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How FX's 'Legit' Became the Darling of the Disabled Community

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The comedy's creators worried its disabled characters might offend viewers, but found those portrayals have earned the show some of its fiercest fans.



From left: Dan Bakkedahl, D.J. Qualls and Jim Jefferies in "Legit"

FX

Drugs, prostitution and masturbation are among the topics tackled by FX's freshman comedy *Legit*. Despite those edgy plot points, it was the show's multiple characters with disabilities that had co-creators **Jim Jefferies** and **Peter O'Fallon** worried they might offend viewers.

OUR EDITOR RECOMMENDS



'Legit' Creators Spill Secrets of Their Abrasive Yet Kind

From series regular Billy (**DJ Qualls**), a 30-something with muscular dystrophy, to Rodney (**Nick Daley**), a party hound with an intellectual disability, the world of *Legit* is full of characters trying to make it no matter their circumstances.

"We were kind of nervous," Jefferies, the show's star,

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tells *The Hollywood Reporter*

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com>). "We know we're not being nasty, but maybe people won't see it the same way we see it."

STORY: 'Legit' Creators Spill Secrets of Their Abrasive Yet Kind Comedy

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/legit-creators-spill-secrets-abrasive-417069>

But since premiering in January, it's the characters with disabilities who have won the show some of its fiercest fans. **Dr. Drew Pinsky** [said on his podcast](http://drdrew.com/026-jim-jefferies/) <http://drdrew.com/026-jim-jefferies/> that *Legit* "elevate[s] the disability conversation to a new plane." Viewers, meanwhile, have hailed the comedy for treating its disabled characters as real people -- not as mere plot points.

In the series premiere, Billy fulfills his dream of losing his virginity when his brother Steve (**Dan Bakkedahl**) and friend Jim (Jefferies) take him to a Las Vegas brothel. That storyline, based on a real-life experience Jefferies had with a friend's brother, has gained the Australian comic a slew of fans who have the disease.

"I've now met on my [stand-up] tour probably more people with muscular dystrophy than anyone would meet in their life," Jefferies says.

This year, *Legit* has become the largest source of work for [Performing Arts Studio West](http://pastudiowest.com/) (<http://pastudiowest.com/>), a talent management agency which works exclusively with performers with disabilities.

But Jefferies says *Legit* has ended up casting people with disabilities without necessarily thinking about it. For instance, one episode called for Jefferies to hang out with two comedians, so he brought his friend **Brad Williams** to play one of them. Williams happens to have dwarfism.

Another episode called for a celebrity to sing the National Anthem at a ballgame, and **Verne Troyer** (Mini-Me in the *Austin Powers* series) nabbed the role.

TV REVIEW: Legit (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/legit-tv-review-412014>)

"It's like we're going out of our way, but we're not," O'Fallon says. "We don't even think about it."

And it's not about being nice or making the audience go "aww."

"People are saying how nice it is, but I want to make the point we've never written a disabled part because it's nice," says Jefferies. "Only if it works for the story. For us, it has been a load of coincidences."

The show did receive some criticism from a woman with muscular dystrophy who questioned why Billy's part went to an actor without the disease. She accused Qualls, who is not disabled, of performing "cripp face" -- a term she said was the equivalent to "black face" for an able-bodied person playing a crippled person.

Jefferies and O'Fallon say they did initially want to cast an actor with muscular dystrophy in the part, but learned that 12-hour days on the set would be too physically demanding for someone with the disease.

The show has also featured guest spots from **Diana Elizabeth Jordan**, who has cerebral palsy, and **Katy Sullivan**, who is a double-amputee and played a love interest of Billy's.

Thirty years ago, a disabled character on TV actually being played by a disabled actor was rare. Members of the industry interviewed for this story recalled having to beg casting directors to audition their disabled clients.

The Facts of Life's **Gerri Jewell**, a comedian with cerebral palsy, broke ground in 1981 as the first actor with a disability to have a recurring role on a primetime network series. In 1989, **Chris Burke** made history with ABC's *Life Goes On* as the first actor with Down syndrome to have a major role on a network series.

PHOTOS: Midseason 2013: TV's Newest Series

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/gallery/midseason-2013-tvs-newest-series-406236>

Progress marched on, and eight years later, a *THR* story reported that "times may be changing" for young performers with disabilities, citing shows like *Touched by an Angel* and *E.R.* giving roles to physically challenged actors, rather than hiring able-bodied actors to portray them.

Gail Williamson, a Down syndrome advocate, says that back then, actors with disabilities were generally cast in sentimental roles meant to tug at viewers' heartstrings. These "event" (or "very special episodes," as Williamson describes them) tended toward the inspirational.

Williamson has observed a major shift in recent years with shows like *Legit* and *Glee* using such actors in edgier roles. Through work with [Down Syndrome in Arts & Media](http://www.dsiam.org/) (<http://www.dsiam.org/>), Williamson has helped get work for **Lauren Potter** (the cheerleader Becky on Fox's *Glee*), **Edward Barbanell** (the party-animal brother of the boss on Comedy Central's *Workaholics*) and **Jamie Brewer** (FX's *American Horror Story*). She's also placed two actors in *Legit* and a number of them on a recent episode of *Shameless*.

"It's funny how far we have swung since that [time]," she says, remembering the '80s and '90s. "Things are happening."

Daley, who has Prader-Willi Syndrome and plays Rodney on *Legit*, says Jefferies is like "a brother" to him and has taken him under his wing. He and O'Fallon aren't afraid to feed him new lines and let him improv on set, opportunities he hasn't been afforded in previous guest roles on *Seventh Heaven* and *Saving Grace*.

"This thing that I'm doing with *Legit* -- It's more fun. It's more exciting and it's more magical," Daley says.

Daley's rep, **John Paizis** of Performing Arts Studio West, says the *Legit* team sees his clients as people first.

"I am thrilled that people are starting to see 'Hey, these guys can be really funny,'" Paizis says. "While they should never be a butt of a joke, they should definitely be part of the joke."

Legit airs at 10:30 p.m. Thursdays on FX.

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