The Actors With Disabilities Redefining Representation

These performers are creating a new template for the artist-as-activist, challenging their industry — and their audiences — to reconsider what inclusion really means.

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From left: the actors Madison Ferris, Lauren Ridloff, Ali Stroker, Gregg Mozgala and Alexandria Wailes, photographed in New York City on June 26, 2020.Stefan Ruiz

RYAN O'CONNELL would like you to know that he is tired and pissed off and horny. He is tired of waiting for what he calls "our 'Transparent' moment" (some of his fellow actors call it, instead, "our 'Pose' moment"), by which he means a single piece of breakthrough pop culture that makes people aware of a heretofore ignored and stereotyped minority, a prizewinning, noisemaking event that kicks open the door to mainstream omnipresence and ultimately to normalization. He is pissed off that it hasn't happened yet. "I think about this a lot," he says. "Why, in this woke-ass culture that we live in, where so much attention is given to marginalized populations, do people with disabilities still largely go ignored?" The actor, who has cerebral palsy, is also, he says, "horny for representation that comes from actual disabled people, because we live in a dark hellscape of a capitalist country. Real power can only be accrued through opportunities, and you need to be given the keys to tell your own story."

O'Connell is more cheerful — well, somewhat more cheerful — than that makes him sound. At 33, he is the star of a short-form Netflix series called "Special" that, when I spoke to him in February, was filming its second season (now halted because of the Covid-19 pandemic). The first garnered four Emmy nominations, including two for O'Connell, who is the show's creator as well as its leading man. "Special" is an alternately gentle, introspective and

raunchy comedy series about the personal, social and sexual emergence of a young Angeleno who, like O'Connell, is both gay and disabled. When he first started working in writers' rooms on other television shows, O'Connell, whose visible symptoms are mild, kept his condition quiet; he only "came out of the disabled closet" five years ago, when he published a memoir, "I'm Special: And Other Lies We Tell Ourselves," which inspired his series. Episodes of "Special" run only about 15 minutes; it's hard not to think of Chris Rock's Afro-radical '90s-era "Saturday Night Live" character Nat X, who complained that his late-night series had to be short form " 'cause if the man gave me any more, he would consider that welfare!"