MOW area is the worst." In conclusion, Bove said, "The entertainment industry needs to accept the diversity of the American scene—including people with all types of disabilities—as has been done more successfully in other fields of work."

No Special Roles

This applies, of course, not only to deaf and hard-of-hearing performers but to actors with other disabilities who often don't even get the chance to audition for roles. Characters who use wheelchairs, for instance, have been portrayed by able-bodied performers in *Forrest Gump*, *Born on the Fourth of July* (though several disabled actors were also cast following a unified presentation to producers by disabled performers), *Coming Home*, *The Waterdance*, *The Men*, *Passion Fish*, and *Reckless*.

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Not Stunted

Most performers possess no desire to jump from the second story of a building for the sake of realism. Thus, the need for stuntpeople. Imagine being the stuntman catapulting from that second story. Now imagine doing it from a wheelchair.

To his knowledge, Mark Mathesan is the only trained wheelchair stuntperson ready for hire. And why would anyone be seeking a stuntperson in a wheelchair? Why not?

"In the 'real world,' " Mathesan explained, "individuals in wheelchairs sit at cafés, go to banks, work in the World Trade Center. If the movie calls for an out-of-control-car to reel into a sidewalk café, for bank robbers to take hostages, or terrorists to plant a bomb in the World Trade Center, why not have a stuntperson depict what happens to someone in a wheelchair in those examples?"

This is one of the premises pitched through Stunts-Ability, an organization founded by stuntman R. David Smith that offers Hollywood trained stuntpeople with disabilities.

With years of stunt work under his belt on such projects as *Predator II*, *Terminator 2*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Baywatch*, Smith, who was born without his right forearm, certainly understands the possibilities his stuntpeople offer. Though he felt the industry was ready to listen, he also felt no one was training people with disabilities in the very skills required for stunt work. Training is therefore a a major component for the organization.

So far, directors such as Robert Zemeckis, James Cameron, and Stephen J. Cannell have hired from the Stunts-Ability team, and noted stunt coordinator Red Horton has participated in training sessions.

Smith talks with industry people about using amputee stuntpeople, for example, in scenes with explosions. Though it's a slightly morbid way to make a living, the concept is clever.

"When a scene calls for a character to be in a major explosion, believe me, no one goes flying into the air with all four arms and legs flailing," Smith said. In the past, stuntpeople have had to have a particular limb tied back to get the effect. "We offer an alternative. In our stunt bags, we carry a remote-controlled prosthetic device. A stuntperson who is a limb amputee wears the prosthetic prior to the explosion. It is 'blown off' during the scene, and the remainder of the shot shows the stuntperson without the 'arm' or 'leg.' That's what we bring to Hollywood: more realism and a sense of detail that can really enhance a scene."

Like athletes, stuntpeople look even more cool to kids. That's why Smith and his roster regularly perform demonstrations in public and private locations—especially in rehab settings where children are learning to live life in a wheelchair or without a limb. Once they realize what their adult counterparts can do, the possibilities seem to expand for a child whose future choices seemed vastly altered.

Meanwhile, our friend in the wheelchair is perfecting his pyrotechnical skills so that he can also be set safely on fire.

—*Cindy Mulkern*

Out on a limb: *Stuntman Scott McCoy jumps from the second story of a building.*

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Industry standards forbid a white actor to blacken his face to play a black character; it's simply offensive even to suggest it. But the same sense of insult doesn't seem to apply when an able-bodied actor portrays a disabled individual.

SAG, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), and Equity have long had a tri-union Performers with Disabilities Committee, which meets monthly and is chaired nationally by L.A. actor Casey Stengel. The committee promotes the inclusion of performers with disabilities in disabled-specific and non-disabled-specific casting, keeps performers with disabilities (numbered at 500 SAG members nationally) apprised of casting and information, oversees a database of actors available to castings directors and producers, and serves as a "watchdog," reacting when its constituency is excluded from auditions.

> "Characters with disabilities don't have to be 'written in.' Putting a deaf actor, for example, in the role of the grocery clerk, the lawyer, the next door neighbor—that's where the deaf people are in my life."
>
> *—Rod Lathim, founder and artistic director of the Access Theatre*

Stengel, who uses a wheelchair and whose credits include *The Waterdance*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and *Married... With Children*, is presently overseeing the creation of a demo video profiling performers with disabilities, acknowledging the need to more efficiently market his constituency. In addition, performance space at the Improv has been secured to showcase talent. He does admit that performers who have disabilities need to present a more organized and vocal force, as evidenced by his sometimes uphill battle to secure participation in projects the PWD committee implements.

The Writer's Guild mirrors the mission to raise the industry's awareness and sensitivity toward guild writers who happen to have a disability and who may not be getting their fair shake. Mort Thaw, chair of the Writer's Guild Task Force on Disabilities, noted, "We still get reports of exclusion from possible pitch and/or production meetings held in buildings without elevators, making it virtually impossible for a writer in a wheelchair to participate."

Also aware that the subject needs a more unified presence, the Writer's Guild will sponsor an industry-wide event in October. Details will be made available as plans unfold.

For Stengel, though, the real crusade is to get disabled performers a shot at roles in which a disability is not pivotal to the script.

"We don't need special roles," he emphasized. "I am frustrated by the lack of mainstreaming. I rarely see a character who happens to be in a wheelchair just doing everyday things like I do: drive a car, go to a restaurant or the bank."

The concept of non-traditional or non-specific casting is hardly new. The premise is simple: Implement true open casting when the character's race, gender, or physical description is not germane to character or storyline. Assume, for instance, that *Death of a Salesman* could be portrayed by an African- or Asian-American family. Any member of the Loman family could, in theory, also be disabled. It doesn't change the plot.

Mitch Longley's wheelchair was rightly irrelevant to this high-profile ad campaign.

Disability Blind

In fairness, there have been some producers who are "disability-blind." Perhaps the greatest strides have been in the commercial world. For several years, Elaine Braly, SAG's affirmative action administrator, has held seminars on non-traditional casting for advertising agencies. The American viewing public is exposed to more and more actors with disabilities on national spots for Sprint, AT&T, K-Mart, McDonalds, Citibank, etc. Though some are designed to actually target a disabled customer (Braille calling cards from Sprint, for example), the majority of these ads simply feature a disabled individual as "just another cast member."

Media journalism has some isolated examples of progress. Los Angeles-based Bree Walker anchored the news with the camera making no attempt to hide her congenital hand deformity. Though she offered to wear prosthetic gloves on the air, the station felt this unnecessary and her inclusion certainly set an important precedent.

Emmy and Peabody Award news correspondent John Hockenberry has covered Somalia, the Gulf War, and the Middle East. Presently a correspondent on *Dateline*, he has chronicled life in a wheelchair in his book *Moving Violations: War Zones, Wheelchairs, and Declarations of Independence*.

Though Hockenberry admits that society's outlook has improved—comparing his high-profile career to his grandfather being denied entrance into the Masons because he had lost an arm—at one point he sums up the Hollywood approach: "The disability experience for the media is part Frank Capra, part Vincent Price, with nothing but the occasional Vietnam movie in between. The assumption that disability is a separate category independent of other news, or that disability-rights stories by themselves reveal anything of the people they claim to be about, are two equal and opposite fallacies. They would have us believe that the experiences of the disabled are not universal, and that people with disabilities have little or no life outside their struggles and strangeness."

Though these examples are encouraging, they are not commonplace. Ironically, on radio, where physically disabilities are invisible as well as irrelevant, an AFTRA member presently has a claim against one local station who denied him a position—concerned, believe it or not, that "he wouldn't be able to carry a stack of CDs or tapes because of his hand deformity."

It appears true that episodic television continues to have few examples of non-stereotypes. Once again, there are isolated success stories: Jeri Jewell broke ground on *Facts of Life*. Chris Burke's work on *Life Goes On* embraced the possibilities of individuals with Down's syndrome. Marlee Matlin established a presence on *Reasonable Doubts*, where her character's legal abilities far overshadowed that she was also deaf; add to this her recurring role on *Picket Fences* as the offbeat bank thief. And this past season's short-lived sitcom *Lore* employed an actress in a wheelchair as the wisecracking sidekick. Daytime's *Guiding Light* features a deaf performer.

Not Hyped or Stereotyped

Mitch Longley is a good-looking actor. Ralph Lauren certainly thought so when the company asked him to model its clothes for a national ad that appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *Elle*. Then the curious rumors began: Was it true this guy was actually wheelchair-bound?

Well, it is true—and its irrelevancy to the project speaks volumes. Longley's ad campaign led to a 40-episode run on *Another World*.

"I played a lawyer," said Longley. "The writing staff wanted it to be realistic, not hyped or stereotyped, so my disability was not even an issue for the first several episodes, which focused more on the character's legal career and love interest. Before the first show aired, the writers invited me to contribute by discussing the character's day-to-day life in a wheelchair. I think the message

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here is that my life is the same as everybody else's, with the exception of a certain mobility, and that's about it."

Longley has also been featured in the syndicated series *Vanishing Son*, where he is rather humorously referred to in the script as "that white boy"—the epitome of making the wheelchair a non-issue.

But Longley's path hasn't been a constant series of easy wins. "I've actually only had two film auditions in my entire career. To me, this is just a magnified version of the issues in society. Producers worry about the bottom line: Are people going to want to see a movie with a disabled performer?"

To put these issues onstage and process them, Longley is at work with director Robert Cicchini on a 15-character one-man show called *Counting Darkness*, planned to be up by the fall.

Actress Maria Serrao, whose credits include *21 Jump Street* and *Knots Landing*, and who was the first disabled woman to compete in the Miss California/USA pageant, has found her niche in the TV fitness world with a 30-market cable program designed for both disabled and able-bodied fitness enthusiasts.

"Believe it or not, I've been turned down for roles because I've been told I don't look 'disabled enough,' " Serrao noted. "People don't expect you to be both fit and in a wheelchair. A wheelchair is simply how I get around. I'm on publicity tours to promote my video product. My wheelchair is the first thing people see—and it is the first thing they forget."

Access Provider

"Non-traditional casting is just a way of life here," explained Rod Lathim, founder and artistic director of the 17-year-old Access Theatre, based in Santa Barbara. Indeed, Lathim said that the company, which is comprised of both disabled and non-disabled performers, reflects his own life.

"As a kid, I always had friends with disabilities, and it was simply no big deal," Lathim recalled. "But as we started to grow up, I realized that they weren't having the same opportunities being offered to me."

What evolved from this awareness was a theatre company where all roles and jobs are accessible to all people—where *abilities*, not disabilities, are stressed. The company spotlights primarily original work that addresses contemporary issues, because, as Lathim said, "The arts are a very powerful way to promote social change. If you see people communicating face-to-face, much can be accomplished in encouraging people's similarities rather than their differences."

Actress/fitness guru Maria Serrao has actually been told she doesn't look "disabled enough" for some roles.

Since its inception, Access Theatre has received numerous awards and has toured to may prestigious stages, including the Kennedy Center, Ford Center, Coconut Grove Playhouse, and NYC's Tribeca Performing Arts Center.

"Quite honestly, we don't want to be unique, and we wish we had more peers," said Lathim. "I just want to work and create art and not have to be the flag bearer. I wish that more companies would get over the 'attitude barrier.' Characters with disabilities don't have to be 'written in.' Putting a deaf actor, for example, in the role of the grocery clerk, the lawyer, the next door neighbor—that's where the deaf people are in my life."

For publicist Patti Shanaberg, the mainstreaming challenge is to educate the public at large. That's why she created Global Image Communications, a public relations company dedicated to more media coverage and promotion of accomplished, non-stereotypical individuals with physical limitations.

"There are many groups that encourage individuals with perceived disabilities to believe in their abilities," said Shanaberg, who herself uses a wheelchair. "But there aren't many examples for the general public to focus on connecting as equals to the disabled community. We need to show more accessible, positive images."

She is not referring to the occasional "superhero" or "help the handicapped" storylines from the evening news, which Shanaberg feels often only sharpen a sense of separateness. Instead, she wonders, why not focus on the professional accomplishments of individuals such as comedians, actors, athletes, scientists, and corporate leaders whose particular disability has little if anything to do with the reason for the media coverage?

A believer in the "show me, don't tell me" philosophy, Shanaberg realizes that "there is a great difference between tolerance, acceptance, admiration, and compliance, and the more preferable ability to genuinely relate to true peers."

One of the best resources for research and casting information—and one of the best hopes for change—is the New York-based Non-Traditional Casting Project. Dedicated to educating the industry about hiring artists on the basis of individual merit, without prejudice regarding ethnic or racial origin, gender, or physical abilities, the project has been a force since 1986.

The NTCP continuously hosts and participates in national symposia and conferences, has been instrumental in getting producers to inform casting directors that they wish to see performers with disabilities, and keeps a database (soon to be online) of more than 3,500 actors available for all forms of non-traditional casting.

But while executive director Sharon Jensen has seen isolated examples of progress, she candidly said that there remains a "paucity of roles played by disabled performers. The number is almost negligible. The film and television industry has barely touched the surface in terms of populations that historically have been shut out.

"We are also concerned with more balanced portrayals. Disabled characters are too frequently depicted as heroes or victims, with sentimentality and idealism brought to extremes rather than developing three-dimensional characterizations. This lack of inclusion may not always be intentional. There continues to be such misinformation in our society, and the entertainment industry is reflecting a problem that is essentially pandemic."

Cuts Both Ways

There are 43 million Americans with disabilities. It is the only minority that any of us can join at any time. In terms of disabled-specific projects, new works need to be created. Joked one actress at a seminar a few years back, "We've been doing *Children of a Lesser God* so long it should be called 'Adults of a Lesser God.' "

As for non-traditional casting, we are no longer a culture where disabled family members are sheltered away at home. We have worked long and hard to integrate our public spaces, and criticisms aside, there has been real progress in entertainment and the performing arts. Only a generation ago, disabled performers were often denied access at prestigious acting schools and bluntly told that performing careers were off limits.

And there are many production entities passionately pursuing non-traditional casting that space has not allowed us to profile. The Taper's "Other Voices" project, Deaf West Theatre, New York's Theatre by the Blind, and Connecticut's National Theatre of the Deaf serve as prestigious examples.

Producers who "get it" are rightfully recognized with awards. But real progress will have been achieved when such awards aren't necessary, because such fair, anti-stereotypical casting won't be out of the ordinary.

No one disputes that Hollywood is a business, and that producers ultimately must have the creative freedom to hire whomever they want—even able-bodied people in disabled roles. As Maria Serrao said, disabled people have to acknowledge that non-traditional casting should ideally cut both ways: Just as disabled performers should have the opportunity to audition for roles that are non-disability-specific, able-bodied performers should not lose the chance to audition for disability-specific roles.

"Some disabled performers have been angered by this statement," Serrao admitted. "But I feel it has work both ways."

Getting it to work both ways—with a fair chance for all qualified performers—is all that this under-used, misunderstood talent pool asks. BSW