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“It’s just the right amount of girly”: Representing Women and Queer People in the Musical Film

*Prom*

At its conception, straight men dominated musical theater. At the conclusion of the twentieth century, thanks to landmark musicals like *The Birdcage* and *Rent*, feminist and queer stories began to have a foothold in major Broadway works. Indeed, it has led to a perception that the American musical theater world is mainly dominated by feminist and queer-friendly narratives.<sup>1</sup> However even with this expansion, patriarchal straight stories continue to dominate the genre. Continually, queer actors must play background characters or abandon their sexuality for roles, never seeing themselves fully represented in the leading character. In tandem, women play damsels in distress, the vilified witch, or have their stories centered around finding joy with a man. *Prom* the musical by Bob Martin and Chad Beguelin, opening in Atlanta in 2016 and premiering on Broadway in 2018, is one of the few queer stories actively told and has wound up widely acclaimed in the 2018-2019 Broadway year, beoming a New York Times Critics Pick in the first part of the year.<sup>2</sup> After such wide success, Ryan Murphy, a gay man himself, decided he would take up the mantle of creating a Netflix-backed movie adaptation. Through shoddy casting, female characters who never buck the patriarchy, and the deradicalization of the queer

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<sup>1</sup> Extra reading utilized for this paper in reference to this is *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* and *A Problem like Maria* by Stacy Wolf

<sup>2</sup> Received positive reviews from [New York Times](#), [Hollywood Reporter](#), [Time Out Magazine](#), and [Variety](#).

experience, Murphy fails to accurately illuminate the queer and female identity within *Prom* the movie musical.<sup>3</sup>

As queer representation has moved into the mainstream, the debate over who can tell an authentic queer story has raged. Immediately after *Prom* arrived on Netflix, controversy arose about James Corden's casting in the role of Barry Glickman, a flamboyant, gay, plus-sized Broadway actor. In reference to James Corden's casting, Samuel Spencer writes, "Opinions differ on how acceptable it is for straight actors to play gay roles, but few straight actors could get away with a gay character like this, a role that would feel stereotypical in an '80s sitcom and here feels offensive."<sup>4</sup> The second scene of the movie has James Corden talking to reporters in what has been derisively termed as "gayface"; in the role, Corden adopts a faux effeminate voice and flaps his hands like a mocking homophobic bully on the playgroup.<sup>5</sup> He talks about fashion, talks about casual sex, and refers to himself as "miss" and "ma'am." Although these qualities and affectations are frequently embraced by gay men, the nuance is lost in Corden's performance. This poses the question, can straight actors play queer characters, and if so how? And what might be lost if straight actors are the ones telling queer stories?

In contrast *The 100*, a show by Jason Rothenberg airing on the CW, stars Eliza Taylor, a straight woman. Taylor plays Clarke Griffin; who is a leader to her people, and is bisexual. Taylor's approach to this story radically parts from Corden's method, in that it de-emphasizing Clarke's bisexuality. Casey Wahl, a bisexual woman, has written about the way in which Taylor

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<sup>3</sup>Whenever *Prom* is mentioned from now on within this paper, it is referring to the Netflix movie adaptation by Ryan Murphy(2020), not the Broadway musical by Bob Martin & Chad Buguelin(2016).

<sup>4</sup> Spencer, Samuel. "The Prom' on Netflix Is a Messy Musical with a Miscast James Corden." Newsweek. Newsweek, December 1, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/prom-netflix-review-meryl-streep-james-corden-nicole-kidman-1551419>.

<sup>5</sup> Gay face, derived from the term "blackface", is a controversial phenomenon that comes about when a straight actor takes on a queer role, often adopting stereotypical mannerism in order to create an "authentic performance of queerness."

allowed her to accept her own bisexuality.<sup>6</sup> Although not explicitly, Wahl points out that many bisexual people experience something called “compulsive heterosexuality”; however, the character arc of Clarke did not include a “comp-het” perspective, helping Wahl discover something important about her own sexuality.<sup>78</sup> Through Clarke, viewer can discover that straight actors are not only able but can add valuable voice to queer stories.

In contrast, Barry, via Corden, does not tackle any barriers or provide any new perspective to the musical *Prom*. Corden’s performance actively reinforces stereotypes, causing viewers to ask the question of how a queer casting director could blunder so badly. One could argue that Barry’s plus-sized-ness holds more value to his character than his gay-ness does. Amazingly, a grand total of zero articles have been written about the value of this character being depicted as plus-sized in either the musical or the movie adaptation. Although Corden does offer plus-sized visibility, the only mention of Barry’s plus-sized status in the script is a joke about him “crying into his Cheetos” as a child in Act Two. Other than that, the role speaks nothing to Barry’s struggles with society’s perception of him. Even if one granted that being plus-sized is fundamental to Barry’s character, one cannot justify the blatant and offensive stereotyping of this queer character since plenty of plus-sized gay actors exist. As stated by Zack Sharf, “the outrage here isn’t a character issue but a casting one that’s specific to Corden”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wahl, Casey. “How a Television Character Helped Me Accept My Bisexuality.” *Culturess*. FanSided, May 29, 2019. <https://culturess.com/2019/05/29/clarke-griffin-the-100-helped-me-accept-my-bisexuality/>.

<sup>7</sup> Compulsive heterosexuality or “comp-het” is a phenomenon faced by many queer people which encourages them to seek heterosexual relationships as the norm while pushing down homosexual feelings.

<sup>8</sup> Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-60. Accessed April 21, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834>.

Shame | ContraPoints. YouTube. YouTube, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7WvHTL\\_Q7I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7WvHTL_Q7I).

<sup>9</sup> Sharf, Zack. “James Corden in 'The Prom' Sparks Critic Outrage: 'Offensive' and 'Worst Gay-Face'.” *IndieWire*. IndieWire, December 1, 2020. <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/12/james-corden-the-prom-outrage-offensive-miscast-1234601570/>.

From casting to writing, *Prom* depicts many powerful female characters. However, these characters are vilified and harshly judged, with their happiness requiring a man to fully satisfy them. While the thespians are traveling to Indiana, Barry and Dee Dee Allen (Streep) have a discussion about their own motivations for coming to help out Emma, a lesbian girl from Edgewater, Indiana who is unable to take her girlfriend to prom. Barry and Dee Dee talk about wanting Tony awards, but it is Barry who gets a long monologue about how he wants a Tony award to show all the people who made fun of him that they were wrong, establishing a sympathetic narrative for an equally selfish male character. As Dee Dee's character develops, she only abandons this selfishness when a man takes a romantic interest in her. Not only does finding a man help her find her dreams, Dee Dee's arc fully mimics a stereotypical Hallmark movie's tropes. Madeleine Trebenski's parody piece "Guidelines for Female Protagonists in Hallmark Christmas Movie" analyzes the transformation which the "high powered career woman living in a major metropolitan area" makes when she meets a "strapping young potato".<sup>10</sup> The most striking similarity to mainstream, conservative Hallmark movies comes at the end of *Prom*, where the protagonist "must abandon the entire successful life she's built for herself to make her life about [her love interest]..." When Dee Dee meets principal Tom Hawkins, she immediately becomes enamored with him. As she develops her relationship, she shares sentiments of wanting to quit her job and being a small town girl at heart. He asks her about her flashy and successful persona and Dee Dee says, "all this..." motioning to herself, "I invented it". She downplays her own success, trivializing the image of celebrity she has crafted for herself. Eventually, Principal Hawkins rejects her after discovering her selfish intent in coming to Edgewater. After this, Dee

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<sup>10</sup> Trebenski, Madeleine. "Guidelines For Female Protagonists In Hallmark Christmas Movies." McSweeney's Internet Tendency, December 20, 2018. <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/guidelines-for-female-protagonists-in-hallmark-christmas-movies>.

Dee realizes her personal wrongdoings and “selflessly” performs a beautiful number about improving herself to get back her “strapping young potato”. In this song, she sings, “I’m begging you sir/Don’t give up on her yet,” displaying how she requires his approval for her personal growth. The song “The Lady’s Improving” portrays her transformation from the selfish person, exemplified by the song “It’s Not About Me,” to a more palatable person who Principal Hawkins can forgive. Although Barry does gain approval from his mother, his story only comes to a close when he goes to Prom. His journey is much more internal, patriarchally allowing the male character to gain personal success without someone else. In contrast, Dee Dee is forced to have a man approve her to fully accept her improvement.

The villain in *Prom*, Mrs. Greene (Kerry Washington), is the head of the PTA. She is a one dimensional character, her only goal being to stop Emma from going to her high school prom with another female student.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to note that Mrs. Greene does not have a first name at all during the movie, positioning her character as a punching bag not a person. She is joined by two other main antagonists who are cheerleaders, named Kaylee and Shelby. These three women represent tropes which have a long tradition of stereotyping throughout the media. The costume decisions for these women also conform to convention. For example, society sees pink as a feminine color while society sees blue as a masculine color. This stems from a shift sometime before the 60s when pink was reassigned from men to women “because it was close to red, a romantic color, and women were seen as more emotional.”<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Mrs. Greene wears pink in every scene but one, with the exception of the final scene where she expresses what I can only call tolerance for her daughter’s sexuality. Throughout the movie, Mrs. Greene is

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<sup>11</sup>Spoiler Alert: it’s Mrs. Greene’s daughter, Alyssa Greene.

<sup>12</sup> Michael, Maleigha. “Sexism in Colors – Why Is Pink for Girls and Blue for Boys?” UMKC Women's Center, June 25, 2018. <https://info.umkc.edu/womenc/2018/06/25/8369/>.

represented as an emotional person who acts irrationally. This negativity of Mrs. Greene's character is displayed by the end of the musical number "Tonight Belongs to You". Washington modifies the timbre of her voice to sound more nasally and even shrill. This cements Mrs. Greene aurally as a "bitch", allowing the audience to brush her off as illogical and wrong.<sup>13</sup> However the ending lends her to taking this more passive role for her motherly duties to Alyssa.

In contrast to all of this female instability and emotion, Trent, played by Andrew Rannells, utilizes "logic" to shame Kaylee and Shelby with the purpose of combating their homophobia. During the gospel-style song "Love Thy Neighbor", Trent insults them directly, stating that having a tattoo and losing your virginity is a sin. Both of their boyfriends are also there, but interestingly he does not particularly shame the boys.<sup>14</sup> He says "hope that you don't masterbate" in contrast to his much more direct accusations of having a tattoo, losing your virginity, or getting divorced/remarried. Trent's differentiation from Mrs. Greene as logical versus emotional shows *Prom*'s patriarchal motif which sits entrenched within society and seeps into this movie.

As a queer story, *Prom* perfectly polishes the queer experience for a straight audience, creating a feel-good narrative drenched with heteronormativity and compromise. The only duet sang by the leading lesbian couple, Emma Nolan and Alyssa Greene, is titled "Dance With You". This duet opens with "I don't want to start a riot/ I don't want to blaze a trail/ I don't want to be a

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<sup>13</sup> A gendered study done on legislators in Colorado found that "women tend to be more passive individuals, and they generally silence themselves, pull back and collaborate quietly in the corner more than men" (*Andrews*). Female subversiveness regularly attracts ridicule within the media, for example Ursula in the *Little Mermaid*.

<sup>14</sup> In relation to this, Shelby's boyfriend has a stepmom, and Trent decides to shame her through him, fully avoiding faulting a man with anything in favor of a woman not even in the building. The one man he does shame, Kaylee's boyfriend, is a person of color while Shelby's boyfriend is white. This does point to an interesting white savior complex of the movie which is much too complex for the scope of this essay. Absent of the race of the man that was shamed, he makes it much more hypothetical.

symbol/ or cautionary tale.”<sup>15</sup> This is a direct stand against the reality of queer experience because for a long time, even today in many places, queer people do not have a choice but to do those things. This straight packaging completely ignores the radical and bloody history of the fight against gay oppression in America.<sup>16</sup> The movie almost acknowledges this through an ending by displaying that they have a huge system to fight against. However, the main characters’ individualistic conclusions fails to create the solidarity that is accurate to the queer experience.

In every scene after the duet, Emma and Alyssa always wear blue and pink respectively, with Emma taking an obviously male role while Alyssa is obviously “the girl”. In “You Happened”, Emma confidently says that she will go to prom with her while Alyssa says, “I won’t hide if you’re by my side.” This makes her lose agency as a character and displays her role as a damsel in distress, instead of a full character. The heteronormativity of gay couples in media may enable quicker acceptance, but the stereotypes are still harmful and inaccurate.

*Prom* should be a jumping of point for queer representation in media, but instead it seems to take steps backward for queer advocacy. The way femininity is vilified throughout the movie only promotes patriarchal ideas. The casting leads to stereotyping in addition to homophobia which should be unwelcome in queer media. Sadly, musicals as a medium should be leaders in queer advocacy, but Murphy’s *Prom* falls well short of doing anything for anyone, other than lessening straight people’s reservations.

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<sup>15</sup> “It’s Time to Dance” does contain a reprise of “Dance With You” however this does not add any radical ideals, and actually to the ideas promoted in the original duet

<sup>16</sup> [The Stonewall Inn Riots](#) are the well-known symbolic beginning to the queer rights movement. Almost immediately following that, radical groups such as the Gay Liberation Front began popping up and advocating for these rights. In their own words, “The Gay Liberation Front is a militant coalition of radical and revolutionary homosexual men and women committed to fight the oppression of the homosexual as a minority group and to demand the right to the self-determination of our own bodies”(GLF).

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