Disability.TV - Ep. 27 Seinfeld, Part One - August 3, 2015

Transcript

[MUSIC]

But isn't what a man says more important than how, long he takes to say it.

>> What you see is a dwarf. I'd been born a peasant, they might have left me out in the woods to die.

[MUSIC]

>> You really a cripple?
>> You tell me.
>> You idiot. I'm Joey Lucas. [MUSIC]

>> Sarah Dumster of British news magazine The Guardian explained Seinfeld. Expertly plotted and beautifully written, Seinfeld was above all a celebration of juvenility. A pay on to the sense of community that can arise when a group of wholly irresponsible inadequates, bonds over shared scorn for or loathing of the outside world.

No hugging no learning was Larry David's mantra. Yet the pageantic escapades and cartoonish peripheral characters ensured that the cynicism was balanced by a winning sense of innocence. I'm Andrew Palrang and this is disability.tv. The podcast that looks at how disability themes and disabled characters are portrayed on television.

In this episode, Seinfeld. It's been called the show about nothing. And I'm not going to try to convince you that it's a show about disability either because it's not. Still, Seinfeld does some very interesting things with disability in the course of its 9 seasons, 180 episodes from 1989 to 1998.

By interesting, I mean cringe-inducing and sometimes offensive, but also satirical and subversive. There's stuff going on here with the shows occasional disabled characters and disability themed bits that I'm pretty sure neither the writers nor the actors were even aware of. So in honor of Seinfield's addition to the Hulu.com streaming line up.

I decided to re watch all of the disability themed episodes I could think. And I came up with eight in all. See if any of these ring a bell to you. Elaine breaks up with Owen Marsh. Over a nice bowl of Yankee bean. Crazy Joe Devola's weird vendetta against Jerry.

George and Susan play Trivial Pursuit with the bubble boy. Kramer talks George into parking in the handicapped spot. Mickey Abbotts' ill-advised attempt at heightening. Jerry dates a deaf US Open lineswoman, who looks a lot like Marlee Matlin. Kramer sings with a velvet fog at a disability charity benefit.

And of course George fakes a disability to get a job at Play Now. I think the best way to go about this is to look at each of these eight moments in broadcast order. I'll play some sound clips. Give a short summary of what happens on the show.

And then describe what I think might be going on. And what I think it means from a disability standpoint. I'll also pose some questions that I hope listeners will answer in comments and in emails. [NOISE] .

>> If you have feedback about this podcast, feel free to comment at the Disability Thinking Blog at disabilitythinking.blogspot.com.

You can also send comments by Twitter and Facebook or by emailing to apulrang@icloud.com written comments may be shared at upcoming podcasts.

>> We begin with the story of Owen Marsh, who likes Yankee Bean.
>> It's good isn't it?

>> [LAUGHTER]

>> Yankee Bean. Why Yankee bean huh? Don't they have beans in the south. [LAUGH] I mean if you order Yankee bean in the south are they offended? [LAUGH]

>> Yankee bean. Yankee bean. I like my Yankee bean. Don't get me wrong. I like coming here and feeding you and cleaning a little and paying your bills. That's good stuff. Good stuff. [LAUGH] I have a wonderful time when I'm with you, wonderful.

But at this point in my life, I'm not really sure that I'm ready to make a commitment to one person. I'm just not really sure that we have enough in common. I mean, for example, I like running in the park, bicycling, roller skating, tennis and skiing and well I'm going to be brutally honest with you you know.

>> [LAUGH]

>> It's a bitch to get here.

>> [LAUGH]

>> It's two subways. I had to transfer at 42nd street to take the double R. Anyway this doesn't mean we can't be friends.

>> [LAUGH]

>> Those were clips from season 3, episode 11, The Alternate Side. By my reckoning, it's Seinfeld's first episode depicting some kind of disability.

The main story is about George taking over a car parking business while the owner's on vacation. But our focus here is on the bee story. Elaine dates an older man, an author named Owen Marsh. Eventually, she decides to break up with him, but before she can actually say the words, he has a stroke.

For some reason, Elaine drags Owen over to Jerry's apartment. And she, Jerry and Kramer try various ridiculous first-aid techniques while they wait for the ambulance. Later, Elaine feeds Owen yankee bean soup because he's now in a wheelchair and seemingly can't speak or feed himself. Awkwardly Elaine breaks up with Owen.

After a whole lot of dishonest hemming and hawing. At the end we hear form Elaine that Owen has mostly recovered. And apparently gave her quite an earful about his view of the breakup. So this is not an uplifting portrayal of a man in a wheelchair. But is it shameful?

Is it harmful, or is there something worthwhile here? Take Elaine's Yankee Bean song. It's clearly humiliating for Owen the character, but for me at least the scene also works as a satire of the condescension disabled people run into every day. Owen is a renowned accomplished author. But as soon as he's in a wheelchair, Elaine literally talks to him like he's a baby.

It made me mad to see it. And yet, it's a kind of behavior I recognize and calling attention to this

might be a good thing. On the other hand, Owen appears more helpless and pitiful than he needs to be. For one thing, he literally has no voice or even a point of view.

That's a creative choice, it's not a necessary part of the story. By not giving Owen any lines, by robbing him of a voice or even a personality, the writers have made him a helpless object of pity. He's exactly the kind of disabled character that keeps people thinking that using a wheelchair is horrible and humiliating.

Now apparently, this episode is one of the few that Jerry Seinfeld himself has said makes him uncomfortable. That's according to Matt and Vinny of these sign cast pod cast. A fantastic pod cast by the way, in which the two guys are going through every episode of Seinfeld in order.

Playing clips and making comments, doing some pretty in-depth behind the scenes research too. In fact, let me play you a clip of the podcast about this episode.

>> The reason I'm so interested in why this is his least favorite episode is because this is personally one of my favorite episodes.

This episode is one of the Seinfeld episodes that got me into the show. >> Yeah.

>> This episode and The Boyfriend, actually, which we'll be covering in a couple of weeks, those two episodes, regardless of what most people think of them, just have, like a special place in my heart.

To the point that it's kind of hard for me to be critical of them, because I just like them so much. But reading Jerry's comments, and actually, we have a clip here of him saying why he doesn't like this episode.

>> Yeah.
>> What was your least favorite Seinfeld episode?

>> I still have trouble there was one where a guy had a stroke and we we're feeding him on the couch. And it was an older guy and we we're feeding him on the couch and I felt very uncomfortable with that episode.

>> I don't remember that.
>> Yeah it was weird, the guy he was in a wheel chair and it was uncomfortable.

>> All right.

>> So thoughts?

>> I don't buy it.

>> You don't buy that? You don't think he hates that episode?

>> No no no no I get that he doesn't like it but, like you said, it's still a great episode. And the awkwardness, the uncomfortable feelings that he had make for it being a very funny scene.

>> Right.

>> I've got to say though, we haven't even got to into the episode yet but when Elaine is feeding him in his wheelchair post stroke? That's a little, that's a little real, you know?

>> And, this brings up an important point that I think we need to come to terms with, right now, if we're going to assess how Seinfeld handles disability.

A big part of Seinfeld's success is that a pioneered in mainstreamed cringe comedy. The characters are supposed to do morally questionable things. They're supposed to violate social norms. Despite appearing to be normal,

functional adults on the surface they're supposed to be selfish and selectively ignorant. Being awful is the point.

Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer are almost never meant to be examples of how people should behave. At best, their awfulness is familiar enough to be relatable, but it's never admirable. And the off things they do are supposed to be funny because of how awful and embarrassing they are.

So when I say I have a problem with how disability is depicted on Seinfeld. It's generally not because

of how the characters behave towards disabled people or what they believe about disability. It's more often how the show's writers and directors choose to depict disabled characters. And because sometimes, I don't think they realize the messages that they're sending.

If I'm supposed to wince that's fine. But if I wince and cringe where it's not intended and for the wrong reasons, that's a problem. Also, let's at least acknowledge that for some viewers, especially some disabled viewers, it doesn't matter if it's satire or some sort of reverse psychology where no we're actually criticizing this behavior not endorsing it.

Some depictions and scenes of disability and treatment of disabled people are just too painful to watch. So if you're going to show a man looking vulnerable and helpless in a wheel chair you better have a good reason for it. So who is the butt of the joke in the Owen Marsh story, is it Owen or Elaine?

Do you think most viewers get the satire? Or do they just laugh at the cripple and feel bad for Elaine being stuck with him. Is this daring, innovative comedy? Or is it just gross? Next, we have a series on run ins with crazy Joe Davola.

>> Oh gosh, Joe Davola.

>> Who?
>> Its this guys a rider, he's a total nut. I think he goes to the same shrink as Elaine. >> [LAUGHTER]
>> Oh god, he saw me.
>> Hello Jerry.
>> Hey Joe, how are you doing?
>> You're under no obligation to shake my hand.
>> [LAUGH]

>> That's my friend George. You look good. >> Why shouldn't I look good?
>> [LAUGH]
>> You do karate, right?

>> You want to hit me?

>> [LAUGH]

>> I didn't do anything.

>> You dropped the script off.

>> No good for you. [LAUGH] Well.

>> You don't have to say anything.

>> No. I guess I'll see you Sunday night. >> What?
>> Kramer's party.
>> Kramer's having a party?

>> No. No. [LAUGH]

>> He's doing something. I don't what it is. It's nothing. He's not doing anything.

>> Gee I thought Kramer and I were very close friends. >> No I'm sure you are.

I'm sure you're very close friends. Very close. [LAUGH] Give my best to Hinkley. [LAUGH] Jerry, Jerry Davola, you have a hair on my tongue. [LAUGH] [LAUGH] Kramer what are you going to do, did you hear that? That guy is going to pull a gun out by the time, he's crazy [CROSSTALK]

>> Steady, now calm yourself! Come on get a hold of yourself.

>> Whatever he's suppose to be on medication, you don't understand, he told me he was getting medication without new medication!

>> Quiet, quiet! Now let me think.

>> I'm going to call the cops. That's what I'm doing.

I'm calling the cops.

>> The cops, what are you calling the cops for? They're not going to do anything.

>> What do you mean they're not going to do anything? They're the cops. They got to do something. [INAUDIBLE] [LAUGH]

>> [INAUDIBLE]

>> It's a terrible mistake. He thinks I ruined some deal of his at NBC.

I don't know anything about any deal at NBC.

>> Call him and tell him that. They're not getting that.

>> Those were clips from a multi episode season 4 arc. Specifically in episodes 3, 8 and 22. It all starts with a chance encounter. While meeting about their sitcom project at NBC Jerry and George run into another TV writer that Jerry refers to as crazy Joe Davola.

He and Jerry have this tense, awkward conversation as Joe appears to be either a bit zoned out or just socially awkward. Jerry continues to have run-ins and misunderstandings with Joe. Over the next several episodes. Each time ratcheting up Joe's unexplained hostility to Jerry. And Jerry's fear that this crazy man will hurt him.

If fact, Joe does leave a threatening message on Jerry's answering machine and Jerry freaks out about it. Meanwhile Joe is dating Elaine. Who has no idea that her new boyfriend Joey is actually Jerry's would be nemesis. Finally Joe leaps out at the audience at Jerry during the taping of his sitcom pilot yelling, Sic semper tyarranis.

Which is what John Wilkes Booth supposedly shouted after shooting President Lincoln. This might be the most straightforwardly ablest story of the series. But also the one least likely to seem that way to most viewers, who are not tuned in to the prevalence and impact of mental illness stigma.

Crazy people are a traditional, heavily leaned on staple of comedy. Mental illness has been a seemingly harmless way to single out people who don't fit in. Worse, it's a short-hand for danger. The crazy Joe Davola arc goes further, suggesting that weird is the same thing as crazy, which is the same thing as dangerous.

Joe Davola turns out to be genuinely mentally ill. But at first he just seems socially awkward. Also it's taken for granted that mentally ill people that

aren't on their medications are dangerous. Despite being comedic this story perpetuates the most harmful stereotype of mental illness. That mentally ill people are scary and dangerous.

Plus people with any kind of odd awkward social demeanor can be easily dismissed as simply crazy. So my questions. Is crazy Joe Davola and his especially harmful depiction of mental illness? Or is it a pretty standard kind of joke for a 90s sitcom? Would it still be considered harmlessly funny today?

Is it always offensive to base comedy on someone being crazy? And would this story have been just as funny and effective if Joe Davola had been depicted as simply weird and inexplicably hostile instead of mentally ill. Next up, the bubble boy.

>> I was watching a show with my son, Donald.

He's got this rare immune deficiency in his blood. Damn this thing. Doctors say he has to live in a plastic bubble. Can you imagine that? A bubble.

>> A bubble?

>> A bubble?

>> Yes, a bubble. [LAUGH] Do you mind ma'am?

>> Oh, sure. [LAUGH]

>> I'd break your heart seeing him in there.

He's like a prisoner. No friends. Just his mother and me. I'm up to six days a week on Yoo-hoo. [LAUGH] We have sacrificed everything, all for the sake of our little bubble boy. [LAUGH]

>> Excuse me.

>> Oh, here. [LAUGH]

>> Would you like to meet him.

>> Oh, well.

You know.

>> He loves games. Maybe you could play Trivial Pursuit with him.

>> Hey mom, what the hell do I got to do to get some food around here? I'm starving. [INAUDIBLE] I shove it in your face.

>> [LAUGH] [MUSIC]

This is Donald. >> Hi.

>> Hello.

>> Who are you? Where's Seinfeld?

>> He's on his way. These are his friends.

>> You looking at. Ever seen a kid in a bubble before? [LAUGH]

>> Course I have. Come on. My cousin's in a bubble. [LAUGH] My friend Jeffrey's sister also.

Bubble, you know. I have a lot of bubble experience. >> What's your story? >> I have no story.

>> She works for NBC.

>> How about taking your top off? >> [LAUGH]
>> Donald, behave yourself.
>> Come on.

>> The season four episode six story of the bubble boy is actually one of the most memorable Seinfeld episodes.

It starts out when Jerry and Elaine meet a Yoohoo delivery driver who tells him about his son Donald who is a bubble boy. That is that he lives in a plastic sealed off room because of an immune deficiency. He asks Jerry to visit Donald. Who is a big fan of Jerry's comedy.

George and Susan are supposed meetup with Jerry Nuwane at the bubble boy's house. Get there first instead, and after some awkward conversation with the parents, go into meet the bubble boy themselves. Donald, who is always offscreen, turns out to be an irascible, vulgar, selfish man. Not a sweet, grateful, sympathetic child.

After more tense, embarrassing conversation and an ill fated game of trivial pursuit, George ends up grappling with Donald through the divider and accidentally punctures the bubble. They flee, along with Jerry and Elaine, as the ambulance takes Donald away while he continues to rave away at George. Maybe I'm off base here.

But this to me reads like a pretty effective satires of what we call inspiration porn. The pop culture trend of portraying sick or disabled people. Most often kids as sweet and saintly. Generating feelings of sympathy and altruism in everyone around them. Donald is the antithesis of this. He's rude, vulgar, spoiled and dictatorial.

Despite this, pretty much everyone treats him like a brave little soldier. The only real negative in this story is the suggestion that disabled kids hold their parents hostage to their needs. A stereotype that gets pulled quiet out a lot in real life situations when people debate how much to help and accommodate disabled children.

But overall I feel like the writers are consciously making fun of sentimental pop culture disability tropes, and non-disabled people's taboos around disability, more than they're making fun of disabled people themselves. Donald is an appalling person but kind of refreshing as a disabled character precisely because he doesn't fit the sweet disabled person stereotype.

Even though most people treat him nicely, it's just as distancing as treating him poorly would be. It doesn't matter that the Bubble Boy is an obnoxious jerk because in a way, he's not a real person to the people around him. Even as parents. He's like an icon or a pet.

Unusually for a sitcom, Seinfeld seems to be pointing out the absurdity of this. My first question is was it an effective strategy to not show the bubble boy? Also did this read as a satire to you or is the Bubble Boy actually just a straightforward disabled villain stereotype?

Number 4 in our lineup we have two disability stories in one episode. >> There's no spaces here. Excuse me are you getting out?
>> No.
>> Why don't you take the handicapped spot? You think?

>> No, No, we'll find a space, there's spaces in the other lot. >> Well I don't want to walk that far.
>> What if a handicap person needs it?
>> Oh come on they don't drive.

>> Yes they do. [LAUGH]

>> Have you ever seen A handicap person can pull into a space and park.
>> Well, there are spaces there, they must drive.

>> No they don't, if they could drive, they wouldn't be handicapped.

>> [LAUGH]

>> So if you can drive you're not handicapped.

>> We're not gonna be that long anyway, we got to get to the party.

>> I got news for you, handicapped people, they don't even want to park there. They want to be treated just like everybody else.

That's why those spaces are always empty.

>> He's right. It's the same thing with the feminists. They want everything to be equal, everything. But when the check comes, where are they?

>> [LAUGH]

>> What's that mean? >> Yeah.

>> [LAUGH]

>> All right, I'm pulling in. >> Go ahead.

>> George!
>> Oh come on, it's five minutes. [NOISE]
>> I just came from Saint Elizabeth's.
>> Saint Elizabeth's Hospital? Why?
>> Well, the handicap woman, I went to see her. >> You went to see her?

>> Yeah.
>> Wow. What happened?
>> I'm in love.

>> [LAUGH]

>> What?

>> Yeah. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I love her, Jerry. I mean I really love her. I'm gonna ask her to marry me. She's got everything I've always wanted in another human being. Except for the walking.

>> Oh, what's the difference? You don't go out that much. >> [LAUGH]

>> In season 4 episode 21 called the Handicap Spot, it once again casts our gang in the role of the disability rights villains. And pretty accurate villains, whose misconceptions about disability closely mirror what a lot of people believe in real life.

Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer go to the mall. Unable to find a good parking space, Kramer tells George to park in a handicap spot. George hesitates but Kramer explains that quote, handicap people don't drive, unquote. And anyway, handicap people don't want to use handicap spots because they want to be treated the same as everyone else.

And that's why the spots are always empty. George piles on saying feminists are just the same. Something about women wanting equality but never paying restaurant checks or some such thing. They take the handicap spot and come back later to discover a mob surrounding the car, angry that a women in a wheelchair crashed because the spot had been taken.

They go away and come back later only to find the car completely trashed. The next day, Kramer comes back to the apartment from visiting the injured woman in the hospital declaring she's beautiful and he's in love with her. He pressures the gang into buying her a used replacement wheelchair sold by a man, by the way, who looks and sounds a lot like a used car salesman.

Of course, the cheap wheelchair goes haywire too. And the woman breaks up with Kramer, declaring him to be a hipster doofus. By the way, we only get to see this woman once with no dialogue at all. Just screaming while her wheelchair runs out of control. As a sort of bonus, we get a small look at traditional disability charity as George's father arranges for his charity to get the woman a big screen TV, as if that compensates for her lack of a wheelchair.

We'll see a more in-depth look at old-fashioned disability charity later on. So there are really two disability stories going on here. In the first we get some very clear and accurate statements representing the most common forms of what I'll call ablest logic. The rationales people use to argue why their attitudes towards disabled people and disability issues are actually more logical than the views that are considered progressive.

Kramer demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of what disability even means. And twice, George goes on a rant about why he perceives to be all the perks and privileges that disabled people supposedly enjoy, at his expense of course. In a follow up, Kramer falls in love with the woman in a wheelchair who is injured because they park the car in the handicap spot.

Superficially it's kind of cool, because here Kramer is instantly smitten by her and this breaks the common stereotype that disabled people don't have love stories. Kramer's not being charitable either. He's in love with her because she's gorgeous, not because he feels sorry for her. But yet again the writers decide to never let us hear her speak or even introduce her as a person.

And this ruins an otherwise promising story. Even though we get a little bit of satisfaction out of the woman kicking Kramer to the curb, we hear it secondhand. It's offscreen, and all tell and no show. Like Owen Marsh before her, she's not a character, she's a prop. I really wish we'd got to know the woman.

So does Kramer and George's twisted logic about handicap parking seem realistic to you as something people are actually likely to say in real life? Or is it over the top? What about how the mob reacts to the parking violation? Are ordinary people that zealous in defending accessible parking?

Also, what might the writers have done to make Kramer's affair with the woman in the wheelchair more interesting? [SOUND]

>> The easiest way to hear all of the disability.tv podcasts is to subscribe using iTunes or Stitcher. Just search for disability.tv or click the iTunes or Stitcher links in the show notes or at the disability thinking blog.

While you're in iTunes, don't forget to leave a podcast review. Good listener reviews help other listeners find the podcast. Don't miss an episode. Subscribe now. [NOISE] .

>> As I promised in the last episode of the podcast, I'm going to keep each episode short from now on. So stay tuned for part two of our look at disability on Seinfeld coming up in two weeks.

In the meantime, send me your comments on what we've talked about so far. I'm anxious to hear your take on these episodes. Until we meet again keep watching, keep listening and don't lose that remote. Join me again in two weeks for the next episode of disability.tv.

[MUSIC]