

Student Podcast Transcript

CSUN Queer Studies Capstone Podcast of Spring 2021 digital exhibit

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Podcast Transcription: Pre-Production: Beyond the Actor for Queer Representation

[SFX: 8MM CAMERA ROLL FADES IN]

[MUSIC FADES IN]

MCC: Representation, a word that portrays someone or even something in whatever light they may choose. A simple word really, but a word that leaves a lasting impression. Hi, I'm Monica Casillas your host for this episode of Pre-Production: Beyond the Actor for Queer Representation. If you haven't realized it yet I will be diving into the pre-production world of film and television to discuss queer representation. Before I begin I would like to clarify to listeners a couple of things that I'll be mentioning. For instance the word queer will be utilized to define the overall initialism of the LGBTQ+ community or how I like to call them, the Alphabet Mafia. More terms will be defined later on in this episode. There will be interviews from Alumni that have studied and graduated in the department of Cinema and Television Arts -CTVA for short- from Cal State Northridge, and for privacy reasons most have been given pseudonyms. And one last thing I would like to clarify before I start this episode is that this is not meant to attack or by any means be malicious to anyone, the goal here is to shed light on a topic that sometimes goes unnoticed.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

MCC: You might wonder why I'm even talking about Pre-Production...for any confusion pre-production is the planning process before filming begins. Generally it's the early stages of the project being filmed, such as finalizing scripts, finding locations, props, casting actors, and of course the financial support of the production. Well my lovely listeners, there was a thought I had about actors and the roles they take on. See I'm a huge Marvel fan and every once in a while I'll take a look at the projects that some of the cast do outside of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I came across this incident from 2018 that involved Scarlett Johansson, a.k.a Black Widow and a role she had agreed to. She received a bunch of backlash for accepting a role that portrayed a transgender man in a film that's based off of a true story called "Rub and Tug".

According to an NBC News report Johanson botched her initial response by trying to justify her decision on bringing up other actors that have done similar roles such as Jeffrey Tambor in “Transparent”, Jared Leto in “Dallas Buyers Club”, and Felicity Huffman in “Transamerica”. Though she eventually withdrew from the role she did state...

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AO: *I wasn't totally aware of how the trans community felt about those three actors playing [Tambor, Leto, Huffman] -and how they felt in general about cis actors playing - transgender people...I wasn't aware of that conversation - I was uneducated.*

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

MCC: I would like to note that I'm aware of other controversies that Johanson has been involved with and I don't agree with how she dealt with the situation in the beginning, but her example triggered my curiosity about how queer representation is thought of beyond the scope of an actor. See when a film or a television show is critiqued because a cis gendered-generally white- actor or actress took on a queer role, they're normally the ones receiving the backlash. Ugh don't even get me started on the double standard since there's more women receiving the backlash a lot harder than men...but I digress. We as a society never really look at the behind the scenes and what I mean by this is the pre-production process before filming. This is where most of the big players such as directors, writers, producers, and many other roles are at play way before an actor is even brought on set. To understand the process I'm going to explore 4 common roles in pre-production: The director, the writer, the executive producer, and the casting process. In hopes to shed some light on why actors should not be the only ones receiving the backlash for queer representation.

[TRANSITION: SILLY NOISE]

MCC: I will admit, there's a vague understanding of how the pre-production process works. If you're not invested in the world of film and television, details about representation can go over one's head. To try to understand the big picture of what's included, think of it as if you're baking a cake. The recipe is the development, retrieving the ingredients and how much of them is the pre-production, the mixing and the baking is the production, frosting the cake is the post-production where editing takes place, and the final look where the cake is ready for presentation is the distribution stage. Now, if the retrieving of the ingredients is the pre-production what usually happens in the stage of baking a cake? You will need to know who's going to eat it to check if you need to adjust the recipe? What ingredients you need to use and where you're going to be looking? How are you going to prepare the ingredients and why do you need certain cooking utensils or not. And finally checking when you need to bake the cake. If you took note, I asked the Big 5 of questioning: the who, the what, the when, the where, and the why, with the added how of course, this gives the idea of what you're going to do. For pre-production

this includes if there will be a setup company, scheduling deadlines, having the preliminary and refined budgets, the hiring of key department heads, securing the rentals, the props, the permits, the location, and other necessities. This is along with hiring the crew, holding auditions for the talent, then eventually having a rehearsal before the final prep for production staging of filming. Aside from giving you an illustrated version of understanding where and what's inside pre-production, it was to show you where the Big 5 questions are. No matter if it's the director, the producers, any casting agency, or even the writer, the Big 5 are key to bringing the representation to the big screen.

[TRANSITION: SILLY NOISE]

MCC: Let's first take a look at the writers. They are the creators of the written dialogue, storyline, background, and overall descriptive creation of whatever characters that are going to be displayed. When researching a writer's involvement I couldn't ignore the development of character designing. Pulling from storywriter and screenwriting consultant Linda Seger, her book *Creating Unforgettable Characters*, had some insightful pieces of advice that she recommends any writer to think about before creating characters. To paraphrase, she emphasizes that all cultural aspects of a character's background shapes the makeup of the values, concerns, speech rhythms, vocabulary, and even emotional life of the character. By asking the Big 5 questions it allows one to form the character's core of consistencies and complexities. The writer must ask themselves how they will grant the description of the character and what might they expect from them. Granted if a good writer wants to add complexities to their character they must look past their own culture regardless of sex, gender, ethnicity, social status, etc., in order to create a character that is fully human. In doing so, they learn to understand that (*quote*) "moving beyond stereotyping means training our minds to see beyond white" (*end quote*). To elaborate on that, Seger discusses how non stereotypical characters are multidimensional while stereotypical characters are not. By breaking the stereotype it humanizes the person, in this case the character in the storyline. For example, an outdated stereotype of a gay man is one who is fashionable, high feminine voiced, sweater around shoulders wearing, with a limp wrist type of character. When in reality gay men can dress, sound, move in whatever way they please. If a gay character in a film or show for that matter had these characteristics it dehumanizes the reality of gay men, just on the notion that they're different. Often times because queer characters are a minority in productions they're more likely to be stereotyped due to lack of specialized research or even consultation. An informational way to understand how much representation the queer community has in film and television is by looking at the *Where We Are On TV* reports released by the organization GLAAD, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. The annual reports detail the presence of queer characters on television, and from 2018 to 2021 there has been slow changes in the percentage of queer diversity. Straight characters still makeup a little over 90% of regular characters, while queer characters fluxuated between 8.8% to 10.2% in just the last 3 years, and probably due to the pandemic it recently dropped to 9.1%. In the most recent one, the

2020-2021 report details that gay men still makeup the majority of regular and reoccurring roles. Now I could go on about Seger's character advice, but something that caught my attention was when she included a quote by Frank Pierson- an American screenwriter-, he states

[MUSIC FADES IN]

EL: *What you need to know about the characters is what the actors need to know to play the scenes*

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

MCC: The reason is because it's suggested that actors should already have the character's information to play them. While yes most actors can pick up a role and start playing the character that's been given, there is this representation factor that comes into play when that happens. An interview I had with one of the CTV Alumni -and for privacy they will be referred to as Gardenias- made an interesting point about queer representation.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

AG: *I don't know, because right there there's this idea that anybody should be able to play anything and then there's this idea-that, so- what it is it comes down to right people, I think because there are so few roles-character that are queer, the idea of sort of casting a straight cis gendered person you know, when there is so many more straight cis gendered roles it feels like your taking away from a group that already has so little representation. So I think if it were more, I think if the representation was more equitable maybe it would be a different argument maybe then you can argue for 'well anybody can get to play anything' but it's not and when it's not, when I think there is a balance that still needs to be achieved, um-then you sort of have to be like 'no' you know. People that maybe share this experience or this identity should be able to embody this character and can probably do it better than somebody who hasn't. But again like these are the opinions of a straight cisgendered person who, I want to reiterate has no-uh, no barren, no qualifications I guess to really have an opinion on this issue beyond. Its a tough one and I stand with the people who are affected, I stand by the queer community you know, whatever the broad opinion on that is and I try to sort of look at it myself but it's not my place to sort of make the call I guess.*

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

MCC: The reason I bring this up is because when there isn't proper representation, stereotypes and misinterpretations of a marginalized group can continue. In this case the representation of the queer community being broadcasted incorrectly. There is only so much a straight actor can do for a considerable enough research on the back-story of

their queer character, and as Gardenia had mentioned (quote) “people that maybe share this experience or identity should be able to embody this character...than someone who hasn’t”. (end quote). This is not to say that a straight actor cannot play a queer character, but by not casting a queer actor into a queer role there is a lack of genuine embodiment of experiences, emotions, and overall representation. A famous example of this is the 2005 film Transamerica in which straight actress Felicity Huffman played a transwoman. Spoilers for those who haven’t watched the film, a brief plot summary of it includes Huffman’s character, Bree, in which she learns that she fathered a son in her college years, all the while she is undergoing the process of physical transformation of male to female. Many things happen throughout the film that if I’m going to be honest it felt like a telenovela, so you have to watch it to understand the rollercoaster of events that happened. Aside from that, the problem I would like to point out is that Huffman is a cisgendered straight actress that was casted to play a trans woman character. And while there were different comments for her portrayal as Bree, there were other trans women actresses around the same age as Huffman at the time that could’ve played that role.

[SFX: FAIRY DUST]

MCC: One that comes to mind is Candis Cayne, who is known as the Fairy Queen in the SYFY show The Magicians. In the late 90’s she was very much transitioning her gender presentation to be acknowledged as a woman. Cayne has been in the acting game for over 20 years now and at the time of Transamerica she would have had 10 years of acting experience plus the real life experiences of a trans woman. Now later in the episode when I discuss casting, you’ll understand why Huffman was chosen instead of an actual trans-actress.

[TRANSITION: SILLY NOISE]

MCC: This brings me to my next point. As writers are indeed the creators of written text, they aren’t necessarily the ones calling the shots. Something I found interesting when conducting interviews with the CTV Alumni was when I asked the question: Who in their experience has the overall final say of what gets placed into the production? There is some interesting responses. From Gardenias:

[MUSIC FADES IN]

AG: *Uh-not the writer that’s something you learn right quick, not the writer, the director depending on how much power they have and sort of how famous they are, it depends on the movie, for a big studio movie the producers and the company have the final say and if things are gonna to be cut because they think it won’t be marketable or whatever their BS excuses are. I was trying to decide if I could swear or not, I may have already sworn but whatever their BS excuse tends to be, um-it you know comes down to usually the producers and the money people, not the money people, the executives will sort of*

will have the final say overall. If a director is really sort of, you know, prestigious and they have a lot of power, if you're a Spielberg or a Tarantino, a Christopher Nolan, Christopher Nolan can't be stopped now, Christopher Nolan says you can't hear my movies and that's your problem, um then it's then. The producer is often the one that also has the most power it's sort of this-we have this idea that it's the director but it is the producer.

MCC: From Diego

DL: *Producers, everyone says directors but really it's not. Producers always have the final say like from the beginning to the end to what we see on screen. It's the producers, or else I mean but if you're going more into like production companies it's the studio that says who or why it is in the movie [Me: not surprised by it but]...I mean directors if they're a big name, if they're a Spielberg it's obvious they're going to get whatever they want on the film [me: that's true]but generally it's the studio or the producer that have the final word.*

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

MCC: While it's oftentimes believed that directors have the final say, which can be true when they have a big name like Gardenia and Diego had mentioned, the producers have the biggest influence in what is placed in the final cut. Since directors are in charge of the creative side and the producers manage the business side of production. I would be lying if the phrase money talks didn't play a huge role in this industry. While researching I came across David Coon's book Turning the Page and in one of his chapters he explains the influence of POWER UP, it is a nonprofit film production company and educational organization that is dedicated to the advancement of women and LGBTQ people through film In one of the chapters it demonstrates how much money can talk.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

EL: Private corporations don't have to represent everybody. They don't have to represent people fairly. They don't have to represent people positively...Their only legal duty is to make a profit for their shareholders." So even if a company wants to tell accurate stories about LGBTQ experiences, if company executives do not see significant potential for a profit, they are unlikely to produce such a film.

MCC: Look I think we can all agree it's a shitty situation when decisions are made based on money, but it shouldn't be an excuse to continue misrepresentation of queer talent. We see how easy it comes to straight cis-actors and actress to get queer roles, but it's also easy to place blame on them because they're The Face of the Production. It should be reminded that actors, more some than others, have difficulty turning down work even if they object to the context of the role. This is something a University of Central Florida PhD student by the name of Trent Fucci mentions in his dissertation about portraying a

gay character. This is not to say that it's okay, it's more of a reminder that the entertainment industry is an inconsistent world to work in.

[TRANSITION: SILLY NOISE]

MCC: If you remember from earlier I mentioned Huffman's portrayal of a trans woman in Transamerica and while I argue there is this lack in queer representation in TV and film, I came to learn something fascinating about the casting process. There is no doubt that actors must go through auditions. Granted this is outside of the realm of actors that are sometimes automatically offered a role because of how talented and famous they are. *cough cough* Meryl Streep *cough*. However while I conducted research I became intimidated by the process and I wasn't even auditioning for anything! To quickly clarify, casting is a term that is applied to the process of finding the best actors for the roles, while auditioning is basically the interview for the actor during casting. They follow a standard application which consists of a brief cover letter, a headshot, a resume, a link to any sample footage, and whatever else is requested for the audition. According to the book Casting Revealed: A Guide for Film Directors written by Hester Schell, who has experience directing, and being a casting director, and a producer, she wrote the book to explain the casting world for new directors. She first and foremost elaborates that actors no matter what they're auditioning for must be treated with respect. She states,

[MUSIC FADES IN]

AO: Actors take a lot of criticism. That is the nature of the industry: everyone has an opinion... We've given our movie stars heavenly status. When we hear gossip, they fall hard. It is especially hard on women.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

MCC: Hmm sound familiar? Actors do indeed receive a lot of criticism which is unfortunately second nature to them so during the auditioning stage it becomes the first place where many of them will be judged. The best example of the first set of judgments is through the Headshots. They are these high quality photos that focus on the face and are generally about 8x10 inches. Let's say an actor or actress are following The Standard application I mentioned and when they turn in the headshots, whether it's the director or casting agency that's in charge of the auditions, when they review headshots they scan the picture looking for inappropriate composition, poor cropping, the amount of make-up, posing, lighting, if they are of high quality, and the most important factor is if their eyes pop off the page to display a sense of personality. The reason for this is because the main goal during casting is to have an efficient filing system to sort out who has experience and who hasn't.

[MUSIC]

MCC: First, the focus is on principle casting. The principle casting is divided into 6 parts: the lead where the story revolves around, the supporting roles where they appear as much as the lead but the story isn't about them, the recurring roles where characters show up but don't necessarily have lines or a full back-story, the day players where actors are on set for one day, the under-fives usually the ones that go in for 5 lines and one scene then leave, and finally the bit parts where actors come in for a particular bit such as a balloon animal person for a scene at a county fair. There is also background casting, that's where the background characters come in and generally a first-come-first-serve style. During all of this the actors that do audition look for are three simple questions that Schell states in her book 1. Is there a character for me, fitting their particular demographic? 2. Can I do it? And this regards to their scheduling. And 3 How much does it pay? Usually once a decision has been made by the actor or their agent they can go through different types of auditions based on the type of part. Auditions that can range from open calls, appointments, improvisation auditions, script readings and cold readings, and one that is commonly heard are the callbacks, this is when the first stage of auditions is passed and they go through the next. All of this may seem long but trust me there is a reason why the casting phase needs to be understood. Let me paint you a picture for anyone that hasn't gone to an audition, specifically an individual audition.

[MUSIC FADES IN: OMINOUS NOISE]

MCC: You're outside waiting with others auditioning for the same role as you, your nerves are high and your hands are slightly clammy, you realize that you've been clutching the side of the script making the corner bend. Your name is called and as you enter you see at one corner of the room a camera sitting on a tripod, under which the reader is sitting holding the same script, then right next to the camera is the director's table, The eyes of the 2 producers maybe sometimes more and the director are on you, Once you introduce yourself it's your time to act!

[MUSIC FADES OUT: OMINOUS NOISE, SFX: CLAP BOARD]

MCC: Did you catch that? Did you catch who's in the auditioning room? Two producers and the director, the heads of the project. This is where the casting process gets tricky. During the time an actor auditions the director and producers are generally looking for how well the actor is at taking directions, if there's a connection, if they're listening, and if there is anything different from the first reading to the last. This is how experienced and big named actors sometimes fall into the roles. Schell mentions that the director or anyone that is in charge of hiring the talent are looking for the right person for the job, they must go based on if the actor fits the character type, if they like their work, if they can communicate clearly with them, and if the actor can create the person they see in their head.

[MUSIC]

MCC: This is where well known straight actors get recognized before queer actors for queer characters. For example, Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in Brokeback Mountain, Eric Stonestreet in Modern Family, Whoopi Goldberg in Boys on the Side, Cate Blanchett in Carol, Eddie Redmayne in The Danish Girl, and Benedict Cumberbatch in Zoolander 2. A rule of thumb that many directors and producers follow is that they avoid considering actors that don't have sufficient experience or have a name in the industry. Due to that many queer actors that don't have a name recognition are limited on who can get casted hence the lack in representation from every identity.

[TRANSITION: SILLY SOUNDS]

MCC: In a field that can be so wide, the subject of having consultants or a consultation is something that I asked my interviewees. Especially with anything involving queer characters and queer talent; my interviewee Stargazer had a great way at putting into words how consultants are important figures in the preproduction phase.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

AS: *So I think having a consultant for the queer community, I think that's really-really important just because then, you know you don't run into that problem that I said I would have is like you know giving a character certain characteristics that maybe wouldn't align with you know the person I think it should you know because obviously a lot of people have a lot of opinions but you have people that are from the community, they can give their two-or not their two cents, obviously not just two cents, they can give their opinion as two you know 'maybe you shouldn't include this, maybe you shouldn't wear that, you know maybe they should wear this, or maybe they should talk like this, maybe it should be a person that looks like this you know. I think having that opinion or be able to have that voice in the creators studio that's so important especially just because you want people's voices to be heard I think that's the whole important thing about cinematography is, is that you give voices to the voiceless and if you don't have that consultant there you're kind of silencing a voice in a sense you know, or you're excluding certain voices from being heard, and obviously not being inclusive just not giving an accurate representation of what the world is you know.*

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

MCC: My goal in questioning the need for consultants and their involvement is to articulate how important their position can be if placed in every step of pre-production, I'm looking at you auditioning room peeps. Consultants are basically a voice of reason and a devil's advocate when needed because they are there to educate. In regards to queer theory, it's a way of pulling from the belief that queer theorist Eva Kosofsky Sedgwick had, in which she believes it is necessary to study gay, lesbian, and queer theory in general. This industry is constantly looking for something that will keep their audience at the edge of their seats and it's about time the idea of "gay-for-pay", a term coined for

straight actors or actresses taking on queer roles for the money, to start diminishing. By having consultants it allows perspectives to challenge the social construction of queer, the essentialism of the queer identity and provide ideas that directors, writers, producers, and even actors wouldn't think of.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

MCC: This can be seen through powerful queer players in the industry. Lee Daniels is famous for his creation of the Fox drama *Empire* where there's a portrayal of a queer African-American man, followed by Daniel's musical *Star* where Daniels casted the third openly transgender actor Amiyah Scott to play a major trans character. Then there's Russel T. Davies who created the HBO Max show *Boys* that is set to explore the HIV/AIDS crisis from the 80's. To Desiree Akhava who won the top prize for The Miseducation of Cameron Post at the Sundance Jury for her film *Appropriate Behavior* in which she directed, starred, and wrote. The film follows a bisexual Iranian descent women through New York and the story draws from Akhavan's own life of experiences. To even Korean-American filmmaker Andrew Ahn where he created a short film called *Do!* where it forced him to come out to his parents in a unique way by casting his own family in the film. Having these opportunities to share stories in tv and film demonstrates how the industry can push away from placing everything and everyone in a box to create unique, diverse representation. Being able to share stories from different queer perspectives provides a beautiful meaning to the value of human representation.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

[TRANSITION: SILLY SOUNDS]

MCC: Before I conclude this episode I would like to get something off my chest. After going through the motions of the pre-production process, I understand that the film and tv industry isn't a perfect place when it comes to accurate representation, whether it be topics involving queer identities to what are appropriate terms to call someone. There are different reasons as to why an actor accepts or rejects the offer, granted that there are no legal repercussions if they accept and they end the contract, there are also reasons why writers write the storyline the way they do, why directors and producers cast who they want. This episode is to display one side of that narrative. Do I think straight actors should turn down roles that should go queer actors for accurate representation? Yeah, but do I also think that if there is a straight casting should there be queer consultants to address accurate backgrounds and stories to have the actor bring the character to life? Yes again.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

MCC: Hell! As someone from the queer community one of my all time favorite on screen gay couple is played by two straight actors. Anyone that has read the series *The Mortal*

Instruments by Cassandra Clare has heard of the now ended show Shadowhunters where Matthew Daddario plays Alec Lightwood and Harry Shum Jr Magnus Bane. In real life both actors are happily married to their own female spouses and on show they were the power couple Malec for 3 seasons.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

[MUSIC FADES IN]

MCC: Well my lovely listeners, I will like to thank you for tuning in to this episode of Pre-Production: Beyond the Actor for Queer Representation. I hope this shed some light on this whole stigma of only scrutinizing straight actors for their queer role when in reality there is much more to the picture than meets the eyes. Quote voice-overs were presented by the wonderful Ashley Oviedo and Eric Leon and music was provided by freesound.org. Once again a big thank you and make sure to check out the other episodes of the 2020-2021 QS Capstone projects.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

[SFX: 8MM CAMERA ROLL FADES OUT]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]