

# The Genesis of *House of Tards*<sup>TM</sup>

By Frank Rogala

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I came across the book, [Retards, Rebels & Slackers](#), by Jaina Bell as I was finishing my first film, [Won't Anybody Listen](#).<sup>1</sup> I had been working on another screenplay and was doing research for a developmentally disabled character when a mutual acquaintance put me in touch with Jaina Bell. Bell had just finished a book based on her nine years of experience as a staff member in-group homes. I was immediately taken with Jaina's book and its heartfelt and personal story. I put everything else aside and set about obtaining the motion picture rights for the book.

A week after completing the agreement, the book received a mostly positive review in a psychology journal. A vicious hate e-mail campaign that immediately followed could only have been in response to that review. It was apparent that the letters were coming from people who had not read the book and were merely reacting to either the (politically incorrect) title or to incidents from the story that had been mentioned out of context in the review itself. This was my first warning that I had entered a truly volatile territory.

The next indication of controversy I was to face came when I decided to create an audio version of the book. I wanted to raise the visibility of the project, and being a big fan of audio books, I sent a

copy of the first chapter to a few voice actors I thought might be interested. When none of them responded I was dumbstruck. I saw this as a very unique and artistically challenging opportunity. Why weren't they interested? Upon investigation I found that able-bodied actors were uneasy creating voices for the very "un-Gump-like" language and attitude of the developmentally disabled characters in Jaina's book.

Undeterred, I was convinced there was a great value in telling the story as Jaina had written it. A genuine truthful glimpse into the lives of a small group of intellectually disabled characters that was not patronizing or absurdly unrealistic. It was hard to name a film that had an intellectually disabled character that wasn't one-dimensional. What seemed to be missing from film and television was either the wisdom or the courage to portray the intellectually disabled as realistic characters who may misbehave, get angry, act out frustrations, long for acceptance and companionship, feel and sometimes act on sexual feelings - in other words, act like human beings.

In June 2004, after being alerted by a friend who had heard of it, I attended the *Perspectives International Film Forum* held at the Arclight Theater in Hollywood. The Forum featured an exciting and diverse program of domestic and international features, documentaries and short films that explored the lives of people with developmental disabilities. Each screening was followed by a lively and thought-provoking discussion between the filmmaker, a disabilities expert, and the audience. I stood up during the first panel discussion and asked how a producer could obtain a valid release from an actor who was developmentally disabled. Just having seen what

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<sup>1</sup> "Won't Anybody Listen was critically acclaimed by major industry and media publications such as the Hollywood Reporter, Variety, New York Times, and Los Angeles Times. It was the rare documentary picked up for theatrical distribution by Seventh Art Releasing. Television rights were acquired by The Sundance Channel. Netflix has signed an exclusive DVD agreement and will make the movie available to its members in January.

was involved in obtaining "errors and omissions" insurance on *Won't Anybody Listen*, I had learned that each and every person appearing in a film must sign an airtight release of rights. Without the proper releases the film would be "uninsurable" and thus "un-releasable." The "panel" explained that under California law, if an intellectually disabled person was of legal age, and not conserved, they could sign a legal agreement on their own behalf. After the "panel" representatives from the Lantermen Regional Center, Easter Seals and Downs Syndrome Association of Los Angeles sought me out.

This gave me an opportunity to bring up issues that were weighing heavy on my mind. I had strong feelings about wanting to preserve the spirit of the book. Doing that would require going against the Hollywood formula of making intellectually disabled characters a "walking angel" that changed everyone's lives or the "unlikely genius" that saves the day. Making the film true to the book would require portraying the motley group home staff with its politically "INcorrect" language (as well as their hearts of gold), and "behaviors" by the "clients" that included adult language, public disruptions, and physical violence. I also wanted to use real intellectually disabled actors. I knew the integrity of the story would prevail and that the movie would stand on its own, however I was worried that isolated scenes or incidents from the book could be taken out of context and misunderstood by well meaning family and friends of the developmentally disabled.

All the representatives looked at me with knowing smiles and handed me their cards. They assured me that what they supported was multidimensional portrayals of intellectually disabled

characters. They were also very supportive of using intellectually disabled actors to play the roles. They promised to help me with letters of support. After exchanging contact information I left the forum feeling heartened and newly energized.

Currently with the help of Jaina (the author) I have cast and begun recording an audio version of the book. Actors from Performing Arts West, Inglewood, CA and The Media Access Office, North Hollywood have been chosen. In addition able-bodied characters are being played by non-intellectually disabled (but otherwise handicapped) actors. After completing production on the first Chapter it will be submitted to Audible.com for their consideration. Audible.com has already expressed interest in the project but whatever their final decision I will finish and find a way to make the audio version publicly available, either through another distributor or through an online system from the book and movie web page. That said, I will be completing the rest of the audio book production during the months of January/February 2005 and press releases regarding the film project will be issued in connection with the January DVD release of *Won't Anybody Listen* by Netflix.

In the meantime, just as with my last film, the House of Tards ([www.HouseofTards.com](http://www.HouseofTards.com)) web page will be developed and used to solicit funding and support for the production of the film. You can click on a link there to contribute any amount of money towards the creation of this new film. All contributors will be named in the final credits of the film (just as they were on *Won't Anybody Listen*).