

Turning Disabled to Abled in the Performance Art World

By Mikaela Arnold

The word “disabled” has many meanings. To some, it is used to identify people who have some sort of disability that challenge those who have them. It comes from the prefix word dis and the suffix ability. Dis means “reversing force” (dis-) and ability means “power or capacity to do or act...” (ability). To me it is just a word—a word that carries a broad range of conditions. People with disabilities can do just about anything that normal people can do with just a small amount of modification. Some can still sing, dance, and do sports. Some people can even participate in the performing arts. This paper will explore some of these people and the disabilities that make them special.

In the early 1800's the circus was a big part of entertainment. This period was called the “America's gilded age”. There was a sub-genre of the circus called the “freak show”. The “freaks” were human beings that have rare mutations that science have not yet understood. These people were called giants, dwarfs, midgets, and two-headed humans. In today's age we can understand that they are normal humans with disabilities that are still rare. People were so amazed at these unique individuals that the circuses made lots of money for the organizers. Some of these people were taken advantage of and or used for awful Nazi era science experiments. Let's look at some of the performers.

Millie and Cristine were twins that were born fused together. They shared organs and body parts. This condition is called “dicephalic parapagus” better known as conjoined twins. (MACLEAN) They were born in the days of slavery to two African slaves. Their disability caused them to not be able to work like the other slaves thus, being named useless to the slave owner. So, they were sent to the circus where they first put on display for the medical community. They were later rehomed to a chimpanzee trainer named “Joseph Pearson Smith” who became their legal guardian (CandyGuy). He and his wife taught them how to sing for a few years until they perform at the circus under their stage name, “The Two-Headed Nightingale”. Sadly, since people did not understand their disability, they became one person rather than two separate girls. I can understand since they look like one person based on the science back then. They were very popular and brought in more money than they did when they started. The unfortunate fact about conjoined twins is that when one twin dies the other follows due to their shared heart and organs. This is what happened to Millie and Christine when they died in 1912. Millie died of tuberculosis causing Christine to die as well in just a few hours apart. There has been

advances in the medical community that allow doctors to surgically separate conjoined twins so that they could live a more fulfilling life. This is highly complex and dangerous process, but it is interesting that it is possible.

I remember when I was little I believed that dwarfs were myths. I believed that Professor Flickwick from Harry Potter was a CGI effect for his character in the movies. Nope and nope. They don't perform magic but there are dwarfs in the world today. Some people call them "little people" and or midgets. Their disability is called Dwarfism-a genetic condition that causes a person to stay a short size roughly at 4 feet (dwarfism-causes-treatments). Meet the Ovitz family- a group of 7 members in the performing arts. In their hayday they sang and danced in their music trope. Not only did they have to overcome the challenges of dwarfism, but they also had to hide their Jewish heritage from the Nazis. (CandyGuy, THE OVITZ FAMILY – Nazi Experiments) The combination of being Jewish and a dwarf intrigue a mad Nazi scientist named "Dr. Mengale" who was the same scientist that experimented on twins. This scientist was a sick man that did horrible science experiments that I am not going to list here. If you have a dangerously curious mind, go to "The human marvels" website to find out more about the experiments. What I will tell you is that many innocent people died or were seriously traumatized in these experiments. The Ovitz family performed for the Nazis and for Hitler himself until they were saved by the Soviet Union. One of the members, Elizabeth, amazingly lived until 1992.

On the other end of the spectrum is the very sweet pinhead named Schlitzie. Schlitzie had a condition called microcephalus that causes one to have an abnormally small and pointy cranium (CandyGuy, thehumanmarvels). This causes the person to have decrease mental compacity. Schlitzie himself had the mindset of a four-year-old. This made him have a childish personality and eternally young. Everyone loved him. People who were pinheads were thought to have come from an alien species or an ancient race due to their odd appearance. Often, they were billed as a female due to the cutesy dresses and small frame. In 1932 Schlitzie starred in the movie, Freaks, directed by Tod Browning (Freaks (1932)). He died in 1971 as the oldest person to date with microcephalus.

Moving from the gilded age to the 21st century the opportunities for the disabled have increased. People are less likely to be called freak or mutants than in the past. Mutants are celebrated in some areas of comic books fans. We can learn more about rare medical mysteries from TV and the various corners of the internet. Ignorance of certain conditions can be fixed with a little bit of research. Still, there are some corners of the world that don't understand that the disabled are just people that need help to succeed.

I would like to talk briefly about a program called the Special Olympics. This program allows people who are disabled to compete in sports. It is a global organization. While most of the events are modified sports,

there is a type of performing arts that is available-Equestrian. In the Special Olympics, Equestrian started in the 1980's and is still around today. For those who don't know, Equestrian involves riding horses. It involves balance, concentration, and strong legs. Some disabilities require a few people to walk beside the horse to make sure that the person doesn't fall off the horse. Balance is a must unless you have a person sitting behind the contestant. I competed in this competition for a few years before school life consumed me. At one time I took first place only to win third place the next year. It takes time and energy. I also took horseback riding lesson at Bakas Equestrian Center - a specialize facility that allows the disabled to ride horses as therapy (about).

There are some people that still judge a person by there looks. People stare at disabled people and sometimes avoid them. Kids are interested in what is wrong with us. Adults should be like their kids and ask questions rather than judge on impulse. We are not robots. We are still human despite our differences. Let's share the performing arts together!!

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