

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION NOTES

I am 51 years of age, with a lifetime as a performer, 21 years as a professional. I am a graduate of NIDA, Australia's pre-eminent actor training school. I have lived the last nine years with an incurable degenerative neuro-muscular illness, but have managed to continue working until I needed to openly declare my disability to the industry in general (and casting agents in particular) two years ago. I felt I would not be able to do justice to certain roles because of what is known in the industry as my 'mobility issue'. From an average of 35-40 auditions and screen tests a year, I have now gone to zero.

In an industry with 95% unemployment, actors are considered a dime a dozen by those in a position of control. Why consider a disabled actor, who has attendant difficulties, when there are 20 others suitable for the same role who have no difficulties? Perhaps, if the actor has sufficient public recognition and a high profile, then they may be given special consideration (although I'm hard put to find an example). But, of course, how can a disabled actor ever get that profile if they are never given the casting opportunities in the first place? It is an industry which is entirely unaccountable for discrimination. And there are so many grounds on which it does discriminate. A casting agent can say they didn't consider a disabled actor for a role because that actor is too tall, too short, too dark, too fair, nose is too big, eyes too narrow, hair too short, hair not curly, fingers too short, teeth imperfect, too good looking, not good looking enough, looks too young - the list is endless. They need never mention the real reason for not casting that actor - disability.

Disabled performers should be able to find acting one of the work opportunities more suited to them. Performance and the arts are about people and ideas, and people with disabilities, although their bodies may be giving them difficulties, are people with ideas as much as any other representative group in our society. And let us not forget that they face discrimination in many industries - it may be illegal, but the disabled unemployed can recount many personal stories. I can't even manage to get CRS Australia (formerly known as the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service) to take me on in helping me search for employment because I am in the 'too hard basket'. This is an organisation supposedly committed to helping place people in the workforce who face difficulties associated with disability and rehabilitation.

I was trained with generous assistance from the public purse, in a time before HECS, when free education was in vogue. Am I now to look forward to the remainder of my life as a financial liability to the Australian taxpayer - unemployable not only in my field of training and expertise, but in the workforce in general? Are the skills I have developed and can still practise, along with my enthusiasm to continue to work in my industry, to be lost to the community?

So how can we address this issue of bringing the disabled performer into the mainstream of the performing arts industry? The two most obvious strategies are colourblind casting and affirmative action.

Colourblind casting for people with disabilities means that there is the chance that almost any character may be disabled. Why shouldn't a lawyer in a courtroom scene have cerebral palsy? A sex worker be blind? A sportsman deaf? A taxi driver an amputee? A mother spreading mayonnaise on her children's sandwiches have a speech difficulty? A mobile phone user have Down Syndrome? (See below - the YUK factor.)

In 20 years of acting, auditioning and reading scripts, I can't recall seeing a role written for a character with a disability. Those I've played myself that have had a disability (e.g. a limp, a stammer) have been the result of a director's idea, i.e. they were never written or cast as disabled characters. Furthermore, even if those roles were specifically created as disabled characters, the chances of casting a disabled actor in them remain slight.

It may be of interest to look at some of the roles I have played on TV, whilst fully able, which could have been played by a disabled performer. They include:

Home & Away - a priest seated in a confessional

- a priest delivering a sermon

All Saints - a patient in a hospital bed

Murder Call - a cleaner (I was required to act a disability, i.e. a withered leg)

Police Rescue - a police kidnap negotiator

CNNN - a scientist in a laboratory

Trial & Tribulations - a judge at the bench

Singles - a chauffeur in a car

TV commercials - seated in an armchair

- lying in bed
- seated at a dinner table
- an astronaut (face only!)
- a flowering pot plant (face only!)

I doubt that any actor with a disability was ever considered for any of these roles.

Is affirmative action the answer? Is it necessary to have quotas in place for scripting and casting requirements? And, if so, how would those quotas work? Do the quotas refer to colourblind casting? Or should they apply to roles written and cast specifically for people with a disability? And, if that is the case, does a TV program such as SBS-TV's *House Gang*, which featured the majority of actors with intellectual disability, fill that station's entire quota, or must disabled performers be spread over a swathe of programs?

Consider the effectiveness of campaigns to cast actors of ethnically diverse or indigenous appearance over the last decade. Consider the breadth of roles now written for and played by women, compared to 20-30 years ago. Is 50% female representation of the police and judiciary a realistic reflection of our contemporary society? You'd be inclined to think so if you watched television. Imagine a time in 30 years when a truly representative proportion of TV characters were disabled!

The YUK factor. It is suggested that children find disability difficult to deal with and that exposure to images of disabled people should be minimised to protect children. Apparently kids find these people YUKKY. In fact, kids tend to follow parental attitudes, which in turn were learnt in childhood, i.e. that disability is YUKKY. In my experience, however, disability produces curiosity in children - that is until they are called away by their parents with an admonition of 'Don't stare' or 'Don't bother that person'. It is the parent who isn't dealing with the situation, remains ignorant, and passes on this pattern of behaviour to the next generation. Unless children and adults are exposed to people with disability, then they and future generations will continue to treat them as invisible. And as science and medicine improve the lifespan of the disabled (and just about everyone else), then they will continue to increase both in numbers and as a proportion of our society. At what point, with what weight of numbers, will they begin to become visible? If ever?

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION NOTES: ACCESS TO VENUES

Cinema complexes lead the way in compliance, followed by sporting venues. Live theatre venues, however, run a very poor last. Even outdoor event venues do a better job. Nevertheless, great improvements have been made in recent years. Take, for instance, the two newest major theatres in Sydney - NIDA's Parade Theatre and Sydney Theatre at Miller's Point.

Both have given serious thought to disability access. Each has level street access and egress entry to the main foyer and a low box office counter adjacent to a higher counter. Each has elevator and/or ramp access to its auditorium's upper levels. And the news backstage for performers is good with all facilities either at stage level or supplemented by an elevator.

The Parade Theatre has level access to two rows of the stalls ('H' and 'J'), with the seat at the end of each row removable for wheelchair placement, the adjacent seat being made available for companion seating. The gallery levels are also readily accessible with a wheelchair area on Gallery One.

Similarly, Sydney Theatre has row 'H' at a level entry point from the foyer, with the opportunity to remove the seat at each end for wheelchairs. This theatre also has dedicated the entire back row of the stalls for wheelchairs and companion seating.

Not as much consideration appears to have been given to those with mobility difficulties who are not confined to wheelchairs. At both venues, the rows adjacent to the level entry point do not have wider leg room, so it is difficult for physically disabled patrons to move further into these long rows once other audience members have taken their seats. And at Sydney Theatre arrangement must be made with front of house staff to use the centre doors level with the accessible row 'H', as these doors are not used for general audience admission.

The extraordinarily low seating in the Sydney Theatre foyer areas make these seats almost impossible to use for those who need to use them the most - the aged or infirm.

Both venues are to be loudly applauded for their achievements in equal access to the mobility, hearing and visually impaired. However, the majority of mobility impaired patrons are not in wheelchairs and more planning is needed in this area for future ventures.

But there is not much to applaud when it comes to other existing major venues. Do the physically disabled have to continue to enter through back doors, loading bays and scenery docks at these venues (e.g. Sydney Opera House, STC at the Wharf, Belvoir Street Theatre), leaving it almost impossible to reach foyers with their toilets, bars and refreshment facilities, as well as the opportunity to mingle informally with other theatregoers and friends? And in terms of seating, the disabled are usually required to sit either at the very front, the very back, or right on the side - those parts of the auditorium usually considered the least desirable and the last to be sold.

It is also important that venues provide an undercover motor vehicle drop-off point a basic necessity for those with significant mobility difficulties, but rarely to be found.

No one wants to see small, innovative and struggling performance spaces closed down because of insufficient disability access, when they can't afford to undertake extensive and expensive alterations (e.g. Stables Theatre, Old Fitzroy). There is no lack of goodwill at venues of this sort, where staff go to enormous lengths to assist disabled patrons in every way possible. But why is it that major venues continue to operate with minimal compliance and no apparent philosophical commitment to genuine equal access for all?

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