

Inglewood theater group showcases actors with disabilities for Hollywood

Corey Moore | May 3rd, 2013, 6:20am

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Maya Sugarman/KPCC

Actors and singers with Performing Arts Studio West sing the chorus of Sly & The Family Stone's "Thank You For Letting Me Be Myself Again" during a rehearsal for their upcoming 15th anniversary performance and fundraiser on May 3, "Recovered: A Musical Journey."

Actors with developmental disabilities compete with non-disabled performers to get roles in Hollywood. But disabled actors often are typecast as handicapped characters. Performers enrolled in a theater group in Inglewood want to break out of that box.

About **90 actors** (<http://pastudiowest.com/talent.html>) at **Performing Arts Studio West** (<http://pastudiowest.com/>) are rehearsing more than a dozen pop and classic rock songs for their upcoming show called "**Recovered: A Musical Journey**" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWAwDuNxEbc>)." ."

The **creative arts adult program** (<http://pastudiowest.com/about/about-us/mission/>) they're part of trains people who have disabilities, including autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and bipolar disorder.

"A lot of people said, 'Oh, my God, you have a disability?'" said Nick Daley, 33, who has Prader-Willi Syndrome — a rare genetic disorder.

Daley said he's often had a tough time proving himself as an actor. Bullies caused him some grief growing up.

"And they used to make fun of me, and they used to piss me off and drive me crazy, and it got to a point where I almost lost it. But, thank God, I didn't," Daley said.

Daley emphasizes that his faith and perseverance have paid off. The actor just signed on to perform in a second season of the hit FX comedy series "Legit."

Problems like everyone else

As Nick Daley beats the drums in the outside yard of the Inglewood studio, **Lisa Koskovich** (http://pastudiowest.com/talent_lisa_koskovich.html) sings and dances. Koskovich, 24, has autism. She's been a part of the program for about three years and wants to land voiceover work in Hollywood.

Koskovich, who lives in Ladera Heights, was laid off last summer from an office assistant job.

But with a cheery smile, Koskovich is motivated — and offers a lesson for people with similar challenges.

“Even if you have a disability, a non disability ... or even your homosexuality ... you can’t hide that. ... Just let it out, because you don’t have to be ashamed of what you are,” said Koskovich.

Inside the studio building on Market Street in Inglewood are small sound stages, dance areas, edit bays and recording rooms. A dozen professional technicians, producers and designers help run the program.

Keeping the doors open

John Paizis (<http://pastudiowest.com/about/staff/john-paizis/>) opened Performing Arts Studio West 15 years ago. The state provides some money, but he said fundraising is necessary.

“The first several years were pretty tough,” said Paizis. “You really had to convince casting directors and producers to take a chance on these actors.”

Paizis said some of his trainees have landed TV roles in shows including “The Secret Life of the American Teenager” and “7th Heaven.”

But overall, he said, it’s tough persuading casting reps to give his actors a chance. They usually ask the same questions, such as, “What kind of special accommodations do they need? Or are they going to become violent on set? Or are they going to be able to concentrate for a long shooting day?”

Paizis works to eliminate misconceptions. He said his actors are well-behaved and prepared when they audition.

Fighting for more roles

Gail Williamson advocates for performers with disabilities in Hollywood. She’s worked as a committee member with entertainment union SAG-AFTRA.

“We’ve got to get them to open up their minds to casting more of what the real life scene looks like,” she said.

Williamson has an adult son with Down syndrome. She recalls how a producer was unwilling to cast her son in a popular food commercial.

“My son’s talent agent can send his picture in and you would consider him with Down syndrome for the McDonald’s commercial?” she remembers asking him. “And he said, ‘Well, no, because people would wonder why he’s there.’ And I said to the guy, ‘You know what? I take him to McDonald’s when he’s hungry. That’s why he’s there.’”

Since that time, her son, Blair Williamson, has landed roles on a variety of shows, including “ER,” “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,” “Nip/Tuck” and “The Guardian.”

Despite some progress over the years, advocates say only a tiny fraction of people with developmental disabilities get acting roles. Most of the appearances are recurring or guest spots.

But actors with disabilities are hoping that producers will hire them for any kind of role not just when the storyline calls for a handicapped person.

Meantime, the entertainers at Performing Arts Studio West aren’t sitting around, waiting for Hollywood to open doors.

They have a show to produce.

With contributions by Ed Joyce



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