

IF THE STRAIGHTJACKET FITS

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By JASON STUART,

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Much has been said and written about the recent Newsweek article “Straight Jacket: Heterosexual actors play gay all the time. Why doesn’t it ever work in reverse?” Contributor Ramin Setoodeh contends that audiences do not accept openly gay actors playing straight roles, such as Sean Hayes in Promises, Promises and Glee’s Jonathan Groff, while offering no proof to support this claim other than his own discomfort.

You may agree or disagree with Setoodeh’s assessment of a performance (clearly Tony voters disagreed), but he moves beyond that assessment to blame the sexual orientation of the actor in making the roles unbelievable. The writer postulates that out actors make unconvincing heterosexuals, an empirically unsupportable idea due to the subjective nature of audience responses. But Setoodeh, an out gay man himself, makes it very clear where he falls on the matter.

To bolster his case, he dismisses straight roles played by Neil Patrick Harris and Portia de Rossi as “broad” (so he won’t count them), and conveniently overlooks Sean Hayes’ perfectly believable turn as Jerry Lewis, Emmy-winner Cherry Jones, Academy Award-nominee Ian McKellen, Lily Tomlin on Damages, T.R. Knight on Grey’s Anatomy, Dan Butler on Frasier and Jane Lynch as Meryl Streep’s straight sister in Julie & Julia, among others.

As an out professional actor and chair of the Screen Actors Guild National LGBT Actors Committee, I reject the notion that openly gay actors are restricted in the roles they can play, and I am proud that so many people, gay and straight, have spoken out about Setoodeh and Newsweek to say the same.

I am a fan of Glee, and feel that Jonathan Groff is perfect for the role he was cast. The fact that Setoodeh can't accept him may say more about his own discomfort with being gay than it does about Groff, but the author's mean-spirited jab could potentially be damaging to the actor's livelihood in the future.

Since the furor erupted over Setoodeh's article, both he and Newsweek have attempted (with little success) to re-frame the wrongheaded argument as a "dialogue starter" that will help move the needle. And maybe that is proving to be true on some level.

What Setoodeh has unwittingly done is pull the curtain back to reveal those who are gay and self-hating. We are now used to revelations of self-loathing politicians who pass anti-gay laws by day while leading a secret gay life. But Setoodeh's article has launched a dialogue about certain gays who inhabit the entertainment industry—agents, managers, casting directors, publicists and the like—who make it difficult for out actors and may be actively engaging in their oppression.

Glee creator Ryan Murphy, a gay man, has emerged from this debate as a role model for the industry. He wrote that when casting his show, actors "are encouraged to read for all roles, no matter what their sexual orientation, color or gender. Who cares who you are or who you sleep with — frankly, it's none of our business or concern. The actor with the best audition should get the part."

Murphy gets that it takes talent for any actor to make a character believable, and that actors play roles quite different from themselves, otherwise it wouldn't be acting.

Our SAG LGBT Actors Committee was formed to provide support to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender actors who work in this business. Our committee will continue to fight to end fear that being open about who you are means the end of your career, but it's an uphill battle when some of our biggest detractors, like Setoodeh, are members of our own community.

It's damaging words like his that continue to be used to pressure actors to stay in the closet, and place doubt in those in positions of power about their casting choices. At the end of the day, though, if Setoodeh can't accept a gay actor in a straight role, then that's really his problem, isn't it? And he needs to keep that in the closet.

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