

Out and Proud

Queer in the Biz

by Joanne Vannicola

Since Ellen's trailblazing episode when she announced she was gay, there have been more shows with LGBTQ roles: *Queer As Folk*, *Bomb Girls*, *The L Word*, *Being Erica*, *Modern Family*, and *The New Normal*, to name a few.

However it wasn't until the mid-90s that television started to put a face to queer characters (often played by straight actors,) and since then it has only really scratched the surface.

As an actor who is out, I have managed to work and maintain a career. I've won an Emmy and been nominated for Genie, Gemini, and ACTRA awards, but the truth is: I don't easily pass as heterosexual. That doesn't upset me. What does concern me is the lack of storytelling from an LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Queer) perspective and the lack of roles for gender non-conforming talent. The question remains: how can we encourage a paradigm shift in our industry, where diverse and multidimensional storytelling becomes the norm and people of all genders, sexualities, races and abilities are equitably represented in the stories that are told?

I've always spoken out and up about the lack of diverse choices for women and LGBTQ people in our industry. I worked against stereotypes of gender, clothing, hair, and the notion that I should render my LGBTQ identity invisible. Many of us do this work on our own with common goals and experiences, including actor and award-winning author of *Fall On Your Knees*, **Ann-Marie MacDonald**. "I remember auditioning for the part of a lesbian for a CBC show in the eighties," Macdonald shared. "I had heard about the part and had to fight for an audition,

even though I had done lots of work already. The producer and casting people thought that it would be unwise to cast "a real one" in the role. I barged into the audition...they were quite frank about my being "wrong" for it because I was "too right" for it. A straight friend of mine got the part. Over the years I played quite a few "girl-next-door" types," Macdonald continued, "often for CBC, gradually evolving into more grown-up roles such as serious crown attorney types. 'Crypto-lesbians' I called them and 'Execu-dykes,' the types of roles that seemed to require a lesbian undertone, but were never declared as such. And all this when I had been out for years! Apart from *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* and *Better Than Chocolate*, if I wanted to play an actual dyke I had to write the stuff myself, which I did for theatre."

A similar story emerged from other women I spoke to: "I got labelled as difficult," says **Trey Anthony**, actor and writer of *Da Kink in My Hair*. "I don't want to play roles that debase me. I call them the 'where is my chicken?' roles. I want stories that speak to me as a queer woman, a black woman." I asked if Anthony thought things had changed. She told of a casting director asking for her 'ABC,' her 'Angry Black Chick.' "No, I don't really think there has been a lot of change, but as someone who identifies as queer, I can pass (as straight). We need powerful writers, especially coming from the black community and for any of us who do have power, we must give back."

Sexism and racism add layers to the already complicated reality of being an LGBTQ actor, particularly if you do not try to pass as heterosexual. **Adamo Ruggiero's** experience was unique: growing up as a gay character on TV in *Degrassi:TNG* while staying in the closet at home. "It wasn't until half-way through the show that I came out," explained the award-winning host of *The Next Star*. "I got used to having three lives. I had a straight life, a gay life on TV and pretended to be a straight guy playing a gay character. It was exhausting. I wanted to come out, to speak

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to my generation and take responsibility but there were so many regular things as a 17-year-old that had to be kept in because I had this public persona and had to think about people watching me. I hope to play gay characters at 37 but I don't want to play the 'flamboyant and faaaaabulous gay.' I

want to play real people, real characters and I'm not the hairdresser type so why would I be brought in for it? Just because I'm gay? I'm an actor and I want to play all kinds of roles."

Actor, writer and ACTRA Toronto V.P. **David Gale** (*Loving Spoonfuls*) observed: "In the music industry and reality TV world the public doesn't have to buy a star's sexuality being something that it's not. But with actors there always needs to be a willing suspension of disbelief. Our society is still uptight around sexuality and so it's easier for the public to believe an actor playing a rapist or a murderer than it is to accept a gay actor playing straight. Isn't that twisted? But I see that changing with the current generation. They grew up with positive gay characters like those on *Will and Grace*. Growing up in the 60s & 70s there were no, out, non-stereotype gay role models."

Actor/writer **Diane Flacks** (*Kids in the Hall*): "When I think of the industry and who it aims to please, it has a life of its own, a fantasy-driven industry of gorgeous people... so we have to take the risk, get things out there, however we can, create our own work." Flacks' perspective resonates. If we are ever going to have accurate LGBTQ representation on our screens, we must break down the stereotype of white, straight and perfect-looking. Otherwise it tells gay actors: 'If you want to be in the industry you must look straight.'

"I look gay, it's who I am." **Billy Merasty**, First Nations actor (*Elijah*) shared his distinct perspective: "I've had casting people tell me I look too gay and some have said I'm not gay enough, but it's a part of my life and I don't want to edit it. I live it. I breathe it, but the business is stereotypical and we are always underestimated by the way we look. And you would think that, with new Native programming and TV shows, I would be working more. I'm not." I asked if he thought it was because he is gay. "Yes," he answered, "but... I was lucky. I was raised Cree and it has enhanced my life and just because I live in a racist and homophobic world doesn't mean that being Cree or gay isn't potent. It's magical."

Change comes slowly but everyone I spoke to agreed there is an overwhelming imperative that LGBTQ characters not only be identified as gay but portrayed as having full lives - sometimes in loving relationships but always with storylines that pertain to more than just their sexuality.

Bomb Girls is a great example of a series with diverse characters, in primetime, on a major network. The show, set during WWII, depicts strong and dignified female characters including a lesbian character named Betty - played by **Ali Liebert**. **Michael MacLennan**, *Bomb Girls*' co-creator and writer explains: "Anyone who claims to care (about LGBTQ issues) should include queer content. I think we have found a good balance with *Bomb Girls*. Betty's character isn't just about being gay, but about her friendships and work and so many other things that make her life full and it's what our audience responds to." Writer **Aaron Martin** of *Degrassi* and *Being Erica* agrees. "I've made a point of putting gays and lesbians in all shows I've written or created. I feel like it's everyone's duty - gay or straight - to reflect reality in the shows they put on the air."

Some LGBTQ people and supporters need to be out, loud and proud and rocket ideas forward, work feverishly for LGBTQ rights and stories. Others need to take time and space and do things slowly, gradually. We are all different. Many actors are still afraid to come out, afraid they won't be able to earn a living, or do what they love. I don't know many out lesbian actors in Toronto. It's actually a lonely thought, to be part of such a small pool of women in our industry, but nevertheless, we are an important part of its fabric, living our lives.

I am grateful for who I've become and proud to walk into any room without feeling the need to hide. Now I audition and play female characters where I am not asked to 'pass' and my sexual identity isn't a barrier but may even enhance the character and open minds. I've been in the business since I was eight-years-old and I'm still here. I prefer to be part of a Canadian culture and history that provides courage, strength and gives hope to the next generation by being out, by being an activist and by working hard to make our industry and the world a better place. No matter how slowly things change, soon there will be a shift in the way stories get told, with equitable representation of LGBTQ people, but we must keep vigilant to make that a reality. To quote K.D. Lang, "Let your freak flags fly." ●



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