



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on January 23, 2024

Stereotyping? Disabled Actor: Disabled Performers Should Get “Normal” Roles

When legendary wrestler Andre the Giant played in movies, he never complained about being limited to portraying, well, giants (he got to play Sasquatch, too). When you're 7'2" and 500 pounds, after all, you're not going to be cast as the jockey in *Seabiscuit*. Today, though, in a time in which identity is fancied reality, it's increasingly common to hear that the obviously disabled shouldn't be limited in the roles they play.

This perspective was heard just Sunday, in fact, from British actor Adam Pearson, who stars in a new movie and Sundance Film Festival hit titled *A Different Man*. Pearson, who's 39 and suffers from a rare, sometimes severely disfiguring genetic condition called neurofibromatosis, made his comments while speaking to *Variety*.



AP Images
Adam Pearson

“Normally, there are three kinds of roles or tropes or stereotypes, whatever vernacular one wants to use,” he said in response to a question. “There’s either the villain, that because I have a disfigurement, I want to kill Batman or James Bond. Then there’s the victim, the ‘woe is me,’ small violin.”

“And then there’s the hero,” Pearson continued, “that because I have a disfigurement but do regular dude stuff, whatever regular dude stuff is, I’m somehow braver than the average guy.”

When then asked if there was any “onus on creatives to ... change that,” the actor agreed and said, “I think it’s lazy writing.”

“Why are non-disabled people writing about disability without consultation?” Pearson then asked rhetorically. “Because when that happens, the end result you might get it right once but nine times out of 10 it’s going to be really inauthentic and inaccurate.” (video below. Relevant portion begins at 2:50).

Pearson certainly has a *bit* of company as a pigeonholed disabled actor. For example, 75-year-old [Michael Berryman](#) (video below), whose appearance is affected by congenital condition hypohidrotic ectodermal dysplasia, has had a long Hollywood career — often playing horror roles, however.

Then there was late dwarfism-afflicted actor [Hervé Villechaize](#), who also enjoyed a notable Hollywood career — but, most famously, played sidekicks/helpers.

So what of these actors? Should they not be typecast as they are? Perusing the [MSN.com comments](#) associated with a *People* article on Pearson made clear that he has support; a large number of posters, however, tried lending perspective.

A few commenters, for instance, said that if “lazy” Hollywood writing is the issue, Pearson could pen his own script; another suggested he could start his own production company. Others stated that everyone



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“is typecast to some extent”; that Pearson is just not going to “get a part where his disfigurement isn’t the storyline of the movie”; and, from a wheelchair-bound respondent, that there’s “some stuff we [the disabled] just cant [sic] do in life.”

Interestingly, I discussed the matter at length [with Pearson on X last night](#) (he was most civil and we had a nice conversation), and he made his position clear. He said he understood he couldn’t play a typical leading man, but that he’d “like to see disabled actors offered roles where their disability is simply incidental and not their raisin d’etre for being offered the role.”

My response was: If “you’re talking about roles such as “next door neighbor and friend,” not that many people, percentagewise, have next door neighbors who just incidentally happen to have severe disabilities” (tweet below).

So, I then continued, how often could you thus cast the severely disabled before it was obvious that being pushed was a politically correct agenda directed toward bestowing roles on an affirmative-action basis? There would be nothing “authentic” about such unreality, either.

Pearson [disagreed](#), asserting that 25 percent of people globally “are registered as disabled.” (The figure I found was closer to 15 percent, but this is irrelevant to the points that follow.) To this, I said that I have a “disability”: a congenital eye defect known as strabismus. “But we’re talking about obvious disabilities here,” I wrote, “such as dwarfism” — which are relatively rare.

Pearson then stated that while that might be my focus, he’s “advocating for ALL disabled Actor[s] to be given opportunities to audition for role[s] that have nothing to do with their disabilities.” But here’s the issue:

Actors with common and/or unnoticeable disabilities have *always* been allowed to audition for such roles — and *have long been getting them*.

Famed actor Danny DeVito, for example, is only 4’10” because he has a [bone-growth disorder](#) called multiple epiphyseal dysplasia. Model Gigi Hadid, who boasts [quite a filmography](#), has [Hashimoto’s disease](#). Nick Jonas has [Type 1 Diabetes](#). [Selena Gomez](#) has [Lupus](#). Orlando Bloom, [dyslexia](#). [Lil Wayne](#), epilepsy. And Daniel Radcliffe, of *Harry Potter* fame, has motor-skill-development disorder [dyspraxia](#). This is surely just a short list, too.

In other words, actors with non-noticeable disabilities don’t need career advocacy — they’re already getting the roles Pearson references. At issue are, as I stated, individuals with *rare*, severe, appearance-altering disabilities.

In fact, the word Pearson used, “incidental,” is helpful in clarifying a relevant distinction here. The actors cited two paragraphs up get roles to which their disabilities are incidental because their disabilities were *incidental to their acting careers in the first place*.

The rare, unusual-appearance group does not get such roles because their disabilities are not incidental to their acting careers, but material. *They’re why they got an entrée into Hollywood in the first place*.

The aforementioned Michael Berryman, for instance, got his start when director George Pal [walked into](#) his Venice, California, gift shop and [said](#), “You have a face I could use in a movie.”

Most of us will never, ever hear those words. They’re only uttered to the incredibly beautiful — or the incredibly unusual.



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And as comedian/actor Bill Maher once put it, addressing Hollywood nepotism, getting your foot in the door is “80 percent” of what determines acting success.

Why does any of this matter? Because it relates to a larger issue: The idea that in the name of “equality” we should ignore reality and assign roles in life (not acting) based on quota. But, like it or not, life’s not fair.

To reiterate, I like Pearson, he was kind during our conversation, and I’ve no desire to offend him. To him I truly, sincerely wish all the best — his cause, though, should be put to rest.



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