

# Hire Education: Three Unions Launch Campaign for Disabled Performers

by James Parks, Nov 22, 2008



Robert David Hall plays Dr. Albert Rollins on "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation."

Although 20 percent of Americans—56 million people—between the ages of 5 and 64 are living with a disability, they are represented by less than 2 percent of characters on TV.

To increase the visibility and equal employment opportunities for performers with disabilities, three unions—Screen Actors (**SAG**), the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (**AFTRA**) and Actors' Equity (**Equity**)—have launched the **I AM PWD** (Inclusion in the Arts & Media of People With Disabilities) campaign. Over the next three years, the I AM PWD campaign will reach out to the entertainment and media industries, the general public, political and legislative leaders and to national and global civil rights, labor and community allies in an effort to urge the entertainment industry to open up equal opportunities for disabled performers.

Actor Robert David Hall, national chair of the Tri-Union Performers with Disabilities Committee, says:

I'm fortunate to have a good career as an actor and creative artist. The normal struggles any performer faces, however, are complicated 10-fold by our industry's reluctance to include people with disabilities in the full landscape of entertainment.

In the 21st century, media is the world's common cultural environment. Society's values and priorities are expressed and reflected in film, television, theatre, news and music. If you aren't seen and heard, you are invisible. People with disabilities are largely invisible within the arts and media landscape.

Hall, who plays Dr. Albert Rollins on the hit TV show "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," has two prosthetic legs and is one of only three regular characters on TV with disabilities. Click [here](#) to see a video of Hall and other performers talking about I AM PWD.

A study of performers in film and television found that the issue is not just the visibility of performers with disabilities, it carries over into how they are treated and job opportunities. For example, the study showed 56 percent of background performers with disabilities earn less than \$1,000 each year. The study also revealed:

- Despite Americans with Disabilities Act regulations and the producer/union policies of non-discrimination and harassment, more than one-third of

performers with disabilities felt they had encountered some form of discrimination in the workplace—not being cast for a role or being refused an audition because of their disability.

- More than one-third report that a reasonable accommodation would help them in their work, but nearly two-thirds never asked for an accommodation because they believed employers would be reluctant to hire them. Many performers are unwilling to be candid about their disability for fear of being viewed as an object of pity and incapable of doing the job.

SAG President Alan Rosenberg says the union is

committed to inclusion of all actors, and will work tirelessly to advocate and seek visibility and equal employment opportunities for performers with disabilities as they are an integral part of the diverse landscape of the Guild membership and the American scene.

Equity President Mark Zimmerman adds that the growth and vitality of the performance industries depends on equality, diversity and inclusion.

The theatre should, and must, reflect the true diversity of our society.

AFTRA President Roberta Reardon sums it up this way:

Now is the time to stand together to combat discrimination and truly integrate our brothers and sisters with disabilities into the promise of the American scene.