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Don't Act, Don't Tell: Discrimination Based on Gender Nonconformity in the Entertainment Industry and the Clinical Setting

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The author describes anti-homosexual attitudes in the entertainment industry. Effeminate male actors generally have a hard time being cast, whether for gay or straight roles. Attitudes in the performing arts mirror those in society as a whole. Case reports are interspersed in the discussion to illustrate the points.

KEYWORDS *discrimination, performing arts, acting, anti-gay, homophobia, gender nonconformity*

There is a “don't ask, don't tell” practice in the hiring of actors for film, theater, and television, but it is certainly as ubiquitous in casting for the world's stage as well. Here is how it works: Actors can avoid discrimination so long as they do not disclose being homosexual. What is considered to be a disclosure in this case can be verbal, but it is more often nonverbal and merely a casting director's perception or interpretation of the actor's sexuality based on his or her gender presentation. This practice limits work for out and “seemingly gay” actors and also severely limits audience perceptions of both homosexuality and gender. A simple example of this can be found in the film *Brokeback Mountain*, for which straight, masculine movie stars were hired to play gay men. By restricting the presence of gender-nonconforming people in film, television, and theater, the message that “you are permitted to be gay, just don't flaunt your identity” (Yoshino, 2006) reverberates like an earthquake and without anyone having to claim responsibility or fix the problem. Until this phenomenon is brought to the surface by naming and

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aggressively discussing it, homophobic discrimination will continue on and below the surface. Specifically we can expect to see more job discrimination, bullying, suicides, and hate crimes against gender-nonconforming people (both gay and straight).

Ramin Setoodeh's controversial 2010 *Newsweek* piece, "Straight Jacket," ignited recent furious debate on this somewhat elusive and discriminatory casting practice. In the article, Setoodeh (who is a theater critic and gay himself) claims he was unable to buy out actor Sean Hayes as a straight man in the Broadway play *Promises/Promises* because the "queeny" Hayes—who, according to Mr. Setoodeh, "would set off your grandmother's gaydar"—seemed to "be trying to hide something" in his performance (Setoodeh, 2010). The piece suggests that Hayes and other self-identified gay actors who have played straight roles (e.g., out actor Jonathan Groff from the ABC television show *Glee*) are unconvincing playing characters in love with women simply because their gender performance does not entirely match the status quo, that is, a masculine stereotype of how a straight man is supposed to behave.

Setoodeh does make a valid point in suggesting that more gay actors would be employed if they could only "act straight" and conform to gender stereotypes. Acclaimed actor Andre DeShields says, "I have friends in the industry—casting directors, for an example . . . who will not cast another person and the reason given is, 'oh, he's too gay'" (Rayworth, 2007). New York casting director Brette Goldstein says, "If you read gay [in an audition], it's over!" (B. Goldstein, personal communication, March 3, 2007).

However, Setoodeh's misguided article actually became a symptom of the suggested problem and even exacerbated it. He had the opportunity to invite readers to explore and question audience reactions to gender nonconformity in a straight, male-dominated society, for example, the discomfort, the threat, and the tendency to blame gay people for these feelings. Instead, he indicted the gender-nonconforming actors themselves for not being better at conforming.

The real source of the problem is not the actors, the casting directors, or even the entertainment industry itself but rather the unidentified, unnamed, and unchallenged expectations we all hold as audiences and as a society. It is imperative that we unpack and identify these expectations, clarify what people actually mean by "gay and straight acting," question why "gay acting" evokes an enormous amount of hatred in people, and understand how casting discrimination against gender-nonconforming people promotes homophobia. By acknowledging subtle influences of homophobia and heterosexism, we provide an opportunity to demystify much of the discomfort that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people regularly face (Russell, 2007). It is particularly crucial for helping professionals who interface with LGBT clients to understand this "gay acting" stigma and how it functions because, as Silverstein says, as long as stigma surrounding sexual

orientation and gender nonconformity exists, individuals will be at risk, even from the helping professionals who claim to heal them (Silverstein, 2007).

CASE ILLUSTRATION

A psychotherapist colleague of mine, whom I will call Bill, once told me a story illustrating this point about stigma within the helping professions. Bill is a self-identified gay man who has a number of gay clients in his practice. In the past year he went looking for a therapist of his own, clicking through various headshots on the *Psychology Today* website (a casting process in itself), seeking a male therapist who seemed, in Bill's words, "firm"—as opposed to the "flimsy" looking ones he was mostly finding in the pictures. He found one: a tall, square-jawed man with a deep voice who, according to Bill, often made reference to his girlfriend in sessions. Bill relayed to me that during one particular session he began to share some feelings with the therapist that his own clients had evoked in him, specifically feelings of discomfort, dislike, and disgust toward male clients who seemed "whiny" and "weak." In an attempt to validate Bill, the therapist chimed in, asking, "You mean you wish they were less faggoty?" Bill told me that he was taken aback at first but quickly recovered, chuckling and agreeing that indeed this is what he meant.

When Bill blankly asked for my reaction to this encounter, I wryly responded, "It sounds like you got what you wanted, someone to help you butch up your clients." It would seem Bill had cast a "straight acting," self-asserting heterosexual male in the role of his therapist in order to have an ego-syntonic object to identify with, a "normal" man who would validate his desire and efforts to avoid being "faggoty" like his clients. However, if this was in fact the line of treatment Bill was searching for, what was he hoping to gain by sharing the unfiltered details with me?

I could not help but think Bill was actually ambivalent about the ego-dystonic feelings he harbored regarding the parts of himself he deems to be "flimsy," "faggoty," and "gay acting," feelings induced by clients he identifies as having these qualities. Yet rather than providing a safe, nonjudgmental holding environment for Bill to process this ambivalence, the therapist colluded with Bill's fear of being gender-nonconforming himself. Together they kicked the gender-variant version of Bill out of their mutually created casting office with a blunt "don't call us, we'll call you!" What does an intervention like this mean for Bill's mental health, for his identity, and for his ability to truly and fully be himself? Perhaps more importantly, how does this affect Bill's work with the gay clients who are looking to him for help resolving similar psychic conflicts, perhaps secretly hoping that through psychotherapy, the "gay acting" version of themselves will be given a chance to live, to be seen and understood, to be given a "big break"?

So, what exactly does it mean to “act gay”? As writer/producer Aaron Sorkin points out in his response to Setoodeh’s piece, “An actor, no matter which sex they’re attracted to, can’t ‘play’ gay or ‘play’ straight. Gay and straight aren’tactable things. You can act effeminate and you can act macho” (Sorkin, 2010). Sorkin is correct, but unfortunately most people assume they can determine sexuality based on gender expression and thus actively discriminate against people on that basis. Studies show that “people are indeed able to discern the sexual orientation of others with accuracy rates above chance” (Johnson, Gill, Reichman, & Tassinary, 2007; see also Ambady, Hallahan, & Conner, 1999). Johnson’s study suggests that gender atypicality plays a critical role in a person coming across as “gay” (Johnson et al., 2007). In many cases, lesbian- and gay-identified people show gender nonconformity in traits such as voice, movement, and appearance (Johnson et al., 2007; Ambady et al., 1999; Bailey, 2003). Though the propensity for gender nonconformity may not be present in all lesbian- and gay-identified people, the “notion that one can ‘read’ sexuality—know whether someone is heterosexual or homosexual—by the way they enact gender has become a staple in American popular culture” (Kimmel, 1996).

Many casting directors, especially for film, encourage actors to “be themselves” and emphasize that auditions depend on the actors bringing their own truth and shaping the casting director’s view of the role to be cast (Merlin, 2001). Casting directors say that they are looking for authenticity, that they are “casting the real thing” (B. Goldstein, personal communication, March 3, 2007). If we are to accept the common assumption that sexuality can be read based on gender expression, we might then assume that the plethora of gender-nonconforming actors looking for work might not feel discriminated against when rejected for straight roles, as they could arguably find plenty of work playing gay and lesbian characters. We would be wrong. Not only are lesbian, gay, and transgender roles few and far between in professional theater, film, and television, but those that do exist, especially in terms of male roles, “often have straight men playing them, and that’s what sucks for the gay guys,” says casting director Goldstein.

If gender-nonconforming men are banned from playing themselves, the problem runs much deeper than gay (or gender-nonconforming) actors being rejected for straight roles. It would seem that the underlying problem is, as psychoanalyst Richard Isay says, “the hatred of what is viewed as ‘feminine’ in men by all men” which is “of great importance to understanding the pervasive homophobia in our society” (Isay, 1990). Hollywood’s most revered actress, Meryl Streep, says:

The absolute hardest thing in the whole world is to persuade a straight male viewing audience to identify with a woman protagonist. To feel themselves embodied by her . . . There has always been a resistance to assume a persona if that persona is a she. (Streep, 2010)

I would add to Streep's statement that audiences in a heterosexual male-dominated society also resist identification with a persona if it even behaves like a she.

As audiences, we all contribute to what Judith Butler calls "policing of gender," that is, societal maintenance of the gender binary (men acting "masculine" and women acting "feminine") (Butler, 1990). We do this by rejecting representations of gender-nonconforming people, especially men, and consciously or not, we participate in the securing of heterosexual male power. Connell says that the power of masculinity concerns "above all else, the superiority of men to women, and the exaltation of hegemonic masculinity over other groups of men which is essential for the domination of women" (Connell, 1991). As sociologist Gregory Lehne points out, a male-dominated society objects to male homosexuality "because it is threatened by fragmentations in the male role that could lead to less male dominance, less male power" (Capers, 1991).

Through this lens, we can see that the discriminatory casting practices described above also apply to female actors who are gay and/or gender-nonconforming. Gender nonconformity in female actors may be perceived as undesirable and/or a challenge to heterosexual male power (Capers, 1991). Casting director Goldstein says that even if she is casting for the role of "the sidekick," the actors who usually get the job are women who are "leading lady types ... or just cute," or those who can "sex it up for the guys" (B. Goldstein, personal communication, March 3, 2007).

Female actors are frequently expected to contort themselves in order to appeal to straight male audiences. Streep describes this process of contorting, by sharing her experience as a high school student searching for acceptance by straight males:

I adjusted my natural temperament which tends to be slightly bossy, a little opinionated, loud, a little loud, full of pronouncements and high spirits, and I willfully cultivated softness, agreeableness, a breezy, natural sort of sweetness, even shyness if you will, which was very, very, very effective on the boys. (Streep, 2010)

Streep describes how this high school contortion translated into her work as an actor by referring to a comment that President Bill Clinton once made to her. Clinton told her that men of his generation think of her character in *The Deer Hunter* as their favorite one she has ever played. Streep describes the character as a "lovely, quiet, hapless girl, who waited for the boy she loved to come back from the war." Of the former President's comment, she says, "I have my own secret understanding of why that is and it confirms every decision I made in high school ..." (Streep, 2010).

Gay and gender-nonconforming male actors face a similar challenge, that is, contorting themselves for straight male audiences, only there is a different, greater obstacle here. Straight men are not turned on by other men,

regardless of how feminine or deferential they seem; the less masculine and assertive male actors are, the more turned off straight male audiences become. Straight male audiences want to identify with the men they see on screen and, through this identification, feel reinforced in their own sense of masculine power. In order for any male actor to find work in such a system, he is forced to mute, cover, contort, and disguise his differences (Yoshino, 2006).

This puts a burden on the actor—a burden that every LGBT person faces—to “fix” a “problem” within himself. The actor is viewed as the problem, which reinforces the shame and powerlessness he is already experiencing. As Dennis Saleeby says, “to assume that the cause of personal pain and social problems is individual deficiency has the political consequences of not focusing on the social structure (the body politic) but on the individual” (1992, p. 97). In just this fashion, Setoodeh’s controversial article perpetuated the problem, that is, placing blame on the actor who is then left alone and saddled with the onus of “covering” himself and his “deficit” (Yoshino, 2006). It is no wonder, then, that gay actors continue to stay in the closet and/or attempt to “act straight” which, as we have now established, simply means to act “masculine.” Novelist Christopher Rice points out that the expression “straight acting” implies an ignorance of the mechanics of *gay* sex (Rice, 2006).

The problem is so toxically infectious that in addition to journalists (even gay ones) exacerbating it, successful openly gay actors regularly advise their peers to hide. Richard Chamberlain, who only came out years after his heyday as a leading man, says, “It’s just silly for a working actor to say, ‘oh, I don’t care if anybody knows I’m gay’—especially if you’re a leading man. Personally, I wouldn’t advise a gay leading man-type actor to come out” (Voss, 2010). Rupert Everett, who enjoyed a good run as a leading man in both British and American films says, “The fact is that you could not be, and still cannot be, a 25-year-old homosexual trying to make it in the . . . film business. It just doesn’t work and you’re going to hit a brick wall at some point . . . It doesn’t work if you’re gay” (Cadwalldr, 2009, p. 18).

Though straight men, whether consciously or not, are the ultimate perpetrators of homophobic casting discrimination, they are victims of it as well. Under this system, all actors and all people are locked into such rigid rules for performing gender that creativity and self-expression become inhibited (Flood, 1997). Heterosexual male actors can become blocked from performing openly and truthfully, particularly with other men, as they may fear presenting as too sensitive, soft or feminine which may in turn read as “gayness” (Blood, Tuttle, & Lakey, 1998). The pressure for a straight male actor to sustain a presentation of male dominance can also compromise his working relationships, pressuring him “to treat others badly” (Flood, 1997).

Ultimately, the rigid limitations placed on gender presentation on screen affects every consumer of entertainment. As Bandelj says, actors’ portrayals

of characters contribute to the social reproduction of human identities. The choice to cast roles within a strict gender binary where men are either “straight acting” and “normal” or “gay acting” and “stigmatized” can shape a global audience’s ideas and understandings “as U.S. film and stage portrayals are among the most pervasive popular cultural objects” (Bandelj, 2003). According to the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), “There is no other medium as capable of affecting human behavior and thought as films” (SAG, 2011).

In limiting opportunities for empathetic, gender-nonconforming, actors, as well as the presence of such characters, the entertainment industry effectively condones homophobia for audiences around the world and thereby sanctions social distancing, aggression, and violence against all LGBT people on the basis of gender nonconformity. When we live with a threat against “gay acting,” we live with a fear of being considered gay, which “limits and distorts everyone’s life choices and relationships” (Blood et al., 1998).

CASE ILLUSTRATION

I have a client I will call Clint, a gay man in his early thirties, who provides an example of how the fear of gender nonconformity compromises one’s life. Clint began treatment in order to increase his self-esteem and improve his relationships. He presents as very intellectual and discursive, or defended as such, and with little affect. At one point in our work together, he spoke disdainfully about people he regularly encounters in his life, both at work and in his social life, who irritate him due to their rampant tendencies to talk about “superficial” topics (i.e., who’s “hot” and who’s “not” in the world of celebrity). Upon probing, we discovered that Clint’s judgment of his peers was really an externalization of his own internal censor against freely expressing enthusiasm, something he had developed as an adolescent as a defense against seeming “silly,” “weak,” or like a “faggot.”

When he was a teenager, Clint remembers seeing the image of a boy his age at a concert with some friends. The boy was skinny, with long “twinkly gelled hair” and hips that willingly swiveled with gusto. This was a “faggot,” he thought, someone who gets teased, beaten up, dismissed, and forgotten. That night, Clint remembers feeling intensely that his friends and family “couldn’t possibly respect me if I was perceived in this way.”

Clint worked to avoid being cast in this role. Since he did not have a proclivity for more palpable masculine behaviors, in the way of being bullish or jockish, he shielded what he perceived to be the more feminine and “silly” sides of himself with intellectual elitism and a reserved, retiring demeanor. Now Clint is weighted down with this shield, feeling distant and disconnected from others, trapped in an isolated melancholy, afraid of taking the risk of revealing his full, genuine self for fear of being rejected, abandoned, or worse. Had Clint experienced a three-dimensional, gender

fluid character on film or television during his adolescence, he might have been able to construct a different narrative about the boy at the concert and about himself.

Who has the power to begin a necessary process of change and eradicate prejudice, discrimination, and hatred against gender-variant actors, gay people, and people in general? Certainly producers and casting directors have this power, though they have no incentive to go against the status quo without significant financial gain for themselves. Perhaps, then, it is up to unions such as the SAG to advocate for these changes of practice.

SAG, “the nation’s largest labor union representing working actors,” has long advocated “nondiscrimination, fair representation and inclusion . . . which today benefit every actor” (SAG, 2011). Looking at several of SAG’s milestone achievements, one can appreciate the union’s effectiveness in advocating for minority actors, as well as for a fair representation of minority characters on screen. Throughout the 1950s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) urged SAG to see that African American actors who were “struggling to attain their rightful place in the life of the nation and the world, [were] not handicapped by misrepresentation in a medium which speaks powerfully to people everywhere” (SAG, 2011). “By the late 1960s, SAG recognized that other minority groups need the type of aid and protection African-American performers had struggled so long to achieve,” including “women, Latino/Hispanics, Asian-Pacific Americans, Native American Indians, seniors and the disabled. Each was clearly part of the ‘American scene’ but badly neglected and underrepresented in casting for movies and television” (SAG, 2011).

In 2010, SAG Interim National Executive Director David White emphasized that it is still a priority for SAG to advocate for a wider margin of diversity regarding actors and characters, saying, “I encourage all of our friends in the creative community to work toward a more diverse and accurate media landscape” (SAG, 2012a). An “accurate media landscape” portraying all people from “the American scene” should certainly include characters of varying gender presentations and sexual identities, being portrayed by a variety of actors. Unfortunately, it has been a harder road to hoe for SAG in advocating for the visibility of LGBT actors and characters on screen than it has been for other minority groups.

SAG has certainly worked hard over the years to achieve this visibility. In the past decade, an LGBT committee was formed to provide support for LGBT union members. SAG has also recently released a manual called *Diversity A to Z*, which is:

a preferred glossary of diversity terms; information for producers, casting directors and talent agents on hiring, casting and representing diverse members; and contacts of our community and industry partners who also work to further fair and diverse representation and employment of

industry professionals in front of, and behind, the cameras. (SAG, 2012b, p. 2)

The manual includes definitions not only for words such as “Sexual Orientation” and “Gay” but also for “Transgender” and even “Men,” which it defines as:

a gender identity that can be connected to maleness, masculinity, and non-male gender identities/expressions. Not all males identify as men and not all men identify as male. Adult males are not seen as “boys” and should not be referred to as such. (SAG, 2012b, p. 11)

In addition, SAG’s nondiscrimination policy reads:

In accordance with this policy, the Producer will make every effort to cast performers belonging to all groups in all types of roles, having due regard for the requirements of and suitability for the role, so that, for example, the American scene may be portrayed realistically. (SAG, 2011)

These advancements certainly address the casting problems I have been outlining. Although SAG has certainly begun a much-needed discussion on these elusive and complex topics, the idea of casting gender-nonconforming actors has not caught fire. One of the reasons, as stated earlier, is that producers have no incentive to use these actors.

SAG does offer contracts for producers of independent films, which include financial incentives for using minority actors, but openly gay or gender-nonconforming actors are not on the list. Furthermore, nondiscrimination policies designed to protect gay and gender-nonconforming people are not legally enforceable. Though several states have passed laws protecting employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation, the same states do not offer legal protections for discrimination based on gender nonconformity, nor are there federal protections against either form of discrimination. Therefore discrimination against any type of employee who “acts gay” remains both prevalent and hard to prove.

The Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 2007, H.R. 3685 (2007–2009), which includes protections for both sexual orientation and gender identity and expressions, has been introduced in nearly every Congress since 1994 and is still awaiting approval. Yale Law professor Kenji Yoshino says in his book *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (2006):

Courts will protect traits like skin color or chromosomes because such traits cannot be changed. In contrast, the courts will not protect mutable traits, because individuals can alter them to fade into the mainstream, thereby escaping discrimination. If individuals choose not to engage in that form of self-help, they must suffer the consequences.

As pessimistic as all this sounds, positive changes have begun to percolate. Straight male audiences are beginning to allow themselves to identify with a few female characters. Meryl Streep says that men of Bill Clinton's generation are now beginning to tell her that their favorite character is Miranda Priestly from *The Devil Wears Prada*—a powerful and complex character they can see themselves in, as opposed to a submissive girl they want to date. Of this change, Streep says:

Men are adapting. About time . . . they are adapting consciously and also without consciously realizing it for the better of the whole group. They are changing their deepest prejudices to regard as normal the things that their fathers would have found very, very difficult and their grandfathers would have abhorred and the door to this emotional shift is empathy. (Streep, 2010)

There is, of course, out actor Neil Patrick Harris—now in his sixth season of playing a straight male character on the television show *How I Met Your Mother*—who continues to be well-received by mainstream audiences and critics alike. It is difficult, though, to quantify how this particular advancement has or will benefit gender-nonconforming and gay actors or how audiences will be changed by it. Harris was already iconically embedded in our cultural consciousness from his days as a child prodigy on the show *Doogie Howser* and has lately created a new iconic role for himself, utilizing his talents as a singer and dancer, as everyone's favorite awards show host. Accordingly, it is hard to tell if the general public will accept a gay or gender-nonconforming actor or character who is not such an anomalous phenomenon.

This brings us to the revelation that is the out, gay, gender-nonconforming actor Chris Colfer and his equally binary-shattering character Kurt Hummel on the hit television show *Glee*. Kurt is an openly gay, effeminate, fashion-forward high school student who is a far cry from Sean Hayes's one-dimensional Jack from the sitcom *Will and Grace*—the only other major effeminate male character to appear as a lead on a major network in history. As *Glee*'s creator Ryan Murphy says of Kurt, "He's proud and he's popular and he struggles, but he has such dignity and I've never really seen that on network television" (Mitchell, 2011). Colfer has become a widely appealing presence on the show, earning a Golden Globe in 2011, but as Murphy says, has also instantly become "a role model to so many gay kids who watch that show, who can see that character and say, "I can be that" (Mitchell).

Will we see more characters like Kurt in mainstream media? The character did not even exist before Colfer's audition for *Glee*. Murphy says that "when we started auditioning, I thought it was kind of ridiculous that we're doing a musical about kids and expression and we don't have the gay point

of view" (Fernandez, 2009). He and Colfer have both reported that the part was written for Colfer because Murphy liked his audition so much. Murphy says, "I've never seen anyone who looks like him or acts like him or sounds like him" (Fernandez). Does this mean we have to wait for another phenomenon like Chris Colfer to fall out of the sky before more well-written, three-dimensional, effeminate male characters will be created?

A recent storyline in *Glee*'s third season actually uses the character of Kurt to confront, in a meta-theatrical way, the "Don't Act, Don't Tell" problem that I have unpacked in this paper. The simple yet complicated and refractory set-up is as follows: Kurt and his boyfriend Blaine, played by the straight and "straight acting" Darren Criss, both audition for the male lead in the school musical. Though Kurt blows away the directors with his singing audition (performing "I Am The Greatest Star," a Fanny Brice number from *Funny Girl*) and though they claim to support "nontraditional casting," they ultimately decide that he is "too gay" for the role. A scene showing his acting audition as Romeo opposite Lea Michele's Juliet causes the directors to erupt in laughter—not because his acting is deficient or that he is unwilling to kiss his female scene partner, but rather because he does not try to cover his effeminate mannerisms. Needless to say, the part goes to his more palatable, gender-conforming boyfriend, and Kurt decides to accept the loss and run for class president instead.

The show's creators do seem to miss an opportunity here that they appeared to construct for this very purpose, that is, to rise above the status quo and model a reality where an audience can accept and enjoy a performance by a gender-nonconforming actor in a romantic leading role. However, directly addressing this topic on a network television show *at all* is progress, and realistically depicting this all too common casting decision forces the audience to empathize with Kurt's rejection and marginalization. Perhaps better yet is the choice to have him pursue the role of class president, a position of power where he can begin to suggest and implement changes, paving the way for people like Kurt to have a wider range in which to express themselves, to be seen, and to exist.

In and out of character, Colfer is uncompromisingly gay, uncompromisingly gender nonconforming, and unequivocally appealing to all. There is no reason we should not see more people like him on screen, and we *must* in order for tolerance, acceptance, and equality to take root. If the parts are written, the actors will come out to play them—perhaps even literally—and with that will come more creative freedom for all actors and audiences. Actors both gay and straight need more room to play a wide spectrum of gendered behaviors, for example, Johnny Depp's gender-variant portrayal of the heterosexual pirate Jack Sparrow in *The Pirates of the Caribbean* films, just as audiences need a wider swath of characters and behaviors with which to identify.

Like it or not, on-screen representations of our lives inform our imaginations and open our minds to truths which we may have not yet experienced in reality. As Thomas Hardy once said:

Art is a disproportioning—(i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion)—of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. (Hardy, 1984, p. 239)

In closing, I would like to share the theme of overlooked realities as it has arisen in my work.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Peter, a self-identified gay man, came to me for help processing ambivalence he was feeling about separating from his wife of 30 years. Peter reported that he had told his wife of his sexual orientation soon after they were married, and that though this was difficult for them both, they had reached some kind of understanding and almost made plans to separate. During this period of adjustment and contemplation, Peter began to explore his sexual feelings with men, dated a man, and quickly fell in love. The plot was set for Act I of his romantic life—the canned, safely heteronormative, stifling part of the story—to transition into the daringly truthful, passionate, liberating Act II, a transition hinging on the pivotal moment when Peter would introduce his lover to his wife. Peter believed that he could only commit to separating from his wife and beginning a life with his lover without guilt and shame if it seemed his wife approved of the man. Peter arranged a dinner for three, which turned out to be “horrible.” Soon after, Peter’s wife gave birth to a child, and Peter had a concrete reason to stay in the marriage for the next 30 years, through to the present day.

When I asked Peter what was “horrible” about the dinner, he replied that his lover had acted “inappropriately” throughout the night. Though he would not specify what the behaviors were, he descriptively summed them up in one word: “feminine.” Peter had been poised to engage in a reality he had long longed for and which he had kept hidden in the form of an obscure fantasy for the duration of his life, that is, the reality of having an openly sexual and loving relationship with another man. If only the man playing the part of his lover were palatable to Peter’s audience, if only he were “straight acting.” Surely Peter must have known this man to exhibit effeminate qualities at some point during their time together alone, but witnessing these mannerisms in the presence of his wife triggered the critical eye of his internal objects, and together all of them served as the audience for the “horrible,” “feminine,” “gay acting” character at the dinner

scene. All of them rejected him, as well as Peter's potential love story with him, on the basis of his gender nonconformity.

Thirty years later, Peter is in my office facing the same dilemma: "to leave, or not to leave his wife," "to live, or not to live his life," only this time there is no catalytic lover. He is now directly confronting his fear of living a life in which he may be perceived to be gay, unprotected by the shield of a false self. In the beginning of our work, Peter seemed to view the therapy room as a casting office in which he would be judged (by me as well as his internal casting director) for not being strong or masculine enough to either leave or stay. I have attempted to reframe his perception, suggesting the office to be more of a creative space where a variety of Peter's selves are allowed to be present in the room—the critical casting director, the masculine loyal husband, the strong and dutiful son, as well as the effete poetic storyteller, the vulnerable lover, and the timid fearful little boy. The process is slow and often painful for Peter, but each day he has dreams, one recurring dream in particular in which he gets closer and closer to a door. Most recently he told me that he noticed the door to be ajar, with only darkness behind it. This is where our work lives at the moment, awaiting a vision of what's behind that door, the image of Peter living his life unbridled, without fear, and without shame.

It is up to us, as audiences of film, theater, friends, family, and clients, to accept and even demand more diversity in the range of gendered behaviors performed in our lives. Without envisioning more freedom in the way we all perform gender, children, teenagers, and adults will continue to be disparaged, bullied, or killed, or will continue to kill themselves.

Every one of us has the power to act who we are, tell who we are, and imagine ourselves with more options for expression. If we are willing to do this for ourselves, we can then empathize with others who dare to live their truth as well, and empathy is the key to transformation for actors and for us all.

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