



Campaign For Equal Opportunities In The Arts For People With Disabilities

IMAGES & EMPLOYMENT
OF DISABLED PEOPLE
IN TELEVISION

A SEMINAR HOSTED BY FAIRPLAY
HELD AT THE IBA • 4TH JUNE 1987

IMAGES AND EMPLOYMENT OF DISABLED PEOPLE IN TELEVISION

A Fair Play Seminar

Labelled Disabled

Vic Finkelstein – 4th June 1987

In the early 1960s a group of very severely impaired people living in a countryside institution run by a voluntary charity began a struggle for their Resident's Committee to be recognised by the able-bodied Management Committee. They wanted to have a more direct say in controlling their own lives. The action taken by the leading figures in this struggle has had a significant effect on the subsequent development of some of the major organisations of disabled people in the UK. Indeed, despite the fact that most of those who were involved are now no longer with us, the influence of their ideas is spreading and, I am convinced, will have a profound and lasting effect on the development of future services for disabled people in this country.

In 1948 a young, much decorated, Second World War RAF pilot helped place an elderly man dying of cancer, with no means of support in the community, into care in a dilapidated house in the countryside. From this small beginning a string of institutional homes, named after him, have been set up around the world.

The able-bodied person I am referring to is, of course, the much praised and commemorated Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, and the homes are the Cheshire Homes. The disabled residents lived in one of the first of these homes, Le Court, and amongst those active in the struggle was the late, and undecorated, Paul Hunt.

It is interesting, is it not, that of these two individuals caught up in our society's neglect of disabled people, all public awards given by able-bodied people went to the able-bodied person, who is probably amongst the most responsible for preventing the development of support systems enabling disabled people to live in the community, and that there is no recognition for the disabled person who strove against all odds for the right of disabled people to be part of the community? Surely, in no other area would such rank chauvinism be tolerated so passively (for example, men giving other men awards for services to women, services which keep women in their place!)

On the one hand we, disabled people, tend to see the achievement of our personal goals through active participation in the community. On the other hand 'concerned' able-bodied people tend to see the goal as the institutionalisation of care (whether in residential home or in the community). In a way this contradiction between what disabled people perceive as desirable and what able-bodied people interpret as possible provides us with the battleground for the dramatic presentation of disability on television.

I have indicated that to the able-bodied mind disabled people are tragic individuals in need of personal care until the advent of a cure. I'll not spend time reviewing programmes to show that this is how disability is presented on television. We will be discussing this later in the day. I want to use my time to characterise the choices available to us in presenting disability on television.

Television reflects both the unity and diversity of our society. A cursory glance at a day's presentation reveals the multicultural nature of our society. Black arts, women and children's programmes, television for working class audiences and programmes for special interest groups in finance, medicine etc, all confirm this diversity. Disability, too, we must acknowledge, gets at least some mention. Different groups, therefore, are assumed to have some right to go on stage and make their own contribution to the social and political life of our country.

However, there is clearly no simple equality between groups. At the top there is the so-called White Anglo-Saxon Male values and culture. This is the dominant culture in our society and, naturally, on television. It is the values of this culture that sets the scene for the visual media's interpretation of disability. The question is are disabled people seeking access to 'normal' television programmes, that is, to the dominant culture, or are we looking for avenues to participate in a multicultural society?

Working in the context of dominant able-bodied perceptions of disability may place considerable pressure on participants to see 'disability' in terms of cure or care. In this situation even disabled people can find themselves supporting an even more active caring role for able-bodied people while reinforcing the passive dependent role for the disabled population. In these circumstances the television presentation of disability has little to do with the reality of disabled people's lives. It has more to do with the perceptions and fears of able-bodied people.

One major concern of the dominant culture is the maintenance of personal ability as a criterion for participation in society. However, if we take on board this able-bodied emphasis on 'it's ability that counts, not disability' then either there is no place for disabled people on television (which explains why we are so rarely seen) or we have to argue that disabled people also have abilities. The curious thing is that in order to emphasise the possibility of disabled people being capable of being 'able people' our identity not only becomes confused but the exceptional (most able-bodied-like) individuals are singled out as role models (which explains why when disabled people do appear on television they are so often presented as heroic). This, of course, reinforces the dominant able-bodied values and makes it even harder for ordinary disabled people to gain a place on television.

The able-bodied view that disabled people need to be cared for and that it is only ignorance that leads to our neglect encourages us to concentrate on changing people's (meaning able-bodied people's) attitudes. This, of course, is very convenient, for it encourages us to concentrate on the concerns of the dominant able-bodied culture. This not only continues television's failure to make space for the development and presentation of a disability culture, but it, too, curiously reinforces the view that on the question of disability it is the views of able-bodied people that really count. Of course, if this is true then why bother having disabled people on television anyway?

The whole matter is further confused since the most obvious way to appeal to the sentiments of able-bodied people, if we can't emphasise how much we are like them because of our abilities, is to emphasise how much we are like them because we are also people, we are people with disabilities. But this, too, serves to reinforce able-bodied values because far from changing their attitudes it attempts to convince them that we are really like them underneath our skins.

When Paul Hunt managed to escape the confines of the residential institution and live in the community, he built on the lessons of struggle learnt in Le Court and started a process which led to the coming together of a number of disabled people in the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. One of the first concerns of members in this new organisation was to develop understanding of our situation. Paul believed that such an understanding could only come from the free exchange of views of disabled people, and he started a lively internal paper which was circulated amongst members.

Included amongst the early concerns was whether or not we should concentrate on trying to change public attitudes. We concluded that the media was dominated by able-bodied values and that our concern was to develop our own understanding and values before facing

experienced media presenters. It became our policy at that time to close the curtain on our participation in radio and television programmes, and during this period we made significant advances in our concept of disability. It was these advances, quite outside the activities of able-bodied service providers and the television presentation of disability, that has provided much of the inspiration for our current organisation-building in the UK today.

We did agree, however, that before deciding whether or not to appear on radio or television we would meet with prospective producers and record our discussions for circulation to union members as an educational exercise amongst ourselves. In preparing for today's talk I recently listened to some of these old tapes, and I can't help smiling at how little movement there has been in the dominant culture in the media and how much has changed in the real world of disabled people.

At this point I think we need to remind ourselves about some basic facts about human beings. It is a human characteristic to try to make the world to suit ourselves (to change the world according to our desires) and that no other animal does this. On the other hand it is clear that disabled people have never had any important impact on shaping the world according to what we want. We should ask, why not? There are two views why this may have been so – (i) because we are disabled we cannot actively participate in social life to influence the world we live in; and (ii) we have not had an influence in shaping the world because we have been prevented from doing so.

The traditional view is that disability is a personal tragedy which results in 'inability' and 'dependency'. But is this interpretation satisfactory? One interpretation is that disabled people have faced three different phases in our history. The first, before the industrial revolution, was one where disabled people who survived were a part of the community, although at the bottom end of the economic ladder. The second phase was introduced with mass production processes brought in by the industrial revolution. This meant the introduction of machines designed to be operated by 'normal' human beings (the 'hands') and this in turn prevented disabled people from participating in the economic life of the community. This elevated 'normality' as an important criterion for participation in our society. In the third phase modern technology has made it possible once more for disabled people to fully participate in economic life.

The basic problem that we face today, then, is that disabled people have been prevented from participating in society – we are an oppressed group, and like all oppressed groups the main struggle is for emancipation i.e. to be able to participate in changing and manipulating the world according to our own perception of our needs and desires. This struggle for emancipation requires disabled people to become active agents of change. Because we have faced systematic exclusion from society so thoroughly and for so long, however, we have become very passive and now face the added problem of learning how to become active and creative in our own interests. Clearly we have made great strides in our own development and as our confidence grows with our increasing self-identity we feel able to participate in television and to demand that television plays its part in enabling us to expand and develop our culture and identity.

It is worth emphasising that the quiet revolution amongst disabled people has not only not been recorded by the media but even those working in the field are shockingly ignorant about what has been happening during the past two decades. During this time disability has been polarising into two distinct camps. At a recent conference amongst professional rehabilitation workers in Edinburgh, for example, a disabled woman complained about the absence of disabled speakers on the platform and Professor Cairns Aitkin, who is Director of the Rehabilitation Studies Unit at Edinburgh University, defended this stance by telling us that

they had chosen the best people to speak on the conference topics! The sad comment on the professor's ignorance is that when disabled people organise conferences today on, say, 'disability in the community' there are very few able-bodied professionals, let alone professors, who would be invited to share the platform with disabled speakers.

At every level, we should note, whether in service provision or pressure groups, whether at the local, regional, national or international levels, there is a new growth of organisations controlled by disabled people alongside existing traditional medical and charitable organisations for disabled people. The theme is always the same: is disability an individual tragedy to be managed by able-bodied voluntary and professional helpers or is it social, the result of people with impairments being forced to live in a world predominantly designed for people with able bodies? For the able-bodied care provider we are dependent, passive figures who have suffered the ravages of a personal tragedy and who want nothing more than to be cared for, or cured. For the disabled person struggling to live in a world designed for able-bodied living we want nothing less than to change the world so that it is fit for our presence.

Some time ago the Manpower Services Commission began a campaign to influence employers' attitudes about hiring disabled people. The campaign set out to convince employers that disabled people are 'fit for work'. From what I've already said it is obvious that I feel that this approach is upsidedown, reflecting yet again dominant able-bodied perceptions of disability. The real campaign, of course, is to make work fit for disabled people! In this light we need to ask how much is television fit for disabled people? Has television moved on and is it better able to recognise that we live in a multicultural world and disabled people have an equal right to contribute to this world, whatever able-bodied people feel or think about our culture? Or should we continue organising amongst ourselves, developing our ideas and culture and leaving the media to its irrelevancy?

The choice between disability as a personal tragedy or as a form of oppression can create confusion amongst disabled people regarding who we are. This confusion is perpetuated because nearly all role models presented to disabled people are able-bodied. In this respect television can assist young disabled people to gain confidence in their right to a place in the world by encouraging the active involvement of disabled people at all levels in television production. In this sense we are increasingly proclaiming the right to be disabled and to be seen as disabled, to see disability as the celebration of difference. After all, now, in our generation, for the first time in history, there is the real prospect of even the most severely disabled person achieving full integration into society. This surely infuses our presentation of disability with something to celebrate about. As a close friend and very shy poet wrote recently:

Labelled
disabled.
That's me, you see.

Labelled
disabled.
That's me, proudly.

Labelled
disabled.
That's me, I'm free.

Thank you.