

# The Wheelchair Activist S3 E9 Transcript

## Marissa Bode

**Emma:** We are already halfway through the third season of this podcast, and I hope you're having as much fun listening to it as I am creating the episodes. If you'd like to support the podcast, you can find the links to our GoFundMe and BuyMeACoffee in the episode description. Another way that you could show your support that is completely free is by sharing this episode with a friend or posting about it on your social media, as well as rating the podcast on whatever platform you're listening to.

This allows us to reach more and more amazing people. This podcast is truly a labor of love so any support that you can show us would be absolutely appreciated.

Welcome to The Wheelchair Activist, a podcast hosted by me, Emma Vogelmann. And every month I interview amazing members and allies of the disabled community who are quite literally changing the world.

**Emma:** Well, this is one of my most highly anticipated episodes from my side because today on The Wheelchair Activist, we are joined by the famous now Marissa Bode. Marissa, thank you so much for coming on the show.

**Marissa:** Of course. Again, thank you so much for having me. Um, my first podcast ever, I think. Yeah. So that's sick.

**Emma:** Oh my gosh. Oh, I'm honored. And, for those of our listeners who may be living under a little bit of a rock when it comes to disability representation in media, can you please tell our audience who you are and what big project you might have coming up?

**Marissa:** Yeah, so, my name is in fact Marissa Bode, um, and I am portraying the character Nessa, Nessarose, in the film adaptation of the wonderful musical Wicked. Which is very exciting. It's, it's been such a long journey, but I'm just, I'm so excited and so grateful to be a part of something so big and so magical.

**Emma:** And I want to ask you about that journey, because I remember a few years ago seeing on Twitter the callout for a real disabled person to play Nessarose in this. So what was that process like? How did you first find out about the opportunity?

**Marissa:** so I definitely... looking back now-- I, I didn't even, I totally forgot about it to be honest, but I did see it floating around on social media, like way prior to when I actually auditioned. But it said like, fantastic-- or like, it said something along the lines of like, must [00:03:00] have, like, really strong singing or something like that.

And I can sing. I can sing. But I look at myself more as an actor who can sing rather than like a strong Broadway singer, singer. And so I was like, Oh yeah, I'll, I'll give it a shot. But I never actually committed and went to do it. Until like, basically at the very last minute, um, when my agent sent it, to me, like actually sent it to me, in late September of 2022.

And it was the audition for Wicked. I had not told my agent at the time really that I sang at all or did any singing. He mainly had sent me, uh, theatrical stuff, stage stuff like plays, or TV stuff prior to that. Um, nothing musical. So he's just like, try your best, and I definitely tried my best.

I [00:04:00] put my all into that audition, to be completely honest, because Wicked is so important to me, and I was like this is huge, and of course I want to be a part of this, so I'm going to try my very very best which I did. Um, and my dad who's my reader for everything he read for me. He's in Wisconsin so he reads over Zoom while I, I film on my phone.

And he read for me in the morning and then later that day while I was at work. I get a call from my agent that I ignored at least three times because I was at work and we were short staffed.

**Emma:** Oh my gosh.

**Marissa:** But I, I finally answered after like apologizing to my coworkers who were busy like, this might be important, can I please answer this?

And they were totally chill with it. Um, and he's like, so we saw your audition, it was really great. Um, and [00:05:00] casting thinks so too, they would like you in for a callback. And so of course I'm freaking out and I'm so excited. And then over the course of a few weeks, I have several more work sessions with casting and callbacks, and then I just like, it's crickets for like a few days or a week.

At least, it might not have been a week. It felt like a week to me. And I was hearing like, back and forth between them, if not every other day, like every day. So I was like, okay, I didn't get it. I'm really sad. And also just like things in my

life in general just weren't going the best for me. And I am being dramatic because that's just the type of person I am.

But like, to me, things in general in my life just like, weren't going well. Like, one of my favorite bracelets broke. Um, my boss at my job, who I genuinely [00:06:00] really loved, he was leaving. And we were already short staffed too. So I was like, I don't know how this is gonna work. and then I was trying to make vegan chili and I was grinding in the pepper and all the peppercorns fell into the chili.

The top fell off and I did start sobbing over my chili. There's probably some tears that fell into that chili. Um, and so I was like, I need something to cling, to, I need a distraction. Yeah. And so. I was like, why don't I just be creative? And so I made this little short film, um, about bad luck and turning your luck around.

And one of my favorite songs at the time was this song called witches by Alice Phoebe Lou, which I also did end up using in the short film, not even thinking about wicked and witches, in general.

And I posted it to my Instagram, not thinking anything about it. Also in the short film, like I, I did create a spell that [00:07:00] said, um, good news will soon come knocking. Which I do think I accidentally did create a spell because literally like two days later, I heard back from casting. Um, and it was for another callback, or at least they told me it was for another callback.

And I go into the callback at 8am, another early one because Jon was also overseas at the time in the UK. And Jon's on the call and we're talking about the character as we had done previously. And then he mentions the video that I posted to my Instagram. And he's like, so I saw that video.

Yeah, it's really cool. But you just got to be really careful about what you post because nobody knows that you're going up for this role. And I was like, actually internally screaming at myself. Like. Oh my God, I absolutely just messed everything up. Like I [00:08:00] ruined it.

**Emma:** Oh my gosh.

**Marissa:** I was actually panicking internally a little bit. Um, but also like, I was kind of sussed out because I was like, well, why do I need to like... nobody knows that I'm going up for this and like, I don't have the part... so like,

**Emma:** Yeah, there should be no restrictions.

**Marissa:** Right. And then he... then I hear a knock at the door and he's like, actually, I got to go get this.

And I was like, Oh my God, of course, answer the door. But he's bringing his camera with him and like the whole zoom with him because this was all over zoom. And he shows me who's at the door. He opens the door and shows me who's at the door. And it's Ariana and Cynthia with the sign that says "Welcome to Oz, will you be our Nessa?"

And I'm not fully processing everything that's going on at all. I'm just like staring at the sign with the [00:09:00] smaller letters just actually trying to read it. And it does not hit me right away at all. I'm like, genuinely in shock. And I was like... Like, I don't know if I asked, Are you sure? But in turn, I was like, Are you sure?

This amazing moment. And also in the background, while they show me the sign, they're playing the song that I used in my video, which is by Alice Phoebe Liu.

**Emma:** How surreal!

**Marissa:** So surreal and also just so thoughtful. Also like, I always forget to bring this up, but like, that same week, randomly, a witch hat just blew into my parents backyard from nowhere.

And I was like, oh, this is, this is for sure, like, I don't know, some kind of witchy omen. Or just something spooky for sure is in the air. And again, I do think I accidentally created a spell. Because also, I was really desperate at the [00:10:00] time. Like, when I did make the short film, because I was having, like, not the best time, and I genuinely thought I didn't get the part, and I was really sad.

I was so desperate for something good to happen, or for me to somehow get the part, even though I thought it was over for me. I was quite literally looking up Good Luck Spells on Etsy to purchase because I was like, I need something. I am grasping at straws. I am so desperate in this moment. They were very expensive, which is why I ended up creating a spell of my own and not purchasing a Good Luck Spell on Etsy.

But after the call I hung up and I immediately called my parents and I think that's when it set in. And I immediately started sobbing, um, to my parents, like, Oh my god, I got it! Um, and they, they wanted me over there to like start

rehearsals, like, immediately, but I didn't have my passport. [00:11:00] Which, when I did tell my parents I got the part, they were happy for me for like two seconds, and then they started yelling at me because they're like, I told you to get your passport!

Which they had. That summer my mom was all over me. She was like, You need to get your passport. And I was like, I'm not traveling anytime soon. I can't afford to travel like that. What's the point? This is-- To any actors listening, one, listen to your mother. Two, get your passport. Yeah and so I had to do this whole convoluted thing where I had to rush my passport.

It was very stressful. But basically, immediately after I got my passport, I was whisked over into the land of Oz and I started rehearsals, basically, genuinely immediately. I, the day I arrived and then I think like the next day I went into rehearsals. I started dance rehearsal, which I had never danced that much in my entire life,

**Emma:** that same day. And so everything happened so fast. It still feels surreal [00:12:00] now, but it felt really surreal. That was my first time ever overseas. Was that in the UK?

**Marissa:** It was in the UK. Yes. And what a, what a great place to be. They had me basically right in the center of London. Like basically just down the street from Hyde Park, which I love Hyde Park.

It's beautiful. Um, Regents Park, I think that's the other park I was by. Which is also absolutely gorgeous and beautiful. The parks there, I think were one of my favorite parts, to be honest. I wish they had more of those in LA. Alas. Um, but yeah, I had such a good time over there and I, I was over there for seven months, I want to say.

**Emma:** Oh, wow. Okay.

**Marissa:** Yeah. So it, it was, a long time. It was a lot, but I had the best time. Um, and it felt like a dream. It still feels like a dream. And [00:13:00] I, I couldn't be more thankful.

**Emma:** Oh my God. I mean, I have so many questions within that, but it just sounds like someone made a movie about getting a role in, you know, a production like this.

Like, I feel like that scene of you getting the offer was like out of a Netflix movie. It just, it feels so cute and so like serendipitous and set up but just in the most beautiful way. And had you met Ariana or Cynthia before getting the offer?

**Marissa:** Yeah, yeah. Over zoom. I think they were, I think they had a rehearsal after or they were busy after or something.

So it was just like a quick step in. It was a last minute decision for them to be a part of it too, because they had originally told me, I think it was going to be at 8:30 or 9, but then last minute they had they had messaged me and were like, [00:14:00] actually, can we do it a little bit earlier?

And that was so Cynthia and Ari could be a part of telling me that I got it. Um, which was really cool and super special.

**Emma:** Oh my god. I could just like... cause I couldn't imagine if that was your first time sort of meeting both of them and then to be offered a part, I would just... I feel like I would explode if that had happened. But just what an amazing way to offer you this role. And you said that Nessa was a really important character to you and I think she is for a huge amount of disabled people. I think particularly, you know disabled people who like musical theater, who care about representation. And there's a lot of controversy, I think, behind the way that Nessa has typically been portrayed. And I, you know, we'll get onto all of that, but why was it an important role to you specifically?

**Marissa:** Yeah, [00:15:00] so I had seen Wicked when I was 11. My mom surprised me on a whim with the tickets to something that I didn't think I would be able to see because the tickets were a bit expensive, um, and so I just kind of thought that was out of the picture for me. But she splurged a little and surprised me with tickets, which was really cool.

And then I, I knew basically nothing about like the overall plot of Wicked other than it was like a prequel or a pre-story to the Wizard of Oz. Um, or at least what I was told. And so I went in and I saw... Obviously, there's an intermission, there's two parts to the story and seeing the character on stage in a wheelchair is like, oh my god, I'm so excited.

And during intermission, I remember speaking to my mom and being like, I wonder if she's actually in a wheelchair. Like, that's so cool that [00:16:00] there's a character in a wheelchair on stage. Cause I like maybe had seen a

character in a TV show, like one time that was in a wheelchair and it was only for like a special episode.

And then you never see that character again. And, and so I was really excited because I had never, on stage anyways, seen anybody in a wheelchair at that point in my life. And so I was really excited and I had told my mom, I was like, do you think that person, that actress is actually in a wheelchair?

And then you get to the second act and it's about her like being fixed and like wanting and pleading and wanting to be fixed. Um, and then. standing again. And obviously ambulatory wheelchair users exist. My partner is one of them. But this also very much wasn't that, especially in terms of betrayal.

And I can't talk a lot about the second [00:17:00] film. But there has been changes that I am happy with in terms of the whole fixing aspect, um, and wanting to be fixed. And also just like, again, having somebody who is authentically in a wheelchair is so important. Again, ambulatory wheelchair users exist, but I did in fact, because I'm a curious person, I literally Googled after the show "is so and so actress actually in a wheelchair?"

Um, answer was no. Uh, so it's so important for disabled actors because we're already so underrepresented in the media in general. So it is so important for actors who are authentically disabled to be cast in disabled roles because nobody knows us better than us. And it does add a better layer of authenticity and just an elevated layer in [00:18:00] general.

And also just having other people in wheelchairs, even if it wasn't me, even if it wasn't me cast in this, it still would've been so important **for somebody to see**, disabled people to see themselves represented. And also another thing, um, just kids in general to see

somebody in a wheelchair represented because education is so incredibly important and there is such a lack of education surrounding disability. I definitely learned that. The job that I was at, which I got the call, that I mentioned for, I was working with kids. I was working with middle schoolers. I was basically an afterschool art teacher slash mentor.

I love working with kids. I love the job itself. Um, but it was really such an eye opener to how little kids know about disability. Because obviously like kids are curious, so they're going to ask me all these questions. Their questions and like assumptions about disabled people. And I was like-- no [00:19:00] fault to theirs, obviously, because they're kids, and the education system isn't where it

should be. I, I didn't get that growing up at all. But it, it was just a reminder of like, wow, you guys really don't know anything about disability. Your assumptions about disability or just like about disabled people... again, no fault to theirs at their own because they're kids and just not taught this.

And I was like, this is scary because how, how are disabled people ever going to be included or ever going to be treated as the human beings that they should be treated as if there's no education, or if people look at disability as this scary, bad, big deal of a thing? Um, so it's so important to me. A roundabout way of me saying representation is so, so important and just scratches the surface of inaccessibility or just ableism within this whole [00:20:00] system.

**Emma:** I think you're, you're absolutely right. I also never have a problem, if a kid came up to me and asked, like, "what's that?" You know, for either, like, my vent or my wheelchair. But what I don't like is when parents or guardians or whoever will sort of shush them and, like, not explain.

Because it-- you're absolutely right. If it's not talked about and like normalized when you're young, you then become an adult. And that adult becomes a doctor, they become a lawyer, they become anything and they will need to interact at some point with a disabled person. And if they haven't been taught how, then how is anything ever going to change?

**Marissa:** Exactly, you said it perfectly. And yeah, you're so right with the shushing thing. And which is why, like, you should teach in home about disability and how to interact with kids. Because yeah, [00:21:00] staring isn't the best and pointing isn't the best, but rather than, like, shushing your kids or turning them away, because that inadvertently, and whether it's subconscious or not, is already off the bat, showing the kid that disability is something that should be shushed or that disability is a bad thing. Just explain.

I use this one example as like a, this should be how parents and kids interact in person with people with disability. I was at the grocery store one time, and this kid just pointed at me in like the little shopping cart, and was like, Mommy, what's that? And the perfect response, probably the best response ever is, "She's in a wheelchair.

They just use that to get around. Some people just get around a little bit differently." And just went about their day. That perfect way. You're not shushing the kid, simply explaining to the kid what it [00:22:00] is, and then you're going about your day. And I know, like, also, like... I don't have an issue with it, but I know within the disability community, some people have a

preference as to whether or not asking the disabled person. Because at the end of the day, it's true, it isn't,

in public, necessarily our jobs to educate non disabled people because that should be happening in home. But like, I don't mind it personally. But, so in this case, I feel like that was like, a good way all around because you aren't asking like, the disabled person to explain it themselves and also like, you're, you're explaining it in such a simple, simple way. But yeah that, I thought that was great. Mother, if if you're randomly listening to this, mother in the store probably like a year ago that did this, thank you.

**Emma:** Yeah, I mean, because it's, you're right, it's such a simple explanation. Like, you don't need to try and, like, explain various medical conditions [00:23:00] or, you know, all of that to a kid, right? You know, you're just... It's, it's not appropriate and it's also not helpful to them. But to put it in such a clear, like, "this is just what some people do.

And this is what some people need" is so important. And I really wish that more parents did that. But I think, you know, what experience then does that parent then have with disability? And, you know, how did they become comfortable saying that to their kid? Because I can imagine as a parent that if your child asks you something you don't know, then you do just try and like brush it off or distract, divert, whatever it might be.

Right, exactly.

But luckily that mom knew a way to respond to that or felt confident responding to that. I think it's so important that, what you were saying about kids and representation and [00:24:00] seeing it. And I think with *Wicked*, what really struck me, even, like I said, you know, just seeing that call out on social media all those years ago, that already, as a disabled person, kind of won brownie points for me for that movie. Because it meant that they cared enough to

want to find an actor who does have a disability like the character. And so it shows such a willingness, even though it's so small and it seems so obvious, that you would want a wheelchair user to play a wheelchair using part. But as I'm sure you know much more than I, that doesn't always happen.

**Marissa:** Right. And, I keep saying that *Wicked* and just how the whole team behind the scenes has handled disability in general, genuinely should set [00:25:00] precedent for everything ever. One in terms of like casting disabled

people. But two, in just like how to interact with us and to see how our, our needs, just as any other actor, are met. Um, in the way that they hired a disabled choreographer to help choreograph the dance, which is so important. Shout out to Hannah Rainer. She's incredibly talented. Love her dearly. They hired a disability advisor, also love her dearly, who's in a wheelchair. Shout out to Chantel. Just so much love to her.

She's like my UK mother. Um, they basically built the first of its kind, to my knowledge, accessible trailer. So that I could have a trailer just like all the other actors. Which you would think should have been standard by now, um, for every other [00:26:00] project that has included a disabled actor. But when they built the trailer too, they consulted with Chantel, um, like how should this be built?

What would be helpful? She gave them suggestions, not thinking like they would go through with like every single one. And they ended up going through with every single one of her suggestions. Like they had buttons on the counters to like raise and lower them. So that in the future too, like if there's a wheelchair user that needs it at like a higher height or their chair is a little bit higher, they can adjust that. Um, a sliding door for the bathroom so that it's easy to press for uh, wheelchair users who might not have as much mobility in their hands.

There was a lift to actually get into the trailer. Um, there was also, I didn't need it, but there was also a hoist in the restroom.

Wow.

Um, so--

**Emma:** I'm sitting here thinking in the UK, and I grew up in the [00:27:00] States so I can somewhat speak to that as well. But I'm sitting here, like, in the UK thinking we don't even have a hoist in every, like, doctor's office or in every hospital.

So, if you think about it in that context, like, them going above and beyond to provide all of that is really exceptional.

**Marissa:** Yeah, yeah. And to whoever uses my trailer next, like, so much love to them. And... and I think even just having an accessible trailer like that just shows, yes, disabled actors exist and we're also here to stay and we're ready to be cast in the future.

Um, cause I think having inaccessible spaces shows, or like, has that mindset of just not being welcoming. And, and just not thinking about disabled people, not acknowledging our existence. So just having [00:28:00] accessible spaces in general is so important. And in terms of acknowledging our existence and also being like, hey, you're welcome here

and we're here to include you. So I think that was really important. And the team over there did a great job. And they were just always checking in with me. Jon, director Jon, was also always just checking in with me if I was comfortable. Like every time I went to a new set, he was always checking in,

"Does this work for you? Are you able to get around?" And I just appreciated that a lot because that's just unfortunately so rare in our everyday life of people just acknowledging us in general.

**Emma:** And to make sure that you feel as included in spaces, like you say, as every other actor who is also on that set.

I mean, you're right, it absolutely should be like a very reasonable expectation that all of that would [00:29:00] happen and that your needs would be provided for. But you are right, that doesn't often happen. I mean, in so many workplaces, you know, whatever the workplace is, like, let alone in an industry like film. You know, you imagine various things,

but I think unless you're in it, you really don't understand what is possible, what isn't possible until we hear about these good practice examples of like you with Wicked. And I had the privilege of, um, interviewing Zak Ford Williams, who was the first wheelchair user in Bridgerton and hearing about his experience about the team went above and beyond and, you know, really had that attention to detail and to his needs.

It just shows that it is absolutely possible. So why is it not happening all of these other places?

**Marissa:** Right. It reminds me of a quote from the late Judy Heumann, who we [00:30:00] all love. For anyone listening that doesn't know who that is, mother of the disability rights movement, incredible, incredible person and activist, um, wheelchair user.

A quote that she had said that I always think about is "If I have to be thankful for an accessible bathroom, how is there ever going to be any progress that's ever made?" Because an accessible bathroom is the bare minimum. Um, and if

we have to like be on our knees being like, "Oh my God, thank you." Basically being like, thank you so much for allowing me to pee with ease and go to the bathroom with ease. How are we ever going to have any further progress when an accessible bathroom is the bare minimum and should be the bare minimum? Um, in terms of just having us included and just being human and being able to access things like every other person [00:31:00] and adult in society.

**Emma:** Absolutely.

It's like, it's a basic human right. And I mean, I also adore Judy Heumann. I mean, her book was sensational. And I have to do this, shout out to the producer of this season of my podcast actually worked with Judy on her podcast. And, um, I just felt so incredibly privileged to have that

you know, tangential connection to, like you say, like the mother of disability rights and the movement. And we all owe her so, so much. Um, I really would love to talk about like the character of Nessa. Because I know that there will be, like you say, things in the second film that you felt happy with the portrayal. But, uh, you know, in sort of that particular scene, which I think, you know, for those of you who are [00:32:00] listening who don't know, you know, there is this moment where the character of Nessa gets,

she gets cured and that, you know, she does stand. And for that reason, like you alluded to, that's why in the stage show, I don't know if it's ever being played by a disabled actor. So I'm really curious what you, as a disabled actor, took from all of that knowledge of like how Nessa was portrayed, and seeing that portrayal, you know, yourself, when you looked up, "was this person that I just saw and thought was really cool, disabled?" Oh no she isn't. Like, how did you bring all of that into how you portrayed this character?

**Marissa:** Yeah, so, obviously, honoring the original script in some ways and obviously like the character itself. But we really wanted [00:33:00] to make sure that this character-- Because also in the stage version, you don't really fully get a sense that she even fully likes Elphaba. She just kind of looks at her as like a nuisance or just annoying.

Um, just like--

**Emma:** Kind of like that like carer or that personal assistant that you don't really want around is kind of the vibe that I got.

**Marissa:** Yeah. yeah. And like, I get it to a degree because obviously there's nothing more that a lot of disabled people want than to be independent and not have anybody breathing over their neck.

But the way that it was portrayed in the stage musical was a little bit more one dimensional. Um, and her character was a little bit more one dimensional. And so in this you actually get to see the bond between the two sisters. Yes, there is still an element of, at one point she does get [00:34:00] annoyed by Elphaba when she pops back up at her school, which she isn't expecting at all.

Cause this is her time away from home and she's, she's still constantly being asked like, are you okay? Like always having, mainly her dad breathing down her neck. Because in this version, Elphaba really does understand that Nessa is independent and she can do things, which I think is really important.

Because obviously, like, there's balance in the way that there's nothing wrong with, as a disabled person, asking for help when you need it. And that's something I'm still learning. While at the same time, we should have space to be independent when we know that we can be independent. Um, and so I think that's definitely shown in the film version rather than, than the stage version.

And again, going back to the bond between the two sisters, I also think that's, [00:35:00] that's very important. Cause again, going back to the whole thing of, being not so one dimensional. It gives her more of an arc for the second film as well. Um, and to everything that transpires, which again, I can't really get into, but it gives her more of an arc rather than just, I don't like my sister for the whole entire thing.

my sister's annoying for the whole entire thing. And it also just like, brings more, um, love and care and makes her... She's of course human, but it just makes her more human. And just, she is a person, rather than just wheelchair girl. You know what I mean?

**Emma:** Yeah. It's like, like any person, there are different facets of your personality and you're going to be in different moods at different times. But I find sometimes with the portrayal of disabled people, it's sort of, a lot of the time it's very one note. Like they're always [00:36:00] sad, or they're always defiant, or, you know, whatever it might be, depending on what it is. But showing that, like you say, that range is part of being human.

**Marissa:** Yeah, it absolutely is. We... and this is like, to me stating the obvious, but disabled people feel all sorts of emotions, and do all sorts of things, so why just show one thing? But yeah.

**Emma:** Did you bring any, like, particular notes, or like, any ideas to the character, or to the production? Because I'm imagining, I mean I don't know what the group of writers was for, for Wicked, but how they maybe were able to get that more nuanced portrayal of a disabled person, like, was there a disabled person in that group? Or, you know, were any comments of yours taken on board [00:37:00] as, you know, a real life living disabled person, like, you know, in terms of how you thought the character should be?

**Marissa:** Honestly, not too much of the character itself. But I know like specifically for the dance, this isn't something that I implemented, but um, something that Jon had made note for in the dance sequence, is the interlude where I dance with Boq, he, he made it and they changed the music, um, and the choreographer helped change this too.

They changed the music so it was a little bit more upbeat. It is a dance and we want to have fun. It is like a beautiful, as in the stage musical, it's like a beautiful moment between Boq and Nessa, but this is like, it's just more upbeat and lively and fun because we're allowed to have fun like that.

So it's not necessarily anything I changed as I didn't [00:38:00] change the script really or I didn't change anything that was written. But I, I was a part of change within the character itself, which was, really cool.

**Emma:** That's really interesting. I mean, I'm dying to ask you intricate things about the plot and like, you know, the storyline with Boq and everything. But I'm just thinking about, you know, again, sort of the, portrayal of disabled people and how I know there has been, you know, sort of feedback and critics and whatnot of Nessa sort of then turning bitter and angry for, you know, someone sort of rejecting her.

And I don't know if this resonates with you, but like I've certainly noticed in media representation that particularly with villains, that a lot of the [00:39:00] time they can be portrayed as disabled people. Or, you know, like there will be someone who is in a wheelchair or has a facial abnormality or whatever it is, who plays the villain and then they get rejected and then they turn super villainous and that's what, you know, sort of launches them into that.

But do you sort of feel that that is kind of the case with Nessa? That it's sort of as standard as that or as obvious as that?

**Marissa:** She definitely does turn bitter but I think because we have what we have in the first film and again it gives her more of an arc, it does show that she is more complex and what she's doing isn't because she's evil per se or because she is like a villain. [00:40:00] But it's because she's hurt and she's jaded of people just, one, like leaving her and leaving her behind, and also just like, just feeling alone. She... and I, I've had periods of my life where I am alone, so I understand like, being alone for so long, you, you have so many thoughts. There's so many thoughts that you can have and they can either be positive or negative or maybe a mix of both.

And I actually ended up journaling as my character to help me further get into the role. And as I was journaling, I did have like that, push and pull, like the bargaining of like how I feel about people, um, or how I felt as the character, how I felt about everybody else in my, life. And it wasn't just pure anger, it was sadness.

It was, it was hurt. Um, maybe some of it was glee [00:41:00] that, now that I am alone, I, I can fully be independent. But yeah, Nessa is definitely, as are a lot of the characters in Wicked, um, just very complex. She's not just the villain or like the sister that's annoyed by everything and ungrateful for everything.

She's, she's a number of things.

**Emma:** So interesting, you journaled as the character as like a way to get into it. Is that something that you've done before or is it just something that you did for this role?

**Marissa:** So I went to performing arts college, and that was an exercise for one of our assignments one time. And it was just like a one page thing, but I, I had never done it for like a character, character that I had actually been cast in before. But because I care about this so much and this is the [00:42:00] biggest thing I've ever been in, in my entire life,

I really wanted to, especially for the second film, show the complexities within my character and, and really, really nail it. Cause I, I do, I am hard on myself and I do hold myself to a really high standard, and I, I really wanted to be in the mind of my character and really make my character as real as possible.

**Emma:** Yeah. Oh, that's so interesting. And I think, you know, we would be, like, missing something really important if we didn't talk about how it feels for you being a authentically disabled person playing Nessarose. And, you know, not just a big role in terms of the disabled community, but it's, you know, Wicked's one of the most highly [00:43:00] anticipated films of the year.

Like, how, how does that feel for you as a disabled actor? Like, do you feel that pressure or is it just, I'm so, you know, welcome towards this opportunity?

**Marissa:** Oh yeah, I feel the, I feel the pressure for sure. I, I am such an anxious girly. I am such an anxious girly for literally everything ever, forever.

Um, I, I think about things from 10 years ago that I did and I'm like, "oh my god, why did I do that?" And I'll just like, fixate on it. So there's absolutely pressure for sure, because that's just how my brain works. And again, like I really do hold myself to a very high standard. And in terms of like to make sure that my acting does feel real and that it is emotive enough and I can connect with the audience when I [00:44:00] do it. So definitely a lot of pressure, but again, like if it wasn't me cast as, as Nessa, I still would have been happy that it went to somebody that's authentically disabled, and that they were seeking and casting people that were authentically disabled. Which also makes me want to bring this up because, one thing about me is I'm never going to shut the hell up about people I care about.

And so in the first film we see in the trailer uh, a mini Elphaba. There's also a mini Nessa who they did also cast who is authentically disabled.

She uses both the wheelchair and a walker, so she is ambulatory, but she was four at the time of filming. Genuinely, one of my favorite days on set was just seeing this cute [00:45:00] little, little thing, this cute little child in this wheelchair. She was in costume with like her, her little curls.

The brakes on her wheelchair, like my wheelchair too, just like stunning, but hers too, like the brakes on her chair, like so much attention to detail. Cause she is Nessarose, her brakes were roses. They were like little flowers.

Oh, cute.

Yeah. And she was just... We, we did in fact race on our, our first day. She won, of course she won. Um, and I still keep in contact with her family. Just very, very like ironically, her family lives down the street from my partner. So, we see her often. My, my partner, has been actually helping homeschool her. She's six

now. But she is the cutest little thing. She has a little sister [00:46:00] too, who is also adorable.

Her family, I, I genuinely cannot say enough good about her family. They are just so lovely, such lovely human beings. I could go on and on about them, but they are such lovely people. I love them so dearly, they honestly feel like family to me, almost, now because I love them so much.

They're doing such a good job of raising their kids. But yeah, it goes back to authentic casting that for younger Nessa too, that they did hire somebody and that they did seek out somebody even for younger Nessa that was authentically disabled. So that's also important, especially like, because it's a young role.

So that like, people that are Cesi-- that's her name-- Cesi age, can see that, if they're allowed to see the film, maybe it's too scary for younger kids, I don't know. Um, but, so that kids [00:47:00] can see a disabled character that young, um, to be like, hey, I can be an actress, too, if I want to be an actress, which is also super important.

Her mom actually just sent me a picture the other day of her with the Nessa doll, um, which was really cute.

Oh, is that the Barbie?

Yeah. Yeah.

Oh, that's so cute.

The day that she got it, she had sent me a video of Cesi being like, "I love it so much" and I, I was holding back tears because that was, that was everything to me, and it was so precious. And yeah, it meant a lot to me.

**Emma:** I completely agree with you on, you know, children who are going to be seeing this, but also as a disabled adult, like for me, knowing that, you know, they gave that opportunity to a young disabled child, like that's so... I don't want to say [00:48:00] something like really cheesy of "really healing" but it kind of is. Because I, you know, I loved theater and performing and all of that as a young disabled kid.

And if, you know, there were opportunities like that, that were more abundant, you know, that it could be very different for a lot of disabled performers who there aren't enough opportunities for. But the fact that they wanted the

authenticity so much to be there that they did hire a disabled child to play the role, I think is, is really beautiful.

**Marissa:** Exactly. And I, I'm a hundred percent biased, but they chose such a good kid to play the role. She, she's great and I couldn't be happier.

**Emma:** So I have to ask what-- I mean, I have mixed feelings about this question because my question is, you know, sort of like, what's next for you?

Like, in a previous [00:49:00] episode, I interviewed Jenna Bainbridge, who is a disabled actor on Broadway, and I asked her this question, you know, what's the ideal role, like, what's next for you? And she actually mentioned that she'd love to play Nessarose. Um, you know, of course, being a disabled actor on Broadway. But I, I feel like when I saw Simone Biles in the most recent Olympics saying, you know, when commentators would ask her what's next, she would be like, well, can't we just kind of like focus on what's just happened now?

And you know, this major success that I'm currently sitting in? Like, why does it always have to be forward looking? So I've mixed feelings about asking you this, but I kind of want to, because you're playing someone else's dream role, you know, as a disabled actor. And of course there are so many roles that exist that are not just, you know, disability, or they don't [00:50:00] have to be a disabled actor, or, you know, disability doesn't have to be part of the character. But what, what do you want to do next?

What's the next sort of dream role, or do you have anything lined up?

**Marissa:** Currently don't have anything lined up, but there's so much that I would love to do, especially since I'm so early on in my career. I would love more of this, which is like collabing with more disabled people in various things, whether it's like being in a writer's room with more disabled people and consulting on that, um, or just working with more disabled actors on a stage or in a film is very important to me.

But also in terms of like characters, like, as you mentioned, I would love to be cast in more roles where the disability isn't the main focus and we're just existing [00:51:00] and kicking it. Because, again, like, as you know, what's portrayed in media does have such a huge impact on how we're perceived in real life.

So, I would love to just exist so that while I'm out in public, I don't have to explain to Susan on the corner, who I've never met, why I'm disabled when she's a grown adult. Cause like, I don't know you! I don't know you! Why, why do you need to know that? Um, But I would love to play more characters, that don't just focus on the disability or at the very least, like, acknowledge it because acknowledging it is important so that we are accommodated, but just moving on and not making like this huge deal about it or, or treating a disability like it is

just like the worst possible thing to happen to you. Cause like, I'm not the first person to make this analogy, or the first disabled person to make this analogy, but we don't treat people with [00:52:00] glasses like this. You know what I mean? Like we don't, glasses are used as an assistive tool for people to help them see better.

But we don't see a person with glasses and are like, "So sad that they're wearing glasses." Like, "I'm going to pray that you get better. And that they don't wear glasses. It's just such a tragic thing that they're wearing glasses. I feel so bad for them." Because wearing glasses isn't a big deal. As me being in a wheelchair isn't a big deal.

I am literally just sitting down. It's, it's not that deep. People want to make it this big deep thing and it is not that deep. So I would love, in short, I would love to be in more roles where my chair isn't this huge big thing. Because it's not. That's just reality. It's something that doesn't need to be pitied. Um, and like anything that's seen as bad about wheelchairs or other assistive devices, [00:53:00] 9 times out of 10, it's because of inaccessibility that exists in the world.

**Emma:** Like, like, rather than saying like, "Oh, it's so sad that she can't get into the building because of her wheelchair." No, it's sad that the building wasn't built properly for a wheelchair user to get inside of it. It's on the architect for not acknowledging the existence of disabled people, rather than a disabled person's fault for having a disability. I think that's so interesting because it's like, there are two ways of looking at that, right? You're missing out by not going into the building and doing whatever's in the building. But the building is also missing out on what you could bring to it and whatever's happening inside.

**Marissa:** Right. And like my patronage. Like if it's a restaurant, like you're missing out on my money and my coin, which

**Emma:** Yeah.

**Marissa:** bad for you, but I guess that's me saving money.

**Emma:** Yeah, or taking it to a restaurant that does care. So [00:54:00] like for, you know, to put it like back with this film, you know, with *Wicked*, if you're wanting to spend money on seeing a portrayal of disability that, you know, is in a film, like, do you want it to be this where it is an authentic disabled actor and, you know, there are things that have been done to address previous

criticism, like of the character, and have that authentic representation. Or do you want to spend your money watching a film that isn't a disabled actor, that paints a very one dimensional picture of disability, and it's more often than not, either the tragedy or the incredible inspiration.

Like, you know, the choice is with the disabled movie watcher to decide which portrayal they want to see.

**Marissa:** Right, exactly. Cause like, I'm sure you've had a lot of the same experience [00:55:00] because you're also disabled, but like, there's been times where I'm just in public doing the most bare minimum thing that any other abled has done and I'm called brave or inspirational.

I was getting Girl Scout cookies one time, and the woman was like, "You wheeled yourself all the way here? So brave of you." It's like, girl, I just want my dang cookies. Give me my Thin Mints and let me be, please. I am begging. Like, I... Like, why are you not saying to any other person that's at the store getting Girl Scout cookies that they're brave for-- You didn't ask, like, the person behind me if they, they walked to the store.

And if they did, they were brave for that. Like, I, I, I don't understand. Well, I do understand. And it does go back to, like, the lack of education about disabled people and our existence as a whole. But yeah, people, people love to [00:56:00] make disability something way deeper than it actually is. Like, I, I'm not inspirational for simply existing. I am just a human being.

**Emma:** Yeah, I, I couldn't resonate with that more. And these, these assumptions that people make about what you can and can't do, and how difficult or not difficult things are, it is, it is wild at times. Yeah, I could talk your ear off about like different experiences that

I've had where people, like you I think said earlier, you know, the I'll pray for you type thing. And you know, we, we're all over that can of worms, but there's so much that's problematic with that, and the responses and all of that. But just like bringing it back to you and this character and just I, I really [00:57:00] as like a disabled person, like, I can only imagine the pressure that you have felt

and probably still feel, you know, doing this role with having so much attention on you and so much like previous conversation about the character and everything. But I desperately want to say, like thank you for doing this podcast because this is like, an opportunity for us to have that conversation about, you know, why is this different, why the industry is slightly different, why is it changing, and why should it change. And I think, you know, bringing it to disabled

audiences and talking about it is incredible. And getting you on the podcast absolutely was a pipe dream of mine that I did not think that I was going to get to do because like I said, it's a hugely highly anticipated film. So, you know, it, it says a lot to me that, you know, this was something important for you to do.

So I really want to say thank you.

**Marissa:** Yeah, thank you. Thank you. Not only for just having me, but for this podcast in general. For just having other disabled people within the industry be able to speak on their experiences. Because again, it does go back to the thing of one education, but also community for other people, other disabled people to be able to listen to this, um, and, and hear from others, their experiences within the industry. Because, again, back to representation, it makes us all feel less alone. So thank you.

**Emma:** And if I don't see you sometime in the future playing a young Judy Heumann, I'm going to revolt.

**Marissa:** Well, I, if, well, if it isn't me, I would obviously hope that it would, would be another disabled person to ever play Judy Heumann in the future because that, that needs to be a thing for sure.

If any, any producers are

**Emma:** listening to this, hire Marissa. Get me to, you know, come in and do some other stuff or I'll be an extra.

I'll, I'll, I'll get someone to get you coffee, whatever it is, but this absolutely needs to happen. But thank you so, so much, Marissa, for coming on the podcast.

**Marissa:** Absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you.

**Emma:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of The Wheelchair Activist. If you want to stay up to date and catch all of our previous episodes, you can find them all on my website, the wheelchair activist.com. You can also follow me on social media at Emma dot Vogelmann on most platforms, and if you'd like to support the podcast, our links to the

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