Hollywood's Child Protection Problem

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Hollywood has reached a tipping point

We have witnessed the dangerous consequences of exploitation and abuse of child actors for decades; however, they have typically been viewed as isolated tragic incidents. We have seen far too many untimely deaths of child stars, from Corey Haim to Michelle Trachtenberg; yet, they have been treated as unique episodes. The tides may be turning. With the recent passing of Hayden Panettiere, and the instances of abuse she bravely shared in her May memoir, there have been renewed calls across Hollywood to evaluate current standards of on-set protections.

What comes next?

There is no longer a question of whether children are being harmed on set. As documented in 2024's *Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV*, child performers have been exposed to toxic and abusive conditions while filming the wholesome television shows that catapulted them to stardom. Now that former stars have come forward with allegations of abuse and their ensuing mental health battles, the focus is on the industry and whether it has put systems in place to prevent such abuse. Further, it is time to critically examine the existing systems and determine if they are strong enough to protect children when the adults in their lives do not properly assume that responsibility.

The current conversation

Following Hayden Panettiere's recent passing, the conversation around safeguarding child actors has intensified. Stars like Anna Paquin have come forward to speak out about the dark underbelly of child stardom and the link between young "specifically pre-sexualized female" stardom and "profoundly sad lives," forged as a result of a lack of protections. Christy Carlson Romano, who rose to fame on The Disney Channel, said of child actors in an essay to Elle "what they need is protocols from safe adults. We put youth athletes in helmets and pads. We invented entire sciences around protecting them from long-term damage. Why can't we pad the children paid to make the world smile?"

This conversation is a crucial one, as the power imbalances on Hollywood sets are undeniable. Children in Entertainment are left vulnerable, constantly surrounded by adults who control their careers and access to both opportunities and resources. If a child is told that speaking up could threaten their job or that existing in uncomfortable spaces is simply part of the industry, that child lacks the authority to push back. When the adults put in place to protect these young actors turn a blind eye to warning signs, the ramifications endure long after filming concludes.

Wigdor joins the fight

Wigdor's recently filed case against Disney, on behalf of Raquel Bolleau, highlights the need for stronger industry-wide protections, as children are still left dangerously vulnerable. This lawsuit forces Hollywood to face the question of whether its current protection laws are adequate.

As alleged in the complaint, Ms. Bolleau was just 14 years old when she was repeatedly assaulted by an adult male employee while filming the 2001 Disney Channel Original Movie "The Poof Point." Ms. Bolleau further alleges that, despite signs that something was wrong, Disney declined to step in and was negligent in their failure to protect her. The company and its executives also facilitated and concealed the abuse by, among other things, violating California child labor laws by separating Ms. Bolleau from her guardian for the majority of each day and directing minors to interact with adults outside the presence of their guardians. This breakdown in protection amounted to serious emotional distress that Ms. Bolleau has had to bear for two decades.

This lawsuit exposes an urgent question for the entertainment industry at large: What accountability systems do studios have to protect children in their care? And even more significant, it raises the issue of what should happen when the adults meant to protect a child actor fail to recognize or act on warning signs of on-set misconduct.

We have reached critical mass

As headlines converge and the lack of on-set protections becomes impossible to ignore, there is an opportunity to appraise the existing standards and advocate for change. Former child actors, like Ms. Bolleau, are increasingly willing to share their experiences and that insight offers a springboard for meaningful institutional change. Hollywood is faced with the choice to demonstrate it has learned from past failures and reshape the standards by which children are looked after on-set. Studios have an elemental duty to protect children, and Wigdor is committed to ensuring they assume that responsibility.