

Autism In Film and Media: Time for Equity?

When we look at film and media, I believe that positive discourse over inclusion is somewhat lacking. How can we address the topic of autism without being insensitive to autistic individuals whilst keeping audiences engaged with the programming? This commentary will look at 4 programmes that feature autism. 2 that employ neurotypicals to portray autistic actors: The Good Doctor; Atypical, and 2 that employ autistic individuals: Holby City; Dinosaur.

Producers strive for realism portraying autistic characters sometimes to the chagrin of those in the autism community, for example The Good Doctor which is about an up-and-coming surgeon called Dr. Shaun Murphy, who happens to have autism and savant syndrome. This is a difficult role for anyone to play given how broad the autism spectrum truly is. Producers can struggle by not clearly understanding the individuality of each person on the spectrum. It's a razor's edge. Trying to avoid producing "inspiration porn" but also making the programming meaningful to those in the autism community. The Good Doctor does a fine job of navigating this razor's edge. The lead character does well in his debut, showing several characteristics that can accompany an autism diagnosis. These characteristics include things such as social awkwardness, lack of eye contact, playing with his hands during stressful situations, etc. That last one is still something I do to this day as an adult who is on the autism spectrum. In my opinion the lead actor's portrayal of an autistic individual will resonate with many in the community. It will be interesting to see how his character evolves moving forward.

While many in the autism community may tune in for Dr. Murphy, autism is only one component of the show that will draw viewers. Based on statistics from the Department of Work and Pension's some 90% of individuals with an autism diagnosis are unemployed (The National Autistic Society, 2021). Discussing the hiring of someone with a disability highlights its importance: Aren't we judged by how we treat people? I do not mean as doctors I mean as people. Especially those who do not have the same advantages that we have. Hiring Shaun gives hope to those people with autism diagnosis that said diagnoses are not overtly life-limiting. I find it somewhat risible that the Producer talks of highlighting unemployment and disability, then employs a neurotypical to play Dr Shaun!

Another US TV show that has created a stir in the autism community is Netflix's comedy Atypical, now entering its fourth season. The coming-of-age series deals with issues of autism and relationships. It is about a high school senior on the spectrum and his family.

Much of the debate about the show centres around the lack of autistic input in its development. Mickey Rowe, currently the first autistic actor to play the lead in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, wrote that while he had hoped Atypical "would be able to offer a glimmer of representation," he was disappointed that Netflix

and creator Robia Rashid (How I Met Your Mother) didn't include autistics either behind the scenes or in any major roles. He objected to the fact that a scene in which Sam is wearing headphones to block out distracting noise is played for laughs and that at times Sam's parents see their son's autism as "a tragedy."

Sam doesn't seem to have a sense of humour. "Why does he rarely seem to take any actual joy in his hobbies"? Some people related to the family dynamics, writing about struggling to give independence to their child, just like Sam's mom, Elsa, or how they wear headphones, fidget (Sam plays incessantly with a rubber band during his therapy sessions) and can have major meltdowns when overwhelmed by sensory input.

When the second season aired, the show *Atypical* introduced five characters with autism: all characters are played by autistic actors, but is all as it seems?

While the creator of the show had nothing but praise to heap on her colleagues for their portrayal of the autism community, she also stressed the importance of involving the autistic community in the production process. But why not for the first series? it wasn't until the creator was criticised that they all of a sudden "loved the autistic group"! The problem for me is yet again neurotypicals think they can do it better; it was only when the creator came in for criticism that they diversified their cast and crew. In my opinion the worst type of politically correct virtue signalling.

Contrast that with British television where things are done somewhat differently. Jules Robertson is a 27-year-old actor from London, best known for playing autistic character, Jason Haynes, in the BBC medical drama, *Holby City*. Jules himself has Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism, a neuro-divergent condition that causes difficulties in social interactions and repetitive patterns of behaviour and interests.

Jason was involved in Access all Areas theatre company and recently spoke about his experiences: "Overall, I think that Access All Areas has been really helpful to me and without it, I wouldn't have got my *Holby City* audition or job. The way in which I have progressed and worked up to where I am now has been a very interesting journey." Having a producer that fought for the right of an autistic actor to play an autistic role was incredible, otherwise, it would have been another example of a non-disabled actor playing a disabled role, like Dustin Hoffman playing Rain Man. Having an autistic individual playing the role has done more to take the stigma out of autism than a hundred dry documentaries. The audience sees Jason's real emotions and can relate to his problems. It makes them feel sympathetic, but also amused and intrigued by the way his brain works, maybe even the people working on *Holby City* have changed their mind about the abilities of people with autism. Jason suggests "I've been able to show them that we are able and capable, as well as being fun and clever."

For actors, every role means diving into a new character, raking about in their psychological wardrobe, and adopting a completely different personality. When Ashley Storrie landed the lead in her first television series it was the opposite. She could at last be herself. The 33-year-old stand-up comedian makes her acting debut in BBC

Three's new comedy drama series Dinosaur playing Nina, who is autistic yet to be diagnosed. Ashley Storrie's portrayal of an autistic individual is both accurate and emotive. In my opinion filming the pilot episode must have been a liberating experience to finally have colleagues who understand her daily struggles. Storrie who, like Nina, has autism spectrum disorder spent years trying to hide her true self to fit in. With the trying conditions of lockdown, an autistic actor was ideal as they like to stick to routines. Storrie explained: "It felt like the part could have been written for me. The minute I read the script, I got goosebumps. There were bits in the story about My Immortal, a weird fanfiction I have read on YouTube that nobody else knows about, but I know inside and out. So, when I read that in the script it was so weird". A huge contrast with the 2 American shows where the autism community seemed much more at odds with what the show's creator was trying to do.

From this article we can see that there is wide variance in the way media deals with the subject of autism. Taking the approach that Hollywood does and using autistic advisors to coach neurotypical actors, is in my opinion demeaning and suggesting that autistic actors aren't good enough to play those roles. Compare that with the programmes from the United Kingdom and you find that both have employed autistic individuals in key roles within the production with, in my opinion, great amounts of success. To me, this use of autistic talent is something that we should be striving for.

If directors/producers want authenticity, then what's more authentic than having an autistic person play the role? When you think about it, autistic people are acting every day – acting at being 'normal', to fit in and not be anxious.