Is This Progress? The Disabled Community Debates Film Roles

IndieWire | July 13 was a rare day in Hollywood: We had two major stars, Dwayne Johnson and Joaquin Phoenix, releasing films in which they play disabled characters. In Skyscraper, Johnson’s alter ego undergoes a below-knee amputation following an opening-scene explosion; Don’t Worry, He Won’t Get Far on Foot casts thrice Oscar-nominated Phoenix as John Callahan, the late artist who became quadriplegic in a car accident.

On-screen representation of disabilities is so infrequent it can seem like a fluke. According to the last U.S. Census, 19 percent of Americans have a disability, but a 2017 study from USC Annenberg’s Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative found that just 2.7 percent of all 2016 speaking roles included a discernible disability. So two in one week is progress, right?

Some disability rights advocates say: DISABILITIES, continued on page 2

HIV Prevention Takes Hold at Colleges With Rise of PrEP

Inside Higher Ed | At the annual college health administrators’ conference Tuesday, one presenter laid out a scenario all too common among students: an 18-year-old gay man, a first-year student who was once sexually stifled in the small town where he grew up, is now out and experimenting on a large, urban campus.

He has 10 or so partners within a couple months -- sometimes using condoms, sometimes not. This is the type of student some health advocates believe is ideally suited to try the HIV-preventive drug PrEP -- which stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis -- which more and more institutions’ health centers have begun prescribing since it gained Food and Drug Administration approval about six years ago.

Because traditional-aged college students remain at risk for HIV and often start to be more sexually adventurous, COLLEGES, continued on page 3

Older Adults Join the Cannabis Craze for Age-Related Ailments

The New Yorker | On a sunny afternoon last August, a dozen women from Balfour Senior Living, in Louisville, Colorado, boarded a bus for a field trip to a marijuana dispensary. One used a walker, one was hooked up to an oxygen tank, and another wore a linen suit and jewelry. All were told to wear hats while walking from the bus to the dispensary door. “The sun is our CANNABIS, continued on page 3

The Baby’s Coming, but Doctor and Hospital Are 100 Miles Away

The New York Times | A few hours after the only hospital in town shut its doors forever, Kela Abernathy bolted awake at 4:30 a.m., screaming in pain.

Oh God, she remembered thinking, it’s the twins. They were not due for another two months. But the contractions seizing Ms. Abernathy’s lower back early that morning sent her to the hospital.

QUOTE-WORTHY

“They were never told what was going on, certainly not the dangers that they may be in.”
—Photographer Phil Hatcher-Moore, on Kazakhstan villagers who were exposed to nuclear testing during the Cold War

“In the United States, the same people who are trying to restrict abortions have tried to restrict contraception, too.”
—Johanna Schoen, a professor at Rutgers University, on possible legal changes to Roe v. Wade, the landmark ruling on abortion

“There remains an urgent need to increase minority representation in medical research.”
—Elena Rios, president, National Hispanic Medical Assn.
DISABILITIES, continued

Nope. “We are over continually having non-disabled people trusted to tell our stories more than actual disabled actors,” said Rebecca Cokley, senior fellow for disability at the Center for American Progress. “It’s maddening and it’s inauthentic.”

Actors playing characters with physical or mental disabilities as a bid for Oscar attention is so familiar it’s a trope, as Tropic Thunder satirized back in 2008. And, it often works: Three Best Actor winners this decade (Colin Firth, Matthew McConaughey, and Eddie Redmayne) stemmed from roles representing real-life men with disabilities, while this year’s Best Picture victor and most-nominated title, The Shape of Water, starred Sally Hawkins as a woman made mute after a childhood trauma.

However, Cokley said that able-bodied celebrities who accept these jobs “[do] not know the actual lived experience of disabled people. Telling me that they spent time at a camp for kids with disabilities is not the same as being shouted, ‘Midget! Midget! Midget!’ when I go to pick up my dry-cleaning,” or “going for 20 job interviews, and not being able to get in the door.”

Skyscraper is not the first blockbuster to include a disabled character. The highest-grossing film of all time (number two when adjusted for inflation), Avatar, featured Sam Worthington in the lead role as an ex-Marine who uses a wheelchair; Worthington will return for each of four upcoming sequels. X-Men: Days of Future Past bucked trends casting Peter Dinklage as Bolivar Trask, a character who was not disabled in the source comics. (The two-time Game of Thrones Emmy winner is the lone disabled actor with a career most of his able-bodied peers would envy.) That film and three more in the series co-starring Patrick Stewart as Professor X, who uses a wheelchair later in life.

Phoenix is considered a possible (though unlikely) Best Actor Academy Award prospect for Don’t Worry, despite the Ruderman Family Foundation calling his casting “a mistake.” IndieWire published a 2017 list of 59 actors who earned nominations as disabled characters (in work ranging from My Left Foot to Forrest Gump).

Of them, only two — both winners for their film debuts — shared their counterparts’ disabilities: Marlee Matlin (Children of a Lesser God, 1988), who is deaf; and Harold Russell (The Best Years of Our Lives, 1947), a veteran who lost both hands during World War II. On the opposite end of the critical spectrum, Razzie champ Battleship did recruit retired Army colonel and double amputee Gregory D. Gadson for the cast.

Get more information about inclusion in the Hollywood Disability Toolkit.

RURAL, continued

June morning told her that her son and daughter were coming. Now.

Ms. Abernathy, 21, staggered out of bed and yelled for her mother, Lynn. They grabbed a few bags, scooped up Ms. Abernathy’s 2-year-old son and were soon hurtling across this poor patch of southeast Missouri in their Pontiac Bonneville, racing for help. The old hospital used to be around the corner. Now, her new doctor and hospital were nearly 100 miles away.

Medical help is growing dangerously distant for women in rural America. At least 85 rural hospitals — about 5 percent of the country’s total — have closed since 2010, and obstetric care has faced even starker cutbacks as rural hospitals calculate the hard math of survival, weighing the cost of providing 24/7 delivery services against dwindling birthrates, doctor and nursing shortages and falling revenues.

Today, researchers estimate that fewer than half of the country’s rural counties still have a hospital that offers obstetric care, an absence that adds to the obstacles rural women face in getting health care. Specialists are increasingly clustered in bigger cities. Clinics that provide abortions, long-term birth control and other reproductive services have been forced to close in many smaller towns.

“It’s scary,” said Katie Penn, who said she was rejected by eight doctors before finding an obstetrician in Jonesboro, Ark., about an hour from Kennett.

When obstetric services leave town, a cascade of risks follows, according to experts at the University of Minnesota Rural Health Research Center who have studied the consequences.

Read more, and get information on maternal health in the U.S.
COLLEGES, continued

University health centers have begun serving as a much more frequent dispenser of this sometimes controversial drug—more so than even a family doctor, who may not be aware it exists or might be reluctant to prescribe it.

The session at the American College Health Association’s annual conference was essentially a how-to on prescribing PrEP, which can guarantee almost total protection against contracting the virus—though concerns linger among college health professionals.

PrEP, sold under the brand name Truvada, is a small, daily-administered blue pill that blocks the acquisition of HIV by protecting the cells the virus attacks. It’s particularly important that PrEP be taken every day, because otherwise its effectiveness is drastically reduced—i.e., it’s about 99 percent effective if taken seven days a week, versus roughly 85 percent at three doses a week, health professionals say.

Though the FDA approved it in 2012 and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention started recommending it two years later, many health providers remain ignorant of PrEP or know little about it. David Reitman, medical director of the student health center at American University.

Colleges and universities often don’t prescribe it because they don’t know about it, or they’re misinformed, Reitman said. But many college-age students should be considered for PrEP, he said. Of the new youth (ages 13 to 24) HIV diagnoses in 2016, about 80 percent—6,766—were people ages 20 to 24, according to the CDC.

Men who have sex with other men still also contract HIV at a much higher rate than straight-identified men and women, and new diagnoses are particularly common among young men of color, especially black men. Kim Daly, health services coordinator at Salem State University, said that people of color much more frequently lack health care access, and the culture at certain institutions, such as at historically black colleges and universities, can discourage discussing issues of sexuality and HIV prevention.

Reitman during his presentation rattled off a list of reasons why college health centers sometimes don’t prescribe PrEP—they think it doesn’t work, or that it can make the virus worse. They think it’s too hard to monitor because of the strict follow-ups required, or that it causes privacy concerns when students take it without their parents’ knowledge.

But similar to birth control pills for women and other contraceptives, PrEP is just relatively new and untried in some college environments, Daly said. She said that some health administrators believe you need complicated protocols in place or lengthy consent forms to administer PrEP. This was often the case for oral contraceptives—women would need to fill out multiple-page consents—but that’s not true with PrEP.

Read more, and get information on HIV infection rates among young people. ■

Because students at colleges often start to be more sexually adventurous, school health centers have begun serving as a much more frequent dispenser of the HIV drug PrEP.

CANNABIS, continued

ao Stammerjohn, who is eighty-four, said she’d joined the group because she’s had chronic pain in her legs, and has been on OxyContin for ten years. “I’d like to get off it,” she said. Others said they had ailments like arthritis or back pain, but didn’t want to disclose their names because they believe marijuana is still stigmatized. “We’re travelling incognito,” one said. “I’m excited. I came to open my mind—I want to know the latest things. I hope this won’t be in the paper, though. We’ll have a crowd coming to Balfour, thinking this is the coolest place.”

Filing inside the Ajoya dispensary, they were overwhelmed by display cases filled with pills, tinctures, edibles, jars of green flower clumps, vape pens, oils, patches, and creams. As they listened to budtenders suggest what to use for pain, arthritis, or sleep, a ninety-two-year-old bowed her head and slowly, slowly, started slumping against the counter.

“Are you all right?” I asked. She fainted to the floor. A staff member knelt beside her as she regained consciousness. Paramedics arrived, but a half hour later, the woman, smiling, walked out the door with a hundred and twenty dollars worth of products.

Seniors are America’s fastest-growing population of new cannabis users. Ten thousand people turn sixty-five each day, according to the Pew Research Center, and more and more are trying the drug for their health and well-being. Even conservative politicians are warming to the idea. John Boehner, the sixty-eight-year-old former Speaker of the House, who in 2011 said he was “unalterably opposed” to the legalization of marijuana, recently made news by announcing that he was joining the board of Acreage Holdings, which distributes cannabis across eleven states. His “thinking on cannabis” had “evolved,” he tweeted.

Read more. ■

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