Seeing Disability: Individuals with Disabilities Seek Representation on Screen

By: Morgan Barker

Although you may not recognize her, Diana Jordan is a film and television actress. Recently Jordan has appeared in several documentaries and independent films, but she hasn’t landed a significant role since 2004. Like many who flock to Hollywood, Diana says she’s wanted to be an actor ever since she can remember.

“I can’t remember ever wanting to do anything else,” and when she landed a role on 7th Heaven in 2004, she says “it was a dream come true.” 7th Heaven was a popular television show following the life of the Camden family, a religious family that faced real-life issues in each episode. Jordan appeared in two episodes as Helen, an African American woman with a disability.

Jordan has cerebral palsy, a disorder, which can affect the brain and movement. For Jordan it particularly affects her speech, at times her voice sounds labored because she has to work very hard to articulate. In spite of this disability, Jordan holds an MFA in acting from California and is actively pursuing her dream.

Jordan is part of a recent movement that is sweeping Hollywood to gain more access, inclusion, and accuracy in the casting and representation of individuals with disabilities. ‘Inclusion in the Arts and Media of People with Disabilities’ (I AM PWD) is a tri-union campaign seeking to address these issues. The campaign began in 2008 to seek equal opportunities for performers with disabilities. According to Adam Moore, the Interim National Director for Affirmative Action and Diversity at
the Screen Actor’s Guild, “this wasn’t just an issue of actors trying to get jobs, it was an issue of equality.”

Members of the I AM PWD campaign insist that the lack of visibility of actors with disabilities on the screen is an issue of unequal opportunities for employment. According to the US Census Bureau’s 2010 American Community Survey, twelve percent of the US citizens have a disability. In contrast, according to the Screen Actor’s Guild, only one percent of scripted roles on television are characters with disabilities. Moore points out that “the film industry is the most visible industry on the planet. If you’re not represented [on film], you may as well not exist.”

Many actors with disabilities are struggling to get cast in roles that do not highlight their disabilities. In 2011, Jordan went on only five auditions and was cast in three projects. But this new push for equal opportunities for actors with disabilities is causing the industry to reconsider this representation issue.

Gloria Casteñada director of California’s Media Access Office, which acts as an agent for actors with disabilities, states “many actors with disabilities are on a fixed income,” potentially limiting their access to transportation to auditions which could turn into roles.

Advocates are also concerned that actors with disabilities are not being sought for roles with disabilities. A perfect example of this appears on Glee with the character, Artie. The actor, Kevin McHale, is not physically disabled like his character. This is problematic because “that took away [a role] from a performer
with a disability,” Casteñada asserts. According to Casteñada, it’s a frequent problem “that really bothers us that are working to raise awareness.”

Advocates for actors with disabilities insist they are not looking for special attention. Instead, they seek fair opportunities. Jordan sums this up, “A lot of actors with disabilities are not called in for a lot of scripted roles. Sometimes they don’t even get the chance to work. I don’t ever want to take away from an actor’s artistry, but that’s an opportunity an actor with a disability didn’t get to have.” Jordan also feels that an actor with a disability “would bring who he or she is to that role.”

In addition, the I AM PWD campaign seeks the opportunity for actors with disabilities to play non-disabled roles. Moore asserts that this is about “expanding the world view.” This implies showing disabilities on the screen because it is a part of the real world. With such a huge population of this particular minority in the US, Moore asserts that “disability is diversity” and it needs to be represented on the screen.

In moving towards casting actors with disabilities for non-disabled roles, Moore feels they need to “work from the bottom up.” He wants to begin with the people who write casting breakdowns and move up to casting directors. The idea is to make the definition of a role as broad as possible, so that actors with disabilities might be thought of for the role.

In a rare example, Robert David Hall, a double leg amputee plays the role of Dr. Al Robbins on CSI. Advocates tout Hall as an example of an actor with a
disability who was also right for the role. Hall got the opportunity to play the role because he was a good actor.

Recently, Jordan has been successful in casting opportunities. She’s auditioned for roles where the casting director was not looking for someone with a disability and landed the part. Jordan was just cast in a short film called Miracle Maker. She will be playing a woman who was in a car accident and suffered brain damage, now she’s looking for a miracle. The role was originally written for an 80-year-old woman and the director was not looking for an actor with a disability. But when Jordan auditioned “They liked what they saw,” she says. They reworked the role so it worked for Jordan, a forty-something, African American woman with a disability.

While Jordan and other actors have experienced some success, advocates are still concerned about equal access to employment opportunities. Jordan realizes, “I’m not gonna get cast to play a high schooler and I’m not gonna get cast to play the bikini babe.” But she wants people to know her disability “limits how people see me, more than my abilities as an actor.” Actors with disabilities are not looking for special treatment they are simply looking for representation and inclusion.