

Transphobia on TV

Chrissy Rogers and Felix Garnet.

“Moving Wallpaper” is a comedy whose second series, shown on ITV1 has just come to a close. It charts the experiences of a group of script-writers, led by arrogant, self-serving boss Jonathon (played by Ben Miller) as they struggle to come up with fresh ideas for documentaries and fiction for a television company. Presented as satire in a similar vein to “Drop the Dead Donkey” it employs dark humour and is often controversial in content.

Episode 4, however, considerably overstepped the mark in its depiction of a transsexual character whose sole function seemed to be the butt of the others’ cruelty and disgust. The reception from the Trans community and their allies has been to lodge an official complaint with the programme makers and with ITV.

This episode, “The New Member” was shown on March 20th at 9pm and my partner and I watched it on the sofas in our separate homes whilst commenting by phone. The plot revolved around the team needing new blood so they hire an award-winning writer to help them kick-start a pilot programme about zombies. They expect someone called “George” but “Georgina” arrives instead; George has transitioned and is now a female – to everyone’s consternation.

This is an old joke and hardly worthy of peak-time 21st century comedy but at least a trans character was being shown, so we gave it the benefit of the doubt . . .

We counted in all, 22 transphobic and 4 homophobic comments in the space of 26 minutes – one every minute.

This is a copy of the letter which we sent to Ofcom after we had made and compared notes.

Channel: ITV 1 (Channel 3)
Programme: “Moving Wallpaper”
Date/Time 20/03/09 21.00-21.30

“This programme made gratuitous use of a transsexual character as an object of derision. “Georgina” joins a team of script-writers and is made to feel unwelcome as the butt of their “jokes”. The latter included but were not limited to:

- *Referring to her as “George” and using male pronouns in reference to her;
- *calling her forthcoming gender reassignment surgery a “knock-through”;
- *threatening to strangle her by the Adam’s apple, “if she/he still has one”;
- *staff going on strike when Georgina receives a higher rate of pay due to her excellent work;
- *saying she has stubble;
- *calling her “it”;
- *claiming to be scared by her “man hands”;
- *saying she is a man in a frock;
- *writing “vaginoplasty” on a colleague’s (?) calendar;
- *consistently undermining her right to be part of the writing team and, finally;
- *forcing her to leave without payment for work done by omitting to sign her contract.

“The fact that this sort of experience is, sadly, one that is frequently experienced by transsexual people makes this lamentable attempt at humour so nasty. I am of the opinion that this character was created simply as a way to get a cheap laugh; she serves no other purpose than as a focus of the others’ disgust and cruelty. Had a similar script been employed to poke fun at another minority it would never have been allowed to air.

“I would urge you to watch this episode in full as it contains

so many unsavoury lines it would be impossible to list them all on an initial complaints form. It is dreadful that transsexual people like myself have worked so hard for fair representation in the media then switch on television to see this.

“I fear that others watching may assume that it is acceptable to behave like this towards a transsexual employee or colleague when it is, in fact, illegal. I welcome your comments and look forward to hearing from you.”

We also set up a FaceBook group

“TRANSPHOBIC EPISODE MOVING WALLPAPER:FOR URGENT ACTION”.

Current membership is almost 500 and 85 letters of complaint have been registered with Ofcom. Others have been sent to the programme’s production company, Kudos, and still others to ITV asking why, when they worked so hard to create a believable transwoman character in Hayley of “Coronation Street” they failed viewers so abysmally this time.

Christine Burns, former Vice-President with Press For Change, presented the episode to members of the Equality Human Rights Commission committee who are taking the matter very seriously and advise a swift result in favour of the complainants. This would take the form of a public apology and – ideally – commitment to further training in the depiction of transpeople in the media, as “Moving Wallpaper”’s clearly breached current broadcasting standards.

So far, ITV has been disingenuous on the subject, claiming the plot was an attempt to “highlight prejudice in a comedic way”. We beg to differ.

My partner and I are both transpeople and activists. We are used to not being taken seriously by the medical profession, by the media and – dare I say it? – even by (some) GLB folk. However, this particular bit of nastiness went way beyond the pale and was more shocking than anything similar shown in the 1970’s due to its context. As my partner says,

“Many transpeople will be starting a new job on the Monday after seeing this and will have their worst fears confirmed. The character of Georgina was there simply to be mocked; she was not allowed to defend herself and left the programme as abruptly as she entered. If a similar plotline had been used to mock a member of an ethnic minority or a disabled person purely because of who they were it would never have been shown.”

Television drama has taken on board the dangers of misrepresenting minority groups; litigation is one and the broader danger is, of course, that members of those groups will continue to be seen as odd and appropriate targets for cruelty and oppression. Characters of many ethnicities, disabled characters and people with learning difficulties are accurately portrayed in a variety of roles. Are we to assume that transsexual people are not considered worthy of the same respect?

Please feel free to join the FaceBook group or the more recent one Trans Media Watch, also on FaceBook which was set up by a friend specifically to monitor transphobic material in the media.

Complaints by email or using their easy online facility may be made to Ofcom at www.ofcom.org.uk