Twitter Thread by Tom Coates



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@piersmorgan A bunch of people will hear "gay roles for gay actors" and say it's stupid or hypocrisy. But there are a few areas to consider:
(1) Do gay actors get roles?
(2) Can straight actors accurately portray gay people?
(3) Can gay actors accurately portray straight people?

@GMB @piersmorgan The first one is I think pretty clear - while it has become considerably easier for gay actors to get ahead in Hollywood, they still don't generally have access to the most common or most popular roles and it can be an impediment to their careers.

@GMB @piersmorgan The same is true in the UK. It is often the case that actors who are out and well-known as gay simply don't get given straight roles in movies or TV. They're considered 'not believable'. Whereas when a straight actor plays an LGBT role, they're (now) considered 'brave'

@GMB @piersmorgan To me that's a clear ethical argument right there - there aren't very many LGBT roles on TV or film. Until out LGBT actors are more able to act in straight roles (and lets be clear, there are a number who do so who are not out) then at least they should be able to play gay roles

@GMB @piersmorgan The second question is whether or not straight actors are able to 'play gay'. The truth is in theory absolutely yes, but in practice often no. Even in the 21st Century gay and lesbian kids still grow up feeling different, they have particular experiences with their families...

@GMB @piersmorgan ... they have particular experiences coming out to friends and work colleagues, they most often find relationships in different ways, they're more conscious of being attacked on the streets and how they express their feelings for one another...

@GMB @piersmorgan ... their careers and life paths are often different, they're often forming different kinds of support bubbles, they're presented with different challenges. These things are often simply invisible or not understood by straight people.

@GMB @piersmorgan Many straight people have a fairly limited amount of contact with these elements of gay culture. They meet the most confident or out gay people. Their insight into gay culture is its most flamboyant or visible bits. And—of course—it's heavily biased by TV/film depictions.

@GMB @piersmorgan This is what Russell T Davies means when he talks about how straight actors often resort to 'codes', or effectively stereotypes or symbols, when displaying gay characters. Thirty years ago those were things like limp wrists and camp and effeminate behavior.

@GMB @piersmorgan Twenty years ago, it was (for men) stereotypes of being a woman's best friend, often very attractive, who loved fashion and was a bit dry or arch.

@GMB @piersmorgan Straight actors and production teams *often* lean on these kinds of tropes to make it clear to their audiences that the character is gay. But they're not actually honest portrayals of gay people, any more than talking about fried chicken would make a black character 'authentic'

@GMB @piersmorgan There are *obviously* exceptions. There are some extraordinarily good depictions of LGBT characters by straight actors across TV and film. But they are *uncommon* and massively overwhelmed by bad ones.

@GMB @piersmorgan So there's your argument #2 - while straight people are obviously capable of playing gay, the majority of performances by straight people of LGBT characters are bad and misrepresent LGBT life and culture.

@GMB @piersmorgan If you want to improve that situation, particularly given that many of the writers and production teams that make TV and film are *also* straight, the importance of aiming to have gay people play gay roles should seem self evident. The work will simply be more real.

@GMB @piersmorgan The third point comes down to this question - if straight people shouldn't play gay characters, then surely it's only fair to say gay characters shouldn't play straight?

@GMB @piersmorgan The basis of this position is that the experiences of gay actors and straight actors - gay people and straight people - are symmetrical. And this is one of the biggest fallacies I see in all arguments that concern people who are members of minority groups.

@GMB @piersmorgan But things are *not* symmetrical. Let me give you a very simple example to try and explain. Many straight people meet their partners through work. Most gay people do not. Why is this the case?

@GMB @piersmorgan There are a couple of very obvious answers. The first is that a small proportion of people identify as LGBT. For the sake of simple maths let's say one in fifty.

@GMB @piersmorgan That means a straight person who goes to an office containing fifty people will likely meet around 24 people of the opposite sex who are heterosexual. A gay person who goes to the same office will most likely meet no other gay people.

@GMB @piersmorgan Secondly, because the general assumption is that people are straight and there remains stigma associated with being gay (or at least work involved in it if you find yourself having to be continually coming out to your colleagues and explaining what it's like to be gay)...

@GMB @piersmorgan ... then the straight people will just assume other people around them are straight and can act accordingly, while the gay people will not assume any of the people around them are gay and may not communicate that they are gay at all.

@GMB @piersmorgan This very simple asymmetry means that for gay people to meet other gay people to date, they have to make special efforts to find places with lots of gay people. As a result, gay people need gay clubs and gay bars, while 'straight bars' or 'straight clubs' would be exclusionary.

@GMB @piersmorgan A position based on saying gay and straight life is 'symmetrical' might argue that you shouldn't have 'gay bars' if you can't have 'straight bars'. But because gay and straight lives are not symmetrical, there's a clear need for 'gay bars' where there isn't for 'straight bars'

@GMB @piersmorgan So how does this apply to our final question? Can (or should) gay actors play straight roles? Well, firstly, there are many many straight roles and very few gay roles. And straight actors have not generally been excluded from playing gay roles, while the opposite is not true.

@GMB @piersmorgan Meanwhile while straight actors do not generally grow up or live in (or understand) predominantly gay environments all their lives, gay actors *do* grow up in and live in and understand predominantly straight environments.

@GMB @piersmorgan It's not perfect. There are going to be parts of straight people's lived experiences that gay people are not going to have as much grasp upon. But they are likely to be able to do a better job. Moreover the consequences of a stereotypical performance is much less.

@GMB @piersmorgan There are many many more straight characters in theatre, tv and film than gay characters. And straight people generally experience considerably less negative stereotyping. So a single flawed performance is much less likely to hurt people's general understanding of straight people

@GMB @piersmorgan So let me bring this last argument together then as simply as I can - while it might seem obvious to argue that if straight people shouldn't play gay, gay people shouldn't play straight, the truth is more complex...

@GMB @piersmorgan ... because as a general rule of thumb, at this moment in time, because of a lack of exposure, stereotyping and asymmetries between the two groups, the effects of gay people playing straight are much less negative for straight people than straight people playing gay are for gay.

@GMB @piersmorgan I'm assuming almost no one has read this far, but if you have I hope I've managed to make it clear that Davies' arguments—while they may be presented simplistically—are not self-evidently wrong or hypocritical.

@GMB @piersmorgan It is not unreasonable to argue that while out gay people are not given access to many leading straight roles that they should at least be able to play gay ones.

@GMB @piersmorgan It is not unreasonable to argue that gay people are more likely to play non-stereotypical gay characters than straight people, who often don't have a deep understanding of what it's like to be gay and may lean on tropes.

@GMB @piersmorgan And it is not unreasonable to argue that gay people often have a better understanding of straight people than vice versa, or that any clumsy portrayals of straight people by gay people are much less likely to cause harm than vice versa.