

Invited Commentary Paper

We are all “Special”

Matthew MacCarthy*

Department of Pediatrics, University of South Carolina and Prisma Health Children’s Hospital, Columbia, SC, USA

Received 2 November 2022

Accepted 22 November 2022

I am a cis heterosexual white male living with mild cerebral palsy (CP), writing a review of a series centered on a cisgender homosexual white male living with mild CP. In other words, I am coming from one marginalized group and evaluating a comedic commentary on the lived experience of someone at the intersection of two. This means that, inherently, I cannot fully identify with the content. But Ryan O’Connell, who wrote and stars in the Netflix original series “Special,” is not interested in making sure other people are comfortable with his existence, and therein lies the beauty of his work.

For those of us who are ambulatory and living with CP, the start of “Special” was perhaps the single most relatable moment in the history of television. Ryan is casually walking down the sidewalk to intro music, trips, and falls flat on his face. A child asks what happened and what is wrong with him, and he responds with the textbook definition of CP, at which point the child screams and flees. Hopefully overdramatic for most of us, variations of this scene have played out a thousand times in my life. When the scene cuts to physical therapy (PT) and Ryan laments feeling stuck in limbo with a mild disability, not fitting in with either “the mainstream world” or “the cool PT crowd,” I knew this series would pull precisely zero punches. Ryan gets a job at an online content creation company, Eggwoke, and tells a coworker that he was

hit (grazed) by a car. The entire office assumes said car accident is the cause of his gait abnormality, and he plays along – cue disability-related identity crisis, from whence we jump off.

For much of the remainder of the first season, CP serves as “an appetizer,” as Ryan puts it, rather than the main course it has been for his whole life. Front and center are his romantic and sexual struggles, his codependency with his mother, and his friendship with Kim, a fashion-forward and headstrong writer at Eggwoke who also feels out of place being overweight and Indian. Self-delusion runs in parallel across these three spokes. Kim uses expensive clothing to hide both her insecurity and her debt. Ryan’s mom, Karen, protects him, and her place in his life, at the sacrifice of her own identity and a budding romance. Ryan himself continues to milk the car accident with his own crush, speaking volumes to the audience in secret about his self-worth when he tells the boy, “It was my fault . . . it basically messed my body up forever.” When he finally decides to ‘come out’ to his coworkers about having CP, he drafts an article that begins “Running from who you are is hard. Especially when you have a limp.”

Strikingly, the show uses that motif with both positive and negative traits. In the conversation that leads to their breakup, Karen’s boyfriend says that, “People with CP can be [jerks], too,” and Ryan is later compelled to confront in himself what others recognize as “internalized ableism” after he dismisses a potential date for being deaf. The show is a comedy, but largely so in the sense that it addresses weighty content from

*Corresponding author: Matthew MacCarthy, University of South Carolina and Prisma Health Children’s Hospital, 9 Richland Medical Park Dr, Suite 410, Columbia, SC 29203, USA. Tel.: +1 803 434 3877; E-mail: matthew.maccarthy@prismahealth.org.

the mind of a comedian. Like Ryan himself, that duality – and an attempt to find peace in the mess – drives the narrative.

Sexuality is a huge focus of the show, and while there is no nudity, some interactions are graphic enough that sensitive viewers should exercise caution. However, from a cultural perspective, the importance of this choice cannot be overstated. The queer community is relatively underrepresented in popular media, and the disabled-queer community is essentially nonexistent. Adding to Ryan's character-accurate lived experience is Buck Andrews, who is, and plays, a gay man with autism. Ryan hires a sex worker at one point, and when he is clearly nervous and unsure of himself, his companion calmly walks through adaptations in positions, saying (without an explicit admission from Ryan) that he has had a few clients with CP before. As I mentioned, the homosexual lens is one that I don't have an eye behind, but given the fact that an abundance of literature has reiterated the need for better sexual education and more open discussion of sexuality among people with disabilities, the honest portrayal of sex and sexuality in "Special" is a greatly welcome addition to the most-watched streaming service on Earth.

Of course, this is a show about dualities, and it would not jibe with what I have already written for the show to not have at least one dip into the dark side of sexuality and disability. Thankfully, there is no exploration or mention of abuse or partner violence, but one encounter that I was initially overjoyed at – when Ryan's partner praises his "unique body" and the beauty of his surgical scars – quickly devolved to a brief introduction into disability fetishism. While some may find this inclusion distasteful, I respect it as an uncomfortable and uncommon but potentially very real possibility for people with disabilities as they explore romance and intimacy.

Season 2 digs much more into the identity of disability and the relatable moments abound, from hilarious to groan-worthy. In a moment pulled from the creator's real life, Ryan is actively using an elliptical machine when it tells him to "resume workout" because he is going too slow. A fellow gym-goer introduces himself in what initially seems like flirtation, but then praises Ryan on how inspirational he is for working out despite limitations (this, or a variation of it, has happened to me at least once at every gym

I have ever attended). Karen struggles with her adult son trying to learn housework, saying, "It's easier if I do it myself." In one particularly notable victory for representation, Buck Andrews' character Henry introduces Ryan to "the Crips," a social group with varying disabilities all portrayed accurately.

It is on the discovery of that group of friends that the show's final moments hinge. Ryan's boyfriend asks one of the Crips if she knows one of his dance class acquaintances who uses a wheelchair, a cliché but perfectly realistic gaffe. As a result, Ryan realizes that he wants someone who can share both core elements of his identity, and that he also does not want to have to explain things about the disability community to a partner because so much of his time in society at large is spent doing exactly that. I was taken aback by the unsympathetic response, only to quickly remember that despite its authenticity, self-effacement, and admirable contributions to representation, "Special" is not a disability etiquette manifesto – it's a loving rant. In a subtle fourth-wall break, Ryan authors another article on disability for *Eggwoke*, and his boss praises it as "an incredible, searing account of what it's like to be disabled in an ableist society. But it's also sad. And angry," to which Ryan responds that he is, in fact, sad and angry. He doesn't want to sugar-coat reality, and clearly, neither does the man portraying and creating him.

Do I expect society at large to glean lessons from "Special"? Maybe. It isn't preachy enough to get through to those who will not be looking past the comedy, but to make it so would be a drastic and detrimental shift in tone. Ultimately, it is a story of a few months in one man's life, portrayed authentically, with no pretense, morals, or endings tied up with bows. The last episode is even called "Here's Where the Story Ends." But before the ending montage of those few months rolls, with its small-but-significant moments of growth, Ryan notes that "We [all] deserve big, gorgeous lives," and that is absolutely true – whether you consider yourself special or not.

Conflict of interest

Author has no conflicts of interest or funding to disclose.