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After #OscarsSoWhite, Disability Waits for Its Moment

Actors with disabilities are rarely tapped to play disabled characters. Ali Stroker, Marlee Matlin and others share their views on representation in the entertainment industry.

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If history is a guide, one of the surest ways to get an Oscar is by being a nondisabled person playing a disabled character.

About 25 actors have won Oscars for such performances, including Jamie Foxx for “Ray” (2005) and Angelina Jolie for “Girl, Interrupted” (1999), according to the Ruderman Family Foundation, which advocates for inclusion of people with disabilities in employment.

In 2018, 12 percent of characters with a disability in top television shows were portrayed authentically, and actors as well as musicians have felt empowered to shape the public conception of disabilities.

Social movements like #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo have started important conversations about an industry with entrenched disparities. With that in mind, we asked entertainers how they have navigated their careers, and where their hopes lie for the future of their industry.

‘If You Can’t Accommodate Me, Then You Don’t Get Me’

By Ali Stroker

Ali Stroker is an actress who won the 2019 Tony Award for her role as Ado Annie in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical “Oklahoma!”

I have had a very positive experience in the entertainment industry. It doesn’t mean navigating the industry was easy, but nothing good ever comes easily. I wanted to join the party. So I started showing up.

I knew I wanted to be an actress on Broadway at the age of 7, after I played the title character in “Annie” in a backyard production at the Jersey Shore.

I majored in drama at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and during that time I loved going to Broadway and Off Broadway shows, as well as concerts and school productions. I ate up every moment around the people I dreamed would one day be my peers. I had been cast in musicals throughout high school and college, but after I graduated, I moved to Los Angeles. I auditioned for the TV show “Glee” and didn’t get cast, but was later cast on the reality show “The Glee Project,” where contestants competed for a role on “Glee.” I was a runner-up and became a guest star on the fifth season.

I hustled really hard as I tried to make a career for myself, but I didn’t get many auditions at first. I took classes at Upright Citizens Brigade and wrote a one-woman show. I wasn’t a writer, but I picked some songs and wrote some stories about my life and put them together. I called it “Finding Glee,” and I performed the show a few times in New York and New Jersey.

I never wanted to use my disability to get work. Meaning, I didn’t want to get hired because I was disabled and writers needed someone with a disability in their story. I wanted to get work based on my ability as an actor, singer and dancer. I wanted to work with creative, intelligent and innovative people.

I am almost always the only disabled person in the room. I have a spinal cord injury and am paralyzed from the chest down. I use a wheelchair for my mobility. Accessibility is always a hurdle, but I am used to dealing with it because it’s a part of my life. I have what I like to call “ninja patience.” I came up with this phrase after noticing many of my friends become impatient about little things. It got me thinking about the special skills I have because of my disability; patience is one of them.

I know that accessibility isn’t perfect. Often I’m dealing with sets and backstages in theaters built in the early 1900s. The doorways are narrow, and most of the bathrooms are tiny. Usually there are stairs. I used to have to be carried onstage, and I would make a comedic bit out of it.

After winning the Tony last year for my role as Ado Annie in “Oklahoma!” I promised myself that I would no longer accept jobs where I would have to be carried onstage. That was a boundary I needed to set for myself. My feeling is, “if you can’t accommodate me, then you don’t get me.” I believe I’m worth it. And the truth is: Every producer and director I’ve worked with has made the space we’re in accessible, because they care. This industry continues to be filled with beautiful relationships and opportunities.

I have to educate people about my disability sometimes, but I view it as an opportunity to connect. I don’t expect people to know what they don’t know. Some people might think that’s overly accommodating, and at times I’ve wondered too. Those are the types of questions I consider each day. I have committed to a life of unpacking my disability. It’s not going anywhere.

Winning my Tony was such a gift. I worked so hard for it, and I look at it on my windowsill and am reminded each day that I am enough.

Getting Hollywood to See the Talent of Deaf and Disabled Actors

By Marlee Matlin, as told to Jack Jason

Marlee Matlin is an Oscar-winning film and Emmy-nominated television actress who is Deaf. She is an author and advocate on diversity and inclusion. Jack Jason is Matlin’s longtime producing partner and sign language interpreter. He is the son of Deaf parents.

In 1987, when I was 21, I achieved Hollywood’s highest honor: the Academy Award for best actress. It was for my role as Sarah Norman in the 1986 romantic drama “Children of a Lesser God.” I was the first Deaf person ever to receive the honor, and it gave hope to the Deaf community that more of us would find open doors for acting roles.

But the response wasn’t quite what I expected. The critic Rex Reed, for instance, thought that my victory was the result of a pity vote, and that I wasn’t even acting because I was a Deaf person in a Deaf role.

I saw it differently. I started acting when I was 8 at the Center on Deafness in the Chicago area, a performing arts center where both Deaf and hearing children put on plays and musicals in an all-inclusive atmosphere. When I was 12, the actor Henry Winkler (“Fonzie” on “Happy Days”) visited the center, and I asked him if I could be an actor like him. He said: “You can be whatever you want to be. Just follow your heart and all your dreams will come true.” Eight and a half years later, I had an Oscar in my hand. How could I ever stop dreaming?

More important, how could I get the nonbelievers in Hollywood to understand the talent of Deaf and disabled actors? After the Oscar, I got busy and came up with ideas for parts for myself. I secured roles on “The West Wing,” “The L Word,” “Seinfeld” and “Quantico,” to name a few. All the while I had mentors like Mr. Winkler as well as Whoopi Goldberg, who knew full well all the “isms” that came with being “different” in Hollywood.

It has now been 33 years, and I am the only actor who is Deaf or identifies as disabled who has received or even been nominated for an Academy Award. Thankfully there are actors of all abilities making inroads in film, TV and theater, like Lauren Ridloff, Russell Harvard and Ali Stroker, who in 2019 won the Tony for best featured actress in a musical for her performance in “Oklahoma!”

[Image description: Ms. Matlin in a fashionable 1980s dress smiling with her Oscar in her hand.] Ms. Matlin in 1987, when she won her Academy Award for best actress for her role as Sarah Norman in the 1986 romantic drama “Children of a Lesser God.” ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy

But even as an Oscar winner, being a Deaf actress isn’t easy. Recently, I was asked to play a judge on a TV show, but five minutes later the offer was taken back when the producer questioned how I could fill a “speaking” role without a courtroom sign-language interpreter. When I told my colleagues, some responded with, “That’s Hollywood.” But if this was happening to me, how often is it happening to newer Deaf or disabled actors? It was a reality check that we must not be complacent.

On this 30th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act, we must reaffirm the fight for inclusion. And I hope that sentiment is true for everyone, not just the millions of us who are Deaf or disabled.

[Image description: Leroy F. Moore Jr. speaking in a blue button-down shirt and scarf while an interpreter signs behind him.] Mr. Moore during the event “Leroy Moore: Black/Brown International Disability Art and Hip-Hop” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan in 2017. Filip Wolak/Whitney Museum, N.Y.

Krip-Hop Nation: A Soundtrack to Change

By Leroy F. Moore Jr.

Leroy F. Moore Jr. is the founding member of Krip-Hop Nation, Poor Magazine and the National Black Disability Coalition.

Twenty years ago, for the 10th anniversary of the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act, the organization I founded and led, Disability Advocates of Minorities Organization, or DAMO, held a rally outside San Francisco’s City Hall that brought together people of color, poor people and immigrants with disabilities.

We printed fliers showing a photograph of President George H.W. Bush signing the A.D.A. into law. We added the words: “Who is missing from this picture?” If you look a little closer, you will notice that all of the people surrounding the president are white.

I described the rally and flier in a recent meeting, with a committee planning events for the 30th anniversary of A.D.A., and a white woman said, “Well that was back then; thank God things have changed!”

Have they? From my perspective in the music industry, they haven’t.

When I was growing up, my father had a huge record collection of blues and soul, and in the 1970s I listened to all of it. I noticed there were a lot of disabled Black male singers and wanted to learn more about them.

In my research I found that the industry has always had trouble supporting and promoting musicians with disabilities, especially Black musicians. Even Stevie Wonder, one of the world’s most famous disabled musicians, was at first marginalized by the industry, as detailed by the scholar Terry Rowden in the book “The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the

Cultures of Blindness" (2009).

Later, I got into hard rock, but then in 1979 the Sugarhill Gang came out with "Rapper's Delight." It brought a new type of music, so I put down my AC/DC and picked up that genre.

In 2007, some of us started Krip-Hop Nation, a network of musicians that has chapters around the world to bring visibility to our talent.

There's Richard Shaw, known as Bushwick Bill, a member of Geto Boys who was born with dwarfism (he died in 2019), and MF Grimm, who lost his sight and hearing and was paralyzed from the waist down when he was shot in 1994. And Brother Ali, who was born with albinism and is blind.

Even with these breakthroughs, disability is still marginalized in the industry. Take the energetic hip-hop style hyphy. As the scholar Moya Bailey wrote in her essay "The Illest: Disability as a Metaphor in Hip-Hop Music," the movement dismisses disabled artists by using words like "retarded" and "dumb" that demean people with disabilities.

Then you have mumble rap, which attributes a style of pronunciation to gold teeth and drugs that can slur speech. I was doing mumble rap as a youth in the 1980s with my cerebral palsy speech without being drunk or high or wearing gold teeth! The real mumble rap started with people with disabilities. These movements in hip-hop have appropriated disability expression without including disabled hip-hop artists.

The 2010 song "Industry Epidemic" by George Doman, known as TraGiC, responds to the lack of inclusion with the question lyric, "Hey public, what if your favorite artists had a disability like me?" He wonders, if some of the most famous hip-hop artists were disabled, would the industry pay them the same props? He ends the song by asking, "When will it be my time?"

Krip-Hop Nation has blown up, with chapters in Germany, Africa, Spain and elsewhere. In 2012, we put out the "Broken Bodies, Police Brutality Profiling" mix tape. And recently, we put on an online benefit concert. Besides trying to educate the hip-hop arena, we raise funds for families. Recently we sent wheelchairs to a single father in Uganda for his two disabled daughters.

With the 30th anniversary of the A.D.A., I would like to see a major conference to educate the hip-hop industry about disability and promote Krip-Hop artists and politics. I would like to see a recognition of Krip-Hop as an official subculture of hip-hop from the music arena. I would like to see Krip-Hop in hip-hop studies. I would like to see more books on how disability has existed throughout hip-hop history, as well as the inclusion of Krip-Hop in the hip-hop museum in New York.

We need change. And I hope Krip-Hop Nation will be the soundtrack to that change.

[Image description: Micah Fowler seated in a wheelchair smiling with two other actors standing next to him in a restaurant."] Micah Fowler as JJ DiMeo in an episode of "Speechless." Rick Rowell/Walt Disney Television, via Getty Images

'The More People *See* Us, the More People See *Us*'

By Micah Fowler

Micah Fowler is an actor and disability rights advocate who most recently played the role of JJ DiMeo on ABC's TV series "Speechless."

Growing up, I had never seen people like me on television or in the movies. A person with disabilities as an actor? I had never seen it, and that affected me. Seeing representation of yourself onscreen is extremely powerful. It says, "I am seen! I am included! I matter! I have a voice!"

I decided I wanted to be an actor after playing Barry in the 2013 movie "Labor Day," a drama about a boy and his reclusive mother and their encounter with an escaped convict. I was 13 during the filming, and I loved every second of being on set. The cameras, the lights used to create night or day, the talent, my stunt coordinator (for a simulated slap to the face), the trailers, and even hair and makeup. The best part, though, was when I discovered that through my acting, I could make people laugh, cry and even gain new perspective. I could make an impact.

I decided I wanted to pursue acting as a career, but I hesitated. I wasn't sure if it was possible, if disability would be welcomed in the entertainment industry.

Not many writers incorporate disabled characters into their work and, when they do, too often those parts go to nondisabled actors. Also, not many casting directors consider auditioning a person with disabilities for a part in which the character isn't disabled.

I often wondered if those with disabilities were not given the opportunity to audition because of fears of the unknown (having little to no previous interaction with a disabled person) or preconceived notions of abilities. So you can imagine my excitement when I was invited to audition for the TV show "Speechless."

From the beginning, Scott Silveri, the writer and executive producer of the sitcom, as well as the creative team, were totally committed to inclusivity, deciding early on to cast an actor with a disability to portray the character of JJ, who had cerebral palsy.

In 2016, after several auditions, to my complete shock, I found myself in Hollywood playing the role. I was so grateful to have even been considered, but then to have been cast, and to represent the disability community, was just a dream come true.

I'd like to believe the work I did contributed to opening doors for others, just as, I found out later, Daryl Mitchell ("NCIS: New Orleans") and RJ Mitte ("Breaking Bad") creaked the doors a little wider for me. One by one we are making progress, but we must expand inclusivity.

We can do this by creating opportunities for people with disabilities in every aspect of the entertainment industry: casting directors, producers, writers, directors. I want to see more people with disabilities sitting behind and speaking up at the table. It has to start at the top, with studios including us and telling our stories. We've seen progress — approaching disabled actors first to fulfill roles is becoming more the norm rather than the exception.

My dream is that people with disabilities will be cast without a second thought, not because they are disabled, but because they are great actors.

Too often, there are misrepresentations of people with disabilities in the entertainment industry: characters viewed as tokens of inspiration or pity and characters viewing their disability as a reason to end their life. The more people *see* us, the more people see *us*. Not as tokens of inspiration or pity, not as suicidal, but as people who can contribute to society and live happy, successful and fulfilled lives.

Rather than people with disabilities always being depicted as the person who can do no wrong — the goody-two-shoes — I want to see some disabled villains and jerks! I can be a jerk sometimes; just ask my sister.

I would love to see less emphasis on perfection in the entertainment industry and more echoes of real life, including more diversity. Let's celebrate our differences so people of all types can see themselves represented, and so we can all say, "I am seen! I am included! I matter! I have a voice!"

[Image description: The actress Lauren Potter smiling in a cheerleader outfit.] Lauren Potter as the spunky cheerleader Becky Jackson in “Glee.” She said her six years on the show “were like a dream come true.” Adam Rose/Fox, via Everett Collection

Looking Up From Down

By Lauren Potter

Lauren Elizabeth Potter is an American actress and advocate best known for her role as Becky Jackson on the FOX television series “Glee.”

You know, I think I was born to be an actress. I guess I’ve always been a little dramatic — at least that is what my mom says. She says I danced before I could walk, that I’d pretend to be every character from every Disney movie I ever saw, including the singing parts, which by the looks on the faces of my very loving and patient family members probably wasn’t a very good idea.

While I was in high school, I took a drama class and met a group that helped actors with Down syndrome find auditions. At 16, I got my first lead part as the young Andra Little in the 2007 movie “Mr. Blue Sky,” about a love triangle between three friends. That’s when I knew I loved everything about being an actor. I didn’t even mind the long hours of filming in the middle of August.

My next audition came two years later, for the television show “Glee,” a musical about a high school choir group. My six years playing the spunky cheerleader Becky were like a dream come true.

My character was more than a cheerleader; I was a prom queen, Lady Gaga, Max the dog to Sue Sylvester's Grinch (Jane Lynch), secret service agent to the vice president of the United States, and even Jesus in a manger. I fell in love, got my heart broken (many times) and even shot a gun (in the show). The writer Ryan Murphy and the casting director Robert Ulrich let me have so much fun. They started with a role for a girl with Down syndrome, and then they let me show the world that I could do anything. They let me be an actress!

Since "Glee," I've acted in a few TV shows, "Chicago Med," "Veep," "Switched at Birth" and Comedy Central's "Drunk History," as well as in a few public-service announcements and the short film "Guest Room," about a young woman with Down syndrome who becomes pregnant.

But I want the casting directors, directors, producers and writers to look outside the disability box and see me for who I am as an actress, not just an actress with Down syndrome. I want to take on more dramatic roles, show who I am and what I am capable of. Yes, I have Down syndrome, but I am never looking down, I am only looking up. I've traveled the world as a public speaker, have served as an Ambassador for the Special Olympics World Games and was appointed to President Obama's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities, and I feel really proud when people say that my work has opened doors for actors with different abilities.

People with disabilities are really not that different, we want the same things everyone else wants: to live free, to be loved and to do the work we love to do. That work for me is acting. Not just acting as a person with a disability, but a person with lots of ability, and if I do say so myself, a lot of talent!