

HowlRound

How (Not) to Write a Casting Breakdown

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by Lynne Marie Rosenberg

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See also: [casting](#), [acting/performance](#), [diversity and inclusion](#)

I am Lynne Marie Rosenberg.

I am thirty-four, but I look twenty-seven, and I sound forty-five.

I am Jewish, but not Jewish enough to play Jewish.

I am Irish, but not Irish enough to play Irish.

I am sexy, but not sexy enough to play Latina.

I have curly hair, which means I'm a character actor.

I have Caucasian skin, which means I can be nominated for an Oscar.

And I am the curator of the Tumblr **Cast And Loose** (<http://castandloose.tumblr.com/>), a collection of the best of the worst casting notices the Internet has to offer.

Unfortunately, my job is very easy. Every day, wayward breakdown authors mindlessly release their words into the world with seemingly no awareness of the damage they can inflict, or the problems that they are perpetuating. I round them up for the day, add my two cents, and voilà: a popular Tumblr followed by actors and non-actors who are fed up with the racism, ageism, colorism, and other abundant 'isms in the entertainment industry.

In case you are unacquainted with breakdowns, they are brief descriptions of characters—distillations from a script or treatment—used to help casting directors, actors, and agents determine if a particular person should audition for a role. Here is a good one:

Titania/Hippolyta: a force of nature. Powerful and mysterious, yet with great humanity. While she possesses a great ferocity, her greatest power lies in her love of life, her sense of joy, empathy, and

humor. [...] Strong language and physical skills are essential. She is someone who is very at ease and activated in her body.

This came from **McCorkle Casting** (<http://home.earthlink.net/~pmcdrize1/>) in the fall of 2014 for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What I like about this breakdown is that we get a sense of the energy of the character, an understanding of the skills required for this particular production, and there are no limitations placed on size, age, race, body type, or sexual appeal.

“Actors are real humans who are reading and being defined by the character descriptions to which we ‘submit’ on a daily basis.”

Here is a bad one:

I'm looking for an extremely hot confident actress with really large breasts who is willing to wear lingerie. You will be required to seduce me and throw a bottle of champagne against a brick wall. There is no actual sexual contact you are just trying to seduce me.

And another:

[LEROY] Male, 25-35, African American. A young LeVar Burton at heart, aware he's the token black friend but totally cool with it

And yet another:

Elderly woman, Age 45+ Comfortable with awkward situations.

Like the awkward situation when forty-five is elderly.

In the two years I have maintained this Tumblr, there has never been a shortage of material. From undergraduate student projects to high-end TV and film auditions, the hits just keep on coming. I would love to wake up one day and find the breakdowns of the world so respectful and well written that my Tumblr crumbles into obscurity, but that doesn't seem to be the case. So, as a service to the breakdown-writing world at large, allow me to present eight easy steps on How (Not) To Write A Breakdown.

1. DON'T BE AN OVERT RACIST

It may seem like a given, but from what I read regularly, a number of content makers— professional, student and otherwise—could use a reminder. For instance, if you find yourself writing something like this...

(20's/30's)—an Asian woman who doesn't have the hard features of most other Asian females—she is more elegant and sophisticated and knows it.

...you're probably an overt racist. Please leave the industry and come back when you're ready to rejoin civil

society.

2. DON'T BE A SUBTLE RACIST

Glaring stereotypes aside, there is a more insidious problem in the industry: roles specified as Caucasian for no justifiable reason. I would like to see a world where the websites that publish breakdowns require posters to justify ethnic specification narratively. Hint: “Because that’s how I pictured the character” is not a good enough answer.

Writers and directors, allow the casting process to inform your work. Let actors surprise you in the room. A person who looks nothing like the character you envisioned may walk in and perfectly capture their essence, but if you limit your breakdown to Caucasian Only (a phrase I see far too often) you are cutting yourself off from a lot of incredible talent.

3. DON'T BE AN EVEN SUBTLER RACIST

Most breakdown websites will not allow a poster to say something along the lines of “all ethnicities considered except [_____].” Instead you wind up with breakdowns like these:

[COLETTE] (Lead) Female, 25-35, Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, South Asian, Ethnically Ambiguous / Mixed Race [...]

[EAST WEST BANK BANKER] (M/F, 35-60, Asian, Caucasian, Latino) [...]

[JULIE] a (ASIAN, HISPANIC OR CAUCASIAN) female in her twenties [...]

You notice that one race in particular is missing in these descriptions. Exclusion is exclusion no matter how veiled an author may think they are being, and black actors matter.

4. BEWARE SURPRISE PORN!

Be very careful with quotation marks. Misused punctuation can quickly take you from a perfectly tame short film to a bad '70s skin flick:

Eric: (Supporting) [...] had a secret crush on Lisa until she “reciprocates” his feelings.

5. STOP USING THE PHRASE “GIRL NEXT DOOR”

Just stop.

6. WATCH YOUR CONJUNCTIONS

Poor conjunction usage regularly leads to accidental misogyny:

[VIKI] She is intelligent, but at the same time she is very sexy.

Nothing that a little replacement “and” couldn’t have fixed. Instead, all of us who identify as intelligent get an ugly slap in the face.

“I would love to wake up one day and find the breakdowns of the world so respectful and well written that my Tumblr crumbles into obscurity, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

7. STOP TELLING US TO DO OUR JOB

Actress should have a clear speaking voice, be able to shift tones between calm, firm, and yelling. Strong facial expressions and body language are very important.

We’re actors. If we can’t use our faces and bodies to tell a story, we shouldn’t be in this business in the first place. Save your word count for something more meaningful.

And, lastly:

8. SPELLCHECK

35-50 year old Caucasian Male who could be made to look like Abraham Lincoln and is a GREAT BREAKDANCER. Must be tall, thin, with a lanky build and ideally with an elongated face, strong facial bone structure and dark hair. Will be featured in a live sketch during the show’s taping in front of a studio audience this Sunday (6/29)!! MUST have a GREAT breakdancing ability and ideally a REEL that is part of his actor’s profile that shows strong breakdancing ability for consideration by the DIRECTOR. As there is no time for auditions, our HBO clients will view headshots/resumes/reels to make booking decisions!

We all thought Infinite Monkey Theorem would produce Shakespeare, but it turns out you get breakdowns for a premium cable television show instead. Respect yourself, respect your reader, and spellcheck your work.

In short, I believe breakdowns are an aperture into the successes and failures of the entertainment business. On a public level, the mistakes that are made, the lack of mindfulness, and both the subtle and overt stereotypes are a direct reflection on our industry and culture at large. But on a personal level, actors are real humans reading and being defined by the character descriptions to which we “submit” on a daily basis. Please, craft your words carefully.