

Disability Depicted: Hollywood's Ableist Gaze

Disability through the ableist gaze of Hollywood reflect notions of pity, curiosity, and heroism. Magda Romanska, a theatre and dramaturgy scholar, notes that “the vast majority of characters with disabilities, whether they’re played by actors with disabilities or not, continue to represent the same outdated tropes.” These include:

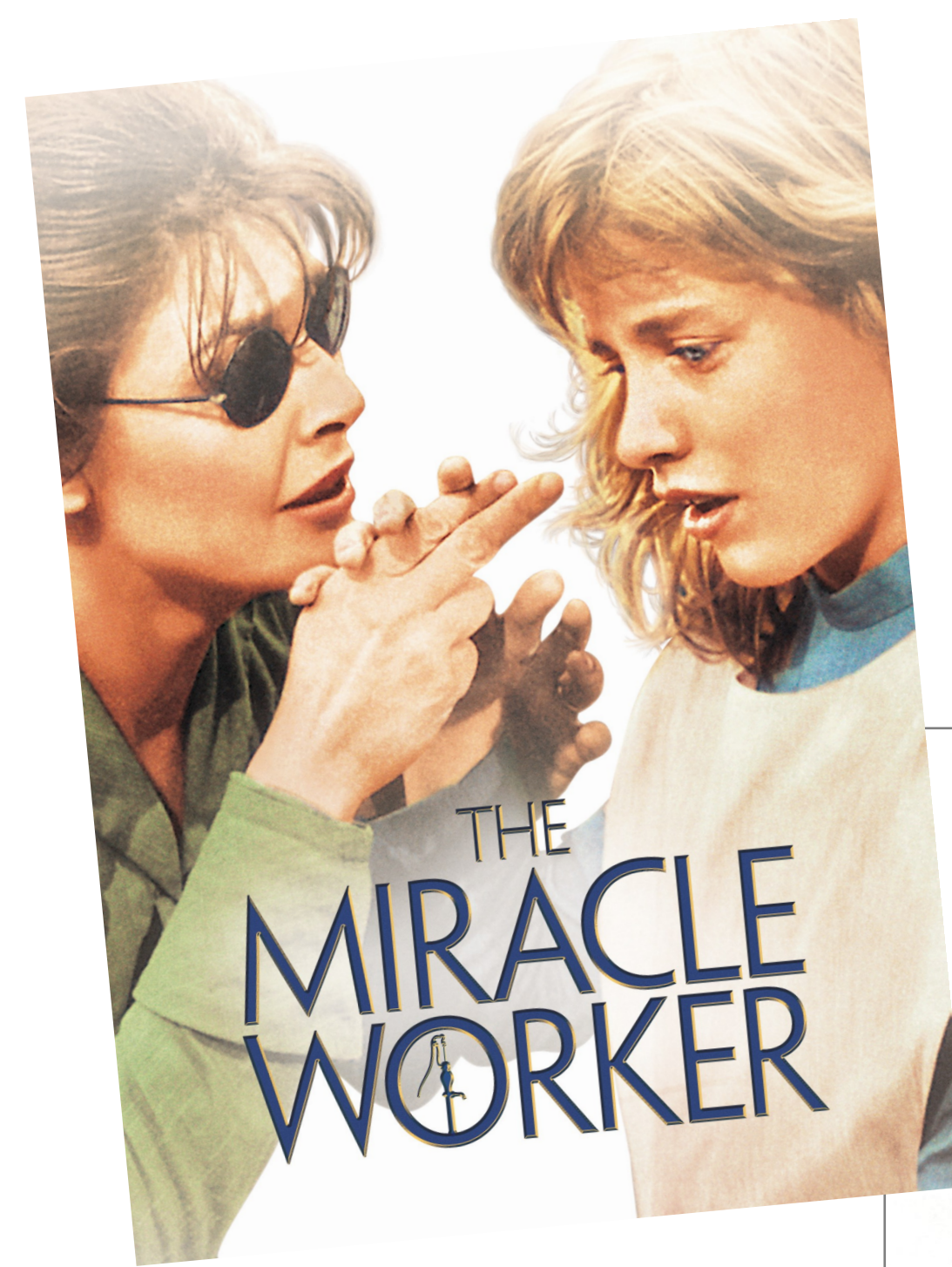
- “Magical Cripple”: the disabled character that guides the protagonist toward enlightenment. Example: the blind Frank Slade in *Scent of a Woman*
- “Evil Cripple”: the mythologically rooted correlation between physical disability and evil. Example: Darth Vader of *Star Wars*
- “Inspirational Cripple”: the disabled character overcomes their disability to succeed. Example: Christy Brown, a character with cerebral palsy in *My Left Foot*

In the end, the depiction of disabilities in films simply reflect the “beliefs and stereotypes about difference” found in society. And as society evolves, so do the depictions and actors.

Some films depicting characters with disabilities that are available at the UW Libraries.



1965: an illiterate and abused blind girl befriended by an African American man. The film intersects both disability and racism.



1962: the story of Helen Keller (blind, deaf and mute) and her teacher Anne Sullivan.



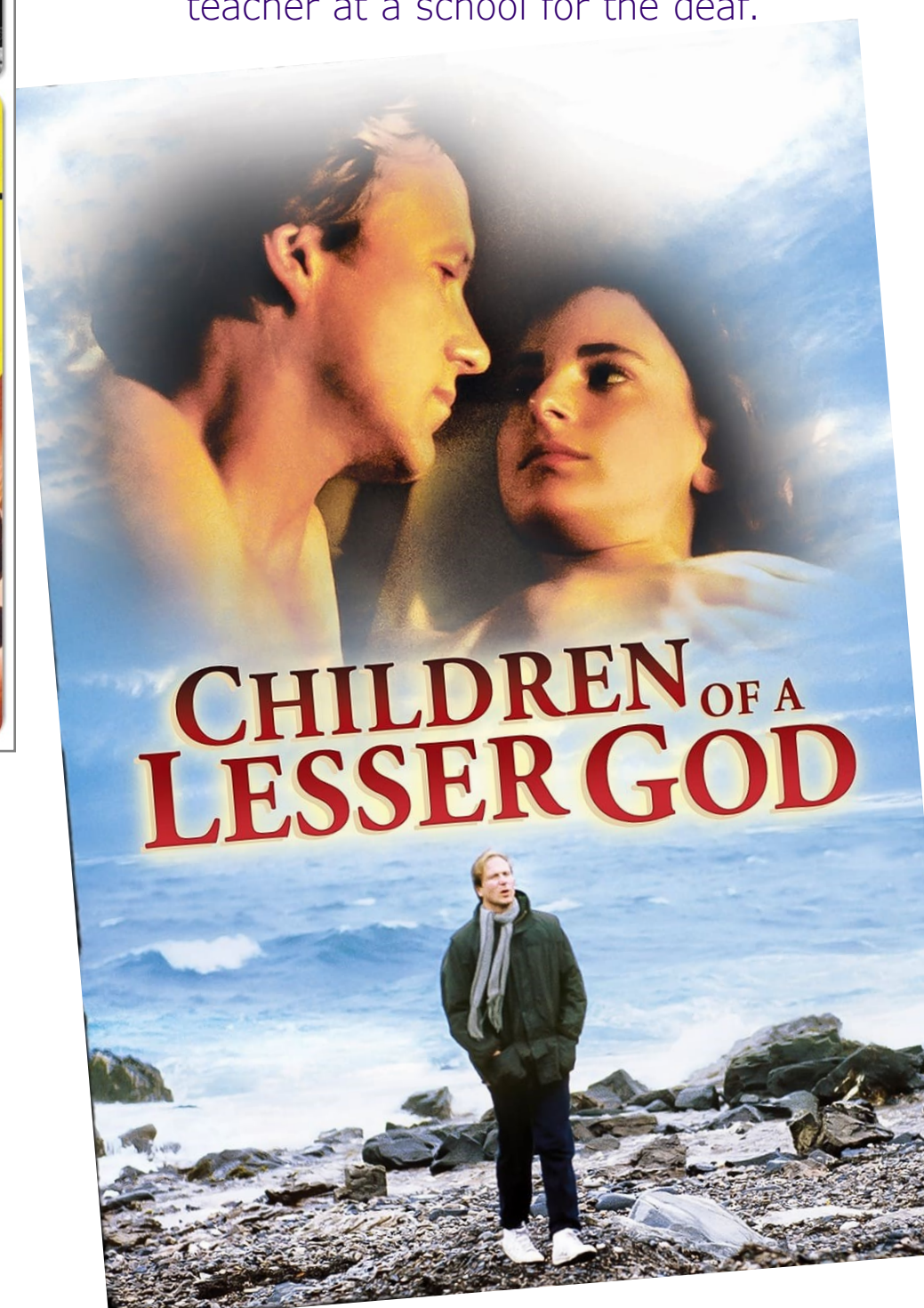
1994: a fable of a man with intellectual disabilities. The film also includes a character with physical disabilities and one with AIDS.



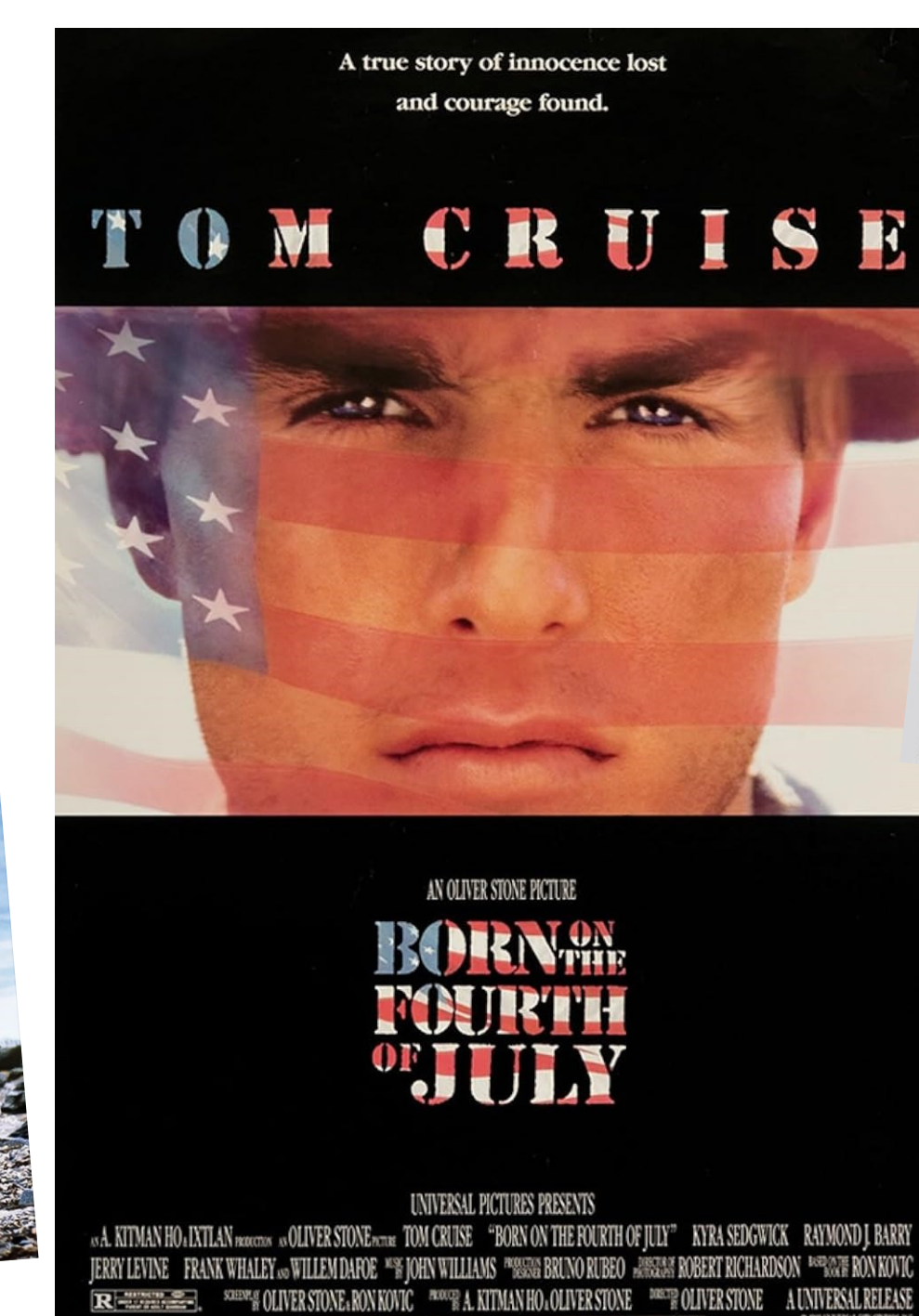
1978: love story between a disabled Vietnam war veteran and disillusioned military wife.



1946: the story of three World War II veterans readjusting to postwar life. One character is a double-amputee played by disabled veteran Harold Russell.



1986: relationship between a deaf custodian and a hearing speech teacher at a school for the deaf.



1989: anti-war film based on the autobiography of Ron Kovic, a disabled Vietnam veteran.

“There is no substitute for the lived experience of disability. It is not a technical skill that can be easily turned on and off. Disabled actors bring with them a lifetime of unique experiences that allow them to present authentic, nuanced portrayals that add not only to the rich, diverse fabric of our country, but create a greater understanding about the society in which we live.”

Christine Bruno, Tri-Union Inclusion in the Arts & Media of People With Disabilities



Academy Award winners: Harold Russell role as Homer Parrish in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946); Marlee Matlin as Sarah Norman in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986); and Troy Kotsur as Frank Rossie in *CODA* (2021).



Disability Drag

There is a long history of casting able-bodied actors as characters with disabilities: Eddie Redmayne as Stephen Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*, Daniel Day Lewis as Christy Brown in *My Left Foot*, Sally Hawkins as Elisa in *The Shape of Water*. Able-bodied actors are attracted to these roles that so often garner praise and prizes — “out of 59 nominations for disabled characters, 27 won an Academy Award – about a 50% win rate.”

A few actors with disabilities have had success in Hollywood: double-amputee Harold Russell playing a disabled World War II veteran in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), Marlee Matlin winning for her role in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), and most recently, Troy Kotsur in *CODA* (2021).

There is an increasing shift, due to the activism of the disabled acting community as well as the growing recognition of the importance of diversity and representation, to cast actors with disabilities as characters with disabilities.