



National Association of the Deaf

www.nad.org

February 24, 2021

David Rubin, President
Dawn Hudson, CEO
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences
8949 Wilshire Boulevard
Beverly Hills, California 90211

Dear President David Rubin and CEO Dawn Hudson,

The undersigned coalition of organizations led by and representing deaf people and people with disabilities reach out to you ahead of your organization's annual ritual of recognizing excellence in films. As you announced in your September 8, 2020 "Diversity and Inclusion Standards for Best Picture Eligibility," going forward, excellence requires inclusion.

Throughout its 94 years, the Academy has nominated 61 actors for portraying characters who are deaf or have disabilities. Only two of them actually had the portrayed disabilities – Harold Russell in 1947 and Marlee Matlin in 1986.

In the 68 years since the first able-bodied actor was nominated in 1952 for playing a blind character, 59 able-bodied actors were nominated for acting as if they were deaf or had disabilities. In essence, nearly every year since 1952, the Academy has rewarded the imitation of disability while excluding actors with disabilities. In fact, the Academy has awarded 27 of these nominated able-bodied actors with an Oscar – nearly half of the nominations.

As a result, it is no secret that actors wanting to win an Oscar seek out roles where they portray characters with disabilities. Such aspirations are encouraged by the Academy, especially when it nominates an actor for pretending to be disabled almost every year, and gives out an award half of the time. Consequently, these results betray the prejudices and biases of those who vote for Oscar winners.

This year is no different. There has been much talk about award recognition for the hearing actors portraying deaf characters in *Sound of Metal*. In fact, awards from other organizations have already gone to Riz Ahmed, who plays the lead, and Paul Raci, who plays the main supporting role. Both are hearing actors who in this movie take on roles of people who are late-deafened, that is, one is a person losing his hearing and a person who is deaf throughout the film, respectively. The exact nature of how these individuals are deaf or became deaf is irrelevant, as it is clear that the awards that they have received to date are driven by offensive pity as was done with the Oscars' 59 nominations and 27 awards. This trend has persisted despite entreaties from disability communities advocating for inclusion and authentic representation for decades.



Through this letter, it is our hope that the Academy will immediately reject from eligibility any and all nominations for able-bodied actors who deign to act as if they are deaf or have disabilities. Your Standards are a good start but it is not nearly enough to simply set expectations on best pictures. The same expectation must be imposed on casting decisions. Otherwise, the Academy can expect this oppression and discrimination towards actors who are deaf or have disabilities to continue as it has every year since 1952.

In *Sound of Metal*, actors who are deaf are relegated to being cast in supporting ensembles that are apparently intended to distract from and compensate for giving away prime starring roles to hearing actors. The Academy must begin by excluding the hearing actors in *Sound of Metal* from any nominations or awards.

This action would not take away the freedom of filmmakers seeking to cast able-bodied actors for roles of characters with disabilities or the freedom of able-bodied actors to seize such roles. We only ask that the Academy not reward such grievous casting decisions.

Actors with disabilities seek work every day, and are often turned away. There are not enough roles for them, and this must change. More importantly, when there are indeed roles of people with disabilities in major film projects, directors continue to give those roles to privileged able-bodied actors who do not have the authenticity and life experience to show the truly complex lives that people with disabilities lead.

Moreover, it is essential to also promote the creation of meaningful roles of people with disabilities who are also from an underrepresented racial or ethnic group and/or are LGBTQ+, as such roles are even rarer. Hollywood must show diversity across the board, including within characters with disabilities.

The blatant exclusion of actors with disabilities must stop immediately. Awards should only be given to roles that portray a disability experience if it is done by actors with disabilities – as was the case for Harold Russell and Marlee Matlin.

Referring to Matlin's Oscar win in 1986, Rex Reed wrote that she only won because of a pity vote, and that she did not deserve to win for acting as a deaf person because she is deaf herself. This is exactly the oppressive view that must be exorcised from Hollywood. After all, are able-bodied actors who portray able-bodied roles not acting because they are just being themselves? Of course not! The exact same principle applies to actors with disabilities.

Consequently, all of us within the disability community call upon the Academy to immediately ban the nomination and/or voting of any award to able-bodied actors taking on disability roles. Failing that, the Academy is complicit in the explicit exclusion and oppression of actors with disabilities.



In addition, the Academy should meet collectively with representatives from the undersigned disability-led organizations not only to address these casting issues but also to review the overall portrayal of people with disabilities in film. It is one thing to allow filmmakers to have free reign in their art, but it is another for the Academy to recognize and praise the offensive portrayals and mistreatment of people with disabilities. We note that in these Standards, you do set expectations for representation of ethnic and cultural inclusion, but leave out representation of deaf and disability inclusion. We see the need for an additional category in your Standards to provide for consultation with appropriate subject matter experts. This was apparent with the misinformation rampant in *Sound of Metal* with respect to sudden hearing loss and cochlear implantation. To resolve this issue, we request that the Academy meet with all the undersigned organizations. In our disability community, our primary driving principle is “nothing about us without us,” and we ask that you respect our position.

Sincerely,

Melissa Draganac-Hawk
NAD President

Howard A. Rosenblum
NAD Chief Executive Officer

Deaf-led, Disability-led, and Interpreter National Organizations Signatories

- American Association of the DeafBlind (AADB)**
- American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)**
- American Council of the Blind (ACB)**
- Association of Late-Deafened Adults (ALDA)**
- Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL)**
- Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network (AWN)**
- Cerebral Palsy and Deaf Organization (CPADO)**
- Deaf Seniors of America (DSA)**
- Gallaudet University Alumni Association (GUAA)**
- Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA)**
- Little People of America (LPA)**
- National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA)**
- National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)**
- National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery (NCMHR)**
- National Federation of the Blind (NFB)**
- National Hispanic Latino Association of the Deaf (NHLAD)**
- Not Dead Yet (NDY)**
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)**
- Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Inc. (TDI)**