

York Region resident shines in AMI's 'Breaking Character'

A King native is using his talents to spread awareness.

And he doesn't mind if you laugh at him.

AMI's Breaking Character explores disability representation through the eyes of six performers with disabilities.

And one of them is Nobleton native Dan Barra-Berger, a legally blind comedian.

Dan, a stand-up comic who is partially sighted, made the long list of CBC's Next Up competition series. Now he just needs to become a regular on the comedy club circuit.

Though humour is at the core of everything he does, so is storytelling. With the support of his partner, Michelle, Dan is on a path to combining those talents to make people laugh, subvert their expectations and advocate for a more accessible world.

He's been doing stand-up on-and-off since late 2017 when he attended the Second City Training Centre.

'It's something I'd wanted to get into for a very long time, but didn't have the drive, time, or opportunity. Comedy has opened up a lot of doors for me, leading to speaking lines on TV shows (I'm on Apple TV's SEE, for example), commercial work, and now, Breaking Character. And beyond that, who knows?'

He admits making people laugh is a bit self-serving.

'I mean I know they're more at ease when they're laughing, and maybe in that, they're less focused on my disability. And also, when I'm on stage and talk about disability, I know some of the crowd's laughter comes from their discomfort - which is good! They have to consider why they're laughing, and I can use that opportunity to teach and, hopefully, change their misconceptions about blindness.'

After losing his vision in 2009, he spent a few years in 'recovery' and went through a divorce in 2012. He then went travelling.

'I backpacked solo across Europe, armed with just my white cane, and over those eight months I relearned how to do everything for myself. I also learned how to tell my entire vision-loss story in a succinct two-minute 'Coles Notes' version. I began to play with how I told that story, and began to realize people were attentive, they laughed when I knew they'd laugh, they'd ask questions and I'd have answers.

'So, I guess I'd say losing my vision led me indirectly into doing comedy, and having had what I'd call my toughest gigs - explaining to a group of inebriated backpackers about something as heavy as my disability, I doubt I'll find many stages more intimidating.

'That's not to say it doesn't scare me every time, going on stage. But I believe that nothing's worth doing if it doesn't scare you, even just a little bit, since you learn something about yourself every time. If it's easy or not scary, you're probably doing something wrong.'

Throughout Breaking Character, Dan tries to defy expectations.

'I think that's something all six of us featured in it do. The truth of the matter is we are not represented well in any media form, and while that's changing, it's a slow process.

?Sighted people have played blind roles for decades, even though there are talented blind actors at the ready. The same goes for wheelchair users, neurodivergent people, people in the deaf community, and any number of other disabilities and differences ? they've all been portrayed, often incorrectly or as the butt of jokes, by able-bodied people.?

What Breaking Character hopefully shows is that they're more than capable of doing the work, and with the lived experience, they give an authentic representation of the role and not just a script-writer's idea of it.

?Also too, we try to show that our disabilities shouldn't be our raison d'etre, that we be included in film and television not because our disability is a plot point. That's a more realistic portrayal of real life, and film, theatre, TV, modelling, and comedy have a long way to go to truly understand inclusion.

?Breaking Character does a great job of showing that, yeah, we're here, ready and willing to work hard. We know it's an uphill battle, but we're getting there. And lucky for the casting directors out there, I know at least six people who can fill any role perfectly.?

In the past decade, less than three percent of films featured a character with a disability.

And, often, these rarest of roles have been taken by neuro-typical and able-bodied actors.

But the industry is at a tipping point as it feels the push for a more inclusive representation.

Major broadcasters have committed to auditioning actors with disabilities. Advertisers are creating campaigns that reflect disabilities in a relatable manner while promoting their products. Those leading the fight aren't just the ones in front of the camera but the people representing them.

Breaking Character is a candid 10-part documentary series capturing the journey these mold-breaking performers make as they navigate the fast-paced and sometimes cutthroat entertainment industry in Hollywood North. Each episode delves into the performers' daily lives and takes us behind the scenes as they go through the audition process, hone their craft, eagerly await news of whether they got the gig, and adapt to the pressures of life in the business.

?Representing the interests, concerns and values of persons with disabilities through accessible media, reflection and portrayal is at the core of AMI's vision,? said John Melville, Vice-President, Content Development & Programming, AMI-audio/AMI-tv. ?We hope that Breaking Character will further the conversation and lead to true diversity on the stage and screen.?

Other performers include Alexia Vassos, Caeden Lawrence, Tai Young, Catherine Joell McKinnon, Rachel Romu.

Season One of Breaking Character features Integrated Described Video (IDV) making it accessible to individuals who are blind or partially sighted. Breaking Character was filmed under strict local COVID-19 protocols.

Episodes can be streamed on demand on [AMI.ca](#) and the AMI-tv App for Apple and Android.

For more, visit www.ami.ca/breaking-character/episodes.

By Mark Pavilons