

The film industry, historically, has had a difficult time representing the disabled community. In 2019, the top 1200 films had a 1.6 percent rate of disabled characters with speaking roles – a four year low (Appelbaum). With the lack of disabled representation, it is important that film leads who portray disabled characters do so in a positive way. However, a recent film has done the opposite of positively portraying the disabled community, specifically the neurodivergent community: Sia's *Music*. Following the story of a young lady who comes into guardianship of her autistic half-sister Music, the movie and its trailer heavily misrepresent the autistic community, practically insulting the troubles of the neurodivergent community. Sia also did a poor job marketing and discussing the film, as her personal actions in regard to legitimate questions clouded the film with poor judgement before its release. I find Sia's work degrading to the neurodivergent community, regardless of her intentions.

To begin, I want to talk about Sia's choice of lead actress. To portray the namesake autistic girl Music, Sia hired dancer Maddie Ziegler – a young lady with no real acting experience outside of music videos and a reality television series. There is a long history of actors and actresses playing disabled characters, but there is a very short history of inexperienced individuals playing disabled characters for a reason. It takes true thoughtfulness and care for an individual to represent a neurodivergent character, with months of work and study often preceding any shooting. The trailer makes it evident that there was very little respect for the issues of the disabled community during filming. Ziegler performs actions such as sticking her teeth out, sporadically moving her fingers, and rolling her eyes constantly. Autism is a spectrum disorder, and while there are autistic individuals who perform those actions naturally, Ziegler does not. Her exaggerated performance is indicative of mockery.

Another major issue with Sia's film is her response to criticism from the disabled community. Following the release of *Music*'s very divisive trailer, many took to Twitter to question Sia's choices regarding the film. Many rightfully accused Sia of ableism, discrimination of disabled individuals, for casting a neurotypical actress as the lead. Her responses included curse words, targeting language, and mockery. Sia even went so far as to tell a disabled actress "[maybe] you are just a bad actor." In interviews, Sia attempted to defend her actions, claiming that her decision to hire Ziegler was based on nepotism and not ableism. Ziegler and Sia have a history together, and Sia claimed she could not have ever made the film without Ziegler. Sia also claims, however, that she did initially attempt to work with a nonverbal neurodivergent actress, but that it was "unpleasant and stressful" for the young girl. If Sia truly believes she could have never filmed without Ziegler, then she would have never attempted to work with another individual. Sia's defense is an attempt to clear her name, not justify her work (Nugent).

Sia claims to have not worked with an autistic girl because it was difficult for the actress, but there are no indications that Sia attempted to make accommodations for the actress. There are a number of recent films that starred disabled individuals and more appropriately represented the disabled community. The audience and critic reactions to Sia's film speak volumes for the terrible job her film does. Both critic and audience scores for *Music* sit comfortable just above ten-percent, and the film, so far, has only grossed 3.9-percent of its budget. In contrast, John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* features a young deaf actress in a leading role, without the exploitation that Sia's film employs. *A Quiet Place* sits at 93-percent for critic and 86-percent for audience ratings, while grossing 2000-percent of its budget. Other films, like *Crip Camp* (co-directed by disabled created), have followed similar trends, accommodating its disabled workers in a

meaningful way to create a supportive film. Sia's rebuttal falls flat, as disabled members of Hollywood have been effectively working for years (Rotten Tomatoes, Box Office Mojo).

It is important to understand that there have been supporters of Sia's choices as director, the most prominent being that she is spreading awareness for the disabled community. I want to counter that argument by explaining how harmful her film is to disabled viewers. Sia's film is littered with often triggering moments for the autistic community: flashing lights, lots of sounds, scenes of restraining Music. There are no warnings anywhere within the film that such harsh scenes occur. For a film meant to spread awareness for the neurodivergent community, it is destructive to include very overloading scenes within *Music* with no warning whatsoever. Sia essentially locked down her film, only allowing those who can handle the sheer variety and number of visuals to watch the film in its entirety. How is that spreading awareness?

Another significant argument made by Sia herself is that she needed a prominent dancer to star as Music because Sia included dance scenes. If Sia had been searching for an autistic actress as she claims, then her idea for the film was inherently overloading for the majority of autistic individuals. Sia constructed a film that was designed to star a neurotypical individual as a neurodivergent character. In most cases, there would be no way for an autistic actress to play Music due to the extreme amount of audio and visual pieces within the set. *Music* is essentially one long music video for a new album, not a socially aware piece on the struggles of the autistic community. This is why Sia needed a dancer and not a neurodivergent actress.

Sia's new film is a gross exaggeration of the autistic community, especially in the mannerisms of the autistic character. Sia's film is ultimately destructive. Not only did Sia go out of her way to create a film about an autistic character that could not include an autistic actress, but Sia also created a film that harms neurodivergent viewers. There is no awareness attributed to

the film, only harm and stereotypes. Regardless of Sia's intentions, her film does nothing good for the autistic community.

## Works Cited

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