

One Woman's Mission to Include Performers with Disabilities in Film and Television

By Pam Vetter



The moment you start talking with film, television and theatre actress Diana Elizabeth Jordan, her positive spirit is infectious. She makes you a believer that good things are happening all the time.

"If you believe in something, everything is possible. Look at how far performers with disabilities have come. We've come a long way, but we still have a long way to go," Jordan says, "but I don't look back. You can choose to sit around and be frustrated, but I choose to focus on where we need to go. That's what motivates me."

In fact, Jordan has been motivated to reach her dreams her entire life. Born with cerebral palsy, she had a love of acting since childhood. After earning a bachelor's degree in Theatre and Media Arts from the University of Kansas, she began her acting career in Chicago where theatre offered opportunity. Her love of the theatre grew.

"I never wanted to sit around and say 'What if? What if I had gone to Los Angeles?' Life is not about regrets. So, I applied to the California State University at Long Beach to further my education and have another tool so I could teach while being closer to Los Angeles," Jordan explains humbly, "I was accepted into the program."

She not only was accepted, but she made history when she became the first actor with a disability to obtain a Masters of Fine Arts degree at Long Beach.

In 1999, she accepted a position at Performing Arts Studio West, which provides professional hands-on training, career management, and on location support for performers with disabilities.

"Diana has worked with us for nine years. She was extremely important in the very early stages of what we were creating," says John Paizis, Performing Arts Studio West Founder and Director. "As an acting instructor and on-set coach, she provides a tremendous amount of insight as she understands the challenges and helps performers work through them. She has been instrumental in getting our actors prepared."

While she sees her work as part of a team effort, Jordan has probably 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.

Jordan has had an especially warm relationship with the critically acclaimed Cornerstone Theater in Los Angeles as she prepares to perform in her fourth show with the company.

"Cornerstone is dedicated to diversity. I performed in my first show with them while I was in graduate school. I'll never forget that call," Jordan remembers. "They worked around my graduation and finals schedule. They were very generous."

Jordan is now rehearsing for another Cornerstone show that features characters with disabilities.

"Playwright Julie Marie Myatt wrote a part with me in mind for 'Someday.' An ensemble piece, it's about a single woman with cerebral palsy who fights to adopt an abandoned baby, while a middle-class couple struggles to conceive. It's a universal story and Julie understands that. The fact that a playwright thought enough of me to develop something with me in mind is amazing," Jordan credits. "The majority of the stories in the disabled community are also stories that are universal. We get married and divorced; we have hopes and dreams; we have children; we deal with families; and we live life. My disability is a part of who I am, but it doesn't define me."

In writing the part of a woman with disabilities, Myatt embraced the character's added dimensions as she conducted research for the play.

"Upon meeting Diana in the Cornerstone interviews, I found her honesty about her life and desires for motherhood very engaging and compelling. I was moved. And, I feel motherhood and disability are so rarely talked about in the conversation about reproductive rights. It is certainly, rarely if ever, talked about on stage. It's high time to talk about it," Myatt reinforces. "Diana brings the same depth and honesty in talking about her own life to her acting, and I felt I wanted that lovely quality and voice at the heart of this play."

As a member of the Screen Actors Guild Performers With Disabilities Committee, Jordan envisions an inclusive environment in the entertainment industry.

"I want to create opportunities for other performers with disabilities. We need to see diversity. We need to see people who are wheelchair users. We need to see people with cerebral palsy and people with Down syndrome. I want our voices to be heard," Jordan emphasizes. "This is about authenticity and equal opportunity. The doors are starting to open and Hollywood is slowly changing. We do have great success stories. Actor Robert David Hall is a great example. On 'CSI,' his character is part of society, he's a coroner, while the disability is just incidental."

Jordan makes a point to find acting opportunities. She is currently appearing in an original series for the Internet "Hollywood Acting Class," created by John Walcutt, produced by Fabiola Prieto, and executive produced by K.J. Bowling. She appears in the upcoming film *Rule of Three*, written by Rhoda and Eric Shapiro, directed by Eric Shapiro, and scheduled to premiere at Fangoria's Weekend of Horrors at the LA Convention Center April 25 - 27. She also performs in the soon-to-be-released film *The Young and Evil*, written and directed by Julian Breece.

Throughout her life, Jordan has used her enviable ability to set goals and achieve them. Of course, every time she reaches a goal, she sets the next bar higher.

"I would love to make a living as an actress and teach night classes. My long-term goals are to work in more film and television projects. Theatre is a great avenue as it offers opportunity to create a recognition of our universal talents and abilities," Jordan notes, "but I believe there's more change ahead. I'm a positive thinker who is very blessed and I find a way to focus on my blessings each and every day. But, this is a team effort and our work has just begun."

For more information on Diana Elizabeth Jordan, visit www.DianaElizabethJordan.com.

To view the online series "Hollywood Acting Class," visit www.tooniceguysproductions.com/hollywoodactingclass. Jordan appears in episodes 1, 5, 6 and 10.

For information on Performing Arts Studio West, visit www.PAStudioWest.com.

Someday will be performed at The Bootleg Theater, 2220 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, from May 29 to June 22, 2008. For more information, visit www.CornerstoneTheater.org.com.