

Movie Characters

By Peter Howell

An actor looking to get noticed could do worse than portray a character with a disability on the big screen. An admittedly unscientific survey of motion pictures and television shows suggests a couple of things. The movies are often based on true stories: *Shine*, *Radio*, *Rudy*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Sybil*, *The Three Faces of Eve*, *The Miracle Worker*. Characters with disabilities are usually treated kindly, at least by their filmmakers (No one ever said an unkind word about Tiny Tim), if not always by the other characters. As you know, Colin Firth recently won his first Academy Award (and 14 other Best Actor awards, including a Golden Globe) for his affecting portrayal of King George VI of England. In an understated yet harrowing scene with his speech therapist, he reveals that, as a baby, he was deliberately pinched by a nanny who doted on his older brother; and teased by his brother and others and bullied by his overbearing father all his life.

Even villains with disabilities often have some sort of redeeming grace. Lawrence Talbot hated turning into a wolfman, and strove mightily to prevent the transformation. And thanks to Lon Chaney, Jr., we witnessed and understood his torment. Long John Silver, the larcenous one-legged seaman in *Treasure Island*, was a lovable rogue. The mad, murderous Phantom of the Opera was more sinned against than sinning. The bitter, standoffish veteran Dan Taylor lost more than his legs in Vietnam. And so on.

Given their sympathetic treatment by their creators, perhaps it is small wonder that moviegoers and critics alike embrace characters with disabilities. Firth is only the latest in a long line of actors to find audience and critical acclaim playing characters who face physical and mental challenges. Some seem to find it more by chance than by choice. Dustin Hoffman was originally cast as the fast-talking opportunist Charlie Babbit in *Rain Man*. But after being moved to tears by seeing a savant named Leslie Lemke (who is blind, mentally handicapped, and has cerebral palsy) play complete piano concertos by ear, he decided to play the part of Raymond instead.

During filming, Hoffman was arguably his own toughest critic. Three weeks into filming, Hoffman, who had spent a lot of time with savant Kim Peek, the inspiration for Raymond Babbit, wanted out. "Get Richard Dreyfuss, get somebody," he told Director Barry Levinson, "because this is the worst work of my life." Levinson told him to keep working, and Hoffman took home both an Academy Award and a Golden Globe. And *Rain Man* grossed almost \$355 million worldwide.

Geoffrey Rush might be best known as the buccaneer Barbossa in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, but he made his bones in 1996 in *Shine*. His portrayal of Australian piano prodigy and domestic abuse victim David Helfgott earned him an astounding 14 Best Actor awards, including all of the Big Three: Academy Award, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild. Shot for a paltry \$5.5 million in two months in Australia, *Shine* went on to gross more than five times as much in the United States alone. Two different actors were nominated for Black Reel Awards: Cuba Gooding, Jr. for *Radio* (2003); and Jamie Foxx for *The Soloist* (2009). The Black Reel Awards recognize and celebrate the achievements of African-Americans in feature, independent and television films. Gooding was also nominated for an NAACP Image Award.

Wounded Vietnam veterans appealed to audiences and critics. Jon Voight won half a dozen Best Actor Awards, including an Oscar, a Golden Globe and the Cannes Film Festival, for his portrayal of paraplegic Luke Martin in *Coming Home*. For *Born on the Fourth of July*, Tom Cruise was nominated for an Academy Award and won a Golden Globe. The biopic based on the life of paralyzed veteran Ron Kovic earned more than five times its \$14 million budget at the domestic box office alone.

Two of America's favorite Vietnam Veterans with disabilities made movie history in 1994. Forrest Gump was nominated for 13 Academy Awards and won six, including Best Actor for Tom Hanks. Hanks also bagged the Golden Globe and the Screen Actors Guild Award, as well as five other Best Actor awards. Hanks' costar, Gary Sinise, was nominated for an Oscar, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild Award for his performance as "Lieutenant Dan" Taylor, who lost both legs in combat. Sinise also won three Supporting Actor awards: from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Films; the Chlotrudis Society for Independent Film; and the National Board of Review.

Despite his low IQ, Forrest had an accidental Midas touch and managed to insinuate himself, like Woody Allen's Zelig, into many of the historic moments of his time. "Lieutenant Dan" was bitter and reclusive. Yet he, too, was a victim, a man whom life had dealt what could reasonably be considered a losing hand. Forrest Gump was not cheap to make. Fifty-five million dollars was still real money in 1994. But so what? It hit the box office running and never slowed down, racking up almost \$674 million in ticket sales. One other movie with two stars with disabilities reaped a nearly unique slew of Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Adapted Screenplay. Until One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest was released in 1975, no movie had won all five major Oscars since It Happened One Night in 1934.

Jack Nicholson won his first Oscar and seven other Best Actor awards for his performance as the free spirit Randle Patrick McMurphy. A criminal who feigns madness in order to avoid going to jail, McMurphy finds himself locked in a fateful clash of wills with Big Nurse. And newcomer Brad Pitt, as a timid, boyish patient with a terrible stutter and little experience with women, earned an Academy Award nomination and a Golden Globe. The list of award-winning portrayals of characters with disabilities is a long and distinguished one, and also includes:

- Sally Field for Sybil (1976): Best Actress Emmy and a Golden Globe nomination
- Joanne Woodward for The Three Faces of Eve (1957): Best Actress Oscar, Golden Globe and National Board of Review Award
- Patty Duke for Helen Keller in The Miracle Worker (1962): Golden Globe nomination and Oscar for Best Supporting Actress
- Melissa Gilbert for Helen Keller in The Miracle Worker (TV, 1979): Emmy Nomination for Best Supporting Actress
- Sean Penn for I Am Sam (2001): Four Best Actor nominations, including Oscar and Screen Actors Guild Award
- Marty Feldman for Young Frankenstein (1974): Golden Scroll Award from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films for playing the hunchbacked sidekick Eye-gor
- Rudy (1993) is based on the life of Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger, whose dream was to play football for Notre Dame, despite his diminutive stature and a reading disability. Although star Sean Astin received no prizes, the movie received a Christopher Award for "affirming the highest values of the human spirit;" and a Studio Heart Award, given to "filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by artistically expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life."

Of course, not every character with a disability is Oscar material. In 2003, for example, *Daredevil*, featuring Ben Affleck as a blind superhero, was ignored by the Academy, the Golden Globes and the Screen Actors Guild. Nevertheless, it did manage to corral four awards:

- The Hollywood Makeup Artist and Hair Stylist Guild Award
- The Mexican MTV Movie Award for Sexiest Hero (Héroe más Sexy)
- The MTV Movie Award for Best Kiss
- The Teen Choice Award for Best Chemistry

Eat your heart out, *Forrest*! An actor looking to get noticed could do worse than portray a character with a disability on the big screen.