



RJ Mitte Transcript - A Winning Mindset

RJ, it's great to speak to you again! We worked together on the Paralympics and we worked together for the British broadcaster Channel 4 before I moved to BBC. You hadn't been to a Paralympics before and that's really why you were hired, to give that fresh perspective on things. Had you been aware of the Paralympics growing up?

I had and it's great to catch up Andy. It's such a pleasure being able to work with everyone during that period of time and growth. I have cerebral palsy for anyone that's listening that doesn't know, so the disability world is very familiar to me. Growing up I watched the Olympics but I also watched the Paralympics. I hung around to the end and it was always amazing to see feats that so many people believed were impossible that were actually possible and getting the opportunity to go to Rio, see all the sports and be a part of the team... it really changed my life when it came to perspective. Just seeing this true strength of valour for everyone.

I remember I spent most of my time reporting on the wheelchair basketball and it seemed like every time I turned around, you were there in the stand next to me as well. Was the basketball your favourite to watch?

Oh, so many highlights. Basketball was one of my favourites. It was an amazing one. Super aggressive and people don't realise how aggressive wheelchair basketball is and it's almost full contact, so I was very keen on seeing it and watching it. Do you remember that upset? It was towards the end... you were there!

You're going to test me here. You're gonna say 'do you remember that match Andy?' and

Do you remember that one match out of the 100 matches that we saw?! It was a close one!

Okay, so there was a close match. I'm going to get on a search engine while you talk.

I'm drawing a blank. I had my Paralympic book the other day and was actually going through some of the old stuff and you know, I spent a lot of time at basketball games. I went to judo, I went to track, did the whole gambit. It was interesting because you had your main parks, then the equestrian parks, and on the other side of the city. We were all running around but it was pretty remarkable to see everything and see the people. I tried to visit as many different sports as possible and see as many highlights that were out there. The one thing that caught me was not just the athletes but the kids and the parents that were bringing their kids. They were in awe because so many people don't realise how amazing it is to have a disability. I know people don't think about the positive aspects but for me, I focus on the positives because it's a personal challenge. We all have these challenges in our life but when you have a personal one it makes you strive even harder. Every match that I went to, every game I saw. It wasn't a race to win, it was a race to who they were as individuals to shine and it was a fight to the death on every part.

You've been with me, you've seen me. I was born with no hands, a very visible different, as I guess you do in some ways. When you're at the Paralympics, you can relax because you're surrounded by so many disabled people - not just the athletes - and I never get the impression people are staring at you in the same way they would outside of the Paralympics. Did you feel that yourself? And did you feel as an ordinary disabled guy again as opposed to this TV and film star?

Well I didn't feel any air of disability, I didn't see it in this. We were at this pinnacle of athleticism event. It wasn't like a 'oh this is a disabled event', this was a triathlon, a basketball championship, judo, power struggle. It wasn't like 'these are a bunch of disabled people'. It took me out of disability and away from the mindset of my own disability and I was just like 'look at these amazing individuals that are breaking world records, defying physical abilities. For me I think that was something that I really was just in awe of. To see so many amazing athletes that I couldn't ever compete with.

We're going to talk about a lot over the next 40 minutes or so, I'm sure. When you were born you weren't breathing and that led to brain damage, and you were diagnosed with CP aged three I believe. Obviously you didn't know any different when you were three, but how did your cerebral palsy affect you as a child growing up and going to school?

For listeners that don't know, CP is most commonly caused at childbirth from lack of oxygen to the brain, which can affect numerous different things but for me it affects motor skills, hand-eye co-ordination, speech. My whole body is like a rubber band retracting. So, because of that I wore braces and casts, I may or may not have talked a little funny, but that was just because I was from the south. But I was very lucky that I grew up with a disabled grandfather, I grew up with disabled grandparents and different capacities of that. For me, disability was quite normal. I wasn't diagnosed until three but I was able to get treatment at a children's hospital and they were very good to me. When it came to general public school or maybe places that weren't so well versed with people with disabilities, you will get looks. You will get questions. You get questions that they have the question mark on top of their head; they're not actual questions. But for me, I never let that taper who I was as an individual. I dealt with bullies because people saw my cast or braces on my legs and were like, well that's an easy mark. But at the same time, I was very athletic. I played soccer, I was in martial arts, all kinds of physical activity, so sport was a big part of my life and it helped me gain control of my disability, that I could utilise it and grow from it. I always saw adversity as an opportunity. When someone didn't understand me, it was an opportunity to bring awareness, and even before realising that, this is what I have. Either you accept it or you're weak and a loser. But for me, I am who I am and I have the tools to grow from it.

In this podcast series I've been speaking mainly to Paralympic athletes who to a certain extent have come from some sort of background of sport being present in their childhood and having a really positive impact on their life, helping them through. Did sport actually give you that kind of protective band of teammates and brothers, who you knew would protect you from any bullies? I don't mean literally, but a certain status.

100%. You're always going to find people who don't understand. Or that don't want to understand. But when it came to sports, unless you're like an equestrian or shooting or stuff like that, it's not really a team sport, but when you're in a team sport, it's a family.

And you grow as a unit because you need to rely on each other to lift you up. For me, that was a big part of my community growing up, soccer and my teammates. I wasn't in the school (team) I was on the YMCA soccer team. It wasn't like 'I know you from the soccer match' it was more of individual groups. But it really was beneficial when it came to that... yeah, I may have bullies when I was at school but I have a family on the field and it's where a lot of people grow. Me and this team, me and this unit are gonna go and push forward and win this. We win because of a team and co-operation. It was a big factor in how I work with other people. Any child or anyone growing up should be in a team sport. Or a sport, nonetheless. It challenges who you are to strive for greatness, to strive to win and to learn how to lose and accept your loss. That's something we don't always agree with, that we can accept our losses. But I think sometimes we don't learn from a win; we learn how to win by losing.

And the growth of the Paralympics, well if you were a child now or I was and we were playing sport, I guess our classmates and even the bullies would see us playing those sports, see a Paralympic Games on the television, the two things come together and it makes people go 'oh okay, I get this and I accept this. Disabled people play sport in the same way as anybody else is' whereas actually, when you were at school in the 90s and me in the 80s, the Paralympics was there but nowhere near the profile that it is now. So perhaps you were possibly the only disabled person those boys and girls saw playing sport.

100%. It was interesting because in my school they really isolated the people with disabilities to one room and that was a thing I had to fight for, to be in a normal classroom, not for them to put me in a special ed where most of the children were fundamentally disabled and couldn't keep up. My mom fought for me to be in a normal classroom and to just have a normal education because it wasn't as forward as it is now. I believe the Paralympics are one of the most detrimental(?) things to our society when it comes to awareness and understanding who we are as individuals, the human condition itself. We didn't see people like ourselves on the soccer fields in the 80s and 90s and martial arts. For me, having those opportunities...people would even question why I was there. 'Aren't you disabled?' When I was in martial arts they were like, 'I don't wanna hit a disabled kid' and my sensei was like 'no, hit him. Hit him hard!' It's kind of that mindset of no, I am not fragile. I am an athlete, a human, I can do these things. I can push forward. We have this misconception of being disabled makes you a fragile person. And some disabilities do weaken the bones and do make you vulnerable for an injury, but certain actually make your bones stronger, muscles tighter, your body works harder.

Never mind mentally stronger of course. We hear now the push for workplaces to be more diverse, a lot of the time people make the very valid point in my opinion that a lot of disabled people can be mentally strong people to have on your team regardless of what you're doing.

It forces you to be mentally strong. You have two options when disabled. You can be a weak, kind of timid, fragile person where I'm beaten, battered, that victim mentality. Woe is me, why did this happen to me? I'm almost pathetic, right? Or you have that person who is forward and thinking 'I accept whatever this is and I will push forward to make the best of it.' Those are really two paths every human shares when trauma happens, but it is the latter one that we all strive for. And I'm very happy that I grew up with a mindset

of 'can't is a decision.' We all can say I can't do something if we never try. As soon as we try, we can do it and 'Oh my God it was so easy to do this!' but I had to work for it.

When did you begin taking an interest in performing of a different kind?

I started acting because of my little sister. I was around 12, she was 1. We were at a water park in Texas and an agent saw my sister and was like 'we would like to use her for a ... campaign.' That's what got us into LA, it was a six-month campaign and at the time my mom was kind of sick, she was in a car accident and had massive surgeries over seven years. We were like, 'yeah, let's go to LA for six months and they're gonna pay for it!' Fifteen years later, here we are. When I went out there, the agent saw her and saw me and signed us both. I started working on shows like Hannah Montana, Everybody Hates Chris, all as an extra within six months. If you wanna be an actor, find background companies. Extra work is a very great start to build on set, be in the environment. Shortly after working on those I booked Breaking Bad around 13 turning 14 and finished it around 21.

We'll come onto BB in a minute. You forget you were on it so young. The character was a teenager, so were you.

2006! Can you imagine?!

But back in 2006, do you remember there being any or many disabled actors on TV or films?

You know I never had a comparison and I never compared. It was happening around me so quickly that I was just in it and I was doing it. I didn't have a comparison and looking back and now working in the community, I see many actors with disabilities who probably did influence me in ways that I subconsciously didn't know. I grew up seeing people with disabilities because my mom was in Home Health, I was in a weird mindset compared to how other people viewed disabilities.

It comes across very strongly and I've heard it from Jonnie Peacock, myself in my own life. We want to just focus on how well we do our jobs rather than constantly coming back to the disability factor. Is that how you feel?

I feel it more as a working adult than I did as a working teen. I understand and see the stigma that a lot of people have when it comes to working with disabilities, does that make sense? We have a different perspective as an adult of how people view us. As a kid we're just goofy kids with big shoes and braces, it's the name of the game. Then you see that, can you walk? Are you okay? Oh, I guess I do have a disability, relative to what people may see. But as I was growing up in the industry, I saw many facets of how people viewed me and I've turned down a lot of roles because they've always wanted me to be the sick or disabled, and I wish I'd have taken those, looking back! But for a long time, I was against them. I didn't wanna be that person. In hindsight I could be whatever as an actor.

When we move on to Breaking Bad then, when the character of Walt Jr came to you, Walt had a disability in the script or as a concept when it came to you? Or was it that the role was non-disabled and they picked you?

It was the first. The character was written by Vince Gilligan and he wrote him in mind of a friend he had in college, who since passed away. My character was based on a real

person with a disability. And it was open casting so there were a lot of people with disabilities auditioning and a lot of people without auditioning. And luckily, I embodied the character the most from his memory of his friend, and that for me was a great honour to portray this real person in his world. Walt Jr. to me is a very special character and I'm lucky to have a character who wasn't over talkative, was a man of action who would do anything for his action. It's something I strive to be like.

If I can ask you two challenging questions, which I hope you won't take too rudely
Do it, shoot it. I'm taking them rudely.

The first is: were you conscious that you were having to prove to people at home that you were still acting? That this wasn't just you turning up and being you. You were still having to act. And now, since Breaking Bad, do you feel that you are a little more restricted in terms of the other characters you can take on because perhaps your disability limits the range of movement or vocal tones?

Yes and no. Yes, to both and no to both. There's a perception about me in the beginning of 'is he really that disabled?' and when I would go into the casting room people would be like 'oh, you can walk? You don't stutter? You sound the same but not a massive stutter!' But yeah, I can walk and talk and do all these things. It works in my interest that people don't always recognise me because they think I'm more disabled than what I am. I look at that as a positive because it means I did my job right. Does it hinder? Yes. But you know what, I can mic drop on Breaking Bad any day. I'm very happy I had a show like that that gave me notoriety, that allows me opportunities. The only reason why I had the opportunity to work with C4 was because of Breaking Bad and I view it as a great honour and responsibility to the community, to the television industry, to give these positive aspects of disability and humanity. And so yeah some of these things are a double edged sword, but what doesn't?

It's a fascinating subject. Did it strike you at the time that your role would be so ground-breaking in terms of the representation of disabled people?

I didn't realise it at the time or what Walt Jr meant to so many people and looking back, I did see people with disabilities, but it was a different way of showing them. You had Seinfeld, Robert David Hall, Michael J Fox. The closest person I had to relate to was Forrest Gump. But he wasn't really disabled. But it didn't cross my mind, I'm now very honoured we have a Walt Jr to look at and to not just be a disabled person, but a pivotal part of a family. A protector, a do-er. Not just someone sick or dying, an actual individual. As we're seeing more diversity growth now, you're seeing that a lot more. It's still very gimmicky but I am very happy Walt Jr set a tone for what we are striving for in the arts and media.

Now, there are a couple of big controversies that I have to ask you about connected to your world and I'd be fascinated by your views. Firstly, we have seen several disabled characters played on screen by non-disabled actors. And I think in a lot of occasions, they've been played very well and very seriously. But why aren't disabled actors being used for those roles? You know, I have no idea. I think a lot of the time people don't get access to them because we don't know where to get access to. And this isn't just for someone with a disability, it's across the board. I look at shows on television and think 'why didn't I even get an audition for that? Why am I seeing this thing being

produced, people working now and why not me?' A lot of it goes to an acting industry that is a very small industry. Yes, it's a global industry but you see a lot of the time the same people getting hired for the same roles and the reason why isn't because of their great talent, it's because they're consistent. They know these people are consistent so they consistently hire them. And I think when it comes to people with disabilities and the lack of opportunity for individuals to audition, isn't that they can't do the job, we just don't have the ability to really cast properly. There's a lot of facets in our industry that we don't realise there are many pieces coming together. We see the final product but don't realise the hundreds of people who go into that final product. And I think a lot of times, people just get forgotten, which is sad. But it's just how it is. There's a lot of people doing a lot of jobs and then people who don't do their job, and sometimes people just don't care. It's disappointing.

That brings us onto our next story which has been around in recent weeks. When you point out that disabled people can think in different way and we're all individuals, it's interesting to hear how that might apply to this story. We've seen a lot of anger towards the Warner Brothers film, *The Witches*. Now just to explain to people listening, crucially in the Roald Dahl book, The Witches are said to have square feet with no toes and claws instead of fingernails. Now they may have claws in the book, but they do have five fingers on each hand. In the film, The Witches are missing fingers on each hand, and a lot of amputees including several Paralympians have reacted very strongly to that depiction, saying it reinforces cruel images, negative images of people with limb difference.

I agree and I disagree. I watched *The Witches* and there are many issues with that film, let alone the six finger, no toes, bald head, demon smile grins. It could have been better, let's start there. With all the people that they had, and I love Anne Hathaway, she is amazing. But she was decent in this, but at the same time I didn't quite grasp what they were trying to do. When they were gimmicky it could have been less gimmicky and when it was less gimmicky, it should have been more gimmicky. They should have hired amputees which would have been a great opportunity. You're casting people with an extender, a pinkie and a thumb. I know like four people off the top of my head that are missing their ring and middle finger that would have been great for these roles. They should have hired people with disabilities.

Would that have made it okay though RJ?

Probably not, probably not. But at the same time, they should have gave people jobs. People need jobs right now, I just thought it could have been better. When you have something that affects a group or community, you have to look at how can we do it positively? How can we still get what we need out of these character types and show positive impact? I don't think the CGI was great and it was a sub-par film. But having someone like Anne Hathaway, the cast and crew were star studded, you cannot take that away from them. It's got more notoriety now than it ever has. It's an opportunity to take a film that then has this stigma about disability and start the conversation. What could we have done better? Who could we have hired to make this a better film? For me, I look at films like this as a positive step for change. Not a negative, a positive. A lot of people will disagree and say it's making fun of amputees, they're making us look like monsters, and there's a big campaign that's #NotAWitch, I don't know if you've seen that. I've seen it a lot and I agree. But now, let's utilise this awareness on 'I have four

fingers, I have no limbs'. Let's raise that awareness on these aspects of human ability. These aren't new things, they're not things that have just happened over the past ten years. These have been part of our genes since the dawn of man. They used to amputate more back in the 1800s than anything. You've got the flu? Cut his finger off!

Depending on where you stand on this, I certainly tend to agree with you that it could be a kick up the backside to the film industry and they won't make the same mistake again. I guess though, doesn't it point to the wider issue that we rarely see disabled people as the hero in films? It's very easy for films where disabled people are the villain, or people who are made to look disabled are made to be the villain, lots of those. It's rare to see disabled people as the hero and it's possibly only the Paralympics that portrays disabled people positively on such a big scale. We can all sit down and watch it and see heroes for three weeks, but not in other spheres like film, and that's one of the wider issues.

I think though that there's a bunch of psychological studies on what people find uncomfortable or strange or weird and you can see all the studies on how people can view disability and a lot of that comes on amputees, little people, down syndrome, the more noticeable ones. There's many studies and the industry use those studies to target markets. They know Anne Hathaway with four fingers and a shark-like face with a crazy accent, it's a market and start a conversation and blow up. They do that intentionally. That's a marketing ploy. They don't care how it blows up, as long as it blows up for long enough to get a return. And when it comes to showing people with disabilities as a hero, it's a case of look at that person overcoming adversity. The only time you see a disabled hero is when they're in a wheelchair and then walking. Or they're like 'we've regained the strength' and now it's an inspirational porn. There's so many of those that we need to go away from and strive for better and have people that may have a disability, but that person is an everyday individual. Not a disabled person.

I'm sat here and I would love to float something with you that I have thought about for a long time but I fear it would add at least another hour to the podcast. But I have this fairly strong belief that every person on the planet has a disability of some kind and disability should be a sliding scale, it shouldn't be you are or aren't. Everybody has something impairing their life.

That is a rabbit hole and I 100% agree with you. We're born into this world and we die in very similar ways. And I've taken care of my grandparents who have been sick, they've taken care of me as a child, and it goes full circle. We forget that.

Just one final thing on The Witches, Warner Brothers and Anne Hathaway have apologised. They said it was never their intention to offend anyone and Hathaway said she never connected the look of her character to people with disabilities. She said, 'Now I know better, I will do better.' And one other interesting point, my wife said 'as adults we can accept that villains come in all shapes and sizes, and you don't have to be physically different to be evil. But for children, they need some visual difference that somebody isn't right.' You see Roald Dahl and other authors use physical roles to portray the baddies, that could be a pointy nose, he went for

baldness in a woman and people with alopecia are quite upset. He uses physical differences across all of his work, lots of other authors and film directors do as well, it's not something you can point at and say, 'That's a disability'. But it strikes me that the mistake the filmmakers made... if they had gone really extreme and made those fingers look nothing like a human hand, much more creature like, they might have gotten away with it. The fact they still looked almost human, that is why quite fairly lots of people with hands similar to those have got upset. And if there was a big villain in a film who had the same length arms as me and no hands, I would feel upset as an adult, let alone a child. You will have read them too, and there are lots of comments out there from parents saying, 'my child has three fingers and they will get bullied at school tomorrow because of this film.' We have to accept that is very, very upsetting.

I agree with you because when I saw them take off the gloves. It looked like they deliberately sacrificed their fingers and toes, it didn't play to me as naturally born like that. I thought they should have made them claws, almost razor blade type things. This isn't an actor's issue. You can't blame Anne Hathaway for that. The people responsible are the CGI and the guys on the backend. It wasn't the acting, directing was so-so, it was the CGI and those errors where they could have been great. They could have made it unique and it didn't even need this conversation, but they went in a way where they weren't thinking. It's cause and effect. I think people don't think about the reaction and I agree with you, it's something that we need to be aware of in the community. Not just in the disabled community but every community, of how we portray each other, how we affect youth. Because this is a kid's movie. This isn't an adult movie; it's made for children so the perception of children will be a negative thing. I always resonated with the villains growing up, and a lot of people will. Because more villains are human than the heroes. I find often that when you see the villain and they're striving for greatness, they're trying to do something from pain and conquest, it's because of these limitations that were placed upon them, right? I always resonated with the villain but never saw it as a negative. I actually just relate more. That's how they've written them.

It just highlights how every individual has a different reaction. Some kids, and we don't know the background, they might have two or three fingers out there and they might take this on as sort of a badge of coolness. They might play up to it in a positive way. We can talk about this for a long time but something you said earlier is very important. We can accept what's happened here if something positive comes out of it for the film industry and it makes a person think a little bit harder.

The damage has been done, and this is one of many films. Sadly, it was a film with some amazing actors and producers that should have known better.

Let's come back to you RJ to finish. What's next on the horizon for you, either in film or outside of film?

Paralympics 2028! No, not yet.

How pumped are you for those?

You know, I'm very excited to have the Paralympics in my country. You know how the Olympics started, right? In Greece but it was a community to bring the world together. This isn't just some sport game, this is a unity event and for me, it's something I'm very passionate about and is so important to have, this global unity of athleticism and growth and diversities to all come together. And I'm so excited that the United States is hosting this event. I'm very saddened by this year but next year. I'm honoured it's coming to our country and I hope to see you in Los Angeles. I've been seeing the facilities build up since I left Rio, I met with the US Olympic Committee and flew back to the States with them. And they're very excited to be housing them in the US. It's a great honour and I'm very happy for it.

I look forward to RJ Mitte lighting the flame in a jetpack or some sort of futuristic thing in 28.

Come in on a drone? You're gonna jump with me, right? I'll be attached to the front of you!

One can only dream. Just one final question and just to bring it back to try and summarise, do you think the inclusiveness of sport and the diversity of sport and something like the Paralympics can actually be an example to Hollywood?

100%. It's a prime example of the pinnacle of human capability. From disability on. The Olympics and Paralympics are a great example of how able we all are and not disabled. I think over the next years the US really steps up their support and coverage for the Paralympics, and the team for the US, I really think there needs to be more support. A lot of nations do a lot for their Paralympians and I hope soon that the US can match that.

It's been fantastic speaking to you but you are somebody who has really fascinating things to say to you on a series of subjects, and I respect and admire the fact that you come at things from a slightly different angle to what might be expected. But on the lighter stuff, I'm going to book my ticket to LA, find a drone and I'll look forward to being involved in the opening ceremony in eight years' time.

I miss you man; it's been too long! That time that we all shared in Rio and working as a unit and pushing forward was one of the best working experiences I've had next to Breaking Bad in my life. I still think back fondly on everything that we experienced. Even the stress of waking up super early, running to the studio, trying to paraphrase everything that we witnessed. It was a remarkable experience and any broadcaster or actor like me who gets this opportunity to do something like that, take it. It will change so much about who you are and how you see the world.