

(In)Visible Woman: Ruth Madeley and Representing Disabled Lives on Screen

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Abstract

This critical reflection examines the growing career of actor Ruth Madeley, and her visibility in the industry as an ambulatory wheelchair user, exploring the impact of 'cripping up,' on casting practice, and its lasting effects on disabled actors, screen representation and the community they strive to represent. Madeley's rise to prominence offers the opportunity to explore the significance of casting disabled actors, and the value of seeing and being seen. Her success indicates a shift toward greater inclusivity and diversity, but the sustained casting of disabled actors remains exceptional rather than commonplace.

*Drawing upon analysis of three high profile roles in *Years and Years*, *Don't Take My Baby*, *Verisimilitude*, and *The Watch*, alongside interviews and related paratexts, I explore how Madeley's disability is negotiated and the tension this creates within her star image. With reference to scholarship on stardom, performance, and disability studies, I argue that Madeley is extraordinary in her ordinariness. She is highly visible, and yet, invisible. Her work dismantles entrenched yet ableist narratives where disabled characters are presented as little more than 'inspiration porn', reflected in Madeley's pursuit of roles where disabled people and their lives are represented as rich and complex, thereby challenging perceptions of disabled characters and their life experiences.*

*What does Madeley's career tell us about the industry's progression since Daniel Day-Lewis' Oscar-winning portrayal of writer Christy Brown in *My Left Foot*? And, as Madeley herself has commented, what is left to do in terms of how we represent disabled lives on screen?*

Keywords: disability; acting; disability representation; star-image; performance; crippling-up

In August 2021, writer Jack Thorne gave the MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival. In it, he reflected upon UK television's failure towards the disabled community, describing disability as 'the hidden diversity,' omitted from wider conversations (**Thorne, 2021**).

Commenting upon the rarity of disabled people both in front and behind the camera, he advocated for change, detailing the difficulties of disability-focussed projects. Within this landscape, he paid particular attention to actors and creators who succeed despite significantly stacked odds. Amongst them is actor Ruth Madeley, listed with *EastEnders'* Rose Ayling-Ellis, and *Life's* Melissa Johns. Their success, Thorne noted, revolves around fitting into broader non-disabled narratives (**Ibid**).

This observation prompted me to consider the oppositions and tensions that are inherent within the life, work, and star persona of disabled actors. Madeley's success makes her an ideal case study to explore and reflect upon how these tensions are negotiated, revealing a series of interrelated paradoxes.

The first paradox: standing out/fitting in, is analogous to Richard Dyer's (1979) observations on the 'ordinary/extraordinary' paradox of the star (**1998: 43**). As Mike Clarke later qualified, the star must remain unique, while also being 'someone with whom the spectator can identify' (**1987: 141**). These qualities are true for Madeley, but come with an added layer of significance, making her *extraordinary in her ordinariness*.

Starring in Russell T. Davies' *Years and Years* (2019), exposed her to a wider audience, culminating in a profile for *Vogue Italia*. This built on earlier critical recognition including a Best Actress BAFTA nomination in 2016 and making the BAFTA Breakthrough Brit list that same year. At the time, interviews typically focussed on her career trajectory, detailing her origins in a family with no acting background. Her rareness always implicit, she subverted this by emphasising she was brought up in the 'same way' as her older sister, 'taught to see there was nothing [she] couldn't do', and instead find 'different ways to do it' (**Ruth Madeley qtd. in Curtis, 2019**).

The extraordinary element of her star persona comes through her self-described 'backwards journey' to the industry (**Madeley qtd. In Nicolaou, 2019**). Whilst working for the charity Whizz-Kidz, Madeley was approached regarding the need for a wheelchair user for an upcoming episode of *Half Moon Investigations*. In various accounts, she details going to the audition to gain insight into the casting process, but never intending to act. After auditioning, she got the part, and later, secured an agent. This reflects the luck and chance elements common to star narratives, and Madeley's rareness as a disabled actor. In responding to a lack of

representation and discovering a hitherto unrecognised talent, her extraordinariness becomes doubly coded.

As Tobin Siebers observes, when on stage, non-disabled bodies are never questioned, but disabled bodies always are, becoming ‘visible, perhaps hypervisible’, through their presence (Siebers, 2016). For Madeley, this is true on stage, on screen or off, both as an ambulatory wheelchair user, and as someone who openly discusses her condition, spina bifida, on social media. This hypervisibility frequently positions her as a spokesperson and role-model. She demonstrates an awareness of her position, advocating for better disability representation, saying she ‘grew up being very aware that no one looked like me on-screen,’ and wanted to help create change in the industry (Madeley qtd. in Brennan, 2021). However, in being cast, she is sometimes rendered invisible, not only by fitting into the narratives Thorne describes, but also when overlooked in favour of able-bodied counterparts.

This creates the second paradox: being seen/being unseen. Madeley navigates the consequences of this primarily in how her disability is negotiated within each role. In some projects, it is minimised to the point of being incidental, operating similarly to colourblind casting.ⁱ In others, it is maximised, filling gaps in disabled social history or articulating the contemporary disabled experience.

Comedic short *Verisimilitude* (2020) sits in the middle of this schema, representing both the disabled experience, and the realities of being a disabled actor. Directed by David Proud and released as part of *The Uncertain Kingdom* anthology in 2020, it explores the consequences of casting non-disabled actors as disabled characters. Colloquially defined by playwright Kaite O’Reilly ‘cripping up’ (qtd. in Komporály, 2005: 66) the term has entered the popular consciousness through debate in the press via Frances Ryan (2015) and Lyn Gardner (2013, 2016), amongst others. For Christopher Shinn, the practice enables ‘the lie of representation,’ while also perpetuating the fascination with disability-as-metaphor, to the exclusion of disabled actors and their true experiences (Shinn, 2014).

Madeley plays Bella, an out-of-work actress, hired as a consultant to advise an able-bodied actor, Josh (Laurie Davidson), after he’s cast in the biopic of a fictitious Paralympian. Josh sees the role as a ‘challenge,’ but has no real understanding of disability, much to Bella’s amusement, and ultimately, frustration. Bella helps Josh in various ways, including how to push a wheelchair correctly, making his performance more authentic through her labour. While Josh is given extra attention as the star, Bella is often ignored. This changes when someone drops out of the film, and she is asked by the director to replace them, upping the film’s ‘diversity quota’ in the process. The film ends as Bella prepares to shoot her first take.

While *Verisimilitude* explores the realities of working as a disabled person, *Don't Take My Baby* (2015) explores what it means to build a family as one. Written by Jack Thorne and aired during BBC Three's disability season, 'Defying the Label' in 2015, it raised awareness of Children's Services investigations into disabled parents. Based on real-life testimonies, it follows a young, disabled couple, Anna, a powerchair user, and partially-sighted Tom, played by sighted actor Adam Long. Both living with hereditary and degenerative conditions, the film details their struggle to keep their baby daughter once their caregiving abilities are called into question.

The film fits into a long tradition of issue-based single dramas, such as *Cathy Come Home*, where a large-scale issue is told on a smaller, personal scale, to generate empathy and understanding; achieved here using video diaries and flashbacks chronicling Anna and Tom's relationship. Central to its affectiveness is Madeley's performance, derived from a place of truth and knowledge. Describing her involvement, Madeley noted the value of drawing on her own experiences during difficult or emotionally vulnerable scenes, including where her own surgery scars are visible (BAFTA, 2016). Much like *Verisimilitude*, her portrayal, and its roots in lived experience are significant, bringing greater authenticity to the character. Her presence underlines the importance of, as Thorne advocates, disabled stories being told with the involvement of disabled people (Thorne, 2021).

The thread of collaboration and involvement is clear in Madeley's most high-profile role to date, as Rosie Lyons in ensemble drama *Years and Years*. Unlike *Don't Take My Baby*, the character wasn't written as disabled, with references and plotlines created after the fact between Madeley and Davies. This culminates in a narrative arc where the future Rosie inhabits creates a cure for spina bifida, leaving her to reflect on what an able-bodied life may be like, before deciding not to take it herself. However, this is one plotline amongst many, and as Madeley noted, 'the fact that she has spina bifida is down the list of interesting things' about the character (Madeley qtd. in Nicolaou, 2019).

Rosie's disability is a non-issue, and she is not shown in her wheelchair until over halfway into the first episode. Introduced as she travels to hospital in labour, the audience engage with her as a person first. This sets the tone for her treatment throughout the series. Fully integrated into the family, she is a fiercely independent, loving, and hard-working single mum to her young sons. Feisty and flirtatious, her disastrous love-life is played to humorous effect, but we laugh *with* her, not *at* her when a date goes wrong. She is someone who, in Madeley's words, has 'a lot of layers to her.' The multifaceted nature of the role, and its significance made her, 'an incredible character to play' (Madeley qtd. in BBC, 2019).

Rosie's characterisation is normal to the point of mundane, and this in itself is revolutionary.

Like Anna before her, *seeing* Rosie living her life matters. Once more, ordinariness is made extraordinary, because seeing a character like Rosie is rare. To see them portrayed by a disabled actor, as part of a primetime BBC One drama, is rarer still.

The positive reaction to Rosie illustrates both the need for more disabled characters on screen, and for depth and nuance in their writing. The Ruderman Family Foundation awarded the production its *Seal of Authentic Representation* in recognition of their work to further accurate and authentic disability representation. Madeley reflected that Rosie represents a 'huge step forward in the industry toward better portrayal of characters with disabilities' (Madeley qtd. in Drury, 2019).

The final role I will explore reveals the third paradox: being good/being bad. Madeley's casting as Throat in BBC America's *The Watch* (2020), inspired by Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, represents a leap rather than a step forward for representation. In the source material, Throat is neither disabled, female, nor white. While it is beyond the scope of this reflection to debate the merits of this in relation to fidelity, or indeed, the problematic swapping of one minority for another, *The Watch* offers the opportunity to contemplate what's possible once disability is considered an asset rather than a limitation.

On social media, responses to her casting and portrayal were generally positive. Where fans disagreed with the choice, Madeley remained pragmatic, creating a dialogue that acknowledged their grievances, while offering her perspective on the importance of Throat in this guise. It is notable however, that Throat's disability was rarely part of their negative response, but rather, the fundamental changes to *their* understanding of the character, transformed from a down-on-his-luck pie merchant to a gang leader-turned-snitch.

In a Twitter thread dedicated to Throat, Madeley explained how her wheelchair was made, using the moment to comment upon the value diverse casting brings to characters. Built entirely from scrap by the props department, as if scavenged from the surroundings, Madeley used the chair, the concrete example of her own and Throat's otherness, to demonstrate why inclusion matters, arguing that characters 'instantly become more interesting & layered [...] Hiring disabled actors will ALWAYS make a project richer' (Madeley, 2021).

Following Madeley's argument, once her portrayal as Throat is understood as an interpretation of the character, *The Watch* also is also lens through which to consider the nuance offered by diversifying casting. Madeley

playing someone who's non-virtuous, breaks down the societal paradigm of the good and bad cripple, while also eschewing the equally entrenched trope of equating villainy with physical disfigurement.ⁱⁱ

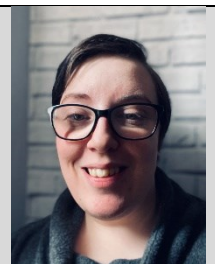
This reflection has illustrated the significance of Madeley's continued success, and what this means for disability representation. By outlining the tensions and oppositions that are negotiated within her star persona, I have also begun to create an ontology of that stardom. In doing so, I have examined what's gained when diverse casting is inclusive of disability: we amplify voices and talent like Madeley's.

The analysis of specific roles within her growing body of work illustrates how the range of roles she can take on is also beginning to diversify, exemplary of the changes in attitude regarding who and what disabled characters can be. Even so, the experiences of Madeley and Thorne prove that change remains painfully slow, with representation disproportionate to the size of the community it should represent. As Madeley remarked, '[t]here's a lot of work still to be done' (**Madeley qtd. in Nicolaou, 2019**). More work to ensure that disabled lives and stories are treated with equal value. More work to ensure disabled creatives are honoured with the same degree of recognition as their able-bodied counterparts.

Later in his MacTaggart speech, Thorne detailed his hopes for the future, when such levels of recognition are commonplace, saying, 'someone is going to build a show around Ruth Madeley, and when they do, they'll realise she is one of the talents of our time' (**Thorne, 2021**).ⁱⁱⁱ

What a future that will be. I cannot wait to see it.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Discussion of 'colourblind' or 'non-traditional' casting processes originate in the context of theatre. Alan Eisenberg, defines this as: 'the casting of ethnic minority actors in roles where race, ethnicity, or gender is not germane.' See Eisenberg, Alan. 'NONTRADITIONAL CASTING; When Race and Sex Don't Matter'. *The New York Times*, 23 Oct. 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/23/theater/l-nontraditional-casting-when-race-and-sex-don-t-matter-486788.html>. For a more contemporary discussion of this in relation to television, see Warner, Kristen J. *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*, Routledge, 2015.

ⁱⁱ For discussion of this damaging archetypal paradigm see Darke, Paul. 'The Changing Face of Representations of Disability in the Media'. *Disabling Barriers-Enabling Environments*, vol. 12, 2004, pp. 100–05; and Gibson, Jessica. 'No Time to Die: The Problem with Bond Villains Having Facial Disfigurements'. *The Conversation*, 6 Oct. 2021, <http://theconversation.com/no-time-to-die-the-problem-with-bond-villains-having-facial-disfigurements-169411>.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the weeks following the McTaggart Lecture, Thorne created the group 'Underlying Health Condition' with actor-writer Genevieve Barr and line producer Katie Player to advocate for change, both in front of and behind the camera. The lecture and its coverage prompted the formation of a new co-production initiative between the BBC and Netflix for disabled creatives. Similarly, Channel Four publicised additional recommendations and best practice guidance for working with disabled talent.