>> Scott Jones: Hi everyone, I'm Scott Jones. I'm a baby filmmaker and consultant and I'm happy to moderate today's conversation: the making of "Queer As Folk." I am a cis white man, I am wearing a green shirt, and a -- brown top hat, and I have a beard and a beautiful smile that is grinning from ear to ear, because I'm very excited to be here with these three fine folks. I just want to say that if you hear any clacking, it's not my nails against the table, it's my service dog Nemo walking around the space. So for this webinar, we have an ASL interpreter and a captionist who is a real person, not a robot. To view these captions, there is a button at the bottom you can click on for the live transcript. In addition, you can view the live captions in a separate window if that is more accessible to you. Please check out the link in the chat to do so. Throughout the webinar, when we mention links, they also will be provided in the chat. This webinar is being recorded, and a copy of the webinar will be uploaded to RespectAbility's website by the end of the week. Before we kick off the panel, I wanted to mention that today's conversation is hosted in partnership with NBCU LAUNCH, the umbrella brand that houses the comprehensive diversity, equity, and inclusion effort efforts across NBCU's television portfolio, which encompasses NBCU Television and Streaming, as well as Universal Studio Group. Among the NBCU LAUNCH talent development programs and initiatives are the landmark NBC TV writers program and NBCU LAUNCH TV directors, and Female Forward. I am very proud to have recently graduated from RespectAbility's Entertainment Lab and I'm so excited that this event is in partnership with NBCU LAUNCH and RespectAbility. If you don't know, RespectAbility is a diverse and disability led nonprofit that works to create systemic change in how society views and values people with disabilities. Comprised of diverse disabled people, RespectAbility's Entertainment and News Media team partners -- team partners with studios, production companies, writers rooms, and news organizations to create equitable and accessible opportunities to increase the number of people with lived disability experience throughout the overall storytelling process. These initiatives, including the award-winning RespectAbility Entertainment Lab, increased diverse and authentic representation of disabled people on screen, leading to systemic change in how society views and values people just like myself. So for today's conversation we will be hearing from the creator and cast of "Queer As Folk" on Peacock. I would -- I'm going to start by reading each panelist's bio, and then I'll ask each panelist to describe -- visually describe themselves. So I'll start with Stephen Dunn. He is a award-winning writer/director, who served as the showrunner of "Queer As Folk." He co-wrote and directed the Spirit award and GLAAD award-nominated episode "The Son," of the Apple TV series "Little America," and his debut feature which I am -- I love and obsessed with, "Closet Monster," had its world premiere at TIFF 2015, where it won the best Canadian Feature Award. Next is Andrew Gurza -- [crosstalk]

>> Stephen Dunn: I'll do this after, I'm disappearing now, bye.

>> Scott Jones: [laughter] You can interject any time, like, feel free. Andrew Gurza is an award-winning disability awareness consultant and the Chief Disability Officer and co-founder of Bump'n, a sex toy company for and by disabled people, which is so awesome. I'm so happy that that exists in the world. Andrew uses they/he pronouns and identifies proudly as disabled. Andrew has spoken all over the world on sex, disability and what it means to be a queer cripple, including several podcasts. He is also the host of disability after dark -- of "Disability After Dark: The Podcast," shining a bright light on disability stories, which won a Canadian podcast award in 2021. Yeah, Andrew, if you want to pop on too, feel free. If not, we can proceed. Ryan O'Connell is also here. He is an Emmy nominated and Writers Guild Award-winning writer, actor, and producer, who served as a writer for "Queer As Folk." He previously created and starred in the critically acclaimed "Special," a four-time Emmy-nominated and writer's guild award-winning short form series on Netflix, which he wrote and executive produced. O'Connell has also received a special recognition award from GLAAD, and a visibility award from the Human Rights Campaign. Before we go to questions, I'm going to ask each of our panelists to give a visual description. So let's start with -- because I see you right in front of me -- Andrew take it away.

>> Andrew Gurza: Hi, I'm a white non-binary cis identified person wearing a bright pink shirt, and I'm a wheelchair user with short brown hair.

>> Scott Jones: Thank you. Stephen?

>> Stephen Dunn: Hey, I am a white cisgendered man with a beard and a black hat, and I am also smiling ear to ear because I'm very excited to be here today.

>> Ryan O'Connell: Hi, I'm Ryan. I'm white, my face is 90 percent glasses, and my internalized ableism is wearing a Nike shirt.

>> Scott Jones: [chuckling] Awesome, thank you all. So yeah, welcome, thank you for being here. It's lovely to see you all. I'm just really excited because I loved the show, I loved your work, and I just I have a starting question for all of you, because there are a lot of aspiring and working producers, filmmakers, and creators here today. What kind of, like, led you to or brought you to storytelling -- and made you want to work in this industry? And anyone can take that, or I can choose, whichever --

>> Andrew Gurza: Pick one of us, we're all too nice.

>> Scott Jones: Okay, Ryan.

>> Stephen Dunn: I can start. I'm from Newfoundland, from St. John's. I always loved movies growing up, and I just wanted -- I got into storytelling, I think, because I just had some experiences in my life that I wanted to channel and just -- I wanted to put my experiences into something. I wanted to specifically work in the queer -- queer realm and -- tell stories from our community that I think don't often -- get to be told, and I guess that's how I found myself here.

>> Scott Jones: Awesome and I mean, that's quite incredible, considering -- yeah I'm calling in from St. John's right now.

>> Stephen Dunn: No!

>> Scott Jones: I am! St. John misses you, and Canada misses you, but I -- it's like -- the tip -- the easterly point of North America, you know, isolated on the rock, so it's pretty incredible to hear that. And -- we're just all so proud of you, so.

>> Stephen Dunn: So proud of you!

>> Scott Jones: Why? For this hat or this shirt? [laughs] Okay, I'll pass it off I guess to Andrew?

>> Andrew Gurza: Sure. You know, I've had to be a storyteller in order to be seen. And I think I never really wanted to -- to do this kind of work when I was coming up. I wanted to be a lawyer, I wanted to go into law and do, like, big courtroom stuff. And then the more and more ableist I realized our system was, I was like, oh, I have a story to tell. I have to tell my story. And then when I -- when I started entering into my queerness and trying to access that and realizing that I didn't -- wasn't given a place in that community, and wasn't even looked at as a viable sexual partner, as an option, I was like, okay, I have to tell the story and I have to use my experiences as a disabled person to share that. Because if I don't, I'm never going to be seen. So it really wasn't -- I never really wanted to do it, I was pushed into it, because I knew I had to, and I knew that if I didn't, I would be, you know, stuck in not being seen and not being understood and not being accepted by community. So I forged my own path this way because I didn't really feel like I had a choice. And that's kind of how I ended up here.

>> Scott Jones: Wow. And I must say, like, I know I -- I follow you on Instagra, as you know, and I think I share, like, so many, like, maybe every post you make --

>> Andrew Gurza: At least once a week! [crosstalk]

>> Scott Jones: You capture, like, the essence of, like, what we're all feeling and it's -- it's so beautifully said, and it's said in a way that is accessible, so thank you. All of your work. Thank you. Okay, Ryan?

>> Ryan O'Connell: Well, growing up I was always, like, a TV and film nerd. I mean I loved, like, Rocky movies and like, Parker Posey stuff, and all the indie films of the 90s. And I really thought, like, best case scenario would be, like, me writing for How I Met Your Mother or something. I never, like, thought that my work could be personal or be about, like, disability. So I mean, even when I started working in Hollywood, the business, it was like, disability had not entered the chat, like, at all. And so -- so yeah. It's sort of -- kind of -- I wouldn't say it happened by accident, but it's been a really interesting turn of events, because I never thought that I would be able to be given the space to talk about disability and write about disability, but now that they've given me permission, there's no turning back!

>> Scott Jones: [chuckles] Sorry. You were from, originally --

>> Ryan O'Connell: Sorry, I'm from Ventura, which is like this kind of, like, little blue-collar beach town near Santa Barbara/Ohi.

>> Scott Jones: Okay, nice.

>> Ryan O'Connell: The epicenter of culture.

>> Scott Jones: [laughs] Okay, so let's just launch right in with a few questions for each of you about developing "Queer As Folk." Stephen, just -- I guess in terms of you -- you went from independent filmmaking shorts to feature that, you know, wowed everyone -- I remember watching it and thinking, "this came from Atlantic Canada? This is amazing! We've never had anything like this," to directing an episode of Little America. And how did you set out to reimagine such a, like, beloved series following all of that?

>> Stephen Dunn: Wow, I don't even know. I've been clawing my way across the border, I guess, for a little while, trying to just -- like, it's -- I found it -- I found it always kind of hard to tell -- get the chance to tell, like, queer stories and in the way that I wanted. I never really saw myself represented even in a lot of queer storytelling sometimes, and I -- "Queer as Folk" was my first exposure to a queer community. When I was in Newfoundland at the time, like, there was -- there was -- god bless his soul, there was one queer person out in my high school. And it was just -- I always admired him, he was so brave because it was not a -- it did not feel like a safe space, like I was -- there was a lot of -- there's a lot of hate towards queer people. And in my community it's not really talked about a lot, but it created an environment that just didn't feel safe. And so I -- I really didn't feel comfortable telling stories about my own queerness and my identity until I left Newfoundland, until I got to Toronto, which is where, ironically, the American "Queer as Folk" was shot, which was my first exposure to a queer community. But when I got there, I actually found that the -- my community and my family there didn't -- wasn't really reflected even in this show. And so I -- when I sought out the rights to "Queer as Folk," it was because I really wanted to continue telling queer stories and, you know, there is really no bigger franchise for queer storytelling -- than "Queer as Folk." It holds such a special place in a lot of people's hearts, but it's only ever really represented a, you know, a fraction of our community. So when I sought it out I really wanted to expand the representation. I wanted to dive a little deeper. I wanted to explore queerness now and what it means in 2022, and to really lean into what the word queer means now. And so you know, that's when we started forming our family, which really started with Ryan. Ryan, I think, was the very first person I ever reached out to when I first got the rights to the show, and was someone I really wanted to collaborate with.

>> Scott Jones: Awesome. I think you and I talked a little bit about this, but like, for people here, what was that process like in terms of like -- the fact that the rights were just sitting there, like, how did you find that out --

>> Stephen Dunn: Well we knew that they were just sitting there, they, like -- Showtime had let the rights lapse by one year and they -- I don't think they knew that they were gone, and so I just snapped them up. I went -- I just -- they went back to Russel T Davies, and so I was already in the UK working on another project, and I was like -- I had my pitch all -- I'd already been working on the idea, and I was like, oh my god, like, I'm just gonna go -- I'll see if he'll take a meeting and he did. He wanted to meet. And then I popped on a train to Manchester, pitched him my take on the show, and he loved it and saw this as a way to, like, expand on the legacy of "Queer as Folk." And I just took it, and I never looked back. [chuckles]

>> Scott Jones: That story is amazing, I love it. You kind of answered the follow-up questions about, like, what aspects did you want to keep and what aspects did you want to change, but is there anything further that you want to say about that?

>> Stephen Dunn: I mean I really just -- there was a lot -- I mean, I didn't want to redo the same story which, you know, they'd already done so so well. I mean, multiple times. But we have to start in a place where our show is starting from within the character dynamics slightly from the original series, but ultimately, like, it takes itself into a whole new direction. But you know, there were just -- there are a lot of characters that I really wanted to have that -- there was, you know, I have a -- I had -- I really wanted there to be a space for the disabled community to be able to exist in the show. First there was Marvin, the character of Marvin. And as we started developing it -- but actually something happened as I was -- as I was developing the show -- I have an uncle, my Uncle Patty, who has CP, came out to me at 60 as I was developing the show. And I told him I was developing "Queer as Folk," and he whispered to me. He was like, "I used to watch that show in my basement, in secret." You know, we were 30 years apart, but both of us were watching it in the exact same way. And that's when I was like holy fuck, like, this show has had such an impact on so many people who did watch it in private and -- that's -- when, you know, I was like okay, I think -- there's another character, you know, it's not really based fully on him, but I wanted to introduce the character of Julian into the show as well, who's in the chat right now.

>> Scott Jones: Yeah, yeah, that's amazing. I also had that experience of watching it at night and also calling, like, you know those gay hotlines -- that were like [crosstalk]. When my mom found the bill it was, like, horrible. Anyway, you kind of talked about -- we were going to pivot to talking about Julian and Marvin, and -- like obviously your uncle, you said that, but how did you ensure that they, like, remained authentic? Like -- what steps did you take to keep it authentic, both in story and portrayal?

>> Stephen Dunn: Is this for me?

>> Scott Jones: Yes.

>> Stephen Dunn: Well a lot of -- I mean, the amazing thing about television -- this is my first time in TV and really getting to experience, like, a writer's room and -- to really understand, like, the collaborative nature of the medium is -- it's so crucial, especially for telling, like, a large ensemble show that, you know, features a lot of various communities. It's important to have folks from those communities in the room, and be it in as a writer, but also we had the opportunity thankfully working with Peacock and NBCU to be able to also hire consultants, also some of which are in this chat right now, to read scripts and -- and give ideas and stuff to be able to make sure that we're doing this authentically. And -- you know -- it's an important part of telling these stories is -- is to involve communities who, you know, the stories are about. It's a no brainer, really. [chuckles]

>> Scott Jones: Well, I mean, for you, but I mean -- it should be. Yeah, that was very much on our minds in the Lab -- RespectAbility Lab -- and it came up many times, like, so it's just so wonderful to hear that from you, that, of course, people need to be in the writers room that represent these communities, so thank you for that. I'm gonna move it over to Ryan now. So I mean, you've worked in other writers rooms. Like, what was it like working in this one, and, like, what did you want to make sure you got right?

>> Ryan O'Connell: Oh my god this [coughs] it was really fun. I mean, it was just a hodgepodge of people and it was really exciting. But I think, you know, Stephen and I met in 2019. We had a very glamorous dinner at Censor Tower, we got along like gangbusters, and, like, he was telling me he was developing "Queer as Folk," and I remember, like, checking in with him, like, over the literal years -- because it took literally years to get it made. And I had just finished "Special," truly when I think it got green-lit, so the timing was chef's kiss. He sent me the pilot. I read it, I loved it. The character of Marvin snap, crackled, and popped off the page. I was so excited. Then me and Stephen had a meeting about it, he was like, "oh, I also want you to be in it." And I was like, "oh my god, twist. Two disabled people? Is that -- is that even legal? Like, oh my god!" [panelists laugh] So I was really really excited because, like, Stephen really just -- he really -- it was truly truly collaborative, and he let me bring my own stuff to it, so I felt creatively very liberated. And it was also very liberating to write for a show where there were two queer disabled people that were wildly different from each other, and weren't necessarily friends. And I really loved -- I loved that, because I feel like, you know -- you might -- people might think, oh, the two disabled characters, they're going to get along, they're going to be BFFs, like crip power, etcetera, etcetera. But anyone that's been a member of a marginalized community knows that it doesn't really work that way, and --

>> Andrew Gurza: Shocker!

>> Ryan O'Connell: Yeah, sometimes the call can come from inside the house. [panelists laugh] So you know it was -- so it was just -- it was really exciting to also just dive into those two characters, and kind of figure out -- you know, why they weren't so close -- and also kind of drawing, you know, their commonalities out too. And yeah, it was just truly a gift, because I just -- I never felt restricted. I always felt encouraged to kind of bring my own things to it. And so it was a real joyous experience, because that's not always the case. You know what I mean? But Stephen gave me the space and gave everyone the space to kind of do their thing, which made it a really fun experience.

>> Scott Jones: Yeah, and that shines through -- and I'd seen on, like, social media, people posting like Julia Lewis, like, and about Stephen's -- openness and vulnerability and -- space for that, so -- and I love that idea of, like, yeah, they're not going to be the same, and the intersections of -- of who those characters are, like, also separates them. So -- love that. I like this question so I'm going to say it as is. You have a history of showing things on TV that are new in terms of sex, queerness, and disability. Was there anything you wanted to highlight in the series that hadn't been seen before on television?

>> Ryan O'Connell: Well yeah, a disabled orgy. [panelists laugh] I know I never checked that off the list with "Special," my bad. Drive me straight to hell. No, I mean I think having a sex positive inclusive orgy, honey, like, let's fucking party, you know what I mean? That was -- that was truly a history-making moment for sure. And I think always just, like, showcasing sex in a very real authentic way. I mean, I think the sex scene between Marvin and Ali in episode four is truly truly so beautiful, and you know -- but it's also -- there's also people just fuckin', so there's all kinds of sex, you know what I mean? There's emotional sex, there's just fucking for the sake of fucking sex, you know? All the varieties. So that was a true true bucket list moment for sure.

>> Scott Jones: I think I loved it when, like, I don't know, was it Brody or someone, like, when they were preparing -- or this might have been a different episode, but, like, the presence of, like, even poppers, and it's like, I know the majority of straight people will not know what that is, but that -- like, it's just funny. Well bravo, it's so so good, I love that episode. Okay, Andrew!

>> Andrew Gurza: Hello!

>> Scott Jones: You -- so yeah, you came on as a consultant for the show, episode four, "#FuckDisabledPeople." Yeah -- what did that entail?

>> Andrew Gurza: I mean, as an overall consultant, I got to read the script, I got to give my ideas, and I got to really like -- I love being able to do that, and I love being able to send across what I would do if I was this character. That would be how to make it authentic, because typically if you write a disabled character in a script, there's no authenticity there, usually. So it was really really -- my favorite part of consulting was really not any of the stuff I did in front of the camera. I love being behind, and being able to say well, here's what I would do, here's how I would pitch this, here's what I might say -- knowing that they may or may not use it, but knowing that regardless, there was an authentic voice who gave an opinion, and that for me was exciting. And then when I -- I had a call with some of the writers one day I said, well you know, I -- I had a disabled orgy back in 2015. Why don't we kind of use that experience a little bit for the show? And they were like, do you want to come down and be in it? And I was like okay, sure. So that all got worked out, and then I get to fly down to be a part of it, which was really really -- for me it was a big bucket list moment, because it meant all the stuff that I had dreamed about about that representation was -- coming true and I got to -- have a hand in that.

>> Scott Jones: Yeah, I mean the straw comment -- that was like -- this is pure Andrew. Like I just love that you made it -- [audio issues] Straws need to exist for --

>> Andrew Gurza: I was the most nervous doing this.

>> Scott Jones: [laughing] Oh, you couldn't tell.

>> Ryan O'Connell: Really? Yeah, I couldn't tell.

>> Stephen Dunn: You were so good.

>> Andrew Gurza: So nervous, oh my goodness.

>> Stephen Dunn: So good.

>> Scott Jones: You're so so good, and like -- hot, it was just great. And you kind of answered a lot of questions there, but -- I love that, I love that move from consultant into -- because yeah, "Picture This" is like, one of my favorite documentaries by the NFB, and it's like -- it's -- it focuses on you and your work -- your incredible work as a -- disabled sex advocate. We're talking about sex, and it's because of you. Like it's -- yeah, anyway. [crosstalk]

>> Stephen Dunn: I'll just say, like Andrew is a huge part of -- from the very beginning, Andrew was a consultant as well, and the -- the crip rave that that Andrew threw in Toronto was a big inspiration for the one in the show. Like it was -- it's a lot of the work that Andrew does and the visibility that -- that he's created is -- a lot of it is in this show -- and exists in the character of Marvin, like, I'm -- I've always been really impressed with -- their work, and I'm -- very grateful that we were able to actually work together in this way finally after --

>> Andrew Gurza: Aw, thank you. [crosstalk] It was such a -- I mean it was -- it's something that's been on my bucket list and on my list of professional things that I've done, it's like, I got to be a part of, like, the most iconic queer show on television. Like, that's -- that's incredible, and I remember when we wrapped the sex scene, which I was also fucking terrified to do, but when we wrapped, the director was like, you -- you -- all of you have helped make -- like, an iconic scene in television. And to know that something I did brought this together so that the next generation of queer disabled people can see that and be like, wow, this existed, this is real, is -- it's mind-blowing that something I did that I never thought would go anywhere has now been immortalized on television.

>> Scott Jones: Well, but of course. Like, you do so much work for the community, like, a sex toy developed by disabled people for disabled people, a podcast, you know, a documentary, like -- you are out there, and you created the hashtag disabled people are hot, like yeah, I just fuckin' love you. I just have to say that, I respect you so much.

>> Andrew Gurza: Thank you.

>> Stephen Dunn: There's no one more prolific than Andrew. Like yeah, I mean, he's incredible.

>> Andrew Gurza: You're all making me blush right now, like what?

>> Scott Jones: All of you watching, please go and follow Andrew Gurza -- what's your handle or should we --

>> Andrew Gurza: AndrewGurza1 on all the places, because I got tired of all the changes and I was like, I'll just have -- be AndrewGurza1, because I don't want to change it anymore, it's fun!

>> Scott Jones: Awesome. So you answered a bunch of questions in one, but I know you and I have talked about this, like, personally about the importance of, like, power chair users, you know, because we always see -- misrepresented -- manual wheelchair users that are played by able-bodied actors, which is horrible. But you never see, like, power chair users. So can you speak a little bit about that?

>> Andrew Gurza: Yeah, I mean, that's really important for me because, shocker, I'm a power chair user so that's what I use every day. But also, you know, only seeing manual chair users -- and they are just as important as power chair users -- but in terms of film and television representation, only seeing that presents this idea that you have to be athletic, you have to be semi-independent, you have to be able to do certain things for yourself, and it doesn't show complex disabilities. And when you have CP like I have, I consider it a complex disability, so it's multiple different ways disability shows up in my body at one time. And seeing a power chair user, most people assume that power chair users are not sexual, they're not independent, they're not -- they can't -- they have no agency. And so I am very, very -- a loud advocate, you know, we need to show different types of chair users in media, because we need to see them as valuable too. And I don't think we're doing that enough. So to be able to see that on the "Queer as Folk" set -- one of my favorite things that I saw when I was on set -- little did I know that I would be in it after I saw it -- but I saw one of the Hoyer lifts that was on set, and I remember walking on set with my mom the day that we shot, and I was just so excited to see stuff that I use in my bedroom every day on a TV set used as a prop for, like, a sex scene around disability. It was so surreal, because we don't see those things in popular media. And so to see it in a sexy way was the coolest thing ever.

>> Scott Jones: And it -- it wasn't only just seeing, like, one of the characters said, like, Hoyer lift. I'm like, oh I love that -- that was actually, like, voiced. I think it was Noah maybe? I'm not -- I'm not sure.

>> Stephen Dunn: Yeah, Noah voices it.

>> Scott Jones: Yeah, it was just like -- I'm like, oh my god -- that's amazing that that is in there. Yeah, thank you for that. Yeah I agree, I think that's so important, and this opened a door for more of that, and hopefully you acting those roles.

>> Andrew Gurza: Not that I'm a good actor or anything, I'm certainly not of the caliber of the other gentleman in -- in the chat right now, but --

>> Ryan O'Connell: Oh, honey, you were great! [crosstalk] Seriously, it was very natch.

>> Andrew Gurza: I was the most awkward --

>> Ryan O'Connell: No! It did not come off that way.

>> Andrew Gurza: Okay good, because I wasn't feeling that way [audio issues] [Stephen laughs]

>> Scott Jones: It was so good. And yeah, I was just squealing. Okay I want to talk a little bit about your podcast, because it's so radical and it -- I'm curious as to how it kind of bled into your experience as a consultant and actor -- and how it informs your work with the show? Disability After Dark, yeah.

>> Andrew Gurza: I mean, I don't know if it directly informed kind of any of the consulting work for the show or kind of what I did, but I think my candidness on the show -- and I've spoken with Ryan on the show before and -- we've -- I've had him as a guest multiple times, and you, Scott, on the show, like, I think my candid discussion of sex and disability and the way we -- the way I talk about it without any filter, without any fear of people being afraid of it and just talking about it openly -- when people listen to that, they go oh wow, I never -- I never have heard somebody be so honest about sex and disability before, wow! So I think that those kind of episodes where I talk openly about sexuality and disability led itself to people going wow, this is somebody that we should tap into for consulting work because they're honest about stuff. And I think a lot of disability work, if we even dare talk about sex, it's very sanitized. It's very -- it's very removed from, like, discussion of fucking, and what it is. And so I -- my view on all that stuff is like, let's go right in there and talk about accessibility, and talk about all those things openly. And sure, if people are uncomfortable, that's great because then maybe they'll learn something and become more comfortable as they go.

>> Scott Jones: Yeah, amazing. I just want to, like, snap away until my thumbs are gone. Yeah, the work that you're doing just is amazing. And the frankness -- and then you also expanded beyond just sex. Like, you also talk about this day-to-day lived experiences and the emotional journey that, you know, comes with -- your disability, and also disability in general, and yeah.

>> Andrew Gurza: Yeah, and I think that's something we're missing in disability discourse. It's very very sanitized right now. Even when we do get into it, like, usually I'm asked to come and speak on special panels about sex and disability, which is great and I'm thankful for that. But also, like, this should be something we're talking about every day. So on my social media and on the platforms that I control, I try to make very clear that we're going to talk about disability every day all the time. It isn't a special episode of -- it's every day.

>> Scott Jones: Yeah I love it. I love it. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

>> Andrew Gurza: Thank you!

>> Scott Jones: Okay, so this question is open to all of you. What should studios, networks, and productions do to make accessibility a priority going forward? I mean, clearly it was on this show, but like, going forward -- because sometimes, you know, we've seen in history, like, Matlin won the best actress award for "Children of a Lesser God" -- I don't know the name of it -- but then we never saw another deaf actress or actor win. And "CODA," you know, it's just a worry that like, okay, it's once in a while. Like, how can we make it -- what do you think needs to happen to make it, like, a regular thing that's incorporated?

>> Stephen Dunn: I have a few things that I think are really important. One, it's very -- on any day it's really difficult to navigate getting into the film industry, and the television industry. It's -- it's very complex, and I think organizations like RespectAbility are crucial for creating a platform for storytellers who are differently abled to be able to, at the core, come up with ideas that are -- you know, that can be bought, sold, licensed, whatever -- like, it's -- it's creating a platform and a bridge for education and creating connections. I think that's crucial for getting into the industry. But I also think, like, in a production side, something that was really important to us going into "Queer as Folk" was making sure that our sets and our stages and our offices were accessible. Because it's usually -- you know, it was the same issue. Like, I'm from, as you know Scott, like, in Newfoundland, it's, like, not a very accessible city. It's all hills, there's stairs, we -- I remember that night we went to the gay bar and it's just, like, in the middle of a set of stairs --

>> Scott Jones: And you took me up to the bathroom remember and the manager -- yeah, wow. Anyway.

>> Stephen Dunn: No, and the -- film sets are often sort of those kinds of environments. They're just -- they're -- it's -- unfortunately accessibility is far too often a bit of an afterthought. And for us going into the show, you know, we had a lot of talks with our -- our line producer to make sure that -- and our ADs -- to make sure that no matter what day it was, no matter who was on set, our sets had to be accessible -- That's, like, ground zero, and like, number one most important thing, but I also want to see more -- that's from a production standpoint, but I think, you know, in getting into the industry, it's really important to have samples and have connections and have written work, if you're -- going to be at the core of -- central of storytelling, and I think that RespectAbility and these kinds of organizations are doing really incredible work to -- make those connections for folks to get into the industry. Those are my thoughts.

>> Scott Jones: I have to say that, like, I don't get an inkling of, like, able-bodied saviorism from you at all. It's just like, in every sense I feel like you just exude this true belief that everyone needs to be included. And so like, that's -- a beautiful thing, and I'm so grateful that you're in the industry and -- mainstream industry, and I -- yeah, I can't wait to see the change that will come from what you're doing, so thank you, thank you, thank you. Anyone else want to speak to that?

>> Andrew Gurza: You know, I think we need people behind the camera. I think we need it in all points of production. I think we need stories written by disabled people, which is why, you know, Ryan O'Connell is one of my contemporaries, and I -- I am so thankful for the work that he's done in putting it out there because we don't have shows like that. One of the things that I -- that rings in my head whenever I think about disabled storytelling is he's like, I want to tell disabled stories all the time and I'm going to do it all the time. And I think that's so valuable, and we don't have enough of that, and I think we need all of these pieces to come together. But in terms of, like, how do we make the industry more accessible, we need to hire consultants, like, to be production consultants on shows, even if they're not in the show, if they're in the background providing script ideas. We need to have these voices so that we can see this diversity we're craving. And I think a lot of directors and people in production are too afraid to confront their own ableism first, and I think if we took all the big production -- producers in Hollywood and said, like, let's talk about ableism for a day, you know, how could your sets be less ableist? They'd probably freak the fuck out, but at least we'd start a conversation about how we can change Hollywood, and we're not -- we're doing -- like, Stephen's done this, but on a larger scale this is not being done, and I think if we talked about ableism more in the industry openly and allowed for people to -- and production teams to be uncomfortable a little bit around their own ableism, then we could move things forward.

>> Scott Jones: There -- I have to say that RespectAbility -- there were some very uncomfortable conversations with, like, certain studios, like, about that very fact, because it's like, we are the largest demographic that is a minority, and there's so many intersections in that demographic, so why are we not in the writers room? Why are we not, you know, directing? Why are we not writing? So I -- yeah, I completely agree.

>> Ryan O'Connell: You need to get more disabled people in power I mean one in four people identify as disabled and I would say that scammers have more representation in Hollywood than disabled people, which is just really sad. [panelists laugh] So I think it -- it's really [audio cuts out] -- as writers. I know that there's a show on Apple TV, right, "Best Foot Forward," that half the writer's room is disabled, which, like, was groundbreaking, but it shouldn't, because the lead was fucking disabled, so like, duh, like, of course you would -- like, you know -- you wouldn't have a female lead or a female-centric show and have all men -- not anymore, you used to, but not anymore. So I think it really is about giving disabled people jobs and really empowering them and giving them real positions of power, which is still unfortunately medium-rare, and yeah, disabled content, honey. There's not much, not much. It's tumbleweed.

>> Andrew Gurza: And you know, paying them too. Let's pay them for what they're giving you.

>> Ryan O'Connell: Yeah, of course!

>> Andrew Gurza: Because that doesn't happen often either.

>> Scott Jones: Yeah, and I think Ryan, yeah, exactly what Andrew said, like, you were trailblazing in that sense. It's like, "Special" was very special to me, and everyone from the disabled community, because it was like, oh, okay, finally, like, we're seeing something, like, on Netflix -- and something very good, like, and funny, and -- and light but also, like, poignant and so --

>> Ryan O'Connell: Well it's frustrating to me that there hasn't been, like, an heir to that show. Like, there's not -- like, it's frustrating to me that, like, we're here, like, a couple years later and there's not like a -- you know, there's -- "Best Foot Forward" was great, but like, there's not much else in terms of, like, a disabled lead especially not coming from an actual disabled creator, and that's just to me, like, unacceptable.

>> Scott Jones: It's that, like, worry of like, okay, we have "CODA" now, like, and that's good enough.

>> Ryan O'Connell: Yeah, like, we did it, we're good!

>> Scott Jones: We did it, great. Oh, good job, yeah. I completely agree.

>> Ryan O'Connell: It's not chic.

>> Scott Jones: Well, yeah, thank you. I want to remind everyone that they can be, like, putting their questions into the chat box, or if they need to, they can also email Lauren at LaurenA@RespectAbility.org. So while we're waiting for those to come in, there just are a couple more questions. Yeah, I guess -- insights that could help disabled creators get into the industry, like, what -- how could, like -- tips for creators who want to get in Television, resources or tools, maybe it's a bleak answer but, like, still, we need to hear it regardless, and yeah, can you speak about that?

>> Ryan O'Connell: I feel such anxiety when people ask me that question, because there's so many different pathways to breaking into the business, and there's not, like, one correct way. I will say, a mentality I've always had is like I'm just a tenacious bitch from hell, and like, I kind of have, like, the confidence of a mediocre straight white male, and I always have. So it's sort of like -- and I write -- I write, like, every day. I'm like true psycho about writing. And so like, between, like, the work being constant, and just being, like, a tenacious bugaboo, that, like, I think that has sort of served me well. Yeah.

>> Stephen Dunn: I also think like being -- rejection is like a huge part of this industry, and it's -- it's really hard to navigate because it's, you know, any creator or artistically-minded person will always put a lot of themselves out there when you do that, and I think it's -- it's crucial entering the industry to not be afraid of that rejection, not to take it personally, to just trudge forward and find your people. Community is really important within this industry as well. And like, building those relationships with folks it's -- it's even in small ways. But like Ryan said, like, really being a tenacious bitch from hell will -- is actually a little bit crucial, like, you kind of have to keep creating in the face of rejection, in the face of opposition, and -- and make sure that you continue to tell those -- stories and put them out there. But for me, I'll say, like, practically, it was programs like -- I did the TIFF talent lab in Toronto -- I learned a lot of like -- I learned a lot of more, like, spiritual approaches to film in that, whereas -- I also went to film school I went to -- I can't remember what it's been renamed

>> Andrew Gurza: Metropolitan Toronto U or something? [crosstalk]

>> Stephen Dunn: And I went to film school. And so in film school, I just got practice making work. It's really -- people want to see that you've -- you've created something before, you know, whether it's a script or it's an actual, like, film or documentary or short film. Having something going into it, having a little package of work, playing at a film festival, all those things really matter. It's a lot of work but it's -- every project I've ever worked on has always been a stepping stone to another. Like, it started with short films, started with very very low budget short films, which turned into a bigger short film, or a longer short film -- you know -- it's -- it takes time and it takes patience and it requires support, honestly. And it's -- important to -- most important I think to separate your ego and your self-esteem from work. That is a death nail. I think if you're acquiring your self-esteem from that external validation of, like, it makes it so much harder. So I think it's -- it's important to stay focused on telling stories that really mean something to you in any -- in many different ways, that's what I --

>> Ryan O'Connell: Yeah, just that rejection part really resonates, because I feel like how you react from failure determines your success. Like, people have such a thin skin, and I understand but there's so much emotional bottoming that happens in this business, like, and how you deal with that really really determines --

>> Andrew Gurza: Could you -- could you just define for us emotional bottoming?

>> Ryan O'Connell: Emotional bottoming is, like, it's truly like -- taking it up the ass, like, figuratively speaking. Like, you're gonna -- be trolled so much, you're gonna be, like, you're gonna have people that don't get you, that don't understand you, that don't know your work, you know what I mean? And you can't let that completely, like, deactivate you and destabilize you. Like, I actually take rejection as an opportunity. I mean, I also, like, get out of bed every day to like avenge my enemies. But like -- [panelists laugh] that's been really helpful for me, but it's like I think a lot of people -- because ego is so fused into our work and all that stuff, I think people can be really take it hard. And I have to say, like, as someone who's made a show and achieved a modicum of success in this business, the failure does not stop. Like, there's never -- there's never a point where you're like, I'm good. I mean, maybe for a few people they reach a point where they can just truly, like, you know, everything they touch turns to gold, whatever, but like, you know, it's --it's still very difficult. It never truly gets a ton easier. But -- and truly, how you bounce back from things not working out will set the tone. And if you are able to do that, and you're just -- I mean, I look at things as like okay, next thing, next thing, next thing, next thing. Do you know what I mean? And that mentality has really served me well, and it's the reason why I've been able to work consistently for the last 10 years in this business, which is hard, you know?

>> Andrew Gurza: Yeah, I think also for, you know, smaller creators who might be watching this, you don't have to create and think, okay, I have to get this to Hollywood. There are platforms now like Twitter and Instagram and TikTok that can catapult you into the spotlight, whether you want to be there or not. So like, I think that, you know, a lot of disabled creators are using those platforms to make a name for themselves, which can then lead to a production company calling you saying, hey, do you want to do "Queer as Folk," or do you want to do this thing? Like, a lot of my stuff lives on Twitter and Instagram, and I don't go searching for the next Hollywood project. People approach me because they see what I do in disability on these platforms and say oh that's cool, we want to work with you. So I think this idea that we have to go right from a -- straight from, like, a writing exercise to a Lab to Hollywood, in 2022 that's sort of not really necessarily the way you have to do it. And I think for a lot of disability creators, that access to different platforms is really vital.

>> Scott Jones: Yeah, and that's a good -- really good point and I think, like, you said it. You don't have to be making art that is like Hollywood. It can be independent, it can be whatever you want it to be, and I love that point. We should pivot to some audience questions now, because I think we're nearing the end. But thank you, you three, for just such great answers. So first one: I would pose this question to Stephen. For disabled individuals looking to get into directing, and maybe you just answered this, what advice do you have when they may be unable to do some of the physical aspects that are required of individuals in jobs typically done to get to the director level, but are otherwise 100 percent qualified for the position? Okay, so that's --

>> Stephen Dunn: Well, in any situation when it comes to directing, having short film work is -- crucial. As I've learned it's very -- especially in television, it's really important to have samples of other work. And I can't speak to anyone's specific needs, but I do think that, like, having attendance and support in when you're -- when you're approaching, like, a directing field is like -- and also, like, assistance as well. Like, no director can -- can do their job without having any kind of support. So I -- I can't really speak to the specifics as it's a bit broader, but I do think that, like, finding a way -- like, there's no rule book. Like, people have written rule books on, like, how to make films and stuff like that, but really they can be made any kind of way. Like, for instance -- what's it called -- the Wes Anderson -- Wes Anderson didn't go on set for Mr. Fox -- Talented Mr. Fox, or whatever? Like, that movie -- and even with COVID, directors are -- when a director gets COVID, oftentimes they don't stop production. They give the director a camera, and they direct from -- from their hotel rooms that they're, you know, they're trapped in. So there's -- there's become -- there's a lot of ways in which to do it, and I think that it's just important to navigate filmmaking in the way that is -- you're able to, because really, it's an adaptable industry. It really is. It doesn't always want to be, but it can be. And especially if you're creating your own content or your own short films, there's a lot of different ways to approach it.

>> Scott Jones: Thank you. This is another one directed to you, I believe. This is from Diane Wright. Can you share the specific ways you're using your privilege as -- no, everyone -- as white men in the industry to broaden access for others? Such a good question. Ryan?

>> Ryan O'Connell: Yeah. So I felt like when I -- when I did "Special," I felt like for the first time that I had a modicum of power, in the sense that I was able to give people jobs. And to me, I felt like Oprah, like, you get a job, you get a job, you get a job. [panelists laugh]

>> Scott Jones: Sorry, I just got the reference.

>> Ryan O'Connell: It was important for me to hire people that maybe typically wouldn't necessarily get a way in. When "Special" l ended, I think the only way that I can really right now kind of achieve that is by helping people that they -- if they, you know, need feedback on a script or this or that. That is sort of the way that I can do it right now. I think it's important to kind of always be in service just in some way. But depending on where I'm at with my work, like, it can either be giving them a job on a literal show, or giving them notes on a script, you know what I mean? I think -- I think I just try to be conscious that I'm always doing something that is of service.

>> Stephen Dunn: [crosstalk] Go ahead.

>> Andrew Gurza: No, go ahead, sorry.

>> Stephen Dunn: I think when we were creating -- as we were staffing and hiring our team on "Queer as Folk," that was just something that, you know, we knew we were telling stories from a very, like, wide set of communities on this show. And so in order to do that, it was crucial for us to hire a writer's room that was a reflection of the characters we were going to be seeing on screen. So I think it's -- that's, I mean again, like, that's -- that is the magic of being Oprah on a television show, is like you get -- you do get to hire your team, and it's really -- I mean, it's really important when you're doing any show that's trying to represent these communities to actually put bums in seats for those -- those writers rooms, you know? It's -- it's important to do so authentically.

>> Scott Jones: Awesome.

>> Andrew Gurza: I think it's just about recognizing your privilege. I know I'm a white disabled person, and I know there are a lot of other white disabled people that take up space and we have to sometimes sit down and shut up, and let other people with different experiences of disability, and disabled people of color have the spotlight. They deserve it, and they have a different experience, and yes, we're all in it together -- but we cannot be ignorant to our own privilege. And so a lot of the time I spend time on my podcast and on my platforms uplifting other voices, being like, I'm going to shut up now and let you tell your story, because they've heard mine before. They know who I am. Maybe they don't know who you are and they should. So I'll stop speaking and give you a platform. If I can use my platforms to elevate someone else, I would rather do that.

>> Scott Jones: And it's just like, move, yeah. Like you said, make space. And that -- yeah, wonderful. Okay, those are really all the questions we can take as we're at time. But I just really really want to thank the three of you for your, like, candidness, your vulnerability, and your wisdom, sharing all of that with us. And I'll take a moment just to thank RespectAbility for providing this platform and NBCU LAUNCH for organizing this enlightening conversation. To learn more about the NBCU LAUNCH team and get the latest updates on their programs and initiatives, please visit their website: nbcuniversallaunch.com, which will be in the chat box, or join the social media community @NBCULaunch on Twitter and Instagram. And to learn more about RespectAbility's work, which is so important in the industry -- in the entertainment industry, please visit RespectAbility.org. Check out the chat for RespectAbility's social media handles as well. And again, thank you to everyone watching, and thank you to our panelists for your time, and just, yeah, your openness. It's been a really great conversation, thank you.