

“I hope this helps other disabled people of colour feel less alone”

Wicked's Marissa Bode on the power of visibility, the importance of support networks and what it's like acting alongside Cynthia Erivo **BY ELLA GAUCI**

When Marissa Bode was six she dressed up as Dorothy from *The Wizard Of Oz* for Halloween. As she grew up, she found herself drawn to the kooky tale of outsiders and misfits. Like many other queer theatre kids, she gravitated towards the prequel play *Wicked* and its exploration of otherness, friendship and community. Little did she know that soon she would receive a phone call that would change her life. It was the chance to play Nessarose in the upcoming Hollywood adaptation of *Wicked*.

Ever since it premiered on the stage in 2003, *Wicked* has captured the imagination of the LGBTQIA community.

Telling the stories of two witches, Elphaba and Glinda, before and after Dorothy's arrival in Oz, *Wicked* has cemented its place in the queer canon. Director Jon M. Chu is set to transport this story from the stage to the screen in November this year, with familiar faces like Ariana Grande (Glinda) and queer icon Cynthia Erivo (Elphaba) guiding us through the story alongside Marissa.

Up until now, the role of Nessarose – who uses a wheelchair – has been played by non-disabled actors on stage. For Marissa, this had to change. “I am the first person to play Nessarose who is authentically disabled and in a wheelchair,” Marissa explains. “I think living in a disabled body every single day gives that performance a different layer of authenticity.”

For Marissa, it still feels pretty “surreal” that she is going to star in one of the biggest films of 2024. Marking her screen debut, landing this role is something that her teenage self could never imagine. It was in high school that Marissa decided she wanted to start pursuing acting, and began spending her evenings scouring casting callouts online. It was also during this time that she became disabled. As she trawled through callouts, she couldn't stop the feelings of helplessness bubbling up. Not only did they often say they were looking for white actors, but it also felt like they weren't looking for disabled stars either.

Being able to provide representation for queer disabled actors of colour now means everything to Marissa. “To be that representation for not only disabled people but disabled people of colour is so exciting and so surreal,” Marissa gushes. “I couldn't be happier. It's so incredible and I hope that this can help other disabled people of colour feel a little bit less alone.”

Over the last few years, we have seen more positive, authentic disabled stories being told on screen. Documentaries like Netflix's *Crip Camp* and the Oscar-winning film *CODA* have been seeking to change the way that disability is represented on screen. While Marissa admits that “being perceived is definitely scary”, she is overjoyed that disabled kids everywhere can find themselves in the film. They can even buy a doll replica of her character, a tangible reminder of the power of representation. “Knowing that I can make an impact like that is so surreal but also so incredible,” she smiles. “Even if I make the smallest impact, I can die happy.”

Chu's new adaptation of *Wicked* feels a lot like an ode to the LGBTQIA kids everywhere, like Marissa, who dreamed of its green, glistening spires and belting songs out after school. With Cynthia Erivo in its starring role, you couldn't get a more queer-coded *Wicked* if you tried. Marissa excitedly tells me what it was like working on set with the queer icon. “It was intimidating in the way that she is so incredibly talented in everything that she does,” Marissa says. “She is so focused and so dedicated to the craft, but she is also just so lovely.”

Photos: Sophy Holland/Universal Pictures, Sami Drasin



Marissa acknowledges that she is extremely lucky, having been surrounded by an incredibly supportive network since coming out, and knows that this is not the case for everyone. While LGBTQIA audiences out there may not be green like Elphaba, they may understand what it feels like to be othered. I ask Marissa what queer audiences can take from the film. “Listen to what you believe in and what you know is right,” she tells me proudly. “Know that there is a community for you out there. Not everybody has the privilege to immediately be in those spaces and be in those communities. You are so loved. You are so valid. And there is a place for you.”

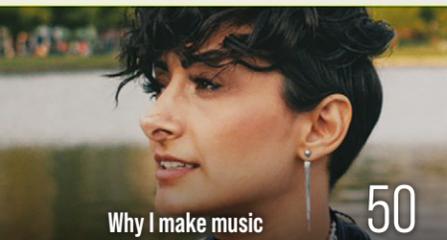
She also hopes that audiences everywhere will look to the team behind this new adaptation of *Wicked* as setting a precedent for inclusion, accessibility and diversity. From providing a first-of-its-kind accessible trailer to casting disabled actors in disabled roles, *Wicked* has shown that inclusivity is not a way to tick a box. It's a way to unlock talent. Marissa hopes that people are encouraged to push for more change in accessibility within the industry.

“The disabled community is in fact one of the only marginalised communities that anybody can be a part of at any time,” she points out. “Things in life happen, so caring about the disabled community now is important for anybody and everybody.”

Wicked: Part I will be in cinemas on 27 November.



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