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SEX(UALITY) SELLS: HOLLYWOOD IS CAPITALIZING ON LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS, FOR BETTER OR WORSE



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There is a pattern emerging in the land of film and television — one that is very quickly reaching epidemic levels. No property is entirely safe, but genre properties seem to be at a particularly high risk, especially those that rely on nostalgia to fuel their marketing -- and, let's be honest, that's pretty much everything these days.

Reboots and remakes rely on a very particular brand of marketing. Namely, nostalgia and whatever their updated premise is. Usually, these changes are small and inoffensive. Perhaps you're getting updated costumes, maybe the writer decided to focus on a different piece of the source material, or maybe you'll delve deeper into the backstory of a particular character. Sometimes they're huge sweeping changes that completely turn the story on its head, like recasting the characters as women instead of men in the new *Ghostbusters* or *Ocean's Eleven* installments. Changes are buzzy, they get the audience talking - for better or worse

- and they give marketers something to turn into headlines. But recently there's been one particular headline that's injecting itself into a lot of rebooted media ... and it's rubbing some people the wrong way.

A lot of characters are suddenly gay.

This year, so far, there have been two instances in as many weeks of a beloved character in a '90s-era property being reimagined as LGBT in some fashion. LeFou in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and Trini, the Yellow Ranger, in Saban's *Power Rangers*, were both widely touted as being either openly gay (LeFou) or struggling with their sexuality (Trini). This, in and of itself, is not an issue. In fact, it's a very good thing that creators are taking the opportunity to update older stories to fit a more modern view of the world.

The problem is that the sexuality of these characters is being used for marketing and not much else.

When a TV show or a movie introduces a gay character, two things happen without fail: there is a lot of press, and there is a core audience who will tune in, no matter what. LGBTQ+ audiences, generally, will see anything that shows even the slightest inkling of being a little bit gay.

There's a particular way that LGBTQ+ audiences interact with media. It's a kind of desperate need of representation akin to an abused animal. We want and need to feel like the media we consume cares about us and wants to represent us truthfully and compassionately. At the same time, we're extremely well aware of the fact that that same media has mistreated us horribly in the past and continues to do so. If there's a gay character on TV, you can bet that character has a legion of loyal fans simultaneously cheering them on and waiting for the other shoe to drop. Will the character be evil? Die? Both?

It's that deep need and deeper fear that makes LGBTQ+ viewers some of the most passionate: perfect to market to, and dangerous to cross.

We need to talk about Lexa

One of the biggest headlines in genre last year was the death of fan favorite character, Lexa, on The CW Network's *The 100*. Lexa was a powerful character, commanding the 12 Grounder clans and working to bring about social change among her people. She was also a lesbian.

When fans caught on to the fact that there was about to be a same-sex relationship at the forefront of this show, they came out in droves, latched on and wouldn't let go.

Of course, that's not the point of this story. LGBTQ+ fans showing up for a story in which they are actually represented isn't surprising. It's what the writers/producers did when they found out how vocal that group really is, how beneficial they were to the show's viewership and their bottom line. They started marketing directly to those fans, putting Lexa in marketing material for the upcoming season and even reaching out directly to those fans to bring in the holdouts.

They assuaged their fears and then played right into them.

Halfway through the third season of the show, fans watched as Lexa was killed shortly after affirming her relationship with Clarke, the bisexual lead. They felt betrayed and they lashed out, loudly and publicly.

The Beauty, the Beast, and the Fool

It's been less than a year since this incident with Lexa and *The 100*, but already it looks like Hollywood is learning the wrong lessons. While on television, showrunners are reacting to the fallout that comes with lying to your most passionate fans, those working in film seem to just have caught on to the idea of using LGBTQ+ characters to boost their audiences.

At the end of February, just a week before Disney was set to release the live-action adaptation of their 1991 animated

classic *Beauty and the Beast*, news broke that one of the film's characters would be breaking from his original mold and coming out of the pre-Revolutionary French closet. Gaston's faithful sidekick, LeFou, was gay. Reactions were mixed. Many long-time fans argued that LeFou had always been coded as gay, so this wasn't really a stretch. Some fans worried about the poor choice in making Disney's first gay character a villain who is literally named "The Fool." Then, of course, there were those who called for the inevitable banning and boycotts. These reactions ran the gamut, but they had one major thing in common: they made this movie the only thing anyone was talking about that week.

The Yellow Ranger comes out

A couple weeks later, almost like clockwork, a brand new movie hit some very familiar headlines. Saban's *Power Rangers* was due out on March 24, and on the Monday before its release, director Dean Israelite told **The Hollywood Reporter** that his film would feature the very first gay big-screen superhero: The Yellow Ranger, Trini, would be coming to terms with her sexuality during the film.

Audiences got excited.

For longtime fans of the original series from the early '90s, a gay Power Ranger was a long time coming. While many assumed it would be the Blue Ranger - a tribute to the original actor, who was famously bullied for his own sexuality - any gay Ranger was better than none. The fact that the Power Rangers franchise, this adaptation included, was always about teenagers of different backgrounds coming together to support each other and kick alien ass together, meant that this would likely be a story of acceptance.

And it might have been if there was any story there at all.

All pomp, no circumstance

Both of these films should have been empowering for fans. Both of these characters should have made the openly queer

adults watching them feel a sense of acceptance and vindication for their closeted, confused or questioning baby gay selves. But in reality, what could and should have been a chance to say something about - well, about anything, really - turned into throwaway moments that only served to affirm the headlines. They made no statements, offered no commentary and had no relevance to the rest of the story or the arcs of the characters themselves.

LeFou's "gay moment" was, quite literally, a moment. It also wasn't explicitly gay, though it was obviously meant to be seen as such. Meanwhile, Trini's scene never goes beyond a sentence or two and is almost word-for-word what was already discussed in the articles previewing her groundbreaking role. She never actually says she's questioning her sexuality. Mostly she just talks about not liking labels and how her family is incredibly normal. We only know either character is 100% gay because we were told about it ahead of time (and because of that eclair).

Characters who happen to be gay have become a brand new form of tokenism. They are not, themselves, token characters - their characterization exists outside of their gayness - but they are being used to appeal to a certain demographic. Rather than serving the role of traditional token characters, Trini and LeFou do not support tired stereotypes or to allow the creators an out for borderline jokes at their expense. But, much like their token predecessors, these characters also do not exist because said creators think representation is important or meaningful. They get butts in seats, they stir up controversy, but they are inoffensive. You cannot rightfully fear them because they don't do or say anything scary. You cannot hate them because they don't actually do any of the things you hate.

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But at the same time, you can't really champion them,
because they aren't really doing or saying anything at all.