

LIFESTYLE

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Actor With Disability Fights For Equal Rights

By Shereen Oca
Staff Writer

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When professional actor Diana Elizabeth Jordan attended her first production of "Romeo and Juliet," she experienced a particular scene that she said to this day still resonates.

Jordan's mother took her, as a young girl, to see the play at an outdoor William Shakespeare festival in Oak Park, Ill., a suburb outside her hometown of Chicago. On that day, when Tybalt fell offstage after being killed by Romeo, and the crowd collectively gasped, Jordan said she immediately became hooked onto the expressive art form.

"You could hear the pin drop," she said. "When I saw this, I thought, I want to do this all my life. It was so magical."

And she has. Jordan moved to Long Beach in summer 1998 to pursue a master's degree with the California Repertory at California State University, Long Beach, and has lived here ever since. During her career thus far, she has performed in approximately 30 plays, appeared on such television shows as "7th Heaven" and played roles in such films as "Rule of Three" and "The Young and Evil," among other accomplishments.

In addition, the actor, who was born with cerebral palsy, also teaches full-time and is the senior staff member at Performing Arts Studio West (PASW), an organization that provides training and career management to actors, singers, dancers and musicians, among other creative professionals, with developmental disabilities.

"Diana is probably one of the best teachers we could ever find to work with this population because she is what our participants are striving to be," said PASW Founder and Director John Paizis. "She is a working actor with a disability and she firsthand knows the challenges."

Paizis added that Jordan is deeply involved in an effort launched by the Screen Actors Guild, Actors' Equity Association and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists called I AM PWD (Inclusion in the Arts Media of People With Disabilities). It's a campaign that strives for equal rights and employment opportunities for actors, broadcasters and sound recording artists with disabilities.

Jordan said her biggest challenge is encountering people in the industry who have misperceptions as to what she can and cannot do professionally. She brought up the example of auditioning for the part of a lawyer. She said while she thinks she can effectively play a lawyer, the casting director may not see her as the right person to assume the role.

"There are lawyers with disabilities, teachers with disabilities, business people with disabilities," Jordan said. "I think we need to see more of people with disabilities on television and film. So that's something I would like to see change. Like commercials, I drink OJ. Why can't I sell it?"

Paizis worked as an associate director of a large behavioral management agency before he founded PASW in 1998. At that agency, many of the programs for adults with disabilities were not administered with creativity or passion on the part of the instructors, Paizis said. He sought to change that by using his background in music and theater as the impetus for PASW.

"I thought it would be a fabulous thing to share my other passions — music, acting, voice and singing — with this population," he continued. "They are like sponges. Anything you give them, they absorb... Just as long as you're sharing your passion, that's what will stimulate."

Since Paizis started the PASW management company, he said he has cast his students in more than 800 roles. PASW also produces in-house theater, film and music productions as well as industry projects, video and music clips.

As a teacher, Jordan conducts sessions on commercial and audition technique, on-camera skills and scene study. She said the most fulfilling part of being able to share her craft with others is observing her students grow as actors and watching their success.

"To know that I was part of a team who helped them to get there, just to see how happy they are when they accomplish a goal ... that's really rewarding for me," she said. "...I love the creative process of acting. I love the collaboration of working with other people. By nature, it is a very collaborative art, and it's fun."

For more information about Performing Arts Studio West, visit www.pastudiowest.com.

For more about Diana Jordan, go to www.dianaelizabethjordan.com.



IN WORKSHOP. Diana Jordan, left, and actor Kenny Johnson, center, work with Performing Arts Studio West performer Raquel Chavez. —Photo by Randy Klinenberg

