



THE DIVERSITY TIPPING POINT



Tobias Forrest in
Daruma directed by
Alexander Yellen

Affecting change is like going on a diet. The notion gives hope of a new you and a brighter future but, in practice, well sometimes it's just easier to forget the revolution and grab that doughnut.

The entertainment industry's cumbersome embrace of diversity has reached its very own doughnut moment. From BLM to #MeToo and everything in between, revolution never occurs without struggle and we're now at the diversity tipping point where change often flounders.

It's startling that it has taken the most atrocious of race-related deaths and high-profile sexual abuses, all played out in grotesque technicolor, for the wider community - those who don't endure the daily battle with discrimination - to acknowledge that maybe, just maybe, there's a problem.

But when support of a cause expects more than platitudes on social media, the world drags its heels. Often, it's simpler just to agree passively: "Change is needed, but don't take my doughnut."

So how do we tip the balance in favour of change and what can be done to normalise diversity and prevent it from being the elephant in the room? Satisfied Eye Magazine took the question to those on the sharp end of the debate.

"This is a big issue, and we have to attack it on so many levels," Erin Rye told us. A Los Angeles-based actor, writer and director, her short film *Lady Parts*, a scathingly witty takedown of the patriarchy's treatment of female actors, is one of SEIFF's official selections for 2020. "It starts with education and opportunity. I would love to see gender parity and racial diversity beginning in film school. Then within those film schools, where important relationships are forming and opinions are being forged, there must be a diverse faculty and a requirement that student productions have a diverse crew."

One barrier, according to Janice Turner, diversity officer at BEC-TU (the UK trade union representing workers in media and entertainment) is lack of transparency and the failure of the film industry to publish the diversity of cast and crew on each production. "So long as this information is not in the public domain, the issue of the under-representation of BAME workers (for instance) remains somebody else's problem. If this data was published for each production, it would focus the minds of those responsible for recruitment on working to address this on future productions. We succeeded in persuading Arts Council England to publish the equality monitoring data of their funded clients and it immediately led to theatres and arts venues which were shown to have poor diversity to take action to address this. We need the same level of transparency in the film industry."

Lauren Appelbaum, Vice President of Communications at RespectAbility (an American non-profit which aims to empower and advance opportunities for people with disabilities across all industries) believes disability needs to be part of all diversity and inclusion conversations. "Disability needs to be looked at as something which intersects gender, race, sexual orientation and other diverse groups. Once we realise that one in four adults have a disability (one in five when you include children as well), we are more likely to understand the importance of the inclusion of people with disabilities. Also, as more people in positions of power disclose non-visible disabilities, this will help normalise not only having a disability, but publicly talking about your disability and sharing the accommodations that would ensure you can do your job better."

But, in an industry where a significant proportion of work is unregulated, non unionised, non-contracted, what can be done to ensure better diversity practices at grass roots level where many belief systems and working practices are developed?

Dan Edge is the Vice Chair of Equity's Deaf and Disabled Members Committee. "I think that the creative industries are in an interesting position when it comes to this. Our public-facing image is probably one of our most powerful tools in changing things at a grassroots level. I tend to look specifically at D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent talent, being part of that diverse group myself. This group is arguably the most underrepresented, and poorly represented group of people in all of the arts. I have personal experience of being asked why there is no work for disabled talent when applying for stage schools. However, some of the industry still tries to claim that there is no disabled talent out there. This is a blatant falsehood. By showing more diverse talent in the visible areas, it then becomes normalised and seems more achievable at a grassroots level. This is the same for any diverse group."

"Hire more and hire often," is Sage Kemp's concise response. An artist, script doctor, marketing, sales and PR specialist with a career spanning twenty years, and an LGBTQIA+ professional, Kemp has experienced first-hand diversity discrimination. "CIS candidates will apply for roles regardless, but for LGBTQIA+ professionals it can help if you actively seek them out and encourage them to apply. Organisations can also run outreach programmes in schools in order to talk to LGBTQIA+ youth and encourage them to consider a career in the film industry, and thereby affirm that it is an option which is available to all - not just the few. People do amazing work at raising the profile of LGBTQIA+ and ethnic minority groups at

events like Pride and Black History Month, but we also need to have more of a presence at a local level – for example, on the high street and in libraries and community colleges.”

Rye has a very simple solution for women in the film industry. “I do believe that there is one absolute way to fix this problem in about two years. If Sundance, Raindance, Slamdance, TIFE, SXSW and Tribeca all got together and decided that in order for a film to be eligible for their festival it must have a crew that was 50 percent non-male identifying (including department heads), we would see a massive change by the following submission period. That may sound bold but, if we want change, we must be bold. These film festivals have an outsized influence on young filmmakers, many of whom have dreamed of them for years. Most would be willing to jump through any hoops to reach that pinnacle – and then they’d have an incredible rolodex of wonderful collaborators they might work with again and again.”

An even-more insidious side-effect associated with a lack of diversity is its impact on the passive acceptance of discrimination and abuses within the industry.

“My film *Lady Parts* addresses exactly this!” exclaims Rye. “When you are the only one in the room (whether that “one” is a woman, black person, person with a disability, or any other marginalised group) it falls to you to speak both for yourself and every other member of your group. In a situation where there’s a power imbalance, you may be unlikely to speak up until the situation becomes truly unbearable. In fact, you might not speak up at all, especially if the situation doesn’t directly affect you. However, on a diverse set, there may be someone else with whom you have similar life experience who might bring up the issue on their own. Or you may look around and see the friendly face of someone you can confide in.”

Edge agrees. “There is strength in numbers, and when you do not have that support it can be scary to raise your voice and challenge wrongs. #MeToo and BLM are examples of where those individual voices were able to connect with others with shared experience, and so they felt empowered to make change.”

“This is starting to change,” Kemp believes, “but the change needs to happen from the top levels of management before it can trickle down to affect the lower levels. Having organisations led by CIS white men who make all the important decisions is not helpful. We only have to look at the Harvey Weinstein case for proof that CIS white men at the top have normalised abuse. There are currently #MeToo movements happening across three different entertainment sectors – film, comedy and gaming – which are all in-

terconnected. It’s terrible when a story of abuse comes out, but I’m pleased that the years of systemic abuse are finally being addressed, both here and in the US. People have been hurt across the board, but they have pulled together and helped heal each other’s wounds. The abusers are also either being forced out or are removing themselves from the situation. I truly hope they don’t worm their way back in.”

Particularly pertinent - and not exclusive to disability - is the argument that the very fabric of the acting profession is about assuming roles that challenge an actor’s abilities, which is often given as a basis for disabled roles going to able bodied actors.

Tobias Forrest is a Los Angeles-based actor who has appeared in productions including *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Weeds* and *Daruma*. He is also a C5 quadriplegic, and he utilises his career in the entertainment industry to raise the profile of people with disabilities. “Any actor should have the opportunity to create honest and authentic portrayals, but not at the risk of doing it wrong and causing further discrimination. Shouldn’t a character who is blind, Asian and a lesbian be played by someone who has as many of those qualities as possible? Unfortunately, there are very few roles for actors with disabilities, so when a non-disabled actor takes the part, they have also taken the opportunity from someone who could create a more authentic portrayal.”

“Currently, it is extremely rare for a disabled actor to even be given the opportunity to audition for a non-disabled role,” Appelbaum adds. “So, disabled roles are often the only opportunity for a disabled actor – which is unequal in terms of access from the beginning. Furthermore, if you want to portray a disability authentically, who better to do so than someone with lived experience of that disability? For example, ASL [American Sign Language] is not only a unique language but also a culture – something that cannot be taught in a few months. Having a disabled actor in the role will help you avoid making a mistake in accurate representation – especially if that actor is given agency to speak up if something is not portrayed accurately. If you are looking to create content with a disabled character, casting authentically disabled actors will lead to a better production.”

Erin Rye in *Lady Parts*
directed by Erin Rye
and Jessica Sheriff



The fight to improve diversity in the industry has endured many false dawns, particularly apparent with the perennial 'diversity blip' that many awards ceremonies undergo after criticism. How do we make change happen, but - more importantly - how do we make change permanent?

Turner suggests "Improving diversity requires the industry to take a long hard look at the way it hires its workforce and to accept that achieving lasting change necessitates ongoing positive intervention. The BFI Diversity Standards unfortunately give the industry a choice of which under-represented group they would like to address with the inevitable result, shown in the BFI's own report, that the industry overwhelmingly chooses women. BAME workers and disabled workers are left behind. A production could meet the BFI Diversity Standards while employing no BAME workers."

"It's a wider cultural problem that happens in every industry," Kemp acknowledges. "It's tricky not to get caught in generalisations of race and cultural assumptions, but we have been talking about this a lot as a community - how you might see certain races entering and rising quickly but not others, because that community may actively discourage their children from entering such industries. Whilst we are in the midst of great change, currently the only thing we can continue to hold on to and encourage is hope for the future. That's why so many people have fought so hard and stayed positive in the face of adversity - so the next generation can benefit from our struggles."

Edge points out that systemic change is hard to achieve compared to a quick fix and this is the root of the problem. "Companies want to be seen taking positive action quickly, especially in the current age where social media has so much power. I understand this and applaud any drive towards positive change. However, policy that is made quickly is generally made badly, and is not built to be long-lasting. In turn, there can also be a complete lack of accountability, since it is the nature of the creative industries for people to move around often. Things are not always carried on or handed over, and there may be some people in some organisations who do not see the importance of change in the first place."

What about initiatives like the Bechdel and DuVernay tests - is there merit in formalising such methods to validate projects throughout the entertainment industry?

Edge is unequivocal in his support. "On a personal level, I think these tests are vitally important. Making them mandatory would challenge creatives to think in different ways and realise things they hadn't before - much like when thinking about access needs for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent performers. This should be "baked in" to the start of any creative process."

"While the DuVernay test is about onscreen content," Turner adds, "BAME workers behind the camera also face being pigeonholed into working on productions that are linked with minority ethnic issues and having far less chance of working on other productions. This is why BECTU's longest running campaign is about transparency of equality monitoring data. When we can shine a light on productions that are doing well and learn from them and take their lessons to the productions that are failing to employ a diverse workforce, then we will speed the pace of change. Onscreen content will improve with a diverse offscreen workforce."

Forrest confirms that other areas of the industry are utilising similar tests. "Fortunately, Jenni Gold, the director of the documentary *CinemAbility: The Art of Inclusion*, has taken the initiative to create one [for disabled performers]. The Gold Test is meant to focus attention on film and television portrayals of the largest minority group; people with disabilities. I believe tests like this are necessary to educate the public and bring awareness to the inequality still present in the entertainment industry."

One area conspicuous by its absence in the debate is the games industry. While simultaneously being notorious for its lack of diversity, the industry also battles misconceptions about its scope. We spoke to Kish Hirani, Chair of BAME in Games, (a UK organisation which advocates for the inclusion of more diverse talent in the games and wider entertainment industry) who is optimistic about the future of the industry.

"The games industry, as a relatively younger industry, has the slight advantage in that we follow the best practices from the other creative sectors, especially the film industry. However, it's still in its infancy in terms of government and art council bodies recognising gaming as a serious business. Currently, all the effort is led by grassroots advocacy organisations like BAME in Games, which is entirely run by volunteers in their spare time. Attracting diverse talent to the industry remains a challenge. The perception of the industry not being a "real job" or a serious career path is still a major barrier in attracting people, especially ethnic minority talent."

Government and local art councils still largely dismiss the industry, despite the revenue it generates - in the UK and most western countries, the annual revenue from gaming now exceeds TV, films and the music industry combined."

And looking ahead?

"BAME in Games takes a more grassroots approach by having monthly meetups at various video game development studios or related organisations to encourage more diverse talent to work in gaming. The organisation will soon be launching a mentorship programme as well. Having a diverse workforce is key. I can certainly see the diversity numbers and visual diversity in games increasing by seeing the audience that is drawn to games, and the indirect and often overlooked impact that video game vloggers and esports players have. In addition to all the work that various diversity organisations put in, retaining key minority talent that then move on to senior roles will remain a challenge, and each studio needs to constantly work on retaining such talent."

Finally, issues of diversity within all industries have been put under the microscope by the most tragic of events - the death of George Floyd and subsequent BLM [Black Lives Matter] protests - the ramifications of which have filtered through all walks of life. What does it say about where we are right now that it needs such atrocities for people to finally say 'enough is enough'?

Edge offers a suggestion: "I think that it shows how insulated peoples' lives can become. How something doesn't affect someone, not always due to malice, but in many cases just naivety. They do not see it as an issue. It takes a truly tragic event like the death of George Floyd for some people to realise that there is a problem - to bring these issues into sharp focus, and into the mainstream consciousness. This is shocking, but it shows the amount of work that is left for all of society to do. This is where the creative industries can be a force for good; by telling these stories authentically and by empowering diverse talent, we can educate the world to be a better place - but we can only do that once we have our own house in order."

Rye mirrors Edge's thoughts: "Unfortunately, sometimes people really need a problem to invade their daily lives before they can truly see it. These systems of oppression work together and are woven through the fabric of our laws, our governments and our culture. They are written into our literature, splayed across our screens, and heard on our radios. It's no wonder we have so many people in our society who have been asleep for so long. What we can and must do is support each other, especially those people who are now awakening. We have an opportunity to reach them, to explain things that they would never have been open to hearing before. Where do we go from here? The answer is everywhere. We go to the streets if we're able, we go to the polls and vote, we go to our email and write to our leaders, we go to our friends and family to have difficult conversations and offer love and support where it's needed, we go to our wallets and give money, we go to our skills and give our time, we go to Twitter and Instagram to amplify diverse voices, and we, the artists, go to the page, the song, the screen, to invite the world into a new way of being, to imagine a better tomorrow."