

DISABLING HOLLYWOOD

PERFORMING ARTS STUDIO WEST (PASW) BREAKS THE STEREOTYPES OF ACTORS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

By Mona El Yafi, Los Angeles

There's no denying that people with disabilities are a significant part of our society - as much as 20 percent of the U.S. population by some estimates - yet if art imitates life why do performers with disabilities remain virtually invisible in media portrayals on screen and stage? There seems to be certain selectiveness in the types of disability the public is willing to embrace and see on screen. Consider Tom Cruise for instance, one of the highest paid actors in Hollywood who has for years been battling dyslexia - a learning disability that alters the way the brain processes written material. Is that an acceptable disability because we don't have to visually face it and be reminded of it? And does one's disability define the one's identity? Actor Robert David Hall, who is seen every week by 27 million viewers on «CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,» has been a double amputee since he was 30. Hall, who is the National Chairman of the Performers with Disabilities Caucus for SAG, AFTRA and EQUITY, is adamant that disability doesn't define anyone. «Everyone has obstacles in life. What I am is an actor. I'm an actor who has found success at what I do and I'm very happy. My disability is part of who I am, but not who I am,» Hall said. «Performers with disabilities have the same talents as able-bodied actors. There's a real disconnect with society but they need to know that people with disabilities lead real lives. We're mothers,

we're fathers, we're lovers; but there's a stigma showing any disabilities.» In 1973, when California passed landmark legislation known as the Lanterman Act (updated in 1977), it granted services to people with disabilities to let them live as independent a life as possible. Since that time, people with disabilities slowly and persistently have paved a new way for themselves, allowing society to grow accustomed to seeing them bagging groceries or serving coffee. And over the decades since the Lanterman Act was passed, people with developmental disabilities are not only coming out of hiding, they're also showing up on the big and small screens as casting directors discover the obvious: People with disabilities who have acting talent can actually play people with disabilities. Take actress Marlee Matlin for example, a deaf actress who won an Academy Award in 1987 for her role in «Children of a Lesser God.» The 1989 television series «Life Goes On» was a breakthrough in that for the first time an actor with Down Syndrome - Chris Burke - played Corky Thatcher, the child with Down syndrome. Yet while the viewing public has come to accept story lines about people with disabilities, typically, non-disabled actors get the roles, as in «My Left Foot,» «As Good As It Gets,» and «Rain Man.» It is a known fact that Hollywood has always had mixed attitudes toward actors with disabilities. Even with two

new sitcom pilots that prominently feature characters with disabilities being produced for the upcoming TV season, Fox is using a non-disabled actor to portray a paraplegic in the fall series *Glee*. Yet slowly but surely, Hollywood's attitude toward the disability community is changing for the better just as it changed toward the Black community in the 80s and the gay community in the 90s and it is because of the presence, impact and efforts of a very unique school, Performing Arts Studio West (PASW) located in the heart of Inglewood California that we are seeing a change. But the change is not only about setting the standard for a more inclusive future in Hollywood - one looking beyond race, gender, ethnicities and disabilities, but as well - and perhaps more importantly - about changing the lives of these students with disabilities to teach them some amazing life skills through performing art. They learn body awareness. They learn to stay in the moment. They learn to listen so they respond appropriately - and all of these skills translate into any occupation, any social situation. They learn life skills to become employable people. What PASW is teaching us on philosophical and spiritual level is that there's no such thing as «acting normal» - because «normal» is what life gives you and what you decide to do with it. Founded by industry veteran John Pizitz in 1998, PASW is a privately owned state funded acting, music, dance and production studio staffed by entertainment industry professionals that offers the combination of professional hands-on training, career management and on location support for performers with disabilities. These disabilities include mental retardation, autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, seizure disorders and a variety of other syndromes. These students are incredibly talented, down to earth, human beings who strive, perhaps more than normal actors, to succeed and in the end have so much to teach us. Their passion is genuine and they always come prepared for the part - with no attitude and no ulterior motive but to do what they love doing: act!

To quote Backstage National Edition: «Brenda Hampton, executive producer of ABC Family's *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, is not being sentimental when she says PASW students' actors Luke Zimmerman and Michelle Marks are a lot easier to work with than many actors without disabilities.» Zimmerman has Down syndrome, Marks has mild cerebral palsy, and both have recurring roles on the show. They're also trained performers, and Hampton appreciates that. «They're darn funny—they're both comedians,» she says. «We're now writing material for them.» Equally important, she adds, they come to work enthusiastic and prepared, thanks in part to their Performing Arts Studio West coaches, who accompany them to the set and rehearse with them each night.» Indeed Luke Zimmerman - the talented young actor with Down syndrome and full time student at Performing Arts Studio West - continues to capture the heart of America with his recurring role on the ABC family show «*The Secret Life of the American Teenager*.» Zimmerman is just one of many success stories of actors with developmental disabilities - his success is even more impressive considering how hard it is to make a living in Hollywood anyway, never mind for an actor with disabilities. On the staff side, another incredibly admirable and talented person is PASW teachers, Diana Jordan. Born with cerebral palsy, she had a love of acting since childhood. A Chicago native, Jordan moved to Long Beach, CA where she not only was accepted into California State Long Beach Theater Department's Graduate Program, but she also made history when she became the first actor with a disability to obtain a Masters of Fine Arts degree. While she sees her success with a career in arts education



John Pizitz, founder of PASW



Luke Zimmerman and Michelle Marks on the set of *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*

as part of a team effort, Jordan has certainly helped hundreds of students who have taken classes at Performing Arts Studio West over the years. But, her own dreams continue as she's performed on the WB's 7th Heaven, in several independent films, and on stage in many productions including The Glass Menagerie at the Steppenwolf Theatre. Equally important is how PASW is breaking grounds by having successfully spearheaded the movement towards a more integrated Hollywood where actors with developmental disabilities are given the opportunity to play not just disabled roles but regular roles as well on stage as well as on TV. Performing Arts Studio West provides professional, hands-on individualized training, career management and on-location support for performers with developmental disabilities working in film, television and commercials. PASW students have been featured in many films and television shows, including ER, Saving Grace, CSI: NY, Cold Case, 7th Heaven, The Secret Life of the American Teenager and Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story. Patis also created the Guest Speaker Program which was developed as a platform for professional working actors to share their experience and expertise. A-List celebrities such as Jon Voight, Edward James Olmos, Charlize Theron and Sean Penn to name a few, are all part of the prestigious roster of guests who have visited the PASW studio. Diva Magazine caught up with PASW founder John Patis to learn more about this amazing studio that is truly making a difference.

What motivated/inspired you to create a performing arts studio catering to people with developmental disabilities? Do you have any prior experience with people with developmental disabilities?

From the time I was young, I always knew I wanted to be a performer. Everything that turned me on as a kid revolved around the arts. Throughout high school and college I was involved in theater, music and dance. At age 19, I moved from California to New York to study acting professionally. I attended The Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theater in Manhattan and had the privilege of training with famed American acting teacher Sanford Meisner. After leaving the Playhouse I worked in theater on the East Coast, the Midwest and in California. I also founded two rock bands, one in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1977 and one in Los Angeles where I eventually settled in 1980. When I moved to L.A. to pursue the "rock and roll dream" I took a job as a classroom instructor at large facility that worked with both adults and children with developmental disabilities. This agency provided day programming, non-public school and residential services. The majority of the individuals served had moderate to profound levels of disabilities. I already had one year of experience working with autistic children in the Bay Area and thoroughly enjoyed working with the disabled community. My mother was a special education teacher and I had a cousin with a disability, so I suppose it was "in my blood." While working on a music and acting career I remained with this agency for 17 years eventually becoming the Associate Director. In my early years there as an instructor, I would often incorporate music and movement as a therapeutic tool with the adults in my classroom. The facility had numerous pianos and I would bring in my guitar to play and sing with my clients. As a director, I would always encourage classroom instructors to share their individual talents and passion with their clients. Sometimes instructors would embrace this idea, but often to my frustration it would fall on deaf ears. The facility closed in 1997 and I found myself unemployed for the first time in my adult life. After a few days of panic, I put idea to

paper and within one month I had a proposal for what evolved into Performing Arts Studio West on the desk of the Director of Client Services of Westside Regional Center, Mary Rollins. Westside Regional Center is a major source of state funding and coordination of programs for individual with disabilities in the Los Angeles area. She found the proposal to be something totally unique and I received a small start up grant of \$5,000.

Did you face any obstacles in your enterprise? How hard or easy was it to create Performing Arts Studio West?

The first obstacle was finding a space in which to work. It took eight months and an initial business relationship with two partners before our doors opened in June of 1998 with 5 participants. The partners were eventually broken away from in the year 2000. They simply did not share my vision of the future of the studio and the tremendous potential of what it could mean for performers with disabilities. That same year, I brought on long time friend and business manager, Randy Klinerberg as the studio's Managing Director.

How did you put together your staff and get your students? How many staff members and students do you currently have onboard?

Initially, I was the sole staff person, responsible for not only the administrative duties but also for teaching each area of the curriculum. The first areas of study were on camera acting, music appreciation & voice, and movement & dance. Our state mandated staff to participant ratio is 1 to 6, so when we reached client #7 I had to hire on another staff person. I initially put an ad in the LA Times looking for an all around performer/teacher who could handle more than one area of study. Almost everyone hired from that point on was referred by staff working for us. I was not interested necessarily in teachers who had previous experience working with people with disabilities. There can be a "burn out" factor after a long stint in that setting and sometimes there is a lower expectation of individuals' disabilities. I believe this comes from working in programs that lack creativity and inspiration. I warned PASW staff to be working actors, singers, dancers, musicians and technical professionals. I wanted teachers who were inspired and passionate about their art, and wanted to share that passion with others. One of our earliest hires was current acting instructor/industry liaison, Diana Jordan. Ms. Jordan is a working actor who received her Masters Degree in Theater. She also has cerebral palsy. The studio currently has a full-time staff of eleven. We are licensed to serve up to 90 clients. Our clients are referred to us by one of six Regional Centers whose purpose is to coordinate program services, housing and health care for individuals with disabilities. As PASW has grown over the years, clients have often become aware of us by seeing our live shows, or seeing our clients in television and film projects. Their response is almost always, "Hey...I want to do that!"

What are the qualifications or requirements needed to be a teacher at PASW? Are there any training involved or certifications to be obtained?

Part of this is answered above. Other staff requirements include having to be fingerprinted and cleared through the Department of Justice. After hire there is ongoing training with regard to working specifically with the population. Staff are certified in First Aid/CPR; Non-Violent Crisis Intervention and attend in-services about the different types of diagnoses within the community and the most effective way of serving those individuals.



PASW STAFF

John Parris: Founder/Director
 Randy Klinenberg: Managing Director
 Carmel Wynne: Director of Talent Management
 Jennifer Ballinger: Event Manager/Consumer Support Specialist/Talent Manager
 Chandel Brown: Technical Director
 Joe Seaber: Music Director
 Diana Elizabeth Jordan: Acting Instructor/Industry Liaison/Guest Speaker Coordinator
 Steve Niel: Acting Instructor/On Set Coach/Project Development
 Lindsay Martin: Dance Instructor/Choreographer
 Damien Hodge: Consumer Support Specialist
 Laurie Grant: Music Teacher/Director of Music Marketing

Is the school open to any students with developmental disabilities or are there certain types of disabilities you can't accommodate?

Qualifying diagnoses include, intellectual disabilities, autism, cerebral palsy and seizure disorder. Within that broad category we have clients with Aspergers Syndrome, Down syndrome, Hydrocephalus, Microcephaly, Prader Willi Syndrome, Legally Blind, Spinabifida and Spastic Quadriplegia.

How did the management branch of PASW come about?

It was always part of the program design to find work in the entertainment industry for our clients. It was very important to me, however, to make sure that our performers were ready and had the skills to be competitive. In addition to our daily classes, we had already produced two original musical comedies and many smaller shows. We had a strong stable of qualified performers. In 2001 we found out about a Cingular Wireless commercial that was going to be using a Special Olympics themed ad. We had several clients who were members of Special Olympics, so we found out who was casting the project and submitted four actors. One of our actors booked the role, was paid well and became eligible to join SAG (Screen Actors Guild). Through that process, we learned how to legitimately search for available roles on Breakdown Services and how submit our talent. We decided to dedicate staff person Carmel Wynne full time to searching for work for our actors. This included not only film and television work, but also theater, student films, non-union shorts, animated projects, commercials, music videos, voice overs and print work. To this date our actors have appeared in over 850 roles in these types of projects.

A few of your students have had roles on TV and in major shows - what was involved in the casting process? Where those roles

specifically written for people with developmental disabilities?

The roles that our clients have booked in high profile TV shows were all characters written to have developmental or intellectual disabilities. The catch is that some casting directors are still willing to read actors without disabilities to fill these roles. This is something we still struggle against, but by no means as much as seven or eight years ago. The casting process for our talent is that that of any other actor. A role comes in over the Breakdowns that Carmel thinks is right for one of our performers. We submit by either hard copy or electronically to the casting director. Here is where things get more specific to our population. We receive a copy of the script and determine if the piece is in good taste and the character is an accurate portrayal of a person with a disability. One of our acting coaches will work with the actor here at the studio to prepare him or her for the audition. A staff person will accompany the actor to the audition for the casting director. If the casting director like what he or she sees, the actor will come back within a day or two to read for producers. If our actor books the role we provide on set support throughout the shoot. We coach on set to make sure the director is getting what he wants from the actor(s). Because filming for a television show moves at such a fast pace, our role as a coach is essential as we make sure that the actor understands exactly what is expected in each scene.

What would you say are the challenges and obstacles you continuously encounter in trying to change Hollywood's mentality towards actors with developmental disabilities?

It really comes down to educating casting directors, and producers about the talent and ability of an actor. If we get someone into a casting office to read for a role, that talent is evident. I don't believe that an actor should automatically be cast in a role just because he has a disability. He also has to have the talent to deliver. I believe



PASW students with TV host personality Howard Marchel



that until a director has the opportunity to work with one of our actors there is always some trepidation regarding how that actor will perform on set. I can say without exception, that we have never had anything but overwhelmingly positive responses to the ability of PASW actors. With regard to scripts that include characters with developmental disabilities, it is rare that something truly unique comes to us. One of the things we do appreciate is when a character with a disability is incorporated into a storyline but the story is not specifically "about disability." This is the case with the ABC Family show "The Secret Life of the American Teenager." Two PASW actors, Luke Zimmermann and Michelle Marks, are recurring characters on this hit show. Luke plays Tom Bowman, the older brother of one of the show's lead female characters. Michelle plays

his girlfriend Tanny. In many ways, their characters are very similar to the other teen characters. They are working through a relationship, and exploring their feelings about love, friends, family and yes...their sexuality.

Do you feel that stereotypes are slowly being eradicated and that the trend is moving toward a more inclusive Hollywood regardless of ethnicities, genders and disabilities?

Slowly would definitely be the right word here. A 2005 study researched by Olivia Raynor, Ph.D. and Katharine Hayward, Ph.D. of the National Arts and Disability Center at University of California, Los Angeles commissioned by The Screen Actors Guild found the following: Only one-third of SAG members with disabilities reported working in a theatrical or television production in 2003. Performers with disabilities worked an average of 4.1 days a year. Males worked an average of 5 days, compared to 2 days work for females. Performers with disabilities under 40 years of age had a higher average number of days worked than those over 40, 6.2 days versus 3.5 days. Despite measures such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Producers/Screen Actors Guild's Policy of Non-Discrimination and Diversity (2001), 36% of the performers with disabilities felt they had encountered some form of discrimination in the workplace, including not being cast or being refused an audition because of their disability. Overall, the respondents believed that their prospects for employment were very limited and identified the three greatest barriers as: (1) only being considered for disability-specific roles; (2) a lack of acting jobs in general; and (3) difficulty getting an audition.

What teaching techniques do you use at PASW? What are the types of performing arts the students learn?

All studio instructors teach or have taught their area of discipline to the non-disabled community. A wide variety of techniques are used in PASW classes. These techniques are as different as the personalities and background of our staff. Each individual instructor draws on their experience as a professional performer, a teacher and student of their craft. Years of sharing their gift with students has resulted in a finely tuned method that is crafted to the developmental level of our clients.

What would you say are the benefits of teaching performing arts - whether music, acting etc. - for people with developmental disabilities?

PASW's one of a kind program has demonstrated powerful results. Our clients gain confidence and improve their ability to communicate effectively. They become increasingly more aware of themselves and others, thus developing more appropriate social skills and the ability to put their best foot forward in a variety of vocational or social situations. Their health improves through dance and exercise. Involvement in PASW has resulted in our clients obtaining viable employment, moving into less restrictive living settings and even obtaining their own apartments.

You have developed a program called "The Guest Speaker Program - what does it consist of and what are its benefits to your students?"

Our Guest Speaker Program brings entertainment industry pros to PASW to share their experience with our clients. We have had speakers from many areas of the industry; actors, directors, cinematographers, musicians, composers, special effects makeup artists. Our speakers talk about how they became involved in the

industry and the challenges that all performers must face.

A Q & A session follows where our clients have the opportunity to ask specific questions of our guests. Actors will often participate in improvisational acting exercises with our performers. Directors will work with our actors on short scripted scenes. Musicians will perform prior to their Q & A sessions. Makeup artists will demonstrate special effects techniques using our clients as models. Our clients benefit by hearing from our speakers about the commitment and hard work it takes to succeed. They become enlightened to the fact that it is no "overnight success." Actor Edward James Olmos put it best when he told our performers that, "Success is when preparation meets opportunity."

What are some of the current and upcoming projects PASW is working on?

As stated previously, we currently have two actors on ABC Family's "The Secret Life of the American Teenager" so we are continuously working with those actors at the studio and on set. We also have produced a 30 second spec commercial for Doritos for their annual "Crash the Super Bowl Contest." Entries become eligible for airing during the Super Bowl and prizes up to one million dollars. This commercial spot uses our actors for non-disability specific roles, which attests to the fact that actors with disabilities are capable of playing more than just characters with disabilities. PASW has recently established its own YouTube channel, PASWTV. This month (November) we will be premiering our first web series, "Sir Glen of Glenwood." It is a broad comedy about a middle aged man living in an inner city neighborhood, who believes that he is a medieval knight. We are also in rehearsal for our annual holiday show. This year's offering is a dance concert featuring all original PASW music performed by our in-house band, Anomaly.

What are your future goals for PASW? Where do you see the studio going and growing into in the next 5 to 10 years?

PASW is one of the nation's foremost resources for entertainment industry professionals seeking professionally trained performers with developmental disabilities. The studio currently has the capacity to work with up to 90 clients on a daily basis. Within the next 5 to 10 years we would like to once again expand to a campus style facility that could serve up to 120 clients daily. This campus would include improved classrooms, performance and production facilities. PASW will continue to produce original live shows and content for new media and the internet. Our music department has recently expanded with the hiring of a director of music marketing and promotion. The goal is to place PASW produced songs in film, television and commercial projects. Music Marketing Director, Laurie Grant & Music Director, Joe Seabe once co-owned LPJ Entertainment here in Los Angeles and were responsible for numerous placements of their material. That same team is now focusing their talents on behalf of Performing Arts Studio West.

On a personal level, what rewards does PASW bring you?

Performing Arts Studio West brings together so many of my life long passions; acting, music, dance, writing, visual arts. I have the opportunity to work in all of these areas on a daily basis, with the added bonus of creating steady work for our professional staff, and of course changing the lives of individuals with disabilities. Every day is different. Every day is challenging. Every day is filled with

love and laughter.

What makes PASW special and unique?

Performing Arts Studio West is truly a one of a kind program. Worldwide, there is no other facility that, under one roof, provides training in acting, music, dance and technical skills, and also creates original theatrical productions, pop music, new media and internet content. The studio also has a talent management division that has an excellent track record with producers and casting directors in addition to a high booking rate. PASW is a state funded facility. And, as is true with many states, California is in a financial crisis. Our funding has been cut twice in the past year and the future of ongoing funding is uncertain. Cutbacks are being seen across the board in the field of social services. As PASW's visibility increases and more entertainment industry professionals come into contact with our performers, we hope to find an "angel" or "angels" to help us financially so we can realize the larger vision we have for the studio. In the meantime, we must rely on limited state funding and small private donations. We encourage people to visit our website www.pastudiowest.com to find out more about PASW and the impact we are making in the entertainment industry and the lives of performers with developmental disabilities.

