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More Than a Disability

The comedic actor Adam Sandler starred in his own movie *The Waterboy*. In this movie he portrays a character with a disability. This character Bobby Boucher stutters, is socially awkward and appears to have Asperger's syndrome. Adam Sandler, like many others decided to take on a roll of a disabled person though, he is an abled-bodied actor. Many have critiqued Sandler on this movie because it appears that he chose an easy target such as a disabled person to make a comedy movie about. The message behind this movie shows that just because someone is disabled, it does not mean that they are incapable of doing great things.

The movie begins with a scene, where Bobby is at one of the football practices at the University of Louisiana, which is the first team he was the water boy for. Within the first few minutes of the movie, you first see that Bobby has a disability and you also see how his "teammates" treat him. Bobby's teammates, as well as his coach, make fun of him with harsh words and physical confrontation. From this first scene, it is evident that there are a few disability stereotypes that Sandler decided to incorporate into his character.

One of the stereotypes implied in this first scene of *The Waterboy*, would be pitiable and pathetic. Bobby does nothing when his teammates taunt him, or when his coach belittles because they see him as an easy target. Another stereotype you see in this first scene is that Bobby is the butt of jokes. Not only are the actual characters in the movie making fun of him, but this is a part in the movie that is supposed to get the audience to laugh along as well. Adam Sandler found a

common disability to make a comedy out of because most people may know someone with a stutter, and people usually make fun of someone with a stutter. This was an easy outlet for Sandler to get a laugh out of an audience without trying too hard, because it is easy for an abled-bodied person to mimic a person with a stuttering disability. In the *Visualization of the Twisted Tongue*, Jeffrey K. Johnson, a writer from Michigan State University clarifies that there is more to stuttering than what most people initially believe. Johnson explains “Stuttering is frequently used as visual shorthand to communicate humor, nervousness, weakness, or unheroic/villainous characters.” This describes how most people view someone with a stutter and how they are often portrayed in movies or tv shows. I agree that mainstream media does not represent someone with a stutter properly because my experience confirms it. When I was in elementary school one of my classmates had a stutter, but it was completely different from the way it was depicted in the movie. The body language of Bobby was different from the kid in my class and also, I have seen someone who stutters in real life and the acting was not good enough to convince me that his character actually had a stutter. I also agree that movie writers and actors need to do more research when taking on a role of someone with a disability, a point that needs emphasizing since so many people believe that disabled people are one dimensional.

Further along into the movie is when Bobby Boucher’s mother played by Kathy Bates is first introduced. Her character is devoted, defensive, and completely irrational. Though Bobby is a grown thirty-one-year-old man his mother still treats him like a child who is defenseless. When Bobby comes home and tells his mother he has bad news, she picks up a butcher knife and demands that he tells her what has happened. Early on in the movie you see that Boucher is a victim of bullying when his teammates make fun of him, which is how movies typically cast an abled-bodied actor or actress who represents a disabled person. By focusing on the humorous

aspect of this movie Adam Sandler overlooks the profound problem that many people with disabilities in fact get bullied, and it seems insensitive to make jokes about the situation. Later in the conversation Bobby has with his mother, he expresses to her how he wants to be the water boy for the team. She responds by saying “Bobby, you don’t have what they call ‘the social skills’ people don’t understand you. That’s why you don’t have any friends except for your mama.”

Within this line it is evident that his mother sees him as an outcast and a burden. This scene in the movie displays two main stereotypes that you would ordinarily see in a movie, and it makes this disabled character seem simplistic. In the article *Revisiting "The Waterboy," Adam Sandler's Least Bad Football Movie*, Tom Keiser, a writer for Vice Sports writes about the approach Sandler made when making fun of a disabled character. Keiser emphasizes “a huge issue with Adam Sandler’s movies, especially as we (warily) approach the release of *The Ridiculous Six*, is that these movies imply that we can make fun of minorities, people with disabilities etc. all we want, so long as it comes with the increasingly off hand message that They’re People Too.”

Keiser’s idea that these movies appears that it is socially acceptable to make fun of minorities or someone with a disability is useful because it sheds insight on the difficult problem of how others are unfairly treated. While watching this movie I caught myself laughing at some cruel things that would not be morally acceptable if it was said in real life to someone with a disability. Many viewers of this movie probably found themselves doing the same thing and that is not okay, movies about someone with a disability should show their capabilities and not just them being the target of harassment.

Towards the end of *The Waterboy* all the characters who once had made fun of Bobby now have become his friends. This shows the stereotype “super-crip” because in the end he overcame all the adversities of being bullied and is now a hero of the entire bayou of south

Louisiana. Sandler gave this disabled character a plain, typical story line that viewers have seen a thousand times, with no real feelings involved. This is a common mistake that most people make when they think of a disabled person, which is that they are not dynamic, but are just simple and seen as one specific thing. The article *The Waterboy Movie Review & Film Summary*, film critic Robert Ebert reiterates that movies do not represent disabled people well enough. Ebert claims that “The Waterboy tries to force this character into the ancient movie mold of the misunderstood simple little guy with a heart of gold. By the end of the movie we are supposed to like him.” I agree that the way disabled people are seen in the media needs emphasizing, because many people do not see what disabled people are like they just see what actors put out there. There are many different aspects to this character that Adam Sandler could have altered to make the movie more heartfelt while at the same time being amusing.

Overall this movie was very funny at times but could improve on many parts. Sandler did just like many other writers and directors, he cast an easy person to play the role of a disabled person instead of taking the time to find someone who has the disability and can act the part as well. This is another main problem in media that needs to be assessed. While the evolution of mainstream media has been great it will hopefully continue to improve on casting the right actresses and actors in the role of a disabled person.

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