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# Dwarfism: wrestling show will simply reinforce prejudice

September 27, 2018 12.27pm BST

Dwarfanators: a force for good or just an update of the Victorian freak show? [Dwarfanators](#)

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Historically and culturally, many societies' frames of reference concerning dwarfism have put people with the condition at the margins of humanity. People with dwarfism are subjected to daily abuse from members of the public when out working, commuting or just getting on with their daily lives.

Even within disability circles, research suggests that the condition is given marginal status. Now, a "dwarf-wrestling" company from the US, The Dwarfanators, has travelled to the UK with the intention of putting on wrestling shows around the country. The PR company in control of its advertising and content has claimed on social media that:

## Author



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*The Dwarfanator's Wrestling show is the first time a show of its kind will be seen in the UK since 'Victorian times'. The aim of the event is change [sic] perception of people with disabilities.*

The reference to "Victorian times" has hit a nerve for some within the UK's thriving dwarfism community. A UK-based charity, The Restricted Growth Association (RGA), representing people with dwarfism has raised concerns that the show could increase levels of abuse against people with dwarfism, and hark back to Victorian freak shows. The Dwarfanators strongly deny this accusation.

Since the media brought attention to this topic – there was a particularly heated discussion with Piers Morgan on Good Morning Britain – people are saying individual freedom is at stake here. The US wrestlers are not only doing this job willingly, they're trying to make a living – and with the cancellation of some of their shows since the start of these discussions, including in Leicester and in Dorset, they claim their livelihoods are at stake.

The RGA has said that the actions of the few impact the lives of many who will have to live with the repercussions of such representations. They are not alone in these assertions. US organisation, Little people of America (LPA), which represents people with dwarfism in the US, has come out in support of the RGA's stance. In a statement, the LPA said:

*Some people argue this issue is about choice. The wrestlers have made the decision of their own free will to participate in the event. Yet, the choice the wrestlers make doesn't only impact them. It impacts thousands of other little people and their families who are forced to address the stigma related to dwarfs being used as entertainment because of their physical stature.*

## Reclaiming the gaze



Detail from Little Big Woman: Condescension. Debra Keenahan

In an article on the aesthetics of dwarfism and returning the gaze , Australian academic Debra Keenahan argued that the representation of people with dwarfism within the visual arts often mirrored the societal attitude towards people with this disability. That is to say, how people with dwarfism are seen in culture and in the arts, reflects our societal conscious at the time.

When considering the “gaze”, you have to question and critique three perspectives. Who has control behind the lens? What is the representation in front of the lens? And finally, who are the spectators? In her own art, Keenahan is reclaiming ownership and complete control of the representation of dwarf images.

Actor Peter Dinklage has become world famous as Tyrion Lannister in the smash hit television series Game of Thrones. But since he first came to prominence in 2003 as Finbar, the central character in The Station Agent, he has been regarded as a leading figure in challenging and redefining societal expectations around dwarfism and the dwarf body.

Taking roles where he can control or manipulate the gaze levelled at his body, Dinklage's dwarfism often becomes an incidental aspect of his character's personality. As one of the central characters in

Game of Thrones, Dinklage has shown the complexity and agency of Tyrion Lannister – a wise, witty, dangerous intellectual as well as a bon viveur and sexually promiscuous charmer.

## Peter Dinklage Wins the Golden Globe Award



Dinklage is known for speaking out about the representations of dwarfism in society, art and culture. He once described the abuse and mockery people with dwarfism receive as “one of the last bastions of acceptable prejudice”. In his 2012 Golden Globe acceptance speech, he mentioned the name of a British man who had been assaulted by members of the public in an apparent copycat attempt at “dwarf tossing”, shortly after an incident involving the English Rugby team in New Zealand. Dinklage encouraged the audience to Google him.

It is at this juncture where organisations such as the RGA and LPA are making the connections between representations from culture and society and dangerous repercussions among the wider dwarfism community.

## Exploiting oppression

There are clear historical links between dwarf comedy acts and the oppression of this community. A recent BBC4 documentary **Dwarfs in Art: A New Perspective** demonstrated how dwarfs have often been the subject of ridicule throughout history. Not least during the times of the freak show when many were not even afforded their own names, let alone their own liberty. **Charles Sherwood Stratton**, for example, was taken as a child by P T Barnum and used in his circus acts under the name of **Tom Thumb**.

The documentary also noted occasions when people with dwarfism were sold or presented to royal households as pets – objects of pleasure for their non-disabled owners’ gaze.



Queen Henrietta Maria of France (1609-69) and her dwarf, Jeffery Hudson (1619-82), by Anthonis van Dyck. Wikimedia Commons

The Dwarffanators wrestling show has reignited these fears. There is consensus between all involved that the acts and freak shows of the Victorian era were exploitative and oppressive. But are things any different today? How can an exploitative and oppressive show from a century ago be remodelled as a bastion of liberation and proof of progressive disability rights?

The wrestlers have all repeatedly stated that the difference between the past and the present is down to choice. As a doctoral researcher investigating demographics within the dwarfism community, I am left scrutinising this voyeuristic gaze in the visual aesthetics of dwarf wrestling. As Alison Wilde argues, cultural portrayals of disability can either act as “a mechanism for the transformation of prejudicial attitudes which discriminate”, or they can legitimise existing narratives and “perpetuate cultural, social, and economic inequalities”.

I feel that the Dwarffanators have missed an opportunity for the former, and have done nothing to help the latter.

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