

SHOULD STRAIGHT ACTORS PLAY GAY ROLES?

Earl Derr Biggers who was not Chinese played Charlie Chan in the popular Chinese detective series. In the 1949 film *Pinky*, white actress, Jean Crane plays a woman who is half black. In the 1959 film *Imitation of Life* white actress Susan Kohner plays Sarah, a light-skinned black woman passing for white. Rock Hudson, a gay man, played successful believable straight roles his entire career. If fair is fair, why can't straight actors "play gay"?

The scope of this paper explores the history of some Hollywood male actors who took on the roles of gay characters and the resulting effect it had on their careers. Openly gay actors continue to perform either in or out of the closet and find varied levels of acceptance and personal rewards. Other actors choose for various reasons to maintain a fabricated image to increase their selling power. Still others refuse to discuss their sexuality either way, especially after playing a gay role. These observations will attempt to recognize the pattern and apply it to the entertainment industry as a whole. To answer the question of whether straight actors should play gay characters, let's first look at the gay image in general.

Gay images are being introduced to mainstream audiences in both film and television and through targeted niche marketing. Gay images are gradually finding a place in the vast world of entertainment. Gay producers and decision makers are living freely out of the closet and finding ways to showcase the important contributions that can be found in gay themed programming. But the question of discrimination exists in the Hollywood system. Does it hurt a gay actor playing a gay role or do gay characters

played by mainstream heterosexual actors help the gay cause? If you see a gay character played by a known heterosexual, does it make the image easier to accept as fantasy?

Audiences are learning tolerance and acceptance when gay lifestyles are presented in non-threatening ways. Hollywood executives and educators are finally taking responsibility and finding financial rewards as well as dispelling myths.

Two major gay stereotypes come out of mainstream media. The first is the extremely effeminate gay character. He tends to be popular and funny, because the audience recognizes him right away. The second is the sick corrupted evil gay person who suffers as a result of being bad. He gives the viewer a reason to detest the person who represents the behavior. Audiences want to either laugh at a gay character or cheer the tragic ending of a gay image because the homosexual threat got its just desserts.

If it swishes, snaps, lisps, sashays, bends a wrist and makes us laugh, the general audience member is comfortable with seeing a gay character on television or in film. Audiences are conditioned to view those expressions as a sign of weakness, thereby they seem harmless and an easy subject to laugh about. As long as the character is on the “receiving end” of the joke, all is well with the world. If, on the other hand, a gay character is portrayed just like everyone else, people get uncomfortable. If he has a sex life, advertisers are sweating bullets. Paris Barclay, an openly gay director of such shows as NBC’s *West Wing* and *ER*, points out the concept that gay characters who are non-threatening and lack a visible sex life do not pose a threat to the audience viewing them (Epstein11). The lack of threat is visible on the hit NBC show, *Will & Grace*. The popular character of Jack McFarland on the show is seen as an effeminate person whose every expression sends out the message, “I am gay!” The role is played by actor Sean

Hayes. The actor was discovered in the gay independent film, *Billy's First Hollywood Kiss*. In press materials, the personal aspects of Sean Hayes life are never discussed. The assumption is left that this is a gay actor playing a gay role simply on the basis of not admitting the obvious. On the other hand, the character of Will Truman is played by actor Eric McCormack. This actor makes no pretense that he is portraying a gay character. His press interviews focus on the fact that he is straight, happily married, producing children. It should be noted that the character of Will Truman is considered the lead role. The role of Jack McFarland is considered a supporting role.

The unique balance of keeping a gay character on television, but not scaring off advertisers, has been the challenge to gay producers since the concept of gay characters were first introduced (Epstein11). Craig Zadan, producer of Storyline Entertainment, who also produced the 2002 film *Chicago*, feels it all boils down to money. When shows like *Will & Grace* bring in huge sums of advertising dollars, others will emulate the formula. Since the conclusion of the series, neither actor has surfaced with an extremely successful project. During the height of the series popularity, Hayes portrayed Jerry Lewis in a well received television movie. McCormack has done Broadway and recently was cast in the lead of the new series *Andromeda Strain*. Both have production companies and are currently developing projects. The phenomenon of Will and Grace enjoyed a different climate than the atmosphere of 30 years ago.

In the 1980's, Harry Hamlin took on the gay role of Bart McGuire in the first gay-themed movie released by a major studio. The movie *Making Love*, released by 20th Century Fox, was not a financial success, but it was considered an important step in the gay movement. It told the story of a husband who wrestles with his homosexuality and

falls in love with a writer played by Hamlin. He did not make a major studio film for the next 22 years. Hamlin did find eventual fame on the television show *LA Law* and does not regret his career choice. His explanation in taking on the gay role was that he wanted to step out of the box (Epstein 36). While most people would say the success of *LA Law* helped audiences forget his gay movie role, Hamlin is not considered a major Hollywood star anymore. He is more recently remembered as husband of Lisa Rena. Both husband and wife have appeared on *Dancing with the Stars*. Most critics feel this show can be a career boost for some, or the kiss of death for others who appear desperate to get any media attention. Hamlin's wife enjoyed a career boost. Hamlin has not.

Doug Savant is currently enjoying success as Tom Scavo, the husband of one of television's *Desperate Housewives*, Felicity Huffman. He was first introduced to audiences in 1992 as Matt Fielding, one of the first regular gay characters on the popular series *Melrose Place* (1992-1997). His character received a lot of mixed comments from the gay community because he could never maintain a stable relationship and was considered too nice to be realistic (Tropiano 57). Work became scarce after *Melrose Place* because he found that casting directors always thought of him as that "gay character" from *Melrose Place* and wanted to let the image die down before they would submit him for other roles. Looking back 14 years later, Savant is still proud that he took on the role and is happy that he has endured (Epstein 38). *Desperate Housewives* is produced and created by Marc Cherry who is one of Hollywood's openly gay producers who remembered him from *Melrose Place*.

Straight from the success of the television show, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, Will Smith's first foray into movies was in a serious drama. The popular stage play, *Six*

Degrees of Separation, was made into a movie around 1993. The advice he received from actor Denzel Washington, was not to let the audiences see him kiss a man for fear his image would be tainted forever with black audiences. Smith took the risk on the role that included a nude love scene with Anthony Michael Hall. The gay community criticized the kiss in the love scene because all that is seen is Smith leaning into Hall (the camera cuts away to a different angle) and then as he pulls away, the audience hears the sounds of a kiss, but the kiss is never clearly seen (Morris). The critical success of the movie caused Smith's gamble to pay off as he went on to become a huge action star. The gay community has often suggested that Will Smith and wife Jada Pinkett have 'close and personal' ties to the gay community, but nothing has ever been substantiated. Smith apparently has the golden touch. He is considered one of Hollywood's most bankable stars and has suffered no career gaps because of the gay character he portrayed. Some stars have not suffered career gaps, but if success is measured by dollar amounts, portraying a gay character can hurt a career down the line.

Matt Sanchez, an internet blogger adds fuel to the fire with internet stories that have surfaced about the "*Brokeback Mountain* curse." With the recent death of Heath Ledger, stories related to various misfortunes that have followed the careers of the talent associated with the Oscar winning film. Heath Ledger was considered an actor of enormous talent and versatility. Ledger began to act at the age of 16, but became recognized from the comedy *Ten Things I Hate About You*. Mel Gibson personally chose Ledger as his co-star in *The Patriot*, which became a huge block-buster success. Once Ledger tackled the role of Ennis Del Mar, the gay cowboy of the controversial film, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), it overshadowed any other role he has portrayed. Despite

his wish not to be pigeonholed or stereotyped as a "one note" performer, all of the press covering Ledger's untimely death has identified Ledger as the promising star who played the "gay cowboy" in *Brokeback Mountain*. After grossing nearly 84 million dollars in *Brokeback Mountain*, Ledger's last effort, *I Am Not There*, a critically acclaimed portrayal of the life of Bob Dillon, only grossed 3.5 million. A subsequent film *Candy*, where he played a heroin addict, grossed 46 thousand dollars. It can be argued that neither film was marketed as a big budget film. Heath Ledger was scheduled to play the Joker in the big budget Batman franchise (Sanchez). His death came at an unlikely time since Ledger had not done a big budget movie since *Brokeback* or was it just the curse? Television can be a different animal because trends can move quicker to the small screen than the Cineplex.

After the success of shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace* a phenomenon entered the mainstream culture. Suddenly gay was "en vogue." "Never before have we been so media savvy, nor have we had so much information at our fingertips about who's designing these clothes and who's writing these songs and who painted that picture," said Carson Kressley, a stylist on Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* ("Wider Accept..."). The successes of gay themed shows were replicated across the globe. The natural evolution was to create a network to support gay programming. Andy Medhurst, a media studies lecturer at the University of Sussex, compared straight people to gay culture similar the way white people that borrow from black culture as a 'hip' thing to do (Masters). Mainstream action stars Ving Rhames (*Mission Impossible*), Wesley Snipes(*Blade*) and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson (*Scorpion King*) campaigned producers to play gay characters as in movies; *Holiday Heart*, *To*

Wong Fo: Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar, and *Be Cool*. None suffered adverse damage to their careers, but it should be noted that their roles were classic non-threatening stereotyped characters, created for comic effect.

Two popular television shows, *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *Noah's Arc* (2005-2006) featured dramatic ensemble casts. *Queer as Folk* produced by Showtime Networks featured basically an unknown white cast with the exception of Sharon Gless (*Cagney and Lacey* fame) and Hal Sparks (*Talk Soup E!* Entertainment). Sparks publicly announced he was heterosexual. He made a cameo in the blockbuster success *Spiderman*. Other members of the cast refused to discuss their personal sexuality. Producers of both shows requested the actors not discuss their sexuality for the sake of the fans connection to the believability of the characters. *Noah's Arc*, produced by the MTV/Viacom owned gay channel Logo, also featured an unknown black ensemble cast. Jensen Atwood played the gay heart throb Wade, broke the PR restriction as well by publicly announcing his heterosexuality. Shortly afterwards he was cast as one of Halle Berry's love interests in the television movie, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Since the cancellation of *Noah's Arc*, Atwood has not been cast in any other heterosexual roles and ended up taking another gay role on another gay channel. The channel simply known as "here! TV," produces a gay soap opera called *Dante's Cove* (<http://www.imdb.com/>).

Risks vary for straight performers playing gay roles depending on where they are (status-wise) in their career. Established stars with huge popularity, "play gay" only as a stereotype character. Even with gay producers putting out good projects, the bottom line is money and who draws an audience. As more and more shows debut to explore real aspects of gay lifestyles there is hope that audiences will become more tolerant and

educated. This is evidenced by the advertising support and mainstream recognition. A pattern is beginning to develop that shows some audiences separating the roles from the actor. Eventually gay actors will no longer have to answer the foolish question, “Are you really gay?” Straight actors will no longer have to proclaim their heterosexuality to prove their talent in playing a gay role.

The success of shows like *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *Noahs’ Arc*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and movies like *Brokeback Mountain*, proved that heterosexual audiences can support gay-themed shows through advertising. More gay-themed movies are receiving wider distribution. Advertisers and studios are starting to take more risks on mainstream television and films. Actors will continue to look for good diverse roles. As the political climate forces issues like gay marriage further into the forefront, movies and television shows will reflect those topics in a more realistic manner. It is all about being in the right place with the right power.

Gays in decision-making positions are making advertisers and studios take more risks by including more gay themes and using good actors whether gay or straight in mainstream television and films. In the end, money talks!

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