

OPINION: The disability community's Bechdel Test

Cast disabled actors whenever possible and tell better stories

August 30, 2015 3:13PM ET

Since the emergence of the (newly renamed) [Bechdel-Wallace Test](#), which is used to judge women's representation in Hollywood films, other groups that feel marginalized in the media — sadly, everyone except white men — have searched for a similar short-hand as a means to communicate what they would like to see change. In the disability community, these efforts have [coalesced around two basic principles](#): Cast disabled actors whenever possible and tell better stories.

Too often, disability only appears as an obstacle to be overcome or a tragedy to which a non-disabled character can react, both forms of [inspiration porn](#).

“How many times must we be subjected to the same kinds of hackneyed, overwrought and, let's face it, lazy storytelling?” Lawrence Carter-Long, an expert on disability and film, asked during a recent email interview. “The best writing about disability focuses on character. Not a rehash of the same two-dimensional tragic or heroic movie-of-the-week stillness we've all seen a hundred times before.”

Here's the good news: in the past year, a number of TV shows did a much better job telling stories about disability. I will focus on four of them, which are slated to return this year: “Empire,” “Daredevil,” “Game of Thrones” and “Switched at Birth.” Despite the flaws in each show, their depictions of disability offer successes worth celebrating.

Empire

Lucious Lyon's eldest son Andre had a tumultuous first season in the hit FOX show. Andre is the highly successful Chief Financial Officer of Empire Records. After his father is diagnosed with ALS, a neurodegenerative disease, Andre and his brothers are forced to compete for the media mogul's kingdom. Andre has bipolar disorder and while his character arc advances to a breakdown, the message is not that his psychiatric disability is a tragedy. Instead, his problems emerge from the [stigma](#) attached to mental illness, especially within the [African-American community](#), which forces him to conceal his condition. His story thus presents the “[social model](#)” of disability, which underscores society's inability to accept neurodiversity as the real problem facing people with disabilities. And because Andre recovered and is now ready to resume plotting, next season will depict an attractive, successful person of color who happens to have a disability.

Game of Thrones

Unlike in “Empire,” the thrones in this show are not metaphorical. Family feuds come with a much higher body count and worse music (“[Rains of Castamere](#)” versus “[Drip Drop](#)” is not a fair contest). The fifth season propelled “Game of Thrones” to new heights both in terms of [popularity](#) and [controversy](#). When people ask why I keep watching, despite my revulsion at the constant depiction of sexual violence, I always point to Tyrion Lannister. Like actor Peter Dinklage who portrays him, Tyrion has [a form of dwarfism](#). He is a complex, charismatic and sexy character. His involvement in the show is not limited to disability issues, but he’s willing to engage them directly in the fantasy context, such as when early in season one he says, “All dwarves are bastards in their father’s eyes.”

In any show, treat people with disabilities by the same rules as everyone else. If your other casts can go on dates, fight crime or swing swords, then people with disabilities can also date, fight crime and swashbuckle.

It’s not just Tyrion. When the great swordsman Jamie Lannister loses his right hand, his identity is challenged. It takes many episodes for him to emerge from a cycle of grief, struggle and therapy. There’s a kind of realism here. Sudden disability can challenge our identity. Although the relationship between Stannis Baratheon and his daughter Shireen, whose face is badly scarred from her brush with the fictional disease [greyscale](#), ended horrifically ([spoilers here](#)), the two had a [heartfelt conversation](#) in which he discussed his complex feelings of love and guilt for his daughter. Overall, disability in the faux-medieval world serves as an aspect of identity, without falling into superficial pastiches of stereotypes.

Daredevil

“Daredevil” was launched to resounding “oops” because it lacked [audio descriptions](#) that would have made the show accessible to a blind audience. Matt Murdock is a superhero with echolocation powers that enable him to construct visual maps of space. Murdock can perceive his best friend giving him the finger, fight ninjas and dodge the New York City traffic, but he is still [blind](#). Without assistive technology, he can’t read a printed book, a clock, a computer screen, his phone or a license plate. The show consistently depicts useful bits of tech: Talking clocks and cell phones, a refreshable braille display and a screen reader all demonstrate that visual impairment doesn’t have to mean the loss of independence. The show may focus on violence, much of it horrific, but it also shows that [simple technological tools](#) can make the world more accessible.

Switched at Birth

“Switched at Birth” may be a teenage soap opera, but it’s better than all the other shows in terms of its portrayal of disability. The show features two girls who were, as one might guess, switched at birth. Bay, the artsy one, lives with her rich family in a mansion, while Daphne, tall and athletic, lives in a poorer part of Kansas City with her mother and grandmother. By the end of the first episode, the poor family has moved into the rich one’s guesthouse. Drama ensues.

Daphne is deaf and actress Katie Leclerc, who plays her, also has hearing loss. In the first season, Daphne's biological parents display their ignorance of deafness. They shout. They offer cochlear implants as a "cure." Daphne and her mother try to explain deaf culture as diversity, not malformity. Later, Bay has to learn to sign because she starts dating Daphne's best friend, Emmett.

The producers of "Switched at Birth" also play with sound and hearing. When two deaf individuals sign, ambient sound drops. American Sign Language (ASL) conversations sometimes take place without subtitles, replicating the perspective of hearing people who do not sign. A [highly praised](#) episode in season two is entirely in ASL, showing a dramatized teenage version of the real-life Galludet uprising, in which deaf students at Galludet University, in Washington, D.C., staged a sit-in to demand a deaf president. In the show, the students seize control of a deaf-only school in danger of being closed.

In another episode, police arrest Emmett and react violently when he doesn't respond to shouted commands. The scene is shown both with and without sound. In the former, there's just a bright light shining in Emmett's face before officers suddenly tackle him. I frequently write about the violence experienced at the hands of police by people with disabilities, including deaf individuals, but I've never seen such a scene portrayed on mainstream TV. This season, a pregnant character [received](#) a prenatal diagnosis that her fetus has Down syndrome. In its soapy way, the show is tackling real issues that are too often ignored, while giving its disabled character enormous agency.

A final rule

"Game of Thrones" and "Switched at Birth" cast actors with disabilities as central characters. Their stories are complex and engage with disability, but do not limit them to disability issues. "Daredevil" and "Empire" present examples of the ways in which society disables individuals and the power of simple accommodations through technology, medication and lack of stigma. The shows are not perfect, but [as feminist critic Melissa McEwan writes](#), a show's problems don't erase the power of good representation, especially for a group that so often is mocked or marginalized. While we might wish the writers and directors made better choices, the positives remain.

Here's my final rule: In any show, treat people with disabilities by the same rules as everyone else. If your other casts can go on dates, fight crime or swing swords, then people with disabilities can also date, fight crime and swashbuckle. Portray people with disabilities as people, and the rest will follow.

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