Cultural Daily

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What Would Really Be 'Brave'? If She Were

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, June 28th, 2012

The culture blather-sphere erupted this week with the perfect trifecta: As Disney/Pixar's *Brave* won the weekend box office with $66 million, and Gay Pride Month culminated in major civic parades, EW.com's Adam Markovitz wondered if *Brave*'s lead character, Merida, is gay.

Markovitz's piece has its cake and eats it too, with political correctness. He wonders if Merida is gay because "she bristles at the traditional gender roles that she's expected to play: the demure daughter, the obedient fiancée. Her love of unprincess-like hobbies, including archery and rock-climbing, is sure to strike a chord with gay viewers who felt similarly "not like the other kids" growing up. And she hates the prospect of marriage…" Then he pulls back toward the end by saying, "Ultimately, it doesn't matter."

Which it shouldn't.

But it does.

Princess Culture

There are really two issues here. The first is a rejection of "girl princess" culture. With *Brave,* Disney also has its cake and eats it too. Merida reviles anything princess-like. But Disney is, shall we say, King of the Princesses, an industry that accounts for over $4 billion a year in toys, games and apparel for girls. Disney even declared the first Annual Princess Week in April.

As Rebecca Hains, who studies girls' issues and teaches at Salem State University, writes, "The Disney Princess marketing machine is SO huge, so far-reaching, that it's hard to avoid and even harder to resist. Parents sometimes blame themselves for their daughters' princess obsessions, but who's really to blame–the parents, or the billion-dollar industry that is invested in profiting by shaping little girls' dreams? I think the answer is clear. In this kind of context, it's hard to choose freely–and that's something to think critically about."

I'm thankful that Merida can choose freely, which separates her widely from former Disney female leads. I was at Disney when the studio made *The Little Mermaid,* and I recall a senior executive's remark that its underlying myth, following the Hans Christian Anderson tale on which it was based, is about "a girl who learns to spread her legs."

Pixar's Story

Pixar is widely known as a gay-friendly work environment, and their It Gets Better video is one of the best. (The It Gets Better Project is designed to give hope to LGBTQ young people facing harassment.) You can watch Pixar's video here:

Yet for some, that wasn't enough. This video was posted in response a year ago, by a teen who asked Pixar to break out of the mold with its film characters as much as it has done with its

employees:

"Gay kids have almost no positive characters to look up to who are like them and who are open about their sexuality," this unnamed teen said. "Your job is to create things. Your job is to empower children… You haven't done that for LGBT kids at all."

I hold the folks at Pixar in highest regard, and I think they do believe it is their job to empower kids – and adults – through their stories. Publicly-traded media companies, however, are another matter; their job is to make money for their shareholders, which is why Michael Izzo, at Business Insider, commented, "Disney would never broach the subject and risk potentially millions of merchandising dollars by stating the sexual orientation of their newest character."

Real Bravery

Here's what we should all take away from this discussion.

Any LGBTQ kid who lives in our world has to be brave.

Any girl who doesn't want to be a princess is brave in the face of the all-out, demeaning media brainwashing that's trying to turn her into one.

The first major media company that will have an openly non-hetero kid character as a movie's lead will be really brave, too.

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