

# Raise Your Voice: Authentic Casting in Media

By **Roxanna Lewis**

RIGHT NOW IS THE TIME FOR A WIDER CROSS-SECTION OF OUR REAL WORLD TO BE REPRESENTED ON MAINSTREAM SCREENS AND STAGES. APPROXIMATELY ONE OUT OF EVERY FOUR ADULTS IN THE USA LIVES WITH A PHYSICAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL DISABILITY. RESPONSIBLE STORYTELLING THROUGH CHARACTERS WHO REFLECT THE WAY OUR HOMES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES ARE POPULATED PROMOTES ACCEPTANCE OF ALL IN OUR KALEIDOSCOPE OF A WORLD.



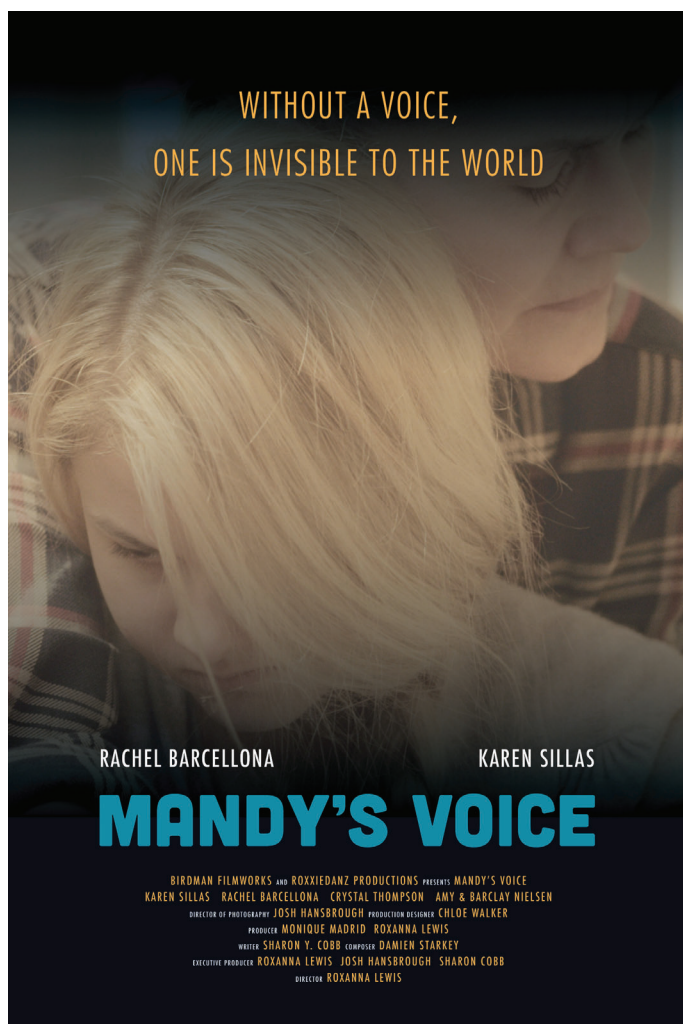
*Dreambody (Kitty Lunn, Sonja Perreten)*



*John F. Kennedy Center archives*

As an only child, I was heavily influenced by the tight-knit, multi-generational immigrant home in which I was raised—my elders tirelessly dedicating their lives to human rights and social activism. Thankfully, I awakened as a young girl to the notion that every single person wants to be met where they are, have their voice recognized, and endeavor to live the fullest life possible. These inalienable rights transcend time, culture, and one’s physical abilities. These

basic tenets of humanity require respect, compassion, and at least a modicum of interest in one another to create the heart-space to understand that which is less familiar to us. It is through being an artist, a sculptor of characters, an architect of stories, and a designer of worlds that I investigate what connects us as one human race.



Entering the world of filmmaking and TV through the side door after establishing my roots as a choreographer and theatrical director held some distinct advantages. I have worked with artists from all over the world, including individuals who happened to be amputees, paraplegic, wheelchair users, deaf, blind, neurodivergent, and neurotypical. I delved into dissecting the complexities of communication by exploring the powers of emotion, deep listening, and a thorough understanding of body language. I was obsessed with the endless ways one can create stories through the manipulation of words, visual design, physical movement, connection through relationships, and use of environment—or the lack thereof. Productions with Gallaudet University, choreographing and performing internationally with Infinity Dance Theatre (NYC), and having been a featured choreographer on Broadway in “Christopher Reeves’ First You Dream” opened my eyes to the importance of finding a variety of performers’ voices. Perhaps one of my most vivid experiences was with Dr. Maya Angelou, where she so humbly asked me, of all people, whether I thought any of her work made a difference in the world—at all? The matriarch of hope and inspiration wondered if her words mattered...I was dumbfounded. The ripples are still traveling in all directions...

All of this came home in a recent project that speaks to my soul: directing and co-producing *MANDY'S VOICE*, a film about a curious and intelligent non-verbal autistic girl who struggles to communicate. Her single mother is desperate to provide the necessary tools for survival in a tough world where if one is without a voice, they are invisible as well.

Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of this film is that I believe it to be amongst the first narrative films to tell a story about an individual on the spectrum through authentic casting. I was determined to cast neurodivergent individuals to work both in front of the camera and behind the scenes. Almost half of our cast, crew, and executive team are either on the spectrum, a parent of someone on the spectrum, and/or an advocate of ASD. We didn't aim to hit a mark—we just did what was right for the story.

In the macro, this film serves as a mirror to our larger societal predispositions and prejudices against those who aren't like “us.” A less exclusive definition of “us” is more important now in society than ever. In the micro, *MANDY'S VOICE* is a visual love letter between daughter and mother, the struggles and triumphs of their relationship. Every mother and every teen-daughter, every son and dad can relate to this story on some level. This is especially the case now as parents and kids work to navigate these very strange times of COVID-19. Issues of isolation, the need for connection, and the need to be heard are universal calls. This film is not only about accepting someone who appears different on the outside; it's about taking it a step further by embracing that individual for who they are inside and out and owning one's voice.

The idea of *MANDY'S VOICE* sparked after my film partner, Josh Hansbrough, made a documentary about the non-profit organization “Peace of Heart” in Ponte Vedra, Florida. *MANDY'S VOICE* is a fictional narrative inspired by the true-life events of a few exceptional non-verbal teens re-







siding at the Peace of Heart community. Writer Sharon Y. Cobb leaned in to flesh out the story, and I was brought in to bring the script to life. Monique Madrid (producer), Ally Cloversett (casting), and I auditioned a large number of very talented actors from Florida, Atlanta, and L.A., but the puzzle pieces weren't fitting, and something was missing from the story: authenticity.

I was acutely aware of the scarcity on screens of stories that celebrate the real voices, character portrayals, and employment opportunities of individuals with differing abilities. The film's message could have been lost due to a fundamental flaw in depicting it. We were determined to honor the message by casting truthfully. As a filmmaker, it's part of my mission to open doors for others who might otherwise be overlooked and tell remarkable stories about real people working through adversity. I recall saying, "We don't need thousands of people to audition, we just need the right few. We're looking for them and they're definitely looking for us."

The right doors opened! We assembled an incredibly courageous team from Florida and New York in the middle of a pandemic. Three out of the five cast members had never acted before. We agreed to rehearse and build camaraderie in a very non-conventional manner via Zoom for months

(which has its obvious pros & cons) to help navigate the complexities of acting and filming. The film was shot with strict public health protocols last July in Jacksonville, Florida.

The amazing Rachel Barcellona poured her heart into the role of Mandy; she is a recent college graduate, actress, author, model, and international spokesperson for autism who was diagnosed at the age of three and was non-verbal herself until the age of five. The indispensable anchor of our cast is Karen Sillas, who garnered the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance for the feature film, "WHAT HAPPENED WAS..." that launched her into prime-time TV as a star in UNDER SUSPICION, WITHOUT A TRACE, LAW & ORDER CSI, and HBO'S THE SOPRANOS.

We are introducing to the screen Crystal Thompson, the founder and Clinical Director of BELIEVE AUTISM in Jacksonville, Florida, where she tirelessly works with individuals with autism and their families. She also happens to be a Latin Dance performer and offers creative dance and art to students. Joining the cast from the Orlando area are Amy Nielsen and her Barclay. Amy is a natural on-screen and mother of four children ranging from 33 to six. She spent nearly 20 years as an elementary and middle school educator. After Barclay was diagnosed with ASD, she started

Big Abilities, her blog and podcast. She's now a published author of two books with more on the way soon, and an invaluable Special Needs Parent Advocate.

Through the making of MANDY'S VOICE, we successfully achieved what others in the entertainment industry have consistently dismissed as impossible—and persevered during COVID-19 on a shoe-string budget. MANDY'S VOICE isn't simply a passion project. It's a ground-breaking advancement in story and casting that demonstrates drive, heart, and vision of what is possible when equity and involvement of people with a variety of abilities is central to the production effort.

It is true the portrayal on film and television of those with different abilities have almost tripled compared to the previous 10 years (about 3,000 films and shows). However, according to a study by Nielsen and the nonprofit organization RespectAbility released in July 2021, almost all of those titles still do not feature actors with disabilities. Approximately 95% of those roles have been portrayed by actors who are traditionally cast. I believe—I know—audiences are ready for more choices, no matter what category of happy marathon binge-watching geek we might fall into. The choice of visibility and inclusion in film and TV increases the number of relatable and fascinating stories we can all share and it promotes better understanding among all of us.

Hollywood producer Deborah Calla and writer-producer Allen Rucker have been working together for over a decade to resurrect the Media Access Awards—an award ceremony that honors entertainment industry professionals who have significantly advanced disability-related narratives. The MAA is now teaming up with Easterseals to expand its reach and broaden its mission. There are many additional platforms, large and small, that express the importance of valuing individuals for who they are—not for who they are not.

So, you want to get involved yourself or for yourself or for a loved one, but don't know where to start your research on diversity and inclusion in the entertainment industry? Here are some great resources for you to begin learning what's out there: GADIM (Global Alliance for Media and Entertainment), The Kennedy Center—VSA, PA Department of Education—Inclusive Arts Education, and Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, UCLA—National Arts and Disability Center. There are numerous talent agencies that specialize in representing individuals with disabilities—in fact, they're looking for you or your loved one right now! Follow your dreams, share your talents, and let your voice be heard.



*Roxanna Lewis' creative approach to filmmaking springs from her expert understanding of motion, composition, and storytelling as a choreographer. Highlights include numerous commissions for the National Ballet of Guatemala and Infinity Dance Theatre—a non-traditional dance company featuring dancers with and without disabilities in NYC. Her ground-breaking work Dreambody is archived in the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts and captured by renowned action painter Terry Rosenberg. Her work has been presented across the US at the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center Out of Doors, and the Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC, as well as for other international dignitaries and audiences in France, Germany, Scotland, Guatemala, Italy, Japan, Thailand, and Hong Kong.*

*As an award-winning film director, Roxanna directed The Crossing (Cote de Pablo/ NCIS), The Shift, I Didn't Know, Hear Me, and multi-media String Theory, which premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with Mandy's Voice currently in post-production. She's worked on additional projects with Island Records, SONY UK, Mpress Records, CNN.Com, The Discovery Channel, Showtime, Mindless Entertainment, DNA Productions, The Revolver Film Company, and Kilo Productions. Roxanna is also Founder/CEO of Roxxiedanz Productions, Inc., a boutique film and commercial production company that develops scripted and non-scripted TV series, documentaries, and short form content celebrating under-represented voices, female-forward content, diversity, and inclusivity. Roxanna thrives on collaborations with visionary artists and creators that love to shake up the status quo.*

*Photos courtesy of Nicole Beth, Dreambody (Kitty Lunn, Sonja Perreten) and John F. Kennedy Center archives.*

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