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(SD)

Producer and Disability Advocate

*How They See Us: Disability in the Screen Industry*

In this interview with producer, editor and disability advocate Stephanie Dower, we explore representation of disability on screen and discuss what we can learn from the COVID-19 shutdown about how to create a more inclusive, accessible, and creative industry - now and in the future.

Resources:

- [Focus on Diversity: Disability on Screen](#)
- [Stephanie Dower and Tanya Modini tackle disability barriers in Seeing Scout](#)
- [Attagirl Initiative](#)

Produced and presented by Aimée Lindorff

AL	Welcome to SQ ON AIR, presented by Screen Queensland - exploring the issues and news affecting the Queensland Screen Sector I'm Aimee Lindorff and in this episode I'm joined by producer, editor and disability advocate Stephanie Dower as we explore representation of disability on screen and how we can create a more inclusive industry.
AL	Stephanie, thanks so much for joining us on SQ On Air today.
SD	Thanks for having me.
AL	For those who don't know you, or haven't met you before, can you tell them a little bit about what you do and what your interest is in the film and television sector?
SD	I've been working as a freelancer probably for ... how many years now? Maybe 10 years almost. So I work predominantly as an editor but in the last few years, I've moved more into the production space, so I do a lot of producing and some writing as well currently, which is exciting.

AL	It is, a woman of many talents and you've just gotten a few projects funded very recently too, can you tell us a little bit about those?
SD	Yeah, so we're pushing forward with a couple. One that was recently shortlisted for the ABC Factual Initiative, it's a short documentary series call <i>Gaysian</i> , which looks at the Asian and LGBTQI communities, living within Australia, so really character-driven, looking at their experiences, their culture, how they contribute to the diversity and the vibrancy of modern day Australia.
AL	That's exciting, that's fantastic, and it's a series?
SD	Yeah, that'll be a short documentary series, so we've just been shortlisted for that, so hopefully if we play our cards right, we will be selected to move into production on that one, or gaining a little bit of funding from that initiative but yeah, it's nice to be selected and we're in with a great bunch of other projects as well, so really interesting and unique storytelling coming out of that initiative so I'm really excited to move forward with it and work with these people, yeah.
AL	Awesome, and you've also been selected to participate in the Attagirl project. Tell us a little bit about <i>Seeing Scout</i> .
SD	Yeah, so <i>Seeing Scout</i> is ... I like to think about it as my baby at the moment. <i>Seeing Scout</i> is a feature romance drama and it's actually a film that I wrote a very early draft, probably going back four, five years ago now and it tells the story of a young woman, she's 18 years old, her name is Scout and she lives in a small regional Queensland town, I should say. She actually has a disability herself, so she's the only one in town. I like to think of her as the disability mascot in the small town that she lives in but it's just about her in her senior year of high school, really I guess learning more about herself, learning her capabilities as a young woman and I guess preparing herself to go out into the big wide world after graduation and moving on from her small town and I guess, on her journey of self-discovery, she I guess, starts spending more time with the local football hero in town, Eli.
SD	The two strike up first a friendship which soon turns into, I guess, a love affair and I guess it's an unexpected and at times, confronting relationship. It's not something that the people around them, or I guess audiences, will have seen before but I think it's an important relationship to portray on screen, to show that particularly women with disabilities are fully capable in participating in a romantic, sexualized relationship
AL	one of the most frustrating aspects of stories, particularly screen narratives that include characters with disability, is that seems to be their defining feature. They don't have much agency outside the fact that this is the character with a disability. This is the character who is deaf, this is the character who is blind and that's their character, but Scout entering the story and centering particularly the love story around her experience.

SD	<p>from my own perspective, just to give background, I actually myself have a disability. I am physically disabled and use a motorized wheelchair for mobility so this is obviously something that's really important for me to see on screen because I know growing up, I never really saw anyone on screen that I was like, "Yeah, I get that. She's portraying my own experience." The characters that I did see on screen of people with disabilities were really negative portrayals and really patronizing at times and that's not my life. I like to think of myself as a capable human being that is doing things that any other able-bodied person would do. Sure, I may go about things in a slightly different way, but it doesn't mean that it's any more heroic or courageous than other people which is, I guess, the other portrayal that you sometimes see is that what Stella Young who is a disability advocate and worked for ABC many years ago, she coined the term inspiration porn. So it was seeing people with disabilities on screen doing everyday things but an able-bodied audience would see them as courageous or inspiring and, "Good on them for leaving their house."</p> <p>I've had those experiences in real life as well where you have random people come up to being like, "You're so brave." I'm like, "I'm literally just at a shopping center. I don't consider this brave in any sort of way."</p>
AL	<p>seeing more representations on screen, does having more representation and much more inclusive storytelling and diverse storytelling, how do you see that impacting, particularly workspaces and the community at large?</p>
SD	<p>Yeah, the representation that we see on screen of, not just people with disabilities, but of all people from minority and marginalized backgrounds, I truly believe that that heavily influences the way society sees those people. That's part of the reason why I'm so passionate about working in the screen industry, is because I think storytelling and creative content has the ability to change or influence the way we see people with disabilities and that's what I want to do. I guess my main aim through my work is to, in a sense, normalize the experience of people with disabilities, because I think once we see something a number of times, we become desensitized to it and we just accept that and I would hope that we think about that in our own worlds and in our own spaces.</p> <p>Just for example, when I travel somewhere, obviously there are a lot of different things that I have to think about that perhaps an able-bodied person doesn't have to think about, so if I'm going to a hotel, is the hotel room going to be accessible? Am I going to be able to use the shower there? Am I going to be able to get into the bed? Is the door going to be wide enough? That kind of stuff, there are going to be any stairs, of course. Whereas, other people who have traveled with me, who are able bodied, that's not something that they think about until they've traveled with me and suddenly, after they've I guess, lived my experience just for a short time, they go back into their own world and they start seeing the same thing.</p>

	<p>Just for example the other day, a friend of mine was saying she went to ... I can't remember where it was, it was a theme park or something like that and she was saying, "I noticed that this particular attraction didn't have any stairs at the back, so you could do that." And things like that. So I think the more that we see those kinds of experiences on screen and we're exposed to those experiences, the more that we start thinking about them and start registering them in our own worlds, which is only going to benefit everyone in the long run.</p>
AL	<p>How do you see that response particularity within the screen sector as a workplace? Because you've been working in film and television for many, many years. Do you see that attitude towards people with disabilities from employers?</p>
SD	<p>Yeah, it's hard. I think you have to get to a place where you have an employer to be able to see that reaction first of all. I think you'll find a lot of people with disabilities do go into the more self employed route because it offers us the flexibility, yes we still have to work against stigma but we have more control over who we work with, the direction of our career, so yes I have had those sorts of experiences. Maybe more people that were maybe not confident that I could do the job that I said I could do. I think it's more that kind of perception that I've gotten from employers or from clients more so. But yeah, as a self-employed person, or as a freelancer, at least I do have more control and more flexibility around how I work and who I actually work with.</p> <p>People are too quick to shut it down straight away. As an editor, if they want me to work onsite somewhere, or as a producer, if you have to be on location, whatever and if it's not necessarily accessible or somewhere that I can get to easily enough, instead of taking a second to be like, "Okay, how can we find an alternative way to work?" People just shut it down straight away and be like, "Oh it's too hard. No, it's just not going to work out." I'm like, "Oh, okay." In those instances, it would be great ... I understand there are some instances where yeah, sure, there are definitely barriers that can't be overcome. There are places that we do film in and yeah, it's not going to be feasible for me to get there or something like that, but I think it would just be nice if more people took a second and thought through some alternative ways that things could be done. "We work in a creative industry, let's think of some creative ways to get more diversity in the roles that we employ."</p>
AL	<p>Certainly, you know what you need to work. Ask you what you need to work instead of making that assumption for you, I guess?</p>
SD	<p>Absolutely, yeah. It's one of those things that, I can't speak for all people with disabilities but I know a lot of people with disabilities are more than happy to ... particularly if you're trying to assist us, or you're trying to employ us in some capacity, ask the question, of course in a</p>

	<p>respectful way, "What can we do to enable you to do the role that we're employing you to do?" We all know what we need, as you said. I'm happy to say, "Particularly for me, the most thing I need is a wheelchair-accessible location." That's my one deal-breaker, if I can't have that.</p> <p>Whereas other people of course would have different accessibility needs but yeah, just ask questions, just bearing in mind ask them in a respectful way and just keep an open mind. That's priority number one, I think.</p>
AL	<p>With the shutdown, obviously the industry and not just film and television, but workplaces across all industries have had to open up a little bit to this idea of accessible and flexible work environments. Do you see that having a positive impact on particularly film and television, now that we're starting to reopen?</p>
SD	<p>I do yeah, absolutely. I think 2020's been a year of unprecedent. No one could have imagined that would have gone through what we've gone through in 2020 but as much as there's been a lot of bad stuff happening and a lot of negative repercussions are happening, there's been some positive aspects as well and definitely one of those has been more people, I guess are learning and awakening to flexible working options. They're realizing that for years, people with disabilities in pretty much all industries, have been asking for flexible ways to work, whether it's working from home, whether it's limited hours, whether it's ... all that kind of stuff, but employers have been too quick just to be like, "No, too hard." Wash their hands of that and move on to the next person.</p> <p>Whereas now that pretty much everyone was in the same boat and had to work from home, suddenly they've been forced to find ways to keep their businesses running, to keep their work going. So it's like, "Oh. Oh, okay if I had just taken some time to think about, 'Oh, maybe we can make this work.'" Yeah, I really hope that we don't have short-term memory loss when things calm down and we don't snap back to what we were doing before but I know there's been a lot of surveys at the moment asking people whether they would like to continue working from home, or would like to go back to the office and that. Overwhelmingly, there's a majority of people asking for a hybrid. They want the flexibility to work from home but they also want the option of going to the office for meetings and for gatherings and that kind of thing.</p> <p>That's all that we've been asking for for so many years, is just having that flexibility. We're not saying that we'll never come into the office. We're not saying that you have to come to us, that kind of thing, but we're just asking for that flexibility and we also have the opportunity to utilize technology nowadays. We have technology like Zoom, all of that kind of stuff that enables us to do more of these face-to-face contacts from remote locations or</p>

	there's so many benefits to having that flexibility, not just for people with disabilities, but for everyone. So I think suddenly, when everyone's in the seat of someone with a disability, more things happen.
AL	Definitely, it's that thing of, "Well, it doesn't apply to me so it's not something I have to consider." But now suddenly the restrictions around COVID meant that access was everybody's problem, all of the time.
SD	The other thing to keep in mind is disability is one of the only minorities that has the potential to impact every single individual's lives. As much as we don't like to think about it, there may be a time in everyone's life that they are going to have more accessibility requirements, or they are going to have to do things in a different way, so-
AL	Or require work aids or mobility aids, or-
SD	Exactly, yeah. So if we can make the world a more accessible and universally designed place now, if something like that does happen to an individual, perhaps it won't be quite as detrimental to their wellbeing. They won't see it as such a big change in their world because yeah, things can still continue. There are ways to do things.
AL	I read about not only how things are made but why they're made the way they are and the world is very much designed for white, able-bodied, colonizing males, very specifically and so it's interesting that you say disability is something that impacts everybody, or can impact everybody at any stage of their life. So to create a more accessible world, is actually to do everybody benefit.
SD	and the other thing to keep in mind is everyone ages. If we're lucky enough, everyone ages, so think about the future, think about where you're going to be in 20, 30, 40, 50 years time and what are you going to want to do? Where are you going to want to go?
AL	So with that in mind, tell me what is your ideal accessible and inclusive workspace?
SD	For me, working in this industry, an accessible and inclusive workspace, it needs to I guess, encourage creativity and I'm not just talking creativity in terms of storytelling and technical work and that, I'm talking about creative thinking in terms of how we work together and how we include people, how we bring people into the space. So not only is it a workspace that everyone feels dignified that they can get in and out of independently, that they can do the work that they need to do in their own way, it's a creative space that functions in many

	<p>different ways. So I think for me, an accessible and inclusive workspace is a diverse workspace, primarily.</p>
AL	<p>What makes, to your mind, you're a Queensland storyteller, you're an editor, you're a sound editor, you're also a writer, you've got these projects going big guns and getting out there. What, to your mind, do you think makes a unique Queensland story?</p>
SD	<p>Queensland is one of those places that I think we're very lucky in terms of we have such amazing resources up here, pretty much everything we've got ... everything we need, we've got here. The only thing that we sometimes don't have access to, we're not Sydney, we're not Melbourne, we are a bit more removed from what was traditionally known as the hub of screen-making, or filmmaking. So I think we have had to be a bit more resilient and a bit more Creative with how we go about things. We have had to be a bit more like, we'll either fly down there for meetings, or we do them over email, Zoom, whatever. So we have had that but I think now, with the world changing, that's becoming easier and we have way more ability to take advantage of the resources that we already have up here.</p> <p>We have the talent, we have the landscapes, we have the locations. We have such a rich culture up here and such a rich industry up here, So, utilizing all those things that I've just said and we don't have to go elsewhere, we can do it all here. I think we also have an entrepreneurial spirit, if that makes sense? We don't mind going out on our own. We have had to in the past.</p> <p>So it's interesting, I remember friend of mine who has done some work down in Sydney on reality shows and those kinds of productions and she does storytelling as well, she has her own projects that she would like to get up one day and is working to get them up and she was talking to, I think a colleague of hers, who was surprised that she had a slate that she wanted to get up. For us, if we want to work in the screen industry up here, we have to go out on our own, we have to have our own slate of projects, that's the only way that we can potentially work unless you want to go into the corporate world.</p> <p>But yeah, down there, it was a bit more like it was a job, it wasn't the artistic choice, it was the job, it was the technical stuff, it was yeah, just get in, get some money, do the job, get out, kind of thing. So yeah, just a different perspective on working in this particular industry, I think, yeah.</p>
AL	<p>Queensland was the first really to embrace self-publishing in Australia, because we are so far removed from the publishing hubs of the country, so we had to do it for ourselves and I think you see that more and more in filmmaking. We're ready to take risks, Queensland,</p>

SD	Yeah, I think it's just we're up for the hard yards. We expect that to happen so I think we do have a bit more resilience towards that. We get in and we fight because that's the only way we work sometimes up here, so yeah, we just got to get in and fight for it.
AL	What are your hopes for the future of the Queensland screen industry? Now that we're having a lot of these conversations and the COVID experience has opened us up to a much more accessible and inclusive working environment, what are your hopes for the future?
SD	Yes, we have been very reflective this year, haven't we? I think my hopes for moving forward into the future, particularly in the Queensland screen industry is just working on reflecting on how we do things. So I guess, reevaluating processes and procedures and the way that we interact with each other on set. I think we need to be more mindful of people's needs working on film sets and working in post production and all that kind of thing. We have a lot of expectations but we also need to make sure those expectations meet the needs of those individuals. So just making the workplaces as inclusive, as flexible, as I guess comforting as we possibly can, to make sure that we all come out the other end of projects feeling good about the work experience that we've just had and feeling like we've been able to contribute to the best of our abilities because we were supported on that set, or on that project. So I think, yeah-
AL	Instead of just burnt out.
SD	Yes, exactly, yeah. Burnout can only take you so far. So I think we do need to get better at that balancing act and I think the year that we've had has really enabled us to ... or given us the space to reevaluate how we do things and make sure that we're not only thinking about the deliverables but we're also thinking about the mental health and the wellbeing of the people delivering that content.
AL	Thanks for listening to SQ On Air. You can find more resources to support your work space at Screen Queensland website, <a href="http://screenqueensland.com.au">screenqueensland.com.au</a>