

JULY/AUGUST 2008

AUDIOLOGY TODAY

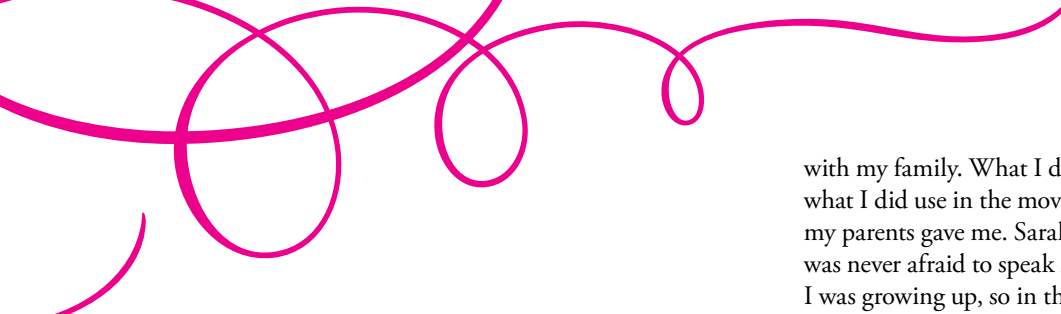
An Interview with

Marlee Matlin

BY DAVID FABRY



Audiology Today (AT) sat down with actress Marlee Matlin to discuss a variety of topics, including her recent stint on the television show *Dancing with the Stars*, her movie *Sweet Nothing in My Ear*, and her status as a role model for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.



AT: Many people are familiar with you from *Dancing with the Stars*, *Law and Order*, or *West Wing*, but some might be surprised to know that you are also the youngest recipient of the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for *Children of a Lesser God*. What was it like to win such a prestigious award for your first major acting role? Did it subsequently place undue pressure on you for future roles?

MM: At the time, I wasn't really mindful of the importance of such a distinction. Being only 21 and having just moved away from home for the first time, I was so new to Hollywood. I think the importance of being honored in such a fashion struck me the following year when I was asked to present the award for Best Actor to Michael Douglas. It was as if I had entered a very exclusive club—people nodded in recognition and reporters asked me very serious questions. It was as if I was watching a movie of a Hollywood actress being welcomed back to the Oscars, but it was me! And I was under double the amount of pressure for future roles. First, because every Oscar winner seems to have the responsibility of following the Oscar-winning role with something as suitably prestigious (rarely happens!) and, second, the fact that critics proclaimed my victory as a result of a pity vote and that I wasn't really worthy of the recognition because they thought I was a deaf person playing a deaf role so how could that be considered "acting?"

It was tough going for me, but fortunately I had the help of friends like Henry Winkler and Whoopi Goldberg, both of who defied expectations themselves and who went on to achieve success. It was a matter of just plowing forward despite what people thought I could and couldn't do, just as when I was a kid. Thank goodness I was well prepared to "fight."

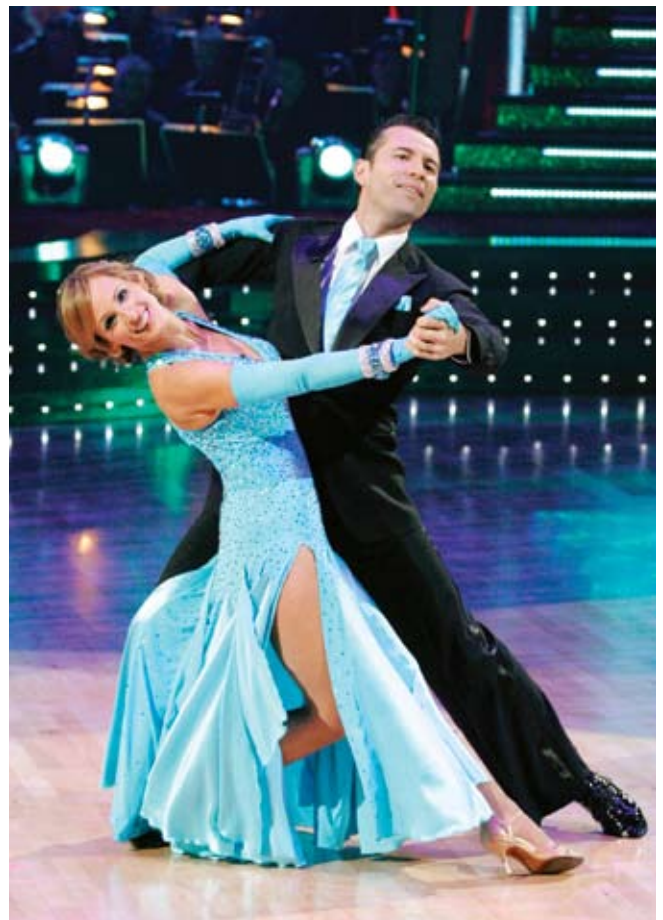
AT: In *Children of a Lesser God*, the character you played—Sarah Norman—was a rebellious and troubled young woman who experiences many changes after meeting an inspirational teacher, played by William Hurt. I know that your family and educational situation growing up in Illinois was entirely different, but did you draw on any of your own experiences for the movie?

MM: Sarah and I couldn't have been more different in terms of our upbringing or our approach to life. Whereas Sarah was rebellious, refused to speak, had a difficult relationship with her mother, and was distrustful of people who didn't sign, I was not. I enjoyed speaking and signing growing up, had a normal childhood that wasn't marred by too much rebelliousness (though like any teenager, I was a bit of a drama queen, but who isn't in their teen years? Ha!), and I had a close and loving relationship

with my family. What I did draw from my own upbringing and what I did use in the movie was the spirit of independence that my parents gave me. Sarah was as independent as they come and was never afraid to speak her mind. That was pretty much who I was growing up, so in that way, we were alike.

AT: What inspired you to become an actress? Was there a signature moment when you realized that this was your destiny?

MM: I got the bug when I was very young—7 years old! It was when my mother and camp counselors invited me to sign a song in sign language on stage at summer day camp. There I was doing my thing and people were smiling and applauding me! It was like the little stories I used to tell in front of the bathroom mirror but this time people were giving me praise! I was instantly hooked. As for the inspiration, I probably will say that it was the fact that I was deaf and had to create my own way of expressing myself that inspired me to act. Sitting at a mirror and telling stories to characters who mysteriously signed back was a great way to keep myself entertained. It eventually made sense since acting was the best way to express myself.



Marlee Matlin and her dancing partner, Fabian Sanchez, on the television show, *Dancing with the Stars*. (ABC/KELSEY McNEAL)

AT: I have to confess to being quite a fan of your work; I have seen most of your movies and television appearances, including your role as Joy Turner's attorney in *My Name Is Earl*, the lip-reading Laura on *Seinfeld*, and the movie *What the Bleep Do We Know*. It really represents a wide range of dramatic and comedic roles—do you have a favorite?

MM: *Children of a Lesser God* is always my favorite because it was my first film, but I must say that every time I do something new, I proclaim it my "favorite." I loved *Seinfeld*, I loved *My Name Is Earl*. I also loved *Picket Fences* and *The West Wing*. And I loved doing *The L Word* and *Dancing with the Stars*. Now ask me about the stuff I didn't enjoy doing or that I'd rather you not see and there's a small list there too. There were times when I just had to work and couldn't be too choosy about the films that I did. Fortunately, they were films that didn't get a great deal of exposure and which were relegated to the \$2 DVD bins at KMart! Haha!

AT: You are such an inspiration to many people with hearing loss—did you ever feel, however, that Hollywood wanted to compartmentalize you into the role of "deaf" or "hard-of-hearing" actress, rather than an Academy Award-winning actress who happens to have a hearing loss? If so, was it difficult to overcome this stereotype?

MM: Hollywood compartmentalizes all actors. It's something that I've heard from my friends like Whoopi Goldberg and it happens to anyone who floats somewhere outside the mainstream. It's a stereotype I have to work on overcoming every day, but I don't let it consume me or identify me. I've been fighting stereotypes all my life and it's just another part of who I am. The trick is balancing overcoming stereotypes and achieving success by putting yourself out there regardless of what people think. I believe people would rather see positive things from me than negative so I work on emphasizing what I can do despite what some think I cannot.

AT: In addition to achieving professional success, you are also mother to four children. I remember in *Children of a Lesser God* that your character wanted to have deaf children, and I have encountered patients over the years who felt the same way. At the time, this was quite a controversial element of the movie—that the mainstream views deafness as a "disability" to be avoided or "repaired." Some people that I knew had a hard time understanding why anyone would prefer deaf over hearing. How do you deal with that kind of attitude and ignorance?

MM: Everyone has a right to his or her opinion and preference. It doesn't mean that we have to like it or have to deal with it. There will always be this attitude about deaf people as long as

WebCapTel®
www.sprintcapter.com

* CapTel is an acronym for Captioned Telephone.

CapTel - Place a Call Via the Web
www.sprintcapter.com

I am finalizing our proposal which I think is our top priority. Yes, that's correct. What I need from you is to collect monthly sales reports asap. Excellent suggestion! By the way, I received

Background Color

Sprint Relay

- Captioned Telephone's next generation is here!
- No special equipment needed – just a phone and a computer with internet access.
- Captions everything spoken to the CapTel* user, which is displayed prominently on their computer screen.
- Ability to print and save conversations.

For more information:
www.sprintcapter.com
www.sprintrelay.com/webcapter.htm

CapTel and WebCapTel are registered trademarks of Ultratec.



Marlee Matlin rehearses for *Dancing with the Stars*. (ABC/ADAM LARKEY)

hearing people are in the majority. It's just the nature of majority/minority dynamics. All I can do, as an actor who happens to be deaf, is show people that whatever "handicap" they think I have or that somehow I am "disabled" in some way, my success and my work proves otherwise. Doing *Dancing with the Stars* was one way of doing that. Yes, I'm deaf and, yes, I can dance. I was glad to have the opportunity each week to show that to 22 million people. I couldn't have asked for a better venue!

AT: I have noticed that in some roles, you have used ASL, and in others you use your voice in addition. Is this a conscious choice, or do you receive guidance from directors and producers regarding their preference for the role?

MM: It's a matter of the script dictating what mode of communication I use. In *Sweet Nothing in My Ear*, it was very clear that the character I played only used ASL and did not speak or use hearing aids. In *The L Word* and *The West Wing*, I played quite a different character, someone who moved between hearing and deaf communities independently and sometimes on her own. That dictated that the characters would have to sign and speak. It just depends on the character and sometimes the assessment comes from me and sometimes it comes from the writers, directors, or producers.

AT: I know that you have been active with many philanthropic organizations, including the Starkey Hearing Foundation, which was featured on *Dancing with the Stars*. I know that you also serve on the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees. Do you find it difficult to find a balance between representing the "hearing" and "deaf" communities?

MM: I've always moved between both the hearing and deaf communities and have no problem supporting charities that have hearing and/or deaf perspectives. I know that some members of the deaf community might find this problematic and sometimes I've even been criticized from hearing people for being too deaf. But that's who I am. As I told myself many years ago, I would never back down from what I believe in. If people have a problem with it, that's unfortunate. I do my best to balance between the two. In the end, I think much more can be accomplished if we strive to bring the communities together rather than talk about how different we are. I am deaf; I cannot deny it. I love, embrace, and live deaf culture. But I live in a hearing world, too, and know that there are all sorts of perspectives out there that I must understand if any sort of progress toward mutual understanding is to be made.

AT: Which do you prefer: movies, television, or stage? Why?

MM: I prefer movies and television over stage only because at this point in my life, stage work in New York would be problematic having four kids and family in LA. As for movies and

TV, it all depends where! Working on a film for three months in South Africa would not be my idea of great job—too far and too long away from the family! At the end of the day, it's really about the script and the work. If it's good, I like it whether it's TV or film. I enjoy working, period.

AT: OK, on to *Dancing with the Stars (DWTS)*—why did you decide to be on the show?

MM: Because it was there, as the cliché goes. No one in Hollywood was probably going to cast me in a musical, where I would dance, and yet I would have loved to had the chance. I love dancing. So why not accept the invitation to dance when it came in? It's the second most popular show on TV these days behind "American Idol," and you know I'd not soon be on that show! Ha!

I've always said work for me is about challenging myself, breaking through barriers but also about having a good time. And *Dancing with the Stars* was just that. It was also about having the chance to show a side of me that people probably would have never seen. In the end, my family loved that I did the show and my kids thought I was the coolest mom for having participated.

AT: I know that you did some dancing in *Children of a Lesser God*, but did you have any other professional dance experience prior to *DWTS*?

MM: The dancing I did in *Children of a Lesser God* was not really dancing. It was improvised movement in a small Italian restaurant. Hardly what I would call dancing. I've danced at weddings and Bar Mitzvahs and have done some grooving at clubs in my younger days. I've always had a good sense of rhythm. But I never had any professional dance training or experience. I was completely clueless when it came to ballroom and Latin dancing when I arrived at my first rehearsal on *DWTS*.

AT: Which was more of a challenge on the show—hearing the music or mastering the footwork?

MM: Well, hearing the music was never going to be a challenge because being deaf just made it too difficult to follow along. It was more about mastering the footwork in time with my partner. I never used the music to dance. I used it to know when I should start to dance; I can hear that much. But 99 times out of 100 the music was just background for me and I depended on Fabian to be my music. That's why I would chuckle to myself when I didn't catch my steps correctly on my last two dances and they said it was because I was deaf. Not true. I didn't catch my steps because I just lost track of my own feet. I never used the music to time my steps. I used Fabian. But it was easier to label my errors on the dance floor as being deaf and not hearing the music for hearing people. That's okay.

I get it. I understood eventually that it was what they needed to hear to be able to understand that what I did was because of my "disability" rather than say it was just simple human error on my part.

AT: I came across a quote of yours that said that the greatest handicap of deafness "does not lie in the ear, it lies in the mind." I think that this is very profound, and perhaps intentionally reflects the fact that the mindset of society is often the actual handicap placed on a deaf person. Am I interpreting your words correctly?

MM: You are absolutely getting the words correctly. It was a quote that I made to Ann Landers when a reader played a hypothetical game of "would I prefer to be deaf or would I prefer to be blind." I told Ann that nothing could be accomplished by playing such games for they only serve to highlight negative stereotypes and look at what we don't have as opposed to what we do have. In the end, no one would ever really have to choose, so what's the point of delving into the debate. It is absolutely the mindset that creates handicaps.

AT: What has been your experience with the profession of audiology? Do you presently wear hearing aids? Do you have any advice for audiologists who work with persons who have profound hearing losses?

MM: I currently wear hearing aids and have to say I couldn't live my life without them. I've been wearing them since I was a young girl and though I may not have liked them much when I was a kid (I figured out all sorts of creative ways to get rid of my hearing aids), I adore the ones I have now. They give me a sense of my environment around me; they give me a chance

Largest selection of stock and custom made recorded hearing tests

NEW :
Multiple Auditory Processing Assessment
MAPA

A comprehensive compendium of tests developed to identify children and adults who have auditory processing disorders. It was designed for ages 8 through adult.

AUDITEC has the largest selection of recorded hearing tests
SINCE 1972

AUDITEC

See our full catalog on line for more information
or call:
314-781-8890 or 1-800-669-9065
WWW.AUDItec.COM

to get in touch with what's happening. But let me emphasize that I cannot rely on them entirely. They only serve to augment what I can see and perceive with my eyes and what I can use to assist what I know with my signs and my speech. And in terms of audiologists working with deaf people, my best advice is patience and appreciation for their preferred communication mode. Whether they sign or speak, a deaf person should be allowed to follow what they prefer works best for them. Too many lives have been broken and too many dreams have been shattered because of personal communication modes that have been forced upon people that didn't want or understand them. My perspective is that all means to communicate work best as long as that at the end of the day, the deaf person's needs, wants, and desires are not compromised.

AT: To that end, can you talk about what motivated you to add "successful author" to your list of accomplishments? Why did you decide to write the book, *Deaf Child Crossing*?

MM: I told myself when I was 11 that I'd like to write a book and tell the world it was okay to be deaf. It probably grew out of my own parents' desire that nothing should be denied to me and that I should be treated like any child should be treated—with love and respect. It might have been that I was having a bad day with kids in the neighborhood or at school. Perhaps someone was making fun of my speech or my signs. In any case, since I was a fan of books and loved reading Judy Blume books, where adversity was openly discussed, I thought I could do the same thing about myself. It wasn't until I was a mom that I thought it was the perfect time to write a book so that I could share these experiences with my children.

AT: Thank you for taking the time to talk with *Audiology Today*. It truly was a pleasure! **AT**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID FABRY, PhD, is the content editor for *Audiology Today* and the chief of audiology at the University of Miami, in Miami, FL.



Marlee Matlin dazzles the audience with her samba. (ABC/KELSEY McNEAL)