

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Rachel Shenton, writer and actress in *The Silent Child*

The Oscar-winning director, **Rachel Shenton** shares her recent achievement with us in this interview, along with her commitment to supporting those with hearing loss to be able to access the arts. She tells us also about her latest project...



Rachel Shenton

Firstly our congratulations on your outstanding achievement. When we last interviewed you in 2017 did you think when you started this movie it would not only get nominated but win an Oscar?

Never. An Oscar didn't even enter my head at that point, the project was a labour of love and we worked hard to get the budget, cast it authentically, shoot it, edit it etc.; the thought of any kind of accolade was the last thing on my mind.

What were the challenges, if any, and the triumphs in making this movie?

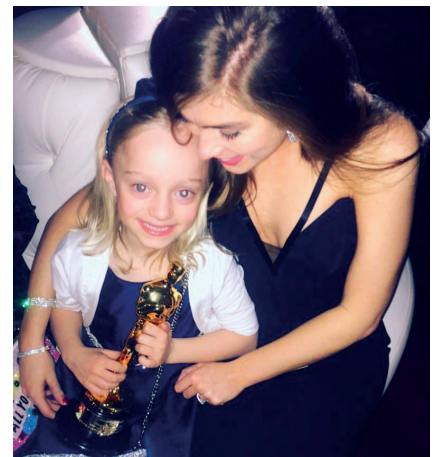
Well the largest triumph (among many others) are the two gold statues we have in our house – that was a pretty good day. However the challenges were also plentiful. Authentic casting was so important to me, so for the role of Libby we needed to find a profoundly deaf actress, who could conceivably play a five-year-old and wanted to act. We had a very tight budget so getting the shots that we wanted was hard with the restrictions. Having a five-year-old on set came with its challenges, mainly down to child licensing. Maisie Sly was only allowed to legally be on set for a very small amount of time before needing a break and when

you're working on a shoe-string time is money. All of these things made it all more worthwhile. Looking back we wouldn't change a thing.

In the movie industry, has it been your experience that having a hearing loss (HL) or being deaf limits career progression? If so, what do you think should or could be done to ensure equal opportunities for people wanting to work in the industry in various capacities?

I'm hearing so of course I can't speak for the deaf community but I certainly feel disability is underrepresented in TV and film and I think it's my job as a creator and hopefully other writers, directors and producers, to create content that reflects real life and write and create characters that have disabilities. I'm so proud of our leading lady Maisie, who is living proof that being deaf isn't a barrier – she's an extraordinarily good actress.

You are a great advocate for deafness, sign language and access to education for the deaf. What more do you think can be done and by whom to ensure that



Rachel and Maisie with their Oscar.

those with HL or deafness get the appropriate access to education?

Thank you. We all know improvements must be made in education to ensure that deaf children receive the right support and go on to fulfill their potential. I believe the way to do that is to raise the profile of deafness – I think it's flown under the radar for far too long because it's silent and you can't see it. People don't understand deafness or the impact that being deaf has on a person or a child therefore the issues remain unresolved. So my objective is to raise the profile of deafness and start a dialogue about the issues.

Recently I was at the opera and there was a signer for the entire performance. How commonplace is this and what is your experience with inclusion of the deaf and the hearing impaired in the arts?

That's great, I love to see a signer at a live performance. It sadly doesn't happen as often as it should but I feel

in recent months we're starting to see a shift. A deaf person shouldn't have to visit the cinema to see a movie at 2.30pm on a Wednesday afternoon because it's the only signed screening.

Where to next for you?

I'm developing *The Silent Child* feature film, which is very exciting.

Any last words and thoughts for the clinicians reading this interview on how they can help to support aspiring young actors and actresses and movie directors to pursue their careers in the arts?

I'd encourage anyone to seek out the people and the companies that can help you get to the next level. There are many great production companies run by deaf creators and film-makers and using predominantly deaf talent. Graeae, Deafinitely Theatre, Mutt & Jeff and BSL Zone, to name just a few. There are also film making courses available via Zebra Uno Ltd (which is the charity that organises Deaffest).

FURTHER INFORMATION

Graeae,
<http://graeae.org/about/our-artistic-vision>

Deafinitely Theatre,
<https://deafinitelytheatre.co.uk>

Mutt & Jeff Pictures,
<https://www.muttandjeffpictures.com>

BSL Zone, www.bslzone.co.uk/watch

Zebra Uno Ltd, www.zebra-uno.com

Deaffest, <https://deaffest.co.uk>

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