

Alison Wilde reviews all six episodes of Cast Offs being shown on Tuesday and Wednesday nights on Channel 4 at 11.05pm for the next three weeks

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Cast Offs stars : Tim Gebbels, Sophie Woolley, Victoria Wright, Mat Fraser, Kiruna Stamell and Peter Mitchell.

(This review first appeared on Disability Arts Online at:

**<http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/Alison-Wilde;>
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I was quite worried when I heard about Cast Offs. After waiting so long for better disability representations, Channel 4's aim to challenge tedious old stereotypes by featuring real disabled actors in new types of roles seemed very ambitious.

There are so many issues to overcome. Is it possible to provide entertaining drama which appeals to both disabled and non-disabled viewers? How would Channel 4 represent a diverse group of people and reach a wide audience? And could this be done without creating nasty new stereotypes? Time will tell how well the programme is received, but the challenge to images of disability is unprecedented.

The first episode of Cast Offs sets the scene for the rest in the series in getting straight to the main points. Its 'mockumentary' style allows the cast to ridicule reality TV formats, conventional stereotypes of disabled people and non-disabled people alike.

With a slight parody of reality TV genres, this spoof survival show set on a British island, allows us an uncompromising focus on relationships between disabled people. This is something we never seem to get with their incidental or temporary appearances as background characters in drama and comedy (as important as supporting roles may be).

Driven by humour, unsentimental attitudes towards impairment and abrasive relationships between the characters, the show wastes no time in establishing its ground.

Stereotypes are subverted from the start and people are mocked on the terms of their impairment status. No one and nothing escapes, including disability politics. Derision is used to create humour throughout the series, and is often related to Tom's blindness, April's cherubic face, Will's thalidomide-affected arms, Dan's paraplegic legs, Gabriella's deafness, and Carrie's restricted growth.

This feels particularly true of the first two episodes where talk about impairment and disability is often used to forge relationships between the characters and shape group dynamics, allowing us brief glimpses of their characters. We certainly get a feel for the rest of the show which we might expect to resemble 'Lord of the Flies on crack' as Tom predicts.

The progress of the castaways through their 90 days on the island is cut with flashbacks to each character's life and there is an immediate focus put on Dan. This was slightly disconcerting for me in this first episode as I found myself wanting to know more about the other characters and occasionally found myself a little lost. However, the series gets more compelling with each episode.

As the series proceeds, I became increasingly drawn into each person's story, but simultaneously I wanted to see much more of their interactions on the island (though maybe this is because I've watched too much reality television). Overall, the series allows us to make strong attachments with all the characters while unravelling a number of disability themes along the way.

The first episode introduces several disability issues. Through time spent on the island and flashbacks of Dan's life, three main issues arose: coming to terms with a new impairment and disabled identity; the roles of parents; and sexuality.

We witnessed the roles other disabled people play in forging new disabled identities, both in the macho environment of the pub and the basketball team and then on the island. Dan's journey is a theme followed through in succeeding episodes.

The depiction of the relationships between Dan and his parents was excruciating to watch. This was an exceptional portrayal of family dynamics, demonstrating the demeaning effects of protective attitudes towards impairment. I felt this depiction of parenting had universal appeal and was handled well, providing a poignant depiction of a newly disabled family.

Watching Dan's parents made me wince in recognition of my own parenting excesses - as well-meaning as they may be. Not funny! Nor was it represented as such.

Conversely, much of the humour about sex and sexuality was very funny. Up to a point. After a while I felt a little weary of the sexual references. Similarly, I was aware on several occasions that I was receiving a political message about disability and the 'golden thread' was broken a little.

On the whole, the script was very well written and very funny but some of the funniest moments, for me, were nothing to do with either sex or impairment. When April asks about dietary requirements and issues of vegetarianism and dairy products are brought up by Will and Gabriella, Tom (who gets many of the best lines) replies, 'I prefer food cooked by other people.' A man after my own heart.

There is so much to be changed in disability representation and one show can only scratch the surface in changing representations of disabled people. Recent innovations such as *Beyond Boundaries* and *Britain's Missing Top Model* have featured real disabled people but they didn't tell us much about the reality of disabled people's lives. Instead, they focussed mainly on endurance, perfection and non-disabled people's ideals.

This time stereotypes are confronted and challenged. But we can't avoid the creation of new ones. There is, for example, a risk that we may all be seen as witty, sardonic individuals. There is also a danger that disability will be referenced to only sensory and physical impairments, as issues of learning difficulties, cognitive impairments and mental health concerns aren't addressed. I was also a little disappointed to find that the central characters were all white.

However, the main question being asked today seems to be, 'Should we laugh at disability?' Surely this question is framed in the language of 'special needs'? It seems ironic that the biggest issue is about protecting us from laughter, a taboo which seems to be on a par with the denial of disabled sexualities. I have really enjoyed comedy created about disability and impairment by non-disabled writers, directors and performers, including the films of the Farrelly Brothers, Little Britain, comedy from Russell Brand and even Ricky Gervais.

But, occupying similar territory, this show has even more potential because (like Disability Arts) it puts disabled people centre stage as actors and writers, as creators and subjects of culture. Despite its flaws, this is a valuable and entertaining beginning.

Much has been achieved in the past from genres which rely on the situational humour of people speaking for and parodying themselves in oppressive structures. This has worked for women in comedies such as Golden Girls (NBC), French and Saunders (BBC) and Absolutely Fabulous. Who can forget the Goodness Gracious Me (BBC) characters who ordered bland food and chips in their 'Going for an English' sketch?

In a similar manner to these shows, the characters in Cast Offs have begun to parody disability, non-disabled values and the paradoxes of identity and inclusion.

There is much to look forward to in this series, not least the wonderful array of hats worn by Carrie. It gets better as it goes

along and I was left wanting to see much more of the characters and perhaps some new ones. Let's hope so!

To find out more about Cast Offs, go to the Channel 4 website www.channel4.com/programmes/cast-offs