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A Class Act: an interview with Julie Hesmondhalgh on casting, representation and inclusion in British television drama

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, actor Julie Hesmondhalgh reflects on her rich body of work in British TV drama, connecting her own career narrative to a consideration of wider industry developments in casting and representation, diversity and inclusion. Julie became a household name as Hayley Cropper in *Coronation Street* (1960-) from 1998 to 2014. Hayley was the first recurring transgender character in a UK continuing TV drama. Julie has since appeared in a number of critically-acclaimed TV dramas addressing important social concerns ranging from the devastating effects of sexual violence to the experiences of autistic children and their families. Throughout her career, Julie has harnessed her public profile to support social and political activism of various kinds, remaining committed to a belief in the power of TV storytelling to bring about positive change. With extended reference to *Coronation Street* and *Doctor Who* (1963-1989, 2005-), Julie discusses how far UK TV drama production has come in tackling systemic inequalities and exclusions, whilst also stressing the progress still required, especially in relation to capturing the complexities of class identity. More broadly, the insights offered within this piece illustrate the value of industry interviews as a methodological approach for TV studies, in revealing the experiences and perspectives of key creative agents within the production process.

KEYWORDS

acting, casting, transgender, class, regionality, diversity, inclusion, representation, *Coronation Street*, *Doctor Who*

Julie Hesmondhalgh is one of Britain's most beloved television actors. Having trained at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA), Julie became a household name as Hayley Cropper in *Coronation Street* (1960-) from 1998 until 2014, as the first recurring transgender character in a continuing UK TV drama. In addition to winning the hearts of soap viewers and approval of the transgender community, Julie achieved critical recognition for her sensitive and nuanced portrayal of Hayley, winning her Best Serial Drama Performance at the 2014 National Television Awards and Best Actress at the 2014 British Soap Awards. Not

only did Hayley's storylines over 16 years on *Coronation Street* reflect UK developments in LGBTQ equality and evolving legislation for transgender marriage, the character's diagnosis with pancreatic cancer also led to the show tackling complex debates around the 'right to die' for terminal patients in Britain. Since leaving *Coronation Street*, Julie has continued to appear in a variety of critically-acclaimed UK TV dramas, most notably in Russell T Davies' *Cucumber* (2015), as a rape victim in *Broadchurch* (2013-2017), a special educational needs teacher in *The A Word* (2016-) and in a guest role in *Doctor Who* (1963-1989, 2005-) alongside Jodie Whittaker's Doctor. Throughout her career, Julie has harnessed the profile afforded by her work to contribute to social and political activism of various forms, drawing attention to a number of causes ranging from transgender rights to support for rape victims to the importance of equality and inclusion in the UK creative industries.

In this interview, Julie reflects on her training and her TV work, with a particular focus on how her regionality and class identity have influenced her casting opportunities. As such, Julie connects her own career narrative to broader debates concerning representation, diversity and inclusion in UK TV drama production. With extended reference to *Coronation Street* and *Doctor Who*, Julie considers how far the UK TV industry has come in recent years in tackling systemic inequalities and exclusions, but also how much work is still to be done, especially in relation to issues such as class inclusion. Throughout the interview, what is clear is Julie's passionate belief in the power of TV storytelling as a vehicle for positive social change.

In line with my previous work investigating television acting (Cantrell & Hogg, 2016, 2017, 2018; Hogg & Smith, 2018), the insights presented in this interview stress the value of foregrounding the experiences, perceptions and processes of those working in the production of TV drama. As a component of TV studies' methodological apparatus, the collection and analysis of primary industry interview data aids in avoiding the 'analytical trap' (Hewett, 2015: 74) of trying to understand a television drama's complex mechanics of creative agency, meaning and value through the consideration of an end-text and its reception alone. As such, this interview adds further conceptual texture to the Trans TV project's exploration and mapping of a medium in transformation.

Chris Hogg (CH): I know you are very proud of your northern, working-class roots and passionate about representing those things in TV drama. Was that partly what led you to a career as an actor?

Julie Hesmondhalgh (JH): Initially, it wasn't about being inspired with seeing myself in certain characters or stories, or about addressing any absence of seeing myself on stage or screen. It was personal in a different way. I went to a really good further education college in Accrington and I had a great teacher who had been a working actor himself. Accrington is a small, northern, industrial town not known for its vibrant arts scene! But this teacher had a way about him that made us feel like it was possible and valid for us to be actors and that [acting] was something worth pursuing professionally.

Many of us from that course ended up at top drama schools. When I went to LAMDA in 1988, there were five of us from Accrington and three of the five were in my year. A disproportionate number! That was largely to the credit of my teacher. At the time, though, we were backed by full local authority grants, so that enabled us to pursue acting regardless of our circumstances.

Partly because of where I was from and the people around me, I saw acting as a pretty self-indulgent luxury. I loved it but it took me a while to connect it to the other part of me that had always wanted to be a social worker or probation officer and help people. Even though I'd grown up watching very socially engaged TV storytelling like *Boys from the Blackstuff* [1982], I didn't really feel or understand that connection and the possibilities in terms of my own work. Then at LAMDA I worked with a really inspirational teacher called Brian Astbury who woke me up to the potential of drama to tell stories that could really speak to a culture at that time. Brian had been involved in creating a multi-racial theatre company in South Africa when it was illegal to do so, and he saw those connections between creativity and social action so clearly. Brian really helped me to connect those two circles of interest in my life to create a Venn diagram – that I could do something I loved creatively and could also bring positive change. Being part of change through art. That is the space where I feel happiest and most fulfilled – in that centre space of my Venn diagram!

CH: Having never lost your Accrington accent, has that had any impact on the sorts of TV roles you've been offered?

JH: Absolutely. I've been thinking about this a lot recently because of all the discussions around class and the arts in the UK, not just about access, but about representation also. Because of their accents I know actors who routinely get cast as sex workers or teenage

mums or young grandmothers on council estates. There is definitely an established stratum of TV casting in terms of accents, the connected perceptions of class and social identity, and the associated roles being offered. My accent seems to lend itself to parts associated with upper-working-class or professional-working-class identities such as nurses and teachers. That's the level of casting in which I seem to be most comfortably placed for UK TV. I don't get cast as doctors or lawyers. Within that casting stratum, certain regions have particular connotations. If you're a Scouser, for example, you're less likely to get those professional-working-class roles. If you're from Birmingham or Wolverhampton with a strong accent, then you're even less likely to get those parts. There is certainly a pecking order of regional accents and comfortable TV casting associations, with levels of prejudice and stereotyping. It's about how your accent lends itself to familiar class representations. Naturally having a strong regional accent makes you work doubly hard to prove to people that you can play characters outside of those parameters. From an English perspective, Scottish, Welsh and Irish accents are a little more classless in casting terms – there are fewer layers to that casting stratum.

I think there is still an underlying idea that the 'best' acting default is the RP accent, as a foundation on which to fashion other accents when required. It makes roles far more accessible to you across a range of class identities and associations. I know actors who have really had to fight to keep their natural regional accents if they're playing particular professional roles like politicians, doctors or lawyers. If you have a strong regional accent, you're routinely asked to soften it or to change it completely to RP [received pronunciation]. I also know many actors who have changed their regional accents permanently in real life to be taken more seriously in the industry – and it has worked. I understand why they would do that.

My career hasn't suffered for not making those changes, however. Because there is now an emphasis on casting the net wider in terms of regionality and class, I've benefitted from that. I've now decided just to own it and to stop questioning it. I think there are people who want you to question it – whether you can be successful in the industry and still proudly identify as working class. When you do continue to identify in that way, people are very eager to try to pick holes in that. It is problematic that anyone coming through the industry from a working-class background may struggle to find role models because most people who have any iota of success are encouraged to no longer define as working class. For me, my regional accent is my baseline and it is about me saying, 'This is me'.

CH: So you feel there's still some way to go in terms of how the UK TV industry includes and represents a full spectrum of class identity?

JH: Institutions like the BBC are making such strides to be more inclusive in all departments in terms of regionality, ethnicity and disability, for example. Class inclusion, however, is far more difficult to quantify and to tackle. You may, for instance, have a workforce which is diverse in a variety of ways but is still predominantly privately educated, certainly university educated, and from generally more privileged backgrounds. That still doesn't really get to the heart of the problem and the complex intersections of identity and opportunity – or identity and lack of opportunity – for, say, a young black person or disabled person or trans person growing up on a council estate in Peckham. When those sorts of genuine voices do come through, it still tends to be through theatre, because there are far more committed development and outreach programmes in regional theatre to nurture those authentic voices from those communities, and then TV sometimes picks them up at a later stage and repackages them for TV.

It does seem to me that there's a willingness to tell working-class stories from TV commissioners in this country, but there's also a nervousness about it now. It all seems very patronising and misjudged now to adopt that 1960s *Wednesday Play* [1964-1970] or *Play for Today* [1970-1984] approach of having largely middle-class creatives make dramas that speak about working-class lives and experiences, exploring those things like a sort of social tourism or to present as benevolent or enlightened. That would, quite rightly, open up TV producers to a lot of criticism today. There are definitely still older executives working in British TV who came up through that grammar school, scholarship route and who still identify as working class and who have a great sense of investment in those stories, although arguably in a more romanticised way, but who are now so disconnected from the realities of what all that means for people and communities today. They're not of that world now and know nothing of that social and economic underclass created by Thatcherism. So how do they tell those stories? I've noticed a pattern on British TV of only telling those stories when they're true stories – through the lens of documentary or 'reality' or 'based-on-real-events' drama. Being able to say that means there's less potential come-back. It becomes a form of permission to tell those stories on behalf of those people. In terms of fictional worlds and characters, since *Shameless* [2004-2013], I can't remember seeing a TV drama in the UK that's properly based in those communities or that people from those communities would actually want to watch and where they would truly see themselves.

CH: More broadly, what change do you hope to see in the TV industry over the next few years in terms of progress for diversity and inclusivity of all kinds?

JH: We're currently going through a phase of real change. We've still got a long way to go but it'd be very unusual to see an all-white production of something on British TV now, whereas I'd say only five or six years ago that would have been completely normal and you wouldn't have even questioned it. Even if you see a period piece like that now, it raises questions. We need to keep finding new ways of telling classic stories, not just to include people but also to have something interesting to say. Traditional ways of telling those stories no longer seem sufficient – shake it up a bit. Even if all historical documents emphatically say that there were no people of colour there at that time, for example, who cares? Still cast inclusively because people watching still need to see a version of themselves, so we can all relate that story to our lives in the present and in an inclusive way. That matters. The framing of things matters. Moments ago, literally moments ago, it would have been seen as acceptable to cast an able-bodied person as a person with a disability. I don't think that could ever happen now. TV productions are having to work a bit harder – and that's good.

I would like to see an end to tokenism and box-ticking approaches to representation. You know, the best friend being Black or Asian or disabled – with the lead still too often White and able bodied. I think we're still a long way from lead roles being more inclusive and it not being note-worthy. We're also a long way from changing perceptions around who can be stars and carry a show as leads. There is definitely a conversation going on about these things currently in training and casting contexts. We're only at the start of that journey, I think. The role of the casting director is incredibly important for shaping those things. And it takes just a few trailblazers to make bold decisions and then those decisions and practices start to trickle through to the rest of the industry.

Seeing that sort of progress more widely takes more than just colour-blind casting though. It's not just about being inclusive with actors but also producers, writers, directors, casting directors, at every stage of the creative process, and thinking in a more sophisticated way about how we tell stories from a broader range of perspectives.

CH: You're still best-known for playing Hayley in *Coronation Street*. How did that role come about and what were your initial thoughts about playing a transgender character?

JH: I auditioned for *Coronation Street* when I was doing a play in Manchester. I was thrilled because where I'm from everyone watches it. It's such a big part of people's daily lives. The casting director explained that the part was going to be controversial. She told me,

awkwardly, that it was a ‘transsexual’ part (as people said then). This took me by surprise. I went to Frontline Books, a radical bookshop in Manchester, as they had some books on trans issues. It wasn’t something you could read about in Waterstones at that time! I had been involved in LGBT charities and politics so it wasn’t something that shocked me, but it was something that I wanted to know more about. However, the available literature was quite radical and political and not really what was needed for the role on *Coronation Street*. It quickly became clear that I had to approach the role as a person rather than as an issue. My initial ideas were totally at odds with what the writing team had planned though. At first, they saw the character as a joke. Hayley was one of a number of failed dates for Roy Cropper. Some of the writers thought it would be a laugh to have Roy go on a date with a ‘transsexual’. I only learned this later. Although my initial contract was short, I felt confident and determined that I could really do something interesting with this character. Thankfully, the writers quickly picked up on that earnestness and also started to see potential in the character beyond just being a gag.

I have a real belief in television, particularly soap, as a tool for social change. So, at the time, I was surprised when the trans community were initially very anti-Hayley and against me playing it, although of course now that makes perfect sense, for all of the reasons we’ve already discussed. They had also identified that it was planned as a joke. But it quickly became very clear that I was taking it seriously and I was playing her as a real person.

Over my 16 years as Hayley, the laws surrounding transgender people changed so much. Along with that, the writing team got more interested in LGBT storylines, and more sympathetic and responsible in the ways they handled those stories and characters. *Coronation Street* ended up getting a lot of praise for the sensitivity it showed towards trans issues and challenges, particularly from the trans community. What I’m most proud of is that Hayley became such a part of Weatherfield and so much more than a trans representation. She became a part of people’s lives. People felt like they knew her. Only soap can really do that for a character. You can’t do that over two or three episodes. It happens over years.

It would all, quite rightly, be handled so differently now. I just wouldn’t be cast. It would be a trans actor. When I worked on *Cucumber*, I had a scene with a trans character, played by a trans woman, Bethany Black. That was a really pleasing moment for me – a sort of passing of the baton from old to new ways of doing things.

CH: Following-on from *Coronation Street*, what led to your role in *Cucumber* and what was that experience like in terms of the things we’ve been discussing?

JH: Well, Russell T Davies has written for *Coronation Street* and is a massive fan of the show. He loves TV and it's always been his medium of choice. He is also completely without snobbery. He values soap as much as any other drama and his tastes are broad. Often with people who are very smart and creative, there is no need for any sort of elitism. Russell is all about connecting with complex characters and their relationships, and he recognises soap as a space for that kind of investment in personal stories and struggles, and what that represents on a grander scale for people. And he reinvented *Doctor Who* through bringing those strengths from soap.

Russell was, I'm sure, instrumental in getting me seen for my role in *Cucumber*, although I'm also certain it was written with me in mind. He is also very aware when it comes to the things we have been discussing around diversity and visibility. At that time, I remember sitting in the readthrough for *Cucumber* thinking I've never been in one this diverse in terms of ethnicity.

Class-wise, *Cucumber* was interesting. I was a realtor, earthy and a worker but definitely a professional with a bit more money than characters I had traditionally played. I softened my accent slightly. I loved that role. Cleo was brilliant and the stories around sex and the sexualisation of children were important and timely. Getting that part after *Coronation Street* was a huge leap forward into a different kind of work for me. They definitely took a punt on me.

CH: I know you're a life-long fan of *Doctor Who* and you've recently had a guest part on the show. What are your thoughts on the recent, much-discussed developments in *Doctor Who* in terms of casting, storylines and inclusivity?

JH: As you can probably guess, Chris, I think the recent developments in the show are absolutely brilliant. What feels like a seismic shift at the time within a culture and stimulates such debate will very quickly become the norm – and that's fantastic – and that's what TV storytelling is all about, being part of a conversation, which brings about positive change in the world. *Doctor Who* is incredibly exciting at the moment in that way, but I'm sure it's a challenge for the people working at the coal face of that currently, in tackling concerns or criticisms which inevitably come in response to bold creative moves, bringing different faces and accents and stories to the screen.

I do think about what it must mean to be a young Asian girl in Yorkshire and see Mandip [Gill] on screen or to be a young black lad from Sheffield and see Tosin [Cole], and think, 'Oh yeah, there I am!' Not only are they seeing characters they can recognise, also

they're seeing an industry which becomes a possibility for them, creatively and professionally. And, as has been much discussed since Jodie [Whittaker] joined the show, young girls are watching and being like, 'The Doctor's a woman – no big deal!' It's so exciting and has added a renewed energy to the show. And it's not just about challenging gender stereotypes. When I first spoke with Jodie, I was really shocked at how strong her natural Yorkshire accent is. Her accent is so central to who she is and what she's about. Jodie comes across as just so authentically herself – what a message for kids watching.

It's a boldness of story as well as character too. Children in this country don't get taught about The Partition of India in school but there's an episode about that – let's have a conversation and learn more about that. Children do learn about Rosa Parks, but as something from the past – something that's gone now, that's sorted. Rosa Parks did what she did, and the world changed. Even though it happens when they've travelled back in time, having Tosin get smacked in the face for handing a handkerchief back to someone in that episode brings it bang into the present and is a really creative way of highlighting that those prejudices haven't gone away.

Doctor Who has always been about social justice. It's never shied away from those issues. This is just the next step in terms of representation. In the stories, it has always been there. I'm sure this is a big reason why so many people who feel like social outsiders in some way, particularly gay men, have made such strong connections with the show as viewers and fans. You have to ask yourself why that has happened over decades. *Doctor Who* has had such a significant gay following because people saw something in that show which spoke to them directly.

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Dr Christopher Hogg is a Senior Lecturer in Television at the University of Westminster. Chris's key research interests centre on TV drama, acting, casting and connected issues of representation, diversity and inclusion. Chris's book, *Acting in British Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, co-authored with Dr Tom Cantrell, University of York), is the first book-length study of acting processes in contemporary television drama production. Chris has also co-edited (with Cantrell) a collection, *Exploring Television Acting*, for Bloomsbury (2018). Chris has published a wide range of chapters and articles in journals such as *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *Critical Studies in Television*, *Media International Australia* and *Senses of Cinema*. Chris is currently working on a monograph, *Adapting Television Drama* (forthcoming, 2021), for Palgrave Macmillan.