

The Newsweek Debate

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By Jason Stuart,

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Many of you have likely heard about the recent Newsweek article “Straight Jacket: Heterosexual actors play gay all the time. Why doesn’t it ever work in reverse?” Contributor Ramin Setoodeh contends that audiences do not accept openly gay actors playing straight roles, such as Sean Hayes in “Promises, Promises” and Jonathan Groff of “Glee,” while offering no proof to support this claim other than his own discomfort.

As an out professional actor and chair of the Screen Actors Guild National LGBT Actors Committee, I am offended by Setoodeh’s attack and proud that our union rejects the notion that openly gay actors are restricted in the roles they can play. I am equally proud that so many people, gay and straight, have spoken out about Setoodeh and Newsweek to say the same.

It has been important for SAG to have a voice in this discussion on behalf of all my fellow brothers and sisters. Our union works tirelessly to advocate diverse hiring of underrepresented groups—including minorities, women, and performers with disabilities—in the entertainment industry. And our union demands that all performers have equal employment opportunities, insisting that qualified individuals are hired regardless of how they may identify. I am an actor; it’s not who I am but what I can play that counts.

The SAG LGBT Actors Committee was created to provide support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender actors so that they don’t need to feel as if they must hide who they are in order to work in this business. But it is harmful attitudes like those of Setoodeh, an out gay man himself—given a national platform by Newsweek—that are used to

pressure actors to stay in the closet, and perhaps worse, place doubt in those in positions of power about their casting choices.

Since the furor over the article erupted, a dialogue has evolved about gays who inhabit the entertainment industry—agents, managers, casting directors, publicists, and the like—who make it difficult for out actors and, some believe, actively engage in holding them back.

To help break this cycle, our SAG committee and the SAG Affirmative Action & Diversity Department regularly meet with entertainment executives to quell fears of the “big pink elephant in the room,” as Setoodeh so gracefully wrote. The committee annually hosts an Out in Hollywood event—last year partnering with the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation—which brings together out casting directors, producers, and actors to discuss the state of the industry for LGBT actors. We also host a variety of screenings, roundtable discussions and film festival panels in Hollywood and New York to not only celebrate the out actor but also challenge those in hiring positions who may have preconceived notions about casting an LGBT actor.

“Glee” creator Ryan Murphy, a gay man, has emerged from this Newsweek debate as a role model for those in the industry to follow. He wrote that when casting his show, actors “are encouraged to read for all roles, no matter what their sexual orientation, color, or gender. Who cares who you are or who you sleep with—frankly, it’s none of our business or concern. The actor with the best audition should get the part.”

Unfortunately, not every showrunner is as committed to diversity. Murphy gets that it takes talent for any actor to make a character believable and that actors play roles quite different from themselves, otherwise it wouldn’t be acting—and he has a hit show to prove it.

Our work is clearly not done, and our union will continue to fight to end fear within the acting community that being open about who you are means the end of your career. But it’s an uphill battle when some

of our biggest detractors, like Setoodeh, are members of our own community.

Actor-comedian Jason Stuart is chair of the Screen Actors Guild National LGBT Actors Committee. He was most recently seen on “The Closer,” “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” “House,” and his own standup special “Jason Stuart: Making It to the Middle.”