

NOW
HEAR
THIS

IT'S TIME TO
GIVE DEAF
AND HARD-
OF-HEARING
CREATIVES
COMPLETE
ACCESS TO
HOLLYWOOD.
THE DEAF
COMMUNITY
HAS MUCH TO
SAY ABOUT
HOW THAT
CAN HAPPEN.

WRITTEN BY
KATIE GRANT

“If *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) broke open the barriers to Deaf representation, *CODA* (2021) was the tidal wave that followed,”

says Academy Award-winning actor and Deaf advocate Marlee Matlin. “We may not have achieved parity, but I see much more advancement now on behalf of the Deaf community in Hollywood than what happened after *Children of a Lesser God*.”

This advancement is most obvious in front of the camera. But what about behind the scenes? Are deaf creatives really included in the whole process of making film and TV from start to finish?

“Hollywood is not ready for deaf people,” says Toj Mora. The deaf film/TV editor, producer, and post producer—whose credits include *Deaf U* and *Beyond Inclusion*—expressed this dismay matter-of-factly through his American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter. But when you consider that *CODA* won Best Picture at the 2022 Academy Awards and *Sound of Metal* was nominated for six Oscars in 2021 (winning two), why isn’t it?

“One of my favorite producers, Jessica Rhoades, once said to me, ‘This system is made by and for hearing people, and then they expect deaf people to function in it the same way hearing people do.’ That hit me hard,” says Shoshannah Stern, the first-ever deaf showrunner and co-creator of the series *This Close*.

“Rather than rely simply on a deaf consultant, why not try to engage them and include them in the development, writing, directing and producing of the project?” asks Matlin, who was part of the cast of *This Close*. Matlin is confident that there are plenty of deaf writers, producers, directors and actors, but adds, “We should be laying the groundwork for many of those individuals who may not be in any of the unions or guilds to find the proper and

accessible entryway.”

“We’re not quite there 100% of having a deaf crew at the Hollywood level,” says Mora, “because at the top level, the decision-makers are still very resistant and scared to take that risk. But they are the ones who are taking the risk by not hiring deaf people. They’re putting authenticity at stake because of that.”

ADD AN ‘A’ TO DEI

Marginalized. Otherized. Stereotyped. Excluded. Categories deaf people are lumped into all too often. But rarely are deaf people considered when it comes to addressing diversity in a production.

Actor, producer and writer Natasha Ofili cofounded IIN4, a coalition named for the statistic that 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. have some type of disability.

“Our mission at IIN4 is to have Hollywood add ‘A’ to DEI,” says Ofili. “It’s access that’s missing from diversity, equity and inclusion. How can we be inclusive, equitable and diverse without access?”

Producers have the power to create accessibility and boost inclusivity for deaf performers, crew, and other creatives in their productions. But doing so raises concerns. To start, can you afford a substantial line item for ASL interpreters at the top of your budget?

Alek Lev, a producer known for *What?* and *California Connect: Communicate Your Way*, puts it this way: “Let’s make it simple. It’s your legal responsibility to provide access. Don’t make anyone fight for it. Everyone, from the people who are gluten-free, to the people who are wheelchair users, everyone has something they want and need.

“Every film is a small business, literally and spiritually. So you have the rights and responsibilities of a small-business owner. The way the ADA was originally constructed, if you have more than 15 people on the payroll, the ADA applies to you.”

What if Hollywood stopped putting people with



Writer-director-producer Alek Lev (above right) and deaf actor-writer-director-producer John Maucere (right) are among the industry's strongest advocates for inclusivity of deaf crew and talent—and authenticity of deaf stories.

disabilities in a different category and just viewed needs as needs? Lev adds, "I think the concept is that everyone has needs on a set and to look at them all, for lack of a better word, neutrally."

Lev believes that communication and accessibility don't need to be seen as problems to be solved but considerations to be addressed equally on par with other production needs.

BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES

A shift in perception about deaf people starts with breaking down stereotypes and opening to facts. DJ Kurs, artistic director of Deaf West Theatre in Los Angeles, says, "Honoring Deaf culture



requires thorough research and an appreciation for intersectionality. Each person has a unique background and experience both within and outside their deafness."

"There's so many different ways to be deaf," Mora says. "If you're able to interact, meet and make friends with deaf people,

it would really change your worldview."

Ofilo was one of the first Black deaf actors animated on a TV show (*Undone*) and the actor behind the first ever Black deaf character in a video game, Hailey Cooper in *Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, proving that deaf actors can not only speak, but speak well enough to be

voice talent—a reality that many hearing people may not appreciate.

Seeing deaf people as the individuals they are naturally lends itself to creating authentic stories. John Maucere, deaf actor, writer, and producer of *What?*, emphasizes that a working script is just the start. “You often have a hearing writer writing a deaf character. We need to make sure that it is authentic. That’s part of what an ASL consultant can do for your screenwriter and your producers,” says Maucere. “Make sure you have your ASL consultant from the very beginning. Once you have that, it’s going to lead to everything else.”

But, Stern notes, “While there’s been a boom incorporating deaf characters in stories, the expectation is for them to behave in a way that hearing people presume they will. The worst, and unfortunately most constant thing I’ve heard in developing stories is, ‘Well, we can make it authentic, or we can make it good,’ as if there’s no way we could possibly have both. These things can and should always coexist.”

One way to achieve that is to always hire deaf actors to play deaf characters. When Patrick Wachsberger set out to adapt the French film *La Famille Bélier* into *CODA*, there was no question about hiring deaf actors. He and the film’s director, Sian Heder, insisted on casting deaf actors in the deaf roles for the most authentic production they could create—something that the initial investors were not behind.

Producer Sacha Ben Harroche certainly intended to make an authentic story with *Sound of Metal*. But when it came to accommodating the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) people, Ben Harroche admits the team made plenty of mistakes as they were blazing the most recent trail for Deaf stories in Hollywood.

“(Director) Darius Marder spent two years in the Deaf community,” recalls Ben Harroche, “so he knew a lot. He knew sign language, but he didn’t know how to really structure the shoot for deaf actors and for the deaf crew.

“We hired ASL interpreters who we

started out calling ‘translators.’ That was the first big mistake of semantics. People educated us with a lot of affection and empathy for our ignorance and guided us into the right vocabulary and the right way of talking about the needs of the Deaf community. And the fact that, you know, deafness for them is not a handicap. Truly.”

“One thing I always tell writers,” adds Shoshanna Stern, “is keep the Deaf experience open and tailor it to the actor you hire. Not all deaf people use hearing aids, and not all of them sign.”

When Toj Mora became part of the experience, it was on the reality show *Deaf U*. He did the first pass for accuracy of the sign language and what he calls “ASL continuity.” Then it went to the hearing editor. “I explained that sign language is very different from what you’re accustomed to,” Mora recalls. “It’s a visual language. It changes everything about how you edit. Deaf editors really

need to be brought in at the same time as the hearing editors.”

Basic creative solutions include asking deaf actors if they need a second take. “If a line was dropped in English, they would do it again,” says Maucere. “If it’s dropped in ASL, you need to speak up for yourself and say, ‘I didn’t do that line correctly. We need to do it again.’ The question is what do you care more about? The story and the quality of work or simply the budget?”

WE ALL NEED TO LEARN

Deaf people need access to communication tools to do their best work on a set. Unfortunately, those tools—such as ASL interpreters, captions and transcriptions in the writers room, and designing the environment to meet the needs of anyone regardless of disability—are often an afterthought or seen as a cost-prohibitive hurdle. “Is it ideal to have an interpreter sitting right

Producer Sacha Ben Harroche on the set of *Sound of Metal*.





COURTESY OF BRITNEE HURSHIN

Using borrowed gear and nearly zero budget, Toj Mora and his friends at Angry Deaf People Productions came together during the pandemic and created a surreal story, *Hamburger Airplane*.

next to the script supervisor if they don't sign? What would be ideal is a deaf script supervisor," says Mora.

When asked if there should be a required course for producers in DEI that includes how to make a set accessible for deaf and hard-of-hearing cast and crew, Ben Harroche is emphatic: "One hundred percent. There are programs to learn how to make a budget. There are programs to learn how to properly behave on set. This should also be a part of the training producers receive."

That class, ideally taught by a deaf person, would include a simple checklist: When speaking with a deaf person using an interpreter, look at the deaf person, not the interpreter. Make sure you are making eye contact and speaking loudly and clearly enough for the interpreter to hear and understand you. Also understand that the interpreter is there for the hearing people to be able to communicate, not only the deaf person.

This information needs to be taught in film schools. Maucere's daughter, who is hard of hearing, is studying TV and film at the University of Arizona. "She's a senior now and there was not one mention about accommodations in four years. We need a course about all kinds of accommodations for folks with all sorts of needs and all sorts of disabilities."

The syllabus for this proposed course would also include having your script translated into ASL before you shoot, and using fewer close-ups—that is, keep the actors' hands in the frame and show the signing. "Shoot open gate, no matter what resolution you want to use in frame," Mora contends. "Then you can always pan it up or down. Shoot wide."

"Explain to everyone on the crew, all the cast, everyone in the production, how to work with the deaf talent and the interpreters," Maucere recommends. "This happened to me on the set of *Diggstown*. I was the only deaf person there out of a huge production, but I

never felt alone."

The interpreters should also be there from the very start in meetings, the writers room, auditions, location scouts, table reads, ADR sessions and sound mixes. Consider them part of the writing team and always have at least two interpreters so they can give each other breaks.

It's also necessary to ask actors about their interpreter. "Sometimes the interpreters are not a good fit for the assignment, whether for personality reasons or skills or whatever," says Mora. "The deaf person should feel safe enough to say, 'Hey, I would like to switch out this interpreter.'"

"My number one piece of advice: You must budget the sign language interpreters first," says Alek Lev. "They are the most expensive thing per minute on set, but it's the cost of doing business and it will pay back in the artistry."

During shooting, Stern suggests keeping the room as open as possible



Left: A still from the Academy Award-winning film *CODA*. Right: Producer Patrick Wachsberger on the set of *CODA*.

so that the actor has the sight lines they need. “Never have a character’s back be turned or have them read lips in the dark,” she says. Flashing lights can be used for visual cues and safety. Remember, deaf people cannot hear the standard knock on their trailer door.

When productions are creatively solving problems and access is successfully provided for deaf actors, it ensures high quality for performances and the project overall. When Stern was on *Grey’s Anatomy*, showrunner Krista Vernoff brought her into the writers room to help with developing the character. Vernoff had writers send drafts to Stern for notes, had line producers reach out to ask what Stern needed on set as far as accessibility, and had editors send cuts to her.

“I got to have conversations with them about when they should be focusing on the character’s signing without depending on the voiceover of the interpreters,” says Stern. “It really starts at the top. Krista let everyone

know they needed to listen to me—and they did.”

Another crucial person to listen to is the ASL interpreter. Eva Tingley is an ASL interpreter, actor, producer, writer, and a CODA—child of deaf adults. “What a lot of people don’t understand is that the interpreter job is exhausting because our brains are working on both sides simultaneously,” Tingley says. “So you get tired really, really fast.”

REQUIRING INCLUSION

As of 2024, the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences will have inclusion requirements to meet if a film is to be nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award. Those who have been largely marginalized hope this will help put the entire scope of human experience on the screen and provide for their needs behind the scenes.

Deaf filmmaker Jade Bryan shares her support for this idea. “When I shadowed director Jonathan Demme on the set of *Beloved*, there was no

computer, there was no access, no way to communicate or share ideas,” Bryan says. “I was crying, because I was watching everybody talking and I felt left out. Everybody was laughing and connecting. It was beautiful, but I wasn’t part of the experience.”

Furthermore, being a great filmmaker is a possibility that doesn’t only apply to hearing artists. “It’s all about the eye, right?” Maucere points out. “It’s what a deaf artist sees. It’s different. Deaf and hearing eyes are different. That’s the gift from God: that it’s how we see and what we see.”

Ofilii used that gift to make a film in 2020. “When I produced my short film, *The Multi*, we filmed it during the pandemic and we had Zoom interpreters,” she recalls. “We had large television screens, tablets and smaller screens in other rooms. It was accessible for everyone, both deaf and hearing crew members. It was new, utilizing technology in that way, but it was obvious that it could be done.”



Deaf filmmaker Jade Bryan (right) with DP Aitor Mendilibar on the set of *The Two Essences*, Bryan's story about a bicultural, hearing/deaf family.

Stern says, "I've heard from so many people that they've watched *This Close* for inspiration or education when making shows with deaf characters. That both touches and frustrates me, because most of these shows don't have deaf people in creative or producing positions."

When asked if he had been worried about how *CODA* would be received in America, Wachsberger says, "I didn't go into that much thinking then. I was like, 'Oh my God, there's a great story there.'"

Ultimately, great stories are how we change our worldview. And accommodating DHH cast and crew can help create more truly powerful stories, whether or not they are Deaf stories. So, Hollywood: Are you listening? ■

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—TOJ MORA