

# Can An Actor With Down Syndrome Change Hollywood?

by Ben Crandell, Sun Sentinel/TNS | August 13, 2019

BOYNTON BEACH, Fla. — Actor Zack Gottsagen faces life with a contagious optimism, an undaunted confidence in himself, and in others, that inspires people to accomplish things they may think impossible, even while they are doing it.

It is all the more remarkable for someone who has spent much of his life hearing the word “no.”

He would never talk or walk, doctors said. He would not be in the school play, his high school said. A feature film starring someone with Down syndrome would never get financing, said two young filmmakers who then spent five years making sure it got finished, living in a tent for much of that time.

Audiences across the country are being introduced to Gottsagen in “The Peanut Butter Falcon,” a bittersweet buddy comedy whose release in more than 500 theaters this month is as improbable as the standing ovations that film-festival audiences have given its star, an unknown 34-year-old actor with Down syndrome who willed the story, from a script no one in Hollywood wanted to read, onto the screen.

Veteran film actor Shia LaBeouf, Gottsagen’s co-star in “The Peanut Butter Falcon” — along with Dakota Johnson and Oscar nominees Bruce Dern and Thomas Haden Church — calls the Zack effect “magical.”

And no one fell under Gottsagen’s spell with more intensity than LaBeouf, the mercurial Hollywood antihero who was arrested and jailed during filming near Savannah, Ga., in 2017 after a booze-fueled breakdown that threatened to pull the plug on the project.

It was a moment of reckoning for the film and for LaBeouf, who has acknowledged that a face-to-face, tough-love conversation with Gottsagen got him sober and changed his life.

“There’s something about Zack that feels altruistic and, dare I say, omnipotent. He can look through you in a way that feels really beautiful,” says Tyler Nilson, who co-directed “The Peanut Butter Falcon” with Michael Schwartz. “I made a promise to him. I made a promise to him that we were going to do this film and I was going to deliver on my promise, hell or high water, living in a tent or whatever.”

‘Like a brother to me’

In “The Peanut Butter Falcon,” rated PG-13, Gottsagen is Zak, a young man with no family who has been consigned to a rural North Carolina nursing home, looked after by a caring staffer, Eleanor, played by Dakota Johnson (“Fifty Shades of Grey”). One night Zak escapes, intent on finding the wrestling school in Georgia run by his favorite ring villain (Thomas Haden Church) and realizing his dream of wrestling stardom as a character he will call the Peanut Butter Falcon.

This opening escape scene, with Gottsagen tumbling from a window in his underwear, seems determined to reassure the audience from the get-go that, yes, it’s OK to laugh at an actor with Down syndrome. Because he’s an actor, who is trying to make you laugh.

Nearby, an Outer Banks shrimp boat captain, Tyler (LaBeouf), barely scraping by and battling depression over the death of his older brother and dark impulses that lead to petty crimes, makes enemies of the wrong people. He is fleeing in a stolen boat when he crosses paths with Zak. Improbably, the hard-hearted Tyler develops a soft spot for Zak and agrees to let him tag along on his way to a new life as a fisherman in Florida. Perhaps, he says, he’ll even help Zak find his wrestling school.

With Eleanor and Tyler’s enemies in parallel pursuit, the two march through cornfields, wander along country roads and train tracks, and drift down the coast on a makeshift raft, meeting blind backwoods preachers, moonshiners, truckers and brawlers in a journey that invites comparisons to Mark Twain and the dark comedy of the Coen Brothers.

The film also features veteran actors John Hawkes and Jon Bernthal, rapper Yelawolf and wrestling legends Jake “The Snake” Roberts and Mick Foley.

Critical to the success of “The Peanut Butter Falcon” is the relationship between its protagonists. Tyler’s brutal candor is balanced with an evolving warmth and protective patience, while Zak opens his troubled friend’s eyes to a simple code of life defined by honesty and fidelity. This mirrored the close bond the two actors nurtured off screen.

“Since we did this, Shia has been like a brother to me,” Gottsagen says during a conversation in his Boynton Beach apartment, surrounded by pictures and memories from the shoot, including a clapper board autographed by the cast and a copy of Down Syndrome World magazine, with Gottsagen, LaBeouf and Johnson on the cover.

As the film has forced audiences to rethink what it takes to be a movie star and how to respond to a comic actor with a disability, “The Peanut Butter Falcon” has enchanted viewers across the country, winning audience awards at the South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas and the Nantucket Film Festival. Gottsagen and his family have been at many of the screenings.

“Every showing he’s been at, he’s gotten a standing ovation. Even places where they say nobody gets a standing ovation, like Nantucket, he does. It’s just incredible,” says his mother, Shelley Gottsagen. “It’s very emotional. People want to stay and talk afterward, sometimes for an hour, two hours. They pour their hearts out. It touches them so deeply.”

### Heroes and villains

Filmmakers Nilson and Schwartz met Zack Gottsagen several years ago as volunteers at Zeno Mountain Farm in Los Angeles, a camp where performers with and without

disabilities meet every year to write, produce and star in original short films.

Zeno Mountain Farm was profiled in a critically praised 2014 documentary, “Becoming Bulletproof,” that followed filmmakers and cast as they shot a western (“Bulletproof”), with Gottsagen as the villain.

Nilson and Schwartz were shooting ideas for short films and commercials at Zeno Mountain Farm, both teaching and learning, when they first noticed Gottsagen.

“We saw Zack give a performance in a short film that was really, really fantastic. He was making decisions as an actor that were really informed and present, adding meat to a character. It was something that I had personally not seen from an actor in my entire life,” Nilson says by phone from Washington, D.C., where “The Peanut Butter Falcon” had a recent screening.

A friendship formed over films and filmmaking, with Gottsagen telling them he had studied acting at the Alexander W. Dreyfoos School of the Arts in West Palm Beach (he graduated in 2004), taught acting and dance at the local Jewish community center, and worked as an usher at Alco Boynton Cinema.

When Gottsagen told them he hoped to be a movie star one day, Nilson and Schwartz tried to let him down easy.

“It was one of those moments for Mike and I where we were, like, ‘I love you, Zack, but I don’t know if the opportunity is going to arrive for a feature film starring somebody with Down syndrome,’” Nilson says. “And Zack, very sweetly and lovingly, was, like, ‘What if we did it together?’ We thought about it for, like, two seconds, and said, ‘You’re right. Let’s do it together.’”

They started with a blank slate and an empty checkbook, Nilson and Schwartz working odd jobs and living in a tent in Los Angeles. They wrote a script and set the film in the Outer Banks because Nilson had lived there and knew people who would lend them boats and property on which to shoot. Gottsagen enjoys pro wrestling, so that became part of the story. Nilson would play the Shia LaBeouf character.

At that point the scant resumé that Nilson and Schwartz brought to the project included credits for writing, directing or producing a half-dozen videos and short documentaries with such titles as “Alex Honnold: At Home Off the Wall,” “The Moped Diaries” and “Taking My Parents to Burning Man.” Nilson once had a bit part in the 2007 Judd Apatow-John C. Reilly comedy “Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story,” and he also had worked as a hand model in a variety of commercials for cell phones, soft drinks and beer.

“I was living in a tent in Los Angeles, but I had made a promise to Zack and Mike that we were going to do this,” Nilson says. “But we were nobodies, with no agents, no manager, no famous friends and a guy that has Down syndrome. We went to the library and checked out books, you know, ‘How to Make a Movie.’”

They sent the script to industry people they thought might be receptive. No one would read it. After a year of seeing the script ignored, the three shot a five-minute trailer (a “proof of concept” in industry jargon) that gave the viewer a feel for the film’s atmosphere and tone, but also “showed that Zack had the chops to do the acting,” Schwartz says.

They distributed the trailer in cold-call emails and by any means necessary (“I don’t even want to tell you what kind of tricks we used,” Schwartz says) and it found its way to producers Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa, who had helped make a 2013 movie called “Charlie Countrymen,” which starred LaBeouf.

“That’s when things started happening,” Schwartz says. “Shia LaBeouf FaceTimed us on his phone and said, ‘I saw the proof of concept, I’ve read 30 pages of the script, and I’m doing it. Will you please let me do it?’”

No fear

Ask Gottsagen if he was intimidated by his celebrity co-stars and his reply is matter-of-fact: “Actually, no. I felt good for that.” Perhaps because he understands he is a good actor, with nuanced comedic skills. “Yes, I am,” he says, looking you in the eye.

Gottsagen says he taught himself how to act by watching favorite movies, including “Grease,” “Hairspray” and “The Greatest Showman.” Also a singer and dancer, he’s performed for years with the SpotLighters, a Palm Beach County program sponsored by Arts4All Florida, and Southern Dance Theatre in Boynton Beach.

Nilson and Schwartz say Gottsagen’s professionalism and improvisational skills were noticed by his more seasoned castmates.

“If you were doing a scene with him, you had better be ready. Zack brought it,” Nilson says.

Shelley Gottsagen and her wife, Navy and Air Force veteran Trish Carland, have nothing but good things to say about LaBeouf.

“He said to me, when we first met him, ‘How do you feel about having your son hanging around with me? You must be not so happy about this.’ And I said, ‘I don’t know you. Let me get to know you,’” Shelley Gottsagen says.

“Shia has the biggest heart. He’s so kind,” she says. “When they walked onto the set, when they first started to film, Shia’s name was up there, top billing, on the call sheet. And Shia said, ‘Take that down. Zack has top billing.’ Actors don’t do that.”

During filming in the summer of 2017, LaBeouf was arrested in downtown Savannah and charged with obstruction, disorderly conduct and public drunkenness. The incident was amplified when TMZ shared police body-cam footage of the actor’s profanity-laced tirade against the arresting officers.

When LaBeouf arrived at a cast party a couple of days later, Gottsagen immediately confronted him. They sat cross-legged on the floor, facing each other, and had an emotional conversation, according to Shelley Gottsagen and Carland.

“His actual words were, ‘Don’t blow it for me. This is my one chance,’” Shelley Gottsagen says. “They talked it out for over an hour. ... They are at one point crying together, at one point laughing and hugging each other. Shia gave him a commitment.”

Gottsagen is more circumspect about what he and LaBeouf shared.

“I was really mad about what he did. I just don’t like to see Shia like this,” he says. “Shia knows everything about what is going on with him. Shia knows about my words, about what I said. And that’s why Shia was trying to fix himself for the better. What he was before, instead of the old Shia, who did what is wrong.”

In a 2018 profile in Esquire magazine, LaBeouf said the episode had a profound effect on him.

“To hear him say that he was disappointed in me probably changed the course of my life,” LaBeouf said. “Zack can’t not shoot straight, and bless him for it, ’cause in that moment, I needed a straight shooter who I couldn’t argue with.

“I don’t believe in God... But did I see God? Did I hear God? Through Zack, yeah. He met me with love, and at the time, love was truth, and he didn’t pull punches. And I’m grateful, not even on some cheeseball s— trying to sell a movie. In real life. That mother— is magical.”

### Lesson in inclusion

Confronting movie stars is not the only example of Gottsagen’s courage. He did all his own stunts in “The Peanut Butter Falcon,” telling the filmmakers that using a body double, which the Screen Actors Guild had provided, would compromise the movie’s authenticity.

This includes an intense scene in which Tyler pulls a floundering Zak (the character can’t swim) across a river as a shrimp boat bears down on him.

“Did you see there were sharks in the water? Which they didn’t tell me until last week!” Shelley Gottsagen says, with a nervous laugh.

Zack Gottsagen has lived on his own for 12 years and you don’t have to look far for the source of his self-determination.

“Shelley was a huge proponent of independence,” Carland says.

Shortly after Gottsagen was born, doctors at a Brooklyn hospital diagnosed his Down syndrome and told his mother he would never walk or talk, he would be a “total vegetable” and was better off in an institution.

“I thanked them and told them I’m a vegetarian, and I’ll take my vegetable to go,” Shelley Gottsagen says.

She continued to be an aggressive advocate for her son’s independence and his talents, especially when they did not seem apparent to others. She had to intervene when the Dreyfoos School of the Arts was reluctant to admit him, she says, acknowledging that his subsequent experience with the theater department was frustrating. “They wouldn’t really give him roles,” she says.

Zack Gottsagen was the first student with Down syndrome to be fully included in mainstream classes in the Palm Beach County School District, according to his mother. She says his success is a lesson in the benefits of inclusion.

“This is what happens when kids are not segregated, when they are allowed to be able to be with everybody and learn from everyone. The best experiences he had in school were the kindness and friendliness of other students without disabilities,” she says. “They say kids are cruel. They’re not. Kids don’t discriminate. Adults do.”

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