



## Prime-Time Crusader

Robert David Hall entertains millions each week as the witty coroner on TV's *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. But his crutch is no prop, and his disability is no act. He's determined to draw attention to both. / By Nancy Henderson Wurst / Illustration by Monica Hellström

**A**FTER 25 YEARS OF RADIO WORK, VOICE-overs, and guest roles on shows such as *The West Wing* and *The Practice*, Robert David Hall scored big in 2000 when he landed the part of quirky coroner Dr. Albert Robbins on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. A core cast member since early in the series, Hall has reveled in the meteoric rise of the CBS show, which has garnered several People's Choice awards and Emmy nominations. These days, however, his most important role may be as an outspoken activist for people with disabilities.

In July 1978, Hall, then 30, was working as a morning disc jockey, writing ad copy, taking acting lessons, playing guitar in a band, and, he recalls with a laugh, "trying to figure out what part of the entertainment world would have me." One afternoon he was headed north on busy Interstate 405 near Los Angeles when the intoxicated driver of a southbound 18-wheeler lost control of his rig, jumped the wire fence separating the lanes, and careened into Hall's beat-up Volkswagen.

A day and a half later, Hall woke up to find his right leg amputated and burns covering his body. By summer's end, he had lost the battle to save his left leg. Ingrained with a "toughness" passed down through generations of military officers, Hall went right back to work. He wrote ad copy in his hospital bed. He rolled his wheelchair across the street to

the radio station and hosted his daily program. Back at home, he recorded commercials and narrations in his living room. And he learned to walk on prosthetic legs.

One year after the accident, Hall was hired at legendary LA radio station KNX-FM. Before long, the acting bug bit. "It's odd even to me that I chose to make it a profession after I lost my legs," he says.

He describes his first TV audition as "very Felliniesque." "It was kind of like a carnival casting call because they didn't know what they wanted," Hall says. "And to the producers, being disabled was sort of a freak show." He didn't get the part but was soon hired for a small role in the TV series *Airwolf* (1984–1986), starring Jan Michael Vincent and Ernest Borgnine. More film and TV parts followed. Still,

**Hall says producers want to portray the sad disabled person or the superhuman disabled person. "You're rarely a character doing a job."**

### The Employability Factor

The gap in employment rates between people with and without disabilities has prompted advocacy group NOD to focus on jobs. It is establishing an "employability center" in Washington, DC, with the help of several U.S. corporations. "If you don't have a job, you don't have the money for transportation," says Michael Deland, NOD's president and chairman. "You don't have the money for recreation, to go to the movies, to eat out. ... Health care is more problematic. Really, what's driving it all is employment."

Hall noticed that his able-bodied peers received far more callbacks.

In 2004, Hall joined the board of the National Organization on Disability (NOD), the ▶



country's most high-profile advocacy group. (The late Christopher Reeve was the vice chairman.) In 2005, as chairman of the Screen Actors Guild's National Performers With Disabilities Committee, he wrote a groundbreaking report which revealed that fewer than 2 percent of TV characters have a disability and only 0.5 percent of those have speaking parts.

HEMISPHERES recently talked with Hall about his role as an advocate for the 54 million Americans with disabilities, the largest minority group in the U.S.

**Q:** What was it like for actors with disabilities when you first started out?

**A:** It's been this way for many years: If you have a disability, they want to do a story about the sad disabled person or the superhuman disabled person. You're either pathetic or inspirational. You're rarely a character doing a job. That's what I love about *CSI* so much. Dr. Robbins' job is to provide clues. They don't stop and say, "Isn't he amazing? He walks with a crutch." It's just: "Oh, there's Doc Robbins. He's cutting and slicing, and he's got some clues to help us solve this week's murder."

**Q:** Are there more opportunities now for actors with disabilities?

**A:** There aren't a *lot* more, but there are more. There are always people who will stereotype people with disabilities. They'll assume that because you're in a chair or because you're blind or because you're deaf, that you're going to slow production down.

**Q:** Why did you become an advocate?

**A:** I noticed that my able-bodied acting friends were getting five, six, seven times as many auditions as I was getting. And I was as good as they were. I didn't like the unfairness of the situation.

**Q:** Why join forces with NOD?

**A:** NOD is on a national scale ... and I'm on the No. 1 show around the world. And when I say something, I have a bit of a platform because people love the show so much. And I take that seriously. I don't ever want to just be an airhead actor. I'd like to do something that benefits a young person with a disability. By seeing somebody with a disability in a crucial role on TV or in

**"CHICAGO'S CHURRASCARIA"**

*"The First Churrascaria in town and still one of the best!"*  
*Phil Vettel, Chicago Tribune*

*"Recognized for Excellence."* Zagat

*Troparous by Renata Castillo*

"Sal & Carvão serves up more than plenty - and plenty more - the BMW of Salad Bars."  
 Pat Bruno, CHICAGO SUN TIMES

"The only real difference between the two is the food at Sal & Carvão is better."  
 David Tamarin, TIME OUT CHICAGO

**Sal & Carvão**  
 CHURRASCARIA  
 BRAZILIAN STEAKHOUSE

Chicago 739 North Clark - 312.932.1100  
 Downers Grove 3008 Finley Road - 630.512.0900  
 Schaumburg 801 East Algonquin Road - 847.925.0061  
 www.salecarvao.com

**hemispheresmagazine.com**  
 click refresh

new design | new content



## Three Perfect Days

HEMISPHERES' award-winning Three Perfect Days series is your insider guide to the world's premier cities and resort areas. Visit our Web site and let our resident writers show you their hometowns.

*Recently Showcased:*

NAGOYA

TURIN

ST. MAARTEN

MAMMOTH MOUNTAIN

BUENOS AIRES

FORT LAUDERDALE

PORTLAND, OR

COPENHAGEN

*Coming Up:*

MUNICH

CHICAGO

SYDNEY

PARIS

RIO DE JANEIRO

hemispheresmagazine.com

### Inner Views

able-bodied population to understand about people with disabilities?

**A:** Just let go of assumptions. Don't make up your mind about me until you have a chance to interact with me.

**Q:** I have to ask about *CSI* here. What do you love about playing a coroner? Is there anything you hate?

**A:** To be a regular on a hit American TV show is a wonderful thing. It takes care of a lot of your bills. I'm lucky that I love the people I work with. I'm kind of a social beast, so I enjoy the fact that in airports people recognize me and they come up and say nice things about the show and tell me their daughter is studying chemistry and their son wants to be a forensic guy. I like the character I play, and I've met a number of pathologists, medical examiners, and coroners. It gets back to the topic of stereotypes. They're not all ghoulish Boris Karloff guys hiding in the dark. I'm also glad I'm an actor because it's a tough job. I've spent a lot of time in the hospital, so I'm not freaked out by tough things. But a couple of times we've had boys on the slab in the course of a story, and one looked a little bit like my son, Andrew, who's 24 now. And that caused me some pain. Another time we had a story line about somebody who was burned horribly, and it took me back to some experiences that I had. Fortunately, though, I know the difference between television and reality, and I moved on from that.

**Q:** How has *CSI* advanced your cause?

**A:** I love the fact that they get who I am as a human being. It's quite an amazing image when you see a person with a disability interacting professionally and normally, even on a fictional TV show. There's a chemistry between the crew and the cast members that translates to the viewer. And when viewers see an African-American man, a woman of a certain age, and a man with a disability working together in an exciting way, it sends a very powerful message. And I'm quite proud to be a part of that.

**Q:** What's next for you?

**A:** I have a little part in a movie coming out called *The Gene Generation* with a wonderful Asian actress, Bai Ling. And I've got tons of work to do with NOD and with Screen Actors Guild. My voice-over work keeps going. I have a trainer, which sounds so Hollywood, but it's really a wonderful thing. I've lost about 30 pounds in the past year. I found out that I have Type II diabetes, so I've cut out the sugar. I'm walking on a treadmill, and I'm lifting weights. I have no desire to be Mr. Universe. I just want to be as strong as I can be because I need the energy right now, more than ever. ■

**Nancy Henderson Wurst**, who has written for *Parade*, *Woman's Day*, and *Southern Living*, is the author of *Able! How One Company's Disabled Workforce Became the Key to Extraordinary Success* (BenBella Books).



"So, what is this place, about thirty-five hundred square feet?"