

“The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo” (Youtube, 2016)

By Keshia Mcclantoc, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA

1 First published to Youtube on January 4, 2016, and later in the inaugural Digital Creators Program at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival, “The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo” soon became a queer audience favorite. Since premiering, the series has earned a nomination for a Gotham Independent Film Award and garnered over 400,000 Youtube views of its pilot episode (Dry). “The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo” quickly proved itself to be the type of eccentric queer content that a digital audience craves.

2 Over a series of five short episodes the story follows theatre graduate student Caleb Gallo and his friends, a group of queer and straight millennial actors and actresses, in the surrealist landscape of Los Angeles. Unlike his friends, Caleb wants to teach rather than act. In turn, Caleb acts the mediator of the group, often negotiating and participating in conflict while he slowly brings all the individuals together. The dialogue in the series is fast-paced and witty, full of carefully timed jokes and nuanced acting approaches. From the first episode, the show proves that it is not afraid to embrace the awkward moments of life or break the fourth wall. Both clever scripts and artful editing provide a story that is eclectically self-aware and not afraid to make fun of itself. This is captured best in the end of the pilot episode when Karen exclaims “I think this is going to be a great show,” and both music and other characters pause (“The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo – Episode 1). Karen falls back into character, claiming she meant the show she was auditioning for tomorrow, and the music plays again when credits roll. In that moment, the editing perfectly captured the self-awareness that carries through the rest of the series.

3 Brian Jordan Alvarez, a 28-year old actor based in LA, serves as the writer, director, producer, and actor for the titular character in the series. Alvarez commented that he based much of the series on his life, saying “I don’t really think about how I’m supposed to be representing gay people, but I know that I am one and I know a lot of them, so I do it based on my real-life experience” (Horowitz). Despite only working on a budget of \$10,000, Alvarez and his team produced a well-defined and polished series. Although this series was funded by a private investor, it is not uncommon for YouTube series to be funded by audience members, through platforms like GoFundMe or Kickstarter. “The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo” is one of many independent web series that have cropped up in the last ten years, most of them funded by a

digital audience. Often, mainstream media lacks or misinterprets queer characters. Independent projects and streaming sites, like Netflix or Amazon Prime, are now working to fill the gaps in mainstream media by presenting an authentic view of the lives of queer characters. Overall, “The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo” showcases an extraordinary pocket-sized view into the queer dating culture of Los Angeles, where moments of queerness that would normally need to be explained in other series are nonchalantly accepted. The series succeeds because it gives a digital audience these moments where queer characters are actually allowed to be real people.

4 However, the series is not without its faults, and still gives into some persistent stereotypes. In the first episode, Lenjamin McButton makes passing attempts at bisexuality and later says it was just a phase. Although these phases become a joke surrounding Lenjamin, the passing comment adds to the persistence media narrative of bisexual erasure (Cruz). When seemingly straight Billy later hooks up with queer Caleb, this erasure is cemented when neither Billy nor the characters around him discuss a newfound bisexuality. Instead, he jokingly posits himself as a “21st century man” (“The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo – Episode 3”). Even the throuple (or, three-way multi-gender relationship) between Caleb’s advisors is named as “lesbian-centric” rather than embracing a label of bisexuality (“The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo – Episode 2”). Although the show makes significant efforts in including the rarely represented identity of genderfluid through the character, Freckle, this does not negate its casual treatment of bisexuality.

5 Additionally, the show calls out racism but maintains a cast of primarily white actors and actresses. In episode four, Freckle recounts a recent sexual venture to Caleb, telling him the race of the two boys who she slept with. Caleb comments that the story could be colorblind, but Freckle insists on the need for diversity, pointing out “if everyone in it were white, then it would be a racist...” (“The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo – Episode 4”). Although this forty second back and forth posits a race problem in media, it does not acknowledge its own flaws. Lenjamin, Caleb’s advisors, and Caleb’s sister are all played by people of color, and make up half the cast, but they have minimal screen time compared to the white cast members. While their inclusion and the notes on race throughout the series are significant, it falls just short of a satisfactory representation.

6 Despite these flaws, “The Gay and Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo” still delivers a potent and nuanced portrayal of queer dating culture. The significance of this representation within an

indie web series proves the changing nature of queer-centric media, which is now making more efforts to cater itself toward a digital audience.

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