

(From left) Luke Zimmerman, Jamie Brewer, and Lauren Potter photographed on Jan. 25, 2012, in Los Angeles

THE EW REPORT

Actors with Down Syndrome

IN 2011, THREE PRIME-TIME TV SERIES FEATURED ACTORS WITH DOWN SYNDROME IN PROMINENT ROLES. THAT MAY NOT SOUND LIKE MUCH, BUT FOR THE GROWING NUMBER OF ACTORS IN THIS COMMUNITY, IT WAS A MAJOR BREAKTHROUGH—AND, THEY HOPE, IT'S JUST THE BEGINNING.

BY LYNETTE RICE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ART STREIBER





Jamie Brewer

In a time when color-blind casting is no longer a new concept, Brewer and her peers want the chance to audition for any role Hollywood has to offer.



Brewer and Jessica Lange on *American Horror Story*

topic is addressed, it's handled realistically and sensitively. Tom often wants to do things that are beyond his ability—he attempts to drive without a license in an upcoming story line—and in Potter's most memorable episode to date (Jan. 17's "Yes/No"), Becky sadly concludes that Artie (Kevin McHale) didn't want to date her because she has DS. "Some days it sucks being me," says Becky in her internal monologue, brilliantly voiced by Helen Mirren. "Focus, Becky. Don't let them see you cry."

Watching that episode, "Lauren and I both cried," says Robin. "She told me she was crying because she knows that it is true for her, too, that some boys don't want to date her because she has Down syndrome."

While *Glee*'s Becky is popular and has a great support system at school, the character with DS that Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk created for their FX drama *American Horror Story* last fall lived a decidedly less charmed life. Adelaide (Brewer) gets locked in a closet full of mirrors by her fiercely dominating mother, Constance (Jessica Lange), who also

did it. They've very much accepted her." But as comfortable as Potter is playing a high school cheerleader, she admits her experiences growing up and attending public schools were far different back home. "The typical kids would pick on me, like, 'What does she have, Down syndrome?'" recalls Potter, her eyes tearing up at the memory. "At my old school, they pushed me and made me eat sand. I was bruised, beat down, and they make me eat sand. I was little back then."

Tom's and Becky's Down syndrome generally does not define their characters on *Secret Life* and *Glee*; when the

flippantly refers to her daughter as "a mongoloid" in the pilot. Though the abhorrent behavior helped underscore Lange's character as a hateful and bigoted relic from another era, it made for some strange days on set for Brewer, an indefatigable young woman who lives with her parents and grandparents about 90 miles outside of Hollywood. "That was an experience," reflects Brewer about *AHS*, her first TV gig, which she booked through DSiAM. "I thought, 'Why is she putting her in a closet? Why is she having her look at her appearance?'" It was a relief having my mom there. She reminds me this is only acting. With those heavy scenes, I know I can step off that set and be comforted by Jessica or my mom." Still, Brewer—who built her confidence over the years by serving as a motivational speaker within the DS community—did not expect any special coaching or treatment before the difficult scene. "There was no problem with me doing the lines or understanding them."

And that's exactly what Brewer and her peers are asking from Hollywood: to be treated just like any other aspiring actor with a head shot and a dream. More specifically, in a time when color-blind casting is no longer a new concept to television (see: *Glee*,

Grey's Anatomy), Brewer, Potter, and Zimmerman want the chance to audition for any role Hollywood has to offer, not just parts that specifically call for individuals with DS. "Producers have gone from having them play sappy Tiny Tim stories to having them play edgy stuff on *Glee* and *American Teenager*," says DSiAM founder Gail Williamson, who works with about 200 aspiring actors with DS. "We're hoping the pendulum will swing back and maybe settle in the middle."

In the meantime, casting agencies like Ulrich/Dawson/Kritzer of Los Angeles are attempting to do their part by considering disabled actors for a variety of scripted roles. (Besides casting *Glee*, the agency also serves shows like *Dexter*, *CSI*, and *Drop Dead Diva*.) "I'm fortunate to be on a show with a person like Ryan Murphy, who says nobody is ever too outside of the box," says agency partner Robert Ulrich, who earned an Emmy for casting *Glee*. "But I certainly don't feel we have done as much as we should. We have to work a lot harder as a community. As casting directors, our job is to be as creative and as flexible as our producers. But we can only do so much. As with any actor, it's about who is right for the role."

Writers want to create stories that reflect the world we live in, Ulrich points out, and the fact is, many viewers don't encounter people with DS on a daily basis. According to the National Down Syndrome Society, less than 10 percent of the intellectually disabled population are in the workforce. (The federal government does not collect specific data on the DS community.) So far this lack of visibility has made it less likely that casting directors will consider actors with DS in background roles like the receptionist at a law firm or a nurse's aide at the hospital. "It's



Luke Zimmerman

"When I auditioned, there were some guys who thought they already got the part. Never mind that! I did awesome."

—*SECRET LIFE'S* LUKE ZIMMERMAN



Greg Finley and Zimmerman on *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*

MORE ACTORS WITH DS



Josh "The Ponceman" Perry, 32
He's generated over 100 million hits for his "Retarded Policeman" webisodes—though they haven't won him many fans among DS advocacy groups. Perry was recently cast opposite Josh Groban in the movie *Coffee Town*, from Brad Copeland (*Grounded for Life*).



Andrea Friedman, 41
Saving Grace, ER, Life Goes On, Family Guy



Peter ten Brink, 19
Hallmark's *A Smile as Big as the Moon*



Blair Williamson, 32
Scrubs, Nip/Tuck, The Guardian, CSI



Katelyn Reed, 9
American Horror Story, Mr. Blue Sky

not easy,” admits Ulrich. “It’s not that there is resistance; it’s just the way it is. You have to keep truthful to the world, but we should also push the boundaries a little bit, change the consciousness of the world. Because in the entertainment community we are fortunate to have creative control.”

At the very least, an ongoing dialogue with the DS community has begun. John Wells, the exec producer of such shows as *ER* and *The West Wing*, asked DSiAM’s Williamson to help him cast a key character with DS for an upcoming episode of Showtime’s *Shameless*, and even tweaked the still-under-wraps story line using Williamson’s input. Still, he doesn’t think casting an actor simply because he or she has DS serves the final product. “Tell me a great human story,” says Wells. “Don’t give me a statistic. If you come in only pushing a dry advocacy position but don’t actually have a story behind it, we can find it a little tiresome.” But Hollywood has the obligation to try, insists Murphy. “Ten years ago, we were having this exact conversation about gay characters, where they were always the flamboyant, ascot-wearing cliché,” he says. “I think that maybe this is the next area in Hollywood where people will start to change. I hope so.”

Until then, all that the actors with DS can do is keep busy... and wait for the phone to ring. When Zimmerman’s not on set, he volunteers at a local courthouse, hangs out with his girlfriend, and takes ballroom-dancing lessons. (He still lives at home, but yearns for independence so that one day he can do his own laundry.) While Brewer holds out hope that *AHS* will have her back in some capacity—Adelaide died in season 1, but the show has no problem bringing people back as ghosts—she’s currently working on her bachelor’s degree in theater at a local college and studying for her driver’s license.

Potter, meanwhile, balances her work on *Glee* (shooting for season 3 wraps in May) with her duties for the White House: In November she was asked to serve on the Committee for People With Intellectual Disabilities, which will advise President Obama on how to help the community gain better access to schools and jobs. Says her mother, Robin, “Because she has a role on *Glee*, it’s given her a voice to speak out for people who can’t speak out for themselves.”

“Ten years ago, we were having this exact conversation about gay characters. I think maybe this is the next area in Hollywood where people will start to change.” —GLEE AND AHS’ RYAN MURPHY

But her daughter’s heart remains with the Cheerios. When weeks go by and she hasn’t heard from *Glee*, the petite blonde assumes the worst. “I get nervous because they may fire me,” she says with a tinge of worry. That’s not likely to occur; she’s set to appear in at least one more episode when the show returns from a six-week hiatus in April, but like any actor in a recurring role, she has no guarantees. To her credit, Potter doesn’t hesitate to lobby for more screen time whenever she’s around Murphy. “The thing about Lauren compared to all the kids we’ve used is that she’s the only one who will come up to me and say, ‘You’re not using me enough. I haven’t been on in three episodes. It’s time to bring me back,’” says Murphy. “She gets that she is a very important role model. She is very vocal that her fans want to see her.” Says Potter with a smile, “My parents keep telling me they have to stop bringing me to restaurants, because people always recognize me.” ■



Chris Burke with the cast of *Life Goes On*

CATCHING UP WITH CORKY

Though complete strangers still yell out “There’s Corky!” whenever **Chris Burke** walks down the street, he’d prefer to receive accolades for the work he does now for the National Down Syndrome Society. Since 1994, Burke, 46, has served as a goodwill ambassador for the New York City-based organization. The former costar of the ABC drama *Life Goes On*, who earned a Golden Globe nomination in 1990, looks at the achievements of his “very good friend” Luke Zimmerman as proof that huge strides have been

made. “I’m so grateful,” says Burke of the new opportunities for the DS community. “It’s given them the chance to do other things in life.” Though he’s never seen *American Horror Story* (“I don’t like scary movies at all”) and he declines to watch *Glee* because it didn’t cast a real-life paraplegic to play Artie Abrams (“To me it’s discriminating against people who are physically challenged”), he’s thrilled for his colleagues Potter and Brewer: “I’m so glad Lauren and Jamie are doing



great.” Burke, who lives in Manhattan with his parents, longs to make a return to showbiz, if only to follow in the footsteps of other former child actors. “I would love to do different things like behind-the-scenes work,” says Burke. “Just like Ron Howard!” —Lynette Rice