

Echo, Narcissus, and the Importance of Being Seen

Although the stories that have captivated my brain of late revolve around Real Housewives and their big, big Birkins, I've recently begun to reflect on a story from slightly less modern times. Say, circa 3000-ish BCE.

It's the one about Narcissus - that guy whose name is often invoked in the presence of the more egomaniacal of our society - and his spurned suitor, Echo. Echo was an ancient Greek nymph whose speech had been stolen, cursed to repeat only the words that were spoken to her ("HELLOOOO!" "helloooo...helloooo...") and Narcissus was, in short, a local hottie. And Echo fell in love with Narcissus as Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a pond, and that is how the two were doomed to remain: He, who only had eyes for himself, and She, who only had eyes for him.

What that story has made me think about is that the Sweet Spot, so to speak, exists somewhere in the in-between; surely we should not become so bewitched by our own fabulousness but we also should not allow ourselves to become, well, invisible.

And, like most everything has since joining PFAL, this led me to thinking about people with disabilities. How they are so often denied the opportunity to see themselves in the media. How they are so often rendered incidental. This month's Emmy awards, however, marked a change with two winning works that highlight the experiences of people with disabilities: "Love on the Spectrum" (Outstanding Unstructured Reality Program) and "Patrice: the Movie" (Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking). The commercial and critical success of these media darlings is helping bring awareness and visibility to our friends and loved ones who deserve to know that they are here and they are seen and their experiences are important.

But why is this even an issue? Because no one wants to end up like Echo and Narcissus.

University of Pennsylvania scholars Gerbner and Gross noted that "positive and nuanced representations of historically marginalized groups in the media can be particularly powerful for those whose stories have either not been told at all, or not been told well." Conversely, they continued, "not seeing ourselves well-represented in the media has been likened to a kind of 'symbolic annihilation.'"

Even back in the 1970's it was apparent that the media can move mountains, both out in the world and in our own self-identity. And today's experts agree that authentic portrayals on TV and in film can be pivotal in leveling stereotypes and stigma.

However...

We mustn't overlook the key word in these specialists' assertions: "authentic." Because true, realistic representation can make the difference between a character who moves our collective mission forward and one that sets it back past ancient Greece. Authentic representation brings about empowerment, educates its audience, shows diversity, promotes inclusivity, and can even bring about social change; irresponsible depictions can be insulting and harmful.

So how do we toe the line?

WRITE WORTHWHILE CHARACTERS

Most characters with disabilities in the media are oversimplified or misrepresented. Ryan Murphy's penchant for portraying people with Down syndrome as oversexed and underprincipled veers from the stereotype (good!), but instead exploits, if not downright mocks (hardly good). Meanwhile, other creators feature glamorized representations - perpetually happy, impossibly inspirational, and, ultimately, one-dimensional. People with disabilities are offered as Villain or Hero, their disability hamartia or superpower.

Authentic characters - ones with depth and flaws and humanity - help to normalize disabilities, to challenge stereotypes and public perception, and promote social inclusion. And we need more of them. The Geena Davis Institute, in collaboration with the Ruderman Family Foundation, concluded a recent study with calls for shows to show that Disability in no way equals Difference, highlight the realities of living with disabilities, and present a diverse, intersectional community in which people with disabilities are members of different races, ethnicities, genders, and sexuality. Because, let's face it, they are.

To wit: the character Corky Thatcher on "Life Goes On" was groundbreaking not just for his status as the first primetime main character with Down syndrome, but for his humanity, his complexity, his utter teenagerness. Corky reckoned with crushes, homework, and chicken pox. He babysat and fought with his sisters. Corky later got married (while actor Chris Burke was featured in Forbes and Us magazines). Just another day in the life of someone extraordinarily ordinary...

CAST CONSCIOUSLY

Hollywood (and Broadway!) have often come under fire for inauthentic casting, shoe-horning non- disabled actors into roles of people with disabilities. These practices often lead to "disabled mimicry" (the physical and vocal representation of disabled roles) which can be inaccurate and/or offensive.

The custom also deprives actors with disabilities of roles that they can perfectly portray without relying on guesswork or caricature. “Atypical” star Keir Gilchrist is a neurotypical actor depicting a character with autism; “HERO Elementary” features a main character with autism although there is no evidence that the actor who voices him shares the disability. Daniel Day Lewis in “My Left Foot,” Tom Hanks in “Forrest Gump,” and Sean Penn in “I Am Sam” all gave it the old college try but some would argue it would have been better to cast people with true disabilities. Celebrated actors like Marlee Matlin, Rick Glassman, RJ Mitte, and Bella Ramsey have enjoyed brilliant careers with disabilities, and there are countless more who have yet to be given the opportunity.

THE STORY’S THE THING

IDD doesn’t make characters, it rounds them out. So IDD shouldn’t be its own storyline.

People with disabilities have rich, active lives - they have loved ones, they have dreams, they have struggles with some things and ease with other things just like everyone else. We need to bring this nuance to the screen, both so the viewing public can understand this truth and so people with disabilities can see themselves reflected in their stories. So, just like a tall character has a life outside of his tallness and bald characters don’t have to harp on their paucity of hair (episode after episode after episode...), characters with IDD can explore love and loss and failure and success like characters throughout history have been allowed to do.

Hollywood needs to stop miscasting, misinterpreting, and outright ignoring characters who don’t conform to the Television Norm. And when authentic representation becomes standard, we will see a lot more neurodiverse shows taking home that golden statuette.