

The Disability Image

Behind the Scenes of Film and Theater

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Disability on the Silver Screen

Higher Learning, a feature released in 1995, is a determined exercise in filmic diversity. The plot focuses on college freshmen grappling with their new multicultural environment and hinges on black-white relations and confrontations. A subplot delves into sexual orientation and male-female issues. Various ethnic groups populate the action, and the climactic scene takes place at a festival celebrating cultural diversity.

Yet no person with a disability appears in *Higher Learning*, not in the crowd at the festival, not as an extra in the classroom scenes. It might seem remarkable that a movie exploring the volatile mix of populations on a college campus could ignore people with disabilities in the age of the Americans With Disabilities Act, but the omission is—sadly—characteristic of the motion picture industry today.

Hollywood remains slow to portray people with disabilities outside the stereotypical roles it has traditionally assigned them. From the time Thomas Edison produced a short in 1898 featuring a man with an amputated leg and another faking his blindness, disabilities have been favored dramatic fodder. But gripping drama, American cinema has made clear, is found only in the circumstances of disability

B Y E R I C M I N T O N

Hollywood loves disabilities, but can people with disabilities love Hollywood?

itself. No major film has featured a disabled person in a leading role whose disability is incidental to the character. There has been no equivalent

to the tangential connection that Will Smith's color has to his character in *Men In Black*.

Martin F. Norden, in his book *The Cinema of Isolation: A*

History of Physical Disability in the Movies (Rutgers University Press, 1994), labels seven traditional stereotypes: the "Obsessed Avenger," who draws evil from his or her disability; the "Sweet Innocent," who emphasizes the tragic element of disability borne by one so pure; the "Noble Warrior," a war veteran bravely pushing on with life despite disability; the "Civilian Superstar," a non-military version of the Noble Warrior; the "Sainly Sage," who, because of disability, is now wiser or has the gift of prophecy; the "High-Tech Guru," who, apparently unable to have an active physical life, becomes a technological whiz; and the "Techno-Marvel," whose robotic prosthetics confer superhuman capabilities.

Has Hollywood progressed beyond such depictions in the past 10 years? The answer is a conditional yes.

The Academy Votes

To gauge cinema's direction, we can look at films nominated for the Academy Awards in the major categories: best picture, best director, the four acting categories and the two screenplay awards.

Today, disabilities dominate the Oscars as in no era before. During the past 10 years, 22 performers playing people with disabilities have been nominat-



Coming Home's Jon Voight: a "Noble Warrior" with sex appeal.

ed for best actor/actress or supporting actor/actress. Beginning in 1988, the best actor winner has played a person with a disability—as defined by the ADA—eight times: Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*, Daniel Day-Lewis in *My Left Foot*, Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*, Al Pacino in *Scent of a Woman*, Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia* and again in *Forrest Gump*, Geoffrey Rush in *Shine* and Jack Nicholson in *As Good As It Gets*. In 1997, four of the five best actor nominations were for portrayals involving some kind of impairment: Rush with mental illness, Billy Bob Thornton with mental retardation in *Sling Blade*, Woody Harrelson with paraplegia in *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, and Ralph Fiennes with severe burns in *The English Patient*.

Setting aside the absence of truly disabled actors in these roles, all four nominees arguably delivered accurate portrayals that treated disability respectfully. It may be more telling to look at who didn't win, particularly in 1997. You had to pity poor Tom Cruise, whose *Jerry Maguire* nabbed the fifth nomination. If the director had made the character blind or given him a speech impediment, Cruise probably would have won the statue. But then, the movie would have become *about* that disability or used the impairment as a metaphor for the sports agent's moral bankruptcy. Cruise achieved that admirably without crutches, pardon the pun.

In Hollywood, a disability still defines the role. An argument could be made that Larry Flynt's story doesn't focus on his paraplegia, but it does use his disability to make a cry for justice. Only as extras in crowd scenes (three times in *Jerry Maguire*, for example) and in minor roles are disabled char-

acters beginning to break free of impairment-defined portrayals. *The Apostle*, starring nominee Robert Duvall, has his fugitive preacher, Sonny, take up temporary residence at the bayou home of a single amputee. The man lives alone and fishes for his daily meal, using crutches to move from home to river and back, and is obviously self-sufficient. The script pays no attention to his amputation, nor does Duvall—who wrote and directed the film—allow Sonny to provide a miracle cure. Considering the movie's subject matter, this non-focus on a disability is a welcome departure from the Hollywood norm.

The Critics React

That norm is a tough nut to crack for both producers and audiences. Moviegoers, conditioned by 100 years of stereotypes, expect certain behaviors

and story lines from their disabled heroes and anti-heroes. They don't necessarily appreciate portrayals of the real thing. As a window into audience perspective, consider how critics reacted to the following three portrayals of characters using wheelchairs:

• *Born On the Fourth of July*

This 1989 film earned Cruise an Oscar nomination for portraying Ron Kovic, a paralyzed Vietnam vet. It won director Oliver Stone an Oscar and also received nominations for best picture and screenplay adapted by Stone and Kovic from the latter's autobiography. Stone shot much of the movie from Kovic's point of view so the audience could experience the barriers encountered by a person using a wheelchair. His depictions of living with paraplegia are brutally honest (terrifying VA hospital scenes, a fistfight between Kovic and another paraplegic vet in the Mexican desert, a row with

his religious mother that ends with Cruise's Kovic pulling out his catheter and screaming that his penis doesn't work anymore). *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby, who called paralysis "just this side of death," thought the film powerful because "no other Vietnam movie has so mercilessly evoked the casual, careless horrors of the paraplegic's therapy, or what it means to depend on catheters for urination, or the knowledge that sexual identity is henceforth virtually theoretical." (Canby considered the sexual prowess of Jon Voight's paraplegic character in the 1978 film *Coming Home* pornographic.) Yet *Born On the Fourth of July* clearly shows that Cruise's character still has sexual vitality.

• *My Left Foot*. Daniel Day-Lewis beat out Cruise for the Oscar with his portrayal of Christy Brown, an Irish poet and painter with cerebral palsy. The Irish production—which also won an Oscar for best supporting actress and nominations for best picture, director and adapted screenplay—presents Brown's autobiography as he wrote it, without sentimentality, tragedy or heroics. The film literally forces Brown's perspective on the audience with the opening scene, a foot taking a record album out of its sleeve and placing it on a phonograph and applying the needle. The music starts, and we see the adult Brown's face. The story is then told in flashback as a nurse assigned to accompany Brown at a benefit gala reads his autobiography. Only then do we see young Christy Brown. This device, as *New Yorker* reviewer Pauline Kael pointed out, doesn't allow the audience to apply Tiny Tim associations to young Christy. Thenceforward, the film relies on superb acting by both Christys for unaffected depictions of Dublin's poverty,



The Waterdance was written and directed by a quad, but it still featured AB actor Eric Stoltz as the lead.

Silver Screen

Brown's penchant for drinking and his constant yearning for women. Though commending the film and Day-Lewis for their straightforward humor, the critics themselves couldn't get past a sense of tragedy. Wrote Kael: "Though he can't feed himself or take care of his excretory functions or wash or dress himself, his life is one romantic infatuation after another," as if the physical disability automatically keeps him from feeling sexual passion.

• *Forrest Gump*: Gary Sinise received a supporting actor nomination for his performance as Lt. Dan Taylor, who spent most of the movie with both legs amputated—by technical wizardry—above the knees. Most reviewers applauded only the special effects,

though Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* wrote that Sinise's "dark, bitter performance offers an element of surprise." That surprise is a fully fleshed character who, unlike most of Hollywood's previous disability portrayals that end with cure or death, moves on to an independent and ultimately happy life. He leads an active sex life, joins Gump on a shrimp boat as a seaman, and is seen hoisting himself to the top of the mast and jumping off the deck for a swim in the Gulf of Mexico.

One notable key to *Fourth of July* and *Left Foot*—as well as *Larry Flynt*, in which Harrelson's performance also rings true—is their input from the real-life subjects or, in the case of Brown, a close friend who produced the movie. These contributions bestow authenticity, providing an all-important—and regrettably rare—insider perspective on disability. Holly-

wood seldom gives people with disabilities the more even-handed treatment it gives African Americans, probably because few people with disabilities hold positions of power behind the scenes and on the screen.

Where Are We?

Missing in all the above films is an actor with a disability playing the lead. Granted, it's easier for special effects to take legs away from Sinise for the last half of a film than to provide an amputee with legs for the first half. Cruise and Harrelson also played characters who become disabled during the course of the film. But while Day-Lewis legitimately earned his Oscar, are there no actors with CP capable of playing Christy Brown? A blind friend once told me that Al Pacino "got it right" in *Scent of a Woman*; could a blind actor have gotten it right? And Kael

herself makes a point about Dustin Hoffman's studied—and, to her, boring—portrayal of autism in *Rain Man*: If the filmmakers were so concerned with accuracy of detail, why didn't they cast a person with autism for the part?

Star power, of course. Except for Christopher Reeve and deaf actress Marlee Matlin, Hollywood currently has no headliners with disabilities. Even if it gets them, they will probably be relegated to roles focusing on their disabilities until American cinema can summon the energy to change its own track record. And still in the wings are dozens of accomplished actors with disabilities, hoping and waiting for Hollywood to see their potential.

Peopling films with disabilities is a start. Providing accurately drawn roles is another step. Now we need a Man In Black who just happens to use a wheelchair. ■

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