

## In on the “out” jokes

By Sean McLennan

The taboo surrounding the secret that “dare not be mentioned” is no more—at least in the media. Individuals may still have difficulty whispering “homosexual” but in TV, movies and newspaper queers are fair game. As it should be! One of the goals of the movement is to break the culture of silence surrounding something that just shouldn’t be such a big deal. As is often the case, however, with new-found exposure comes some discomfort and vulnerability that requires an adjustment period—both for us and the straight public—to renegotiate our societal boundaries of acceptability.

Recently, a Washington, D.C., radio station announced a promotional contest for Melissa Etheridge tickets—The Running of the Bull Dykes—in which tickets were strapped to a woman who was to be subsequently chased down by a herd of dykes attempting to snatch the tickets away. Rules for the contest: bull dykes must have: 1) a piece of flannel clothing, 2) boots, 3) short hair (long hair can be tucked up), 4) shorts or pants—no skirts, 5) and absolutely *no* makeup. Understandably, radio station personnel were attacked for their blatant exploitation of stereotypes and for perpetuating hate. The station management maintained their position that “dyke” was neither malicious nor derogatory towards lesbians.

Put aside, for the moment, the irony of straight male radio hosts pronouncing that “dyke” is no longer a slur and entertain the notion that they are right. Is it possible that our efforts (to gain acceptance) have succeeded so well? That when a straight man says, “dyke” he intends no negative connotation? Was this contest intending to laugh at lesbians or was it intending to laugh with lesbians? Perhaps they were laughing near lesbians...

Personally, I suspect that we’ve not yet come that far. Whether the radio station intended harm to lesbians through maliciously playing on stereotypes, or whether, being straight white males, they just don’t get how loaded those words are, I don’t think that the message is a positive one. I can’t image that any real bull dykes showed up. (I mean, honestly, what self-respecting bull dyke wouldn’t already have her tickets?) But wouldn’t it be nice if we had come that far?

Today, the issue of gay-themed humour in the media has become ambiguous. The jokes and innuendos on TV and in the movies seem less and less blatantly offensive. I often find myself at worst unsettled; attempting to interpret the intentions underlying humour that straddles the border of appropriateness. After all, stereotypes of every variety are the target of ridicule that comes off in both positive and negative lights. Jack, from *Will*

& *Grace*, embodies as many stereotypes as Big Gay Al from *South Park*—so why then am I comfortable laughing at Jack and not at Big Gay Al?

In some of the many conversations I’ve had on the subject, I’ve attempted to emphasize the role that context plays, especially the intended audience. When some frat boy cracks a fag joke in the gym locker room where he presumes (probably incorrectly) that his entire audience is straight, that has a very different feeling than if the same frat boy were to crack the very same fag joke to an assembly of close friends, half of whom he knows are fags themselves.

The second situation is “inclusionary” in that there is a group identity of friendship that supercedes sexual orientation, and so within that group it is safe to pick on each others’ less meaningful characteristics. In the first, orientation is the group identity, and telling the joke helps to define its boundaries.

So even though not all the actors, producers and writers of *Will & Grace* are gay, it’s obvious that their target audience is largely (although not exclusively) a queer one. The target audience of *South Park* is primarily straight teen-to-twenty-something white males. The disparity between the two establishes quite a different demographic relationship of which we, as an audience, may not be consciously aware, but certainly has an impact on our perception. Group identity is one of the most psychologically significant characteristics (along with gender and age) that we use to assess our surroundings—so much so that there may be innate neural hardware devoted specifically to processing it—and the majority of that assessment occurs below our level of awareness.

Would The Running of the Bull Dykes be as disconcerting had it been organized by a campus GLBT group? The Ben Affleck and Matt Damon films, *Chasing Amy*, *Dogma*, and most recently *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, have a somewhat controversial standing within the GLBT community, in part because of the misogynistic and homophobic rantings of Jay. Aren’t those rants placed in a slightly different light when the films continually imply that the source of Jay’s endless venom is his own repressed homosexuality? Subtle changes in context can cause rather dramatic shifts in group dynamics and consequently in interpretation.

The question remains: what are we to make of these situations in which queer

humour plays a part but we feel are not “inclusive”; where there seems to be no malicious intent, but boundaries have been crossed nonetheless? A good example is *Dude, Where’s My Car?*, a film with rather unsubtle and unflattering depictions of gay and transgender stereotypes. The main characters are neanderthal-like straight males (perhaps intended for a similar audience!) and clearly, amongst this demographic the suggestion of blurred gender [roles] still provokes a mixture of fascination, horror and hilarity. For the most part, the portrayals are not offensive, as such; they’re simply stupid. The movie has one shining moment. Ashton Kutcher and Seann William Scott, the two leads, nonchalantly kiss full-on so as not to be outdone in a one-up-’em competition with Fabio and his girlfriend. Their action shows no regret, no startled realization of the lapse in judgement and no revulsion at the “indecent” act that they had been duped into performing. They display only the simple smug satisfaction of victory.

This marks a dramatic departure from the typical devices of this genre. As cultural role models (shudder) for this demographic group—traditionally one of the most homophobic demographic groups—Kutcher and Scott in *Dude, Where’s My Car?* have possibly done more to ease homophobia than any other pair of actors. (And of course kudos to the writers and directors responsible for the scene in the first place...) They sent a message that a same-sex kiss was trivial compared to other considerations and directed it where it is needed the most.

So does that excuse the insensitive portrayals throughout the rest of the movie? Mmm... perhaps “excuse” is a strong word, but it may warrant cutting the film a little slack. They may be annoying stereotypes, but any exposure that isn’t blatantly offensive—good, stupid, or indifferent—is likely to foster desensitization of the issue. Who knows? Maybe *Dude, Where’s My Car?* made some guy more inclined to give in to his girlfriend when she wanted to rent *The Broken Hearts Club*.

As a community, while we need to be firm and consistent in our reactions, perhaps we should extend more understanding than we are offered. There is no point driving away ambivalent potential allies because they are simply ignorant of the issues and the impact of their words. We cannot fault the well-meaning straight boy for singing I’m the

Only Gay Eskimo around a campfire, not realizing that it mocks the very serious issue of isolation and alienation that many queer folk deal with, just because he was not granted an innate understanding of life experience that is not his own. Hopefully, we can respond with compassion and a sincere desire to bridge a gap in understanding without unwarranted condemnation.

The ambiguity of humour in the media reflects, I think, an ambiguity in the wider perception of the gay community. I believe that many people, from lack of personal experience, are somewhat neutral on issues of queer concern and could easily be swayed either way on the basis of a single experience. Thus, we must remain vigilant lest our own (well-deserved) sensitivity to jest becomes a witch hunt alienating us from potential allies who have no intention of wronging the gay community, but who lack understanding simply because they aren’t gay.

In my personal interactions and battles, I try to be quick to react and equally quick to forgive. The above campfire scenario, complicated by other factors, ultimately proved to be a very positive experience and resulted in a sincere shift in consciousness for everyone involved. Perhaps it would be best if, instead of viewing the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and off-the-cuff humour as personal attacks, we attempted to perceive each incident as a cry for education. Changing our perception may not cure the problem, but it may establish a more effective course of treatment.

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