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AWARDS

## ‘CODA’ star Troy Kotsur on being deaf in Hollywood, and his historic Oscar nomination

The actor is generating buzz with his new film.



— Troy Kotsur arriving at the 2022 Screen Actors Guild Awards in February.

Patrick T. Fallon / AFP via Getty Images

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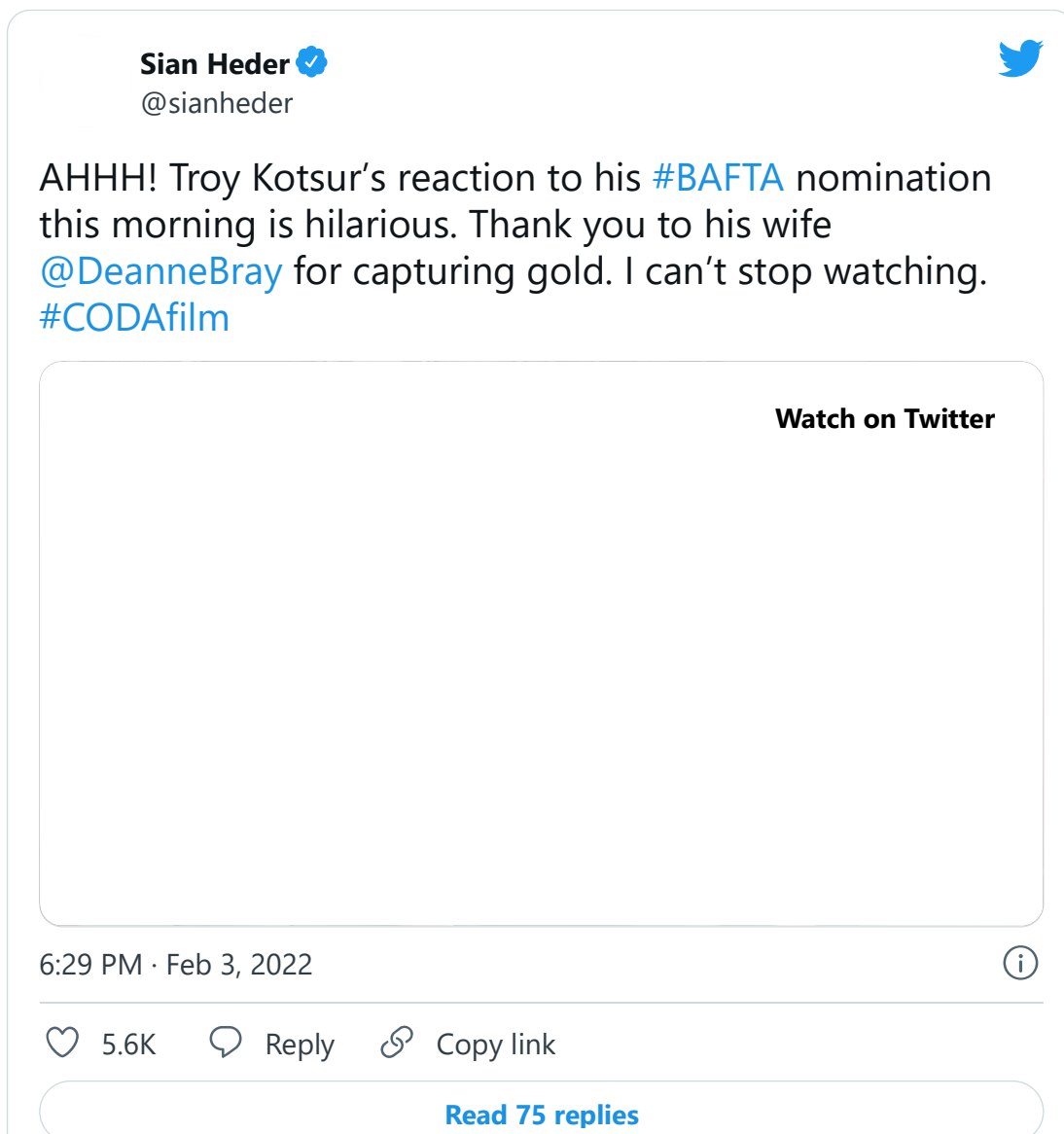
**By Randee Dawn**

As actor Troy Kotsur remembers it, receiving his first Academy Award nomination in February – for his supporting role in Apple TV+'s "CODA," was an utterly thrilling moment: He was with his wife on FaceTime, and they reacted together.

But as a now-veteran of the awards season (Kotsur has already won a Screen Actors Guild Award for his "CODA" performance and been nominated for a BAFTA award, too), he has learned to play it a bit cooler: "I jumped for joy," he told TODAY, "but I controlled myself."

Kotsur learned the hard way what happens when you get overenthusiastic in front of a camera. In early February, a video showing the moment when he learned he'd been nominated for that BAFTA award went viral – because the 53-year-old actor literally fell out of his chair.

"CODA" director Sian Heder posted the video on Twitter, writing, "AHHH! Troy Kotsur's reaction to his #BAFTA nomination this morning is hilarious.... I can't stop watching."



Chagrin led to acceptance, and now Kotsur just laughs at the memory. "I forgot that my chair had wheels," he explains. "So I slipped and lost my balance. I didn't realize how viral that fall would go, all over social media.... I couldn't stop the momentum. So yes, so be it. I have to accept that that video is out there."

Consider the chair fall Kotsur's *second* best performance of the year. His first, well, that's nothing less than milestone-making. Why? Because Kotsur is now the first solo male actor to win the SAG Award and the first deaf male actor to receive an Oscar nomination. (Kotsur's conversation with TODAY was done via Zoom, interpreted by Justin Maurer.)

"CODA," which stands for "Child of Deaf Adults," itself is the story of a largely deaf family headed up by Kotsur's character, Frank. In the film, his hearing daughter (Emilia Jones) is starting to forge a career in music rather than going into the family fishing business. Conflict ensues, and emotional heartstrings are tugged. But Kotsur was just one of two award-winning deaf actors on camera: Marlee Matlin, who became the first deaf actor to win an Oscar in 1987 for "Children of a Lesser God," plays his wife.



— Emilia Jones and Kotsur in "CODA." Apple TV / Alamy Stock Photo

Matlin has given him advice about how to behave now that the paparazzi lights and literal spotlights have turned his way. "She warned me that there was going to be so many flashbulbs



on the red carpet," he recalls. "My eyes have to get used to it. It's not easy for me, being deaf and being a visual communicator, to feel like my eyes are burning. Now I realize I might need sunglasses! Everything is new to me."

Which all by itself must be a strange sensation, as Kotsur is no newcomer to acting. He studied the performing arts at Gallaudet University in the late 1980s, then began touring with companies like the National Theater for the Deaf in theatrical productions like "A Streetcar Named Desire." Over the years he's had guest roles on TV series like "Scrubs" and "CSI: NY," but his movie career has largely been focused on small, independent films.



— Kotsur as Stanley Kowalski, Suanne Spoke as Blanche in Deaf West Theatre's performance of "A Streetcar Named Desire," circa 2000. Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

"In TV and film, they tend to have deaf characters as victims or sympathy characters," he explains, "unless it was based on a true story. In 'CODA,' Frank was a hardworking man who

was successful and protected his family. Also, he has a vulgar sense of humor, so I was thrilled to show what deaf vulgarities in (American Sign Language) looked like on the big screen."

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Kotsur spent time in Gloucester, Massachusetts (the setting of the film), to get a sense of the place and what fishing life might be like. "They told me not to shave or cut my hair for five months before the first day of shooting," he recalls.

But it wasn't just about physicality; as he explains, ASL has its own regional dialects, just like verbal language.

"The sign for 'truck' (has) five different signs," he says, gesturing in a number of ways. "Being in Gloucester, on the fishing boat for two weeks really influenced the way I signed, because they wear heavy rubber gloves, which influence the way I communicate. It's their specific culture, language and accent. It's a myth that ASL is monotone."





— (L.-r.) Amy Forsyth, Daniel Durant, Marlee Matlin and Kotsur in "CODA."

Apple TV / Alamy Stock Photo

Kotsur is also hitting the mainstream at a fortuitous time; movies featuring deaf actors in more than "victim" or "sympathy" roles are becoming more common, including "Sound of Metal," "Eternals" and "A Quiet Place."

"But remember," he says, "those films had just one deaf character apiece. 'CODA' was one of the first times there was a deaf ensemble cast with three deaf actors. Our film is a big step forward."

Nor does he think this is some kind of passing fad. "It's the first time I've really seen Hollywood this motivated," he says. "Deafness is almost a hot topic this year. I'm getting offers, and I might consider to direct one or two projects. I'm curious to see where I can fit in."



— Kotsur in "CODA." Apple TV / Courtesy Everett Collection

"In the past," he adds, "I worked so hard trying to make a living. This time, it's the other way around. The tables are turned and they're giving me offers, rather than me scrambling for jobs. The most important thing I'd like to tell Hollywood is to get rid of their fear. Don't be afraid of being creative. It's OK to be afraid ... but it'll help you improve. Discomfort will help you grow."

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Randee Dawn



Randee Dawn (she/her) is an entertainment journalist and author based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for TODAY.com,