

Women at Warp Episode 67: “The Outcast”: A Very Special Gay Episode

ANDI

Hi and welcome to Women at Warp: A Roddenberry Star Trek podcast. Join us as our crew of four women Star Trek fans boldly go on our biweekly mission to explore our favorite franchise. My name is Andi and thanks for tuning in. Today I am joined by my co-host Sue.

SUE

Hi everybody.

ANDI

And Grace.

GRACE

Hey.

ANDI

So before we get into our topic today, which is “The Outcast.” I want to get some of our housekeeping out of the way. Our podcast is 100 percent funded by our listeners So if you're interested and giving as little as a dollar a month you can head over to patreon.com/womenatwarp. We use that funding for all sorts of stuff... con stuff, equipment stuff, cool stuff! Trust! Ya so you can always support us there. Grace you're hoping to get to GeekGirlCon aren't you?

GRACE

I am! I'm supposed to be there it's in my schedule I don't have any panel that I'm involved with at this time but that could change.

ANDI

Dun Dun Dun...

GRACE

Ya!

ANDI

And Sue I think you're headed to New York Comic-Con?

SUE

I am. And so are some people from Priority One and Mission Log so we are still in talks about possibly having a network get-together. So keep an eye out for a Facebook event

ANDI

And also since this is the future, congratulations on an extremely successful Dragon Con.

GRACE

Yeah.

SUE

Why thank you.

ANDI

I bet you're really tired from all of those panels you did.

SUE

I expect that I am.

GRACE

And not even hung over a little I'm sure.

SUE

Not a bit! That reminds me I have to pack my flask.

ANDI

All right. Well we have a special guest today. Ami Angelwings. You want to tell us a little bit about yourself?

AMI

I'm Ami Angelwings and I'm pretty much everywhere on line except Overwatch and I run Escher Girls that I guess is now my most famous thing. I used to run Comic Reviews and other things. Escher Girls is a site on tumblr, which is just about the way women are portrayed in pop media like comic books and in anime and other things... in videogames, yeah that was the other one, and like sort that you know on promotional box art and stuff like that and just some of the ridiculous ways that women are portrayed in and posed in and stuff like that. There's a misconception it is just about the impossibility of the pose that kind that is where the site name came from for some things. Sort of like an Escher painting where you kind of look at it and you go oh that looks OK. And I was like no way. That's kind of weird.

ANDI

That's anatomically impossible!

AMI

Yeah but it's not necessarily impossible it could just be ridiculous like it could just be like ... that's not something that you would be posed for. Not necessarily impossible. Like I sometimes call it kind of stuck in quicksand syndrome where it's like the enemies are behind you and for some reason every woman is always standing with her butt kinda turned... around? Right? It's like you can't move your legs!

ANDI

The boobs and butt pose, yeah.

AMI

Yeah. And it's like I'm not saying it's impossible all the time. Sometimes there are sort of things where it's like oh they moved her butt cheeks so that it can be visible. Or like they moved her boobs so that it can be visible which my friend called boob flounder.

EVERYONE

[laughter]

AMI

But sometimes it's just that it's kind of ridiculous. It's just to give examples mostly, because what I noticed a long time ago when I was writing stuff about this topic, it was like we all know what's out there is just nothing has kinda curated it. So that's what I do. But like I always get people who like to focus... because in my description I have like an "or" not an "and"... so it's like it can be any of these things but people just focus on the impossibilities. "So you think that women aren't flexible at all." I'm not saying that! Nobody actually reads what I say so I guess I'm getting used to that.

ANDI

I remember years ago I submitted to Escher Girls a something from the civil war comic. I think it was Dagger and Cloak. It was Dagger and she was pointing and her boob like melted all the way down. So you can get both boobs into that picture.

AMI

I remember that one, yeah.

ANDI

And one of her boobs was legit at her belly button just so we can see them both clearly. It was pretty amazing.

GRACE

Good lord!

AMI

It's just meant to get the conversation started. It's not meant to be the end-all and be-all. And I only take submissions about professional official art sort of like comic books and advertising. Fan art is fan art. I don't put that up. Right? Because I don't want people to feel like they shouldn't draw. It's about what the industry selects for. It's not about what you personally do. Which I try my best to like because I'm not for any sort of harassment culture and sometimes I worry about this. I always say: no I'm not picking on like random or this type of art. I have nothing against that!

ANDI

Well that makes a lot of sense I think.

GRACE

Yeah

ANDI

And I really love that blog.

GRACE

It's fantastic. Yes.

ANDI

And we've got a really good topic really rich. We're going to be talking about "The Outcast," the TNG episode. And when we put out a call for comments on our Facebook... guys I don't think we've had an episode get this much discussion.

GRACE

No I think you're right.

ANDI

The comments that we got and the quality of the comments we got we got a lot of different viewpoints from a lot of different like lenses. It was very very interesting. So I encourage you all if you haven't already to go and check that out and feel free to participate because I was really impressed and our listeners rock!

SUE

It's so good that we have our listeners listening right?

GRACE

Yeah. This one's for you listeners.

GRACE

Let us listen to you.

EVERYONE

[laughter]

ANDI

So “The Outcast.” Just really quickly if you have forgotten “The Outcast” is what I like to think of as TNG’s very special gay episode.

GRACE

Without any actual gay.

ANDI

Exactly. And it is the one where Riker falls in love with a member of an agender race who decides that she is actually a woman and they fall in love but her race in the end decides that she is wrong and needs to be cured. And they do so in a very disheartening end.

AMI

It's a gut punch

ANDI

Yeah. So I think that this is an episode that people mostly remember so we're not going to spend a whole lot of time on the synopsis. I think that the actual themes of the episode are really rich and are going to give us a lot to talk about. So first thoughts on this one?

GRACE

It's one of those episodes that no matter how many times I see it no matter how many times I know what's going to happen I always find myself just wishing that it's going to end differently. It always hurts to get to the end.

SUE

I think that this episode in general... in general... holds up really well but that's because it's one of the TNG episodes that's meaning for a lot of people has changed the most since it first aired.

ANDI

Yeah. I would agree with that.

SUE

Because we're two we're talking 25 years 1992 to 2017. Right? That's 25?

GRACE

Yeah.

SUE

Yes. And it was very clearly intended to be about homosexuality. And today I think a lot of people especially people who are seeing it for the first time read it read it as a trans allegory.

EVERYONE

Yeah.

SUE

So it's like the immediate thing you think about because of how society has changed with the episode. And I think its effectiveness has changed depending on how you yourself interpret it and what you take from that episode.

ANDI

Yeah when I "First Time Trekked" it I completely read as a trans episode. And I was actually pretty impressed with it for the fact that it was on TV in 1992. And please tell me another American TV show that did a trans episode, even if inadvertently, in 1992. You know I think we forget sometimes like how rare that would have been. So I mean there are plenty of I guess shortcomings that we are definitely going to be discussing but I think it's hard not to be impressed that they even made this episode at that time.

AMI

Yeah. I wanted to be on for this episode because when you asked me it was like... well... like this episode came to mind because I have strong opinions on it. I sort of argue the trans-devil's-advocate where it's like I know a lot of people have tons of problems with it but I also think that it's kind of a good episode in some ways. Like I think the speech at the end, which we're going to get to, like of you just clip it ... it's a really great sort of a protrans speech.

ANDI

Kind of timeless too. I feel like that's the one part of the episode that doesn't change.

AMI

So like it's a trans episode that was in 1992 but the thing is that people didn't catch that it was a trans episode... and part of it was that trans issues was not quite in the mainstream. Right. So people kind of knew gay issues. It's accidental and the shows kind of an ignorance of the writers, I think, because this is TNG's sexuality version of the half white half black episode of TOS.

SUE

Yes.

ANDI

Let That Be Your Last Battlefield.

AMI

Yeah. Where it's like we're gonna make something up here and they didn't make something up because it exists. But they thought they were making something up.

SUE

They thought it was something preposterous that could never happen so let's use it to tell a story.

AMI

It is a little bit of... like I kind of fine that cute. I don't know why. It's like "awh you think you're making something up."

ANDI

You think you're so creative. Isn't that precious?

SUE

[laughing]

AMI

Yeah. But also like another thing besides the trans sexuality and gender identity stuff here is also that I love Riker and Beverly Crusher's weird romances with people. And like everybody they have a romance with is like there's something interesting about them... not necessarily bad but... Beverly Crusher also dates the trill right? Who ends up changing genders.

ANDI

They do have a tendency to get the more interesting love interests, I think, Beverly and Riker.

GRACE

Yeah.

ANDI

There's none of this Troi business where she just falls for swarmy ass dudes that do some shady crap.

GRACE

Although I guess in that case she's the mysterious love interest.

ANDI

Ha ha! That's true.

AMI

So it's like Riker's dated the assassin girl [from "The Vengeance Factor"] who I also love. And this episode I always say Riker dated the trans girl and people kind of forget that because they're "like she wasn't trans" I'm like "well she identifies as the gender she wasn't assigned." So...

SUE

She is quite literally trans.

EVERYONE

Yeah.

SUE

Whereas she is she is also a metaphor for a lesbian.

ANDI

She has to wear a lot of hats.

AMI

Like and I know that from like the gay episode point of view it completely fails because there's like people wanting her to be more masculine or a male actor or whatever. And that would be good for the gay part. For the trans part it's also complicated because then it would be... like if you look at her as a trans woman it would be another example of having a CIS man act as a trans woman sort of thing.

ANDI

That's really interesting I never thought about it like that. To me one of the things that would have been awesome about having a male actor is that the point of the episode, at least I've always seen the strongest

point of the episode, is that gender is internal. So I felt like a male actor might portray that better like drive that theme home better but you make a really good point.

AMI

Yeah. And I think for trans women, I can't speak for all trans women, but like some trans women who really identify with the episode ... you know they identify with her being a woman ... having like a CIS person portray a trans person is always going to be problematic. But sometimes you have like CIS men portraying trans women there's always this "trans women are really men" sort of the thing. You know? And I think it's cool! I like that Riker dated a trans woman and I think that's cool. It's the conflation of sexuality and gender thing of the heteronormativity that kind of screws up that episode.

ANDI

We had a Twitter comment that I thought was pretty straight forward about it. Olivia said it doesn't quite work because it hinges completely on "heteronormativity female identified attracted to male identified." So it's strange. I thought that when I rewatched it because I've rewatched it a couple times since I first saw it. I was more impressed with it when I first saw it then I have on rewatches. Although I still will always have a special place in my heart for this episode. But the thing that really struck me is that like we get this episode that at least they were attempting to tell a story about like LGBTQ but like more on the LGB side of things.

GRACE

Oh yeah.

ANDI

And then we end up with a straight couple, essentially, which is really interesting to me and kind of undermines what they were trying to do which is why I think it's so interesting that we're talking about it. Like is it a gay episode or is it a trans episode? And I think that's so interesting. Like every time you look at you can look at it little skewed a little bit and the whole meaning of the episode changes.

SUE

Just really quickly in case we have listeners who are not familiar with the phrase heteronormativity. Basically it means that being straight is normal. So the issue of... we haven't agender character who feels she is a woman and is a woman and declares that to people and then falls in love with a man. While it's trying to be an allegory for homosexuality, they're still portraying straight couple.

GRACE

Which we have no shortage of already.

ANDI

Especially in Star Trek! Ha ha!

GRACE

Yeah. Yeah.

SUE

But there's also some issues surrounding the portrayal of the J'naii because they are supposed to be agender and asexual and they are basically portrayed with all of the worst stereotypes of both of those communities.

ANDI

Yeah we actually got a phenomenal comment on that on our Facebook from Tina who said "As someone who is agender and asexual this episode seems like one I'd love. A whole planet full of people like me? That seems like a dream come true. But then I watch it and I find nothing in the J'naii I can relate to. There's every awful

stereotype about asexuality given form. They look down on non asexuals, are cold unfeeling and dispassionate, they're incapable of having sex or romantic relationships or if they do then they are no longer asexual. And on top of that Soren's line about how the J'naii used to have gender and sexuality has a strong implication that their society was intentionally engineered into what we see. To me that runs a little too close to the idea that asexuals are just suffering from some medical condition that can be fixed." And so I felt that was a really cool comment and that brought up a lot of issues. And I'd love to discuss that a little more.

GRACE

Yeah one of the interesting things about this episode is - intentionally or not - it touches on a lot of different issues with portrayals of members of the LGBTQ community and the asexual community. Again whether it intended to or not for good or for bad it brings a lot of issues in discussion wise.

AMI

Yeah and I think it's again sort of their... like it's completely unintentional because again they think they're making stuff up again.

SUE

Yes exactly.

AMI

So they then think that there was an agender community. They didn't think that there would be any problems of how they were portraying this because like the whole thing about Star Trek is that we move our issues onto a different planet so that people can sort of see it. Whereas if you put it on to humans then people kinda get defensive. At least that's the theory behind that right.

ANDI

The strength in the allegory of sci-fi telling is exactly that. It's giving us a lens to look at it from the outside.

AMI

But the problem is that there are people who are agender and therefore it's like seeing themselves as this authoritarian society who are the ones doing reparative therapy... is really messed up. And also that whenever people portray like androgyny in media it's always like we're going to have CIS woman play all the characters.

GRACE

And it's always very visually a masculine bent of androgyny.

AMI

Right. Exactly.

GRACE

You don't see a lot of male bodied actors in skirts or dresses or anything it's usually just CIS women in frumpy clothes with unflattering haircuts. I hate to stereotype but that's usually how you see it.

AMI

It's interesting, actually, how many different ways you can look at this episode. What people latch on to depending on what means something to them or what does it. Like for me I really love Soren. This gets lost in everything but it's Soren who bonds with Riker because they're both really good pilots. And then he's like "I don't want to let you pilot a shuttle that you don't know how to use." Then she's like "I'm a really good pilot." And then he's like "so am I." And he's like "Wow you are a really good pilot!" And so this is also sort of like a gamer girl thing to me. And I think that's really cool. And I kind of like that he likes her because of all these things not just because she's stereotypically... like even when we're talking about heteronormativity that's kind of cool.

SUE

I do also like that he outright asks what pronouns to use. But it is not great that in you know 24th century Federation that Commander Riker can't get beyond masculine and feminine pronouns.

AMI

Yup. This is like the world building thing that kind of runs into the 1982 people who aren't aware of these things writing the episodes so you end up with like... now we watch it and we're like "oh the future apparently has no... we don't use z or anything."

SUE

The limiting factor for so much of this stuff is what the people writing the episode were familiar with and what they thought was possible or preposterous or they were making up.

GRACE

And honestly that gets very distracting. Just being like "Really? You guys don't know about the 'they' pronoun? Not even going to try? Okay fine!"

ANDI

I would like to say though going kind of back to Soren and Riker together I have to say that I can't think of another person besides Troi that has that much chemistry with Riker.

GRACE

They have great sexual tension both of them.

ANDI

Yeah it's pretty impressive. Like for me she's the only one-off love interest that I could actually see him... like it felt organic and it felt like he really fell in love with her rather than just like... "oh this is the love interest of the week." And I think that's why so much of this episode that still kind of holds on is because they felt very authentic.

AMI

Yeah. And I think that's why the ending hurts everyone so much because I really really rooting for them.

SUE

You just want those crazy kids to make it.

AMI

Yeah exactly. And I also like that Soren like... it is really heteronormative... and I really, really like in terms of what makes a man and what makes a woman, but I also think that in the way her questions to everybody and her questions to Riker and her questions to Crusher sort of exposes how constructed that is in our society too because Crusher was trying to explain like, "wait a second I have to think about this... um makeup?"

ANDI

It is true, it's like when you actually have to sit down and be like, what is man and what is woman, and like this whole idea of like "these qualities are for men and these qualities are for women." It does highlight how stupid that is.

SUE

I do love that we get the bit with Crusher where they're talking about makeup and she's like, "So women make themselves beautiful to attract men and only women do that". I'm just like I know men definitely do that! They just do it different.

EVERYONE

Laughter

AMI

So should we also mention about the portrayal of warfare.

ANDI

Yes. This is a good segue into ... all of us sudden Worf is sexist! Ha ha ha!

AMI

Yes! All of a sudden! And this has always bothered me. It's like where did this come from?

ANDI

I feel like there like in the writers' room and they're like "we need to have someone push back on this so we can show the other side but shit we've made this a egalitarianism society we make randomly sexist? It's the Klingon! Make the Klingon sexist!"

GRACE

Any sexist behavior he has though would have come from being raised by his federation parent though. Right?

SUE

Right, that's the thing! Klingon society has been shown as being sexist but Worf wasn't raised in Klingon society.

ANDI

Yeah. So he also super digs really hot strong women which is something I share with him. When I see Dax with a bat'leth, I'm all about that.

AMI

Well it's like Worf has been playing poker with them for so long ... like this the first time or does he do this regularly? Like does he regularly just balk the way Troi or whoever plays poker?

GRACE

Has he taken a bunch or cold medicine what is happening?

ANDI

It just really is out of place. WORF? Why did this come up now? Oh it's part of the theme of the episode.

SUE

Well I hope every time he brings it up that that Bev calls him out on it.

ANDI

Yes.

AMI

And it's like Worf... if you like dated K'Ehleyr... oh women are weak. And I just feel like if Kaylor can show up, just the ghost of Kaylor, should show up and just punch him.

GRACE

I have a theory and you may not all agree with it but it's mine. My theory is he saw these sort-of would be andro-aliens and was like, "damn! That's kinda hot!" Then he's like, "oh wait I'm not supposed to find that that hot! Gwahhhhh! Hype it up on the misogyny here!" Worf doth protest too much is what I'm sayin'.... He liked them sensible haircuts.

SUE

You see this little tiny like throw away supposed to be funny scene though... can open up a conversation about how effeminate words are used as insults. And that's a problem! That's part of micro aggressions society. "That's a woman's game" or even "that's so gay" because the idea is that gay men are effeminate and being feminine is bad.

GRACE

Or man up. Don't be such a girl about. Stuff like that.

SUE

You throw like a girl, you run like a girl. It's a problem.

AMI

And it's also interesting because in the whole poker episode, even when Worf at the end... and this is the scene of the scene of him saying like, "these wild cards in my hand, I don't know even though... what's it's difficult for me to know the strength of my hand or whatever"... also goes to how he's like he is he's accidentally admitting that actually this is just making the game harder on him. It's not like he kind of dismisses it but then he's like, "oh actually there's a lot of strength to this complexity to the wild cards" ... so I think that's sort of interesting. Intentional or not. It, sort of the whole femininity, or things derided as being feminine, are weak or whatever, have their own complexities and strengths to them that people also have to master.

ANDI

Yeah that's amazing. I've never thought of it that way. And I think you might be giving the writers a little too much credit.

AMI

No I'm saying it's by accident. I'm not giving them any credit.

ANDI

By accident. But I do think that's a really interesting point.

GRACE

If I could break something up on the flipside here. In contrast we have a scene later on where Riker is talking with Troi. And they actually have a really interesting conversation where pretty much he's letting her know, "Yeah I'm interested in Sorin." And they have this conversation that goes kind of along the lines of Troi saying, "You know there's nothing you could do that would end our friendship. Our friendship is always going to be there. I'm going to respect you no matter what. Both as an ex: respecting your choices to move forward and to see the people who you choose to see. But also as a colleague and a friend. Who just respects your autonomy as a person." It feels like a very important scene both in her... just kind of as a friend being like hey you have my blessing. And again as an ex being like you also have my blessing. You don't really get to see that in a lot of media where people have a functioning relationship as the exes where there is mutual respect for each other and not like a bunch of played up jealousy that we do see a lot in their relationship.

SUE

Yeah I was going to say it's so much different from Encounter At Farpoint. It's like "Ooh your ex boyfriend's coming on the ship"

GRACE

And they have this chaste kiss at the end of that. Her just being kind of like, "go for it you go for it buddy!" And. It's a very sweet very tender scene. And I wish we got the that portrayal of their relationship platonically more.

AMI

That's a really good point. And they really love that. And I think that's also why a lot of people read Sorin as so important to Riker because he doesn't talk to Troi about women he dates that often.

GRACE

No he doesn't just brag about every notch in the bedpost to her.

AMI

And I really love their relationship too here. And where it's like yeah the ex relationship stuff like that. This is why I really love TNG when it's really working because it's like when I watched these episodes as a kid like in reruns and whatever I was always like... see this gave me a false impression of how adults work. I thought adults were going to be like TNG. They got to be mature. They don't fight with each other. They handle their conflicts. They talk to each other they can talk openly.

SUE

Star Trek ruined me for real life.

AMI

Yeah. It's actually like, no, adults are not more mature.

GRACE

Also in the ways you'd expect.

AMI

And also it's like the whole Gene Roddenberry no conflict thing that the TNG writers always complain about. I like it! Because you're right that in other shows it would be like oh the exes can't get along, they're jealous. And she's just like no I'm going to talk to you about it and it's cool. And I love it.

ANDI

Yeah I like their relationship in general with a handful of like missteps inconsistent writing across the seasons but I've always liked the way Riker and Troi deal with stuff like this. And I think this is an awesome example of that.

AMI

Yeah. And also about the relationships going back to... Part of why they kind of set him up as the sexist who is uncomfortable with J'nai is because and if he's uncomfortable with Riker's relationship with Sorin is that regardless he's like, "You want to throw away your career to save your trans girlfriend. I'm with you." And I love that end. Ahere Worf is willing to throw away his career too.

GRACE

Worf has definitely got his back not in the same way that Troi does but he's got his back. Or alternately Worf just really wants to break onto this planet and have a stealth mission with Riker.

AMI

Well probably. Yes he probably has that on his bucket list.

GRACE

He just wants to screw with the J'naii little bit because he can't screw the J'naii .

AMI

Yeah and that's unfortunately the other thing. There's also that because like he doesn't like the J'naii anyways and Soren is breaking that. So it's not super perfect but I still love when he's like, "I will go with you."

GRACE

I got you bro!

ANDI

Space bros got to space bro. One thing that we've kind of touched on but haven't really explored is the aspect of the conversion therapy. So let's talk about the conversion therapy ending which there is a lot of discussion about this on Facebook about whether or not they liked the ending whether or not they thought it works like it or a lot of people who liked to have thought that the sadness helped. And there are some people that did not like the ending at all. One of my favorite comments on that was from here and Peter said, "The ending was problematic. It portrayed conversion therapy as effective leaving no lasting negative impact on the individual. It removed the horror of the experience and in so doing reinforced the perspective of those forcing the change. It was limited in what it could get away with on TV at the time but that took a powerful episode and removed some of its teeth for me."

GRACE

Definitely definitely.

SUE

I have always read this as tragic as it's supposed to upset you and supposed to make you feel terrible but maybe I'm the only one who also read Sorin as playing the part. So that it didn't really work but that she had been tortured or beaten or whatever terrible thing they might have done to her into just blending in and not sticking out anymore.

GRACE

That's the thing though they could have easily had her like say something to Riker or they could have also easily just had it be an ending of, "I'm not going with you to safety I'm going to stay here and try to change my society from the inside." Which we've seen in a bunch of different episodes of Star Trek and it's just a case here of... well why not now! And I think honestly it's because, I swear, we cannot get a gay story with a happy ending when straight people are writing it because we always have to be the tragic figures and that is exhausting. But this was really an opportunity where they could have had an optimistic ending that still carried gravitas, but just chose to go with the tragic ending.

ANDI

I think it's a little bit ambiguous on whether or not Sorin is actually quote unquote converted. Which also gives us a lot of different interpretations.

AMI

This is interesting because I totally get the complaints. They didn't show the horrors of conversion therapy or maybe she was faking it. And like I do root for a happy ending. I kind of feel like this episode is always going to head this way. Yeah it sucks that it's yet another bury our gays sort of episode end. But also like for me

personally I think that a that she wasn't faking it and b the conversion therapy that like that there's no lasting scars or whatever. I think the point for me is that it doesn't matter. Like let's say conversion therapy in real life was just perfect. You could zap a ray at someone and change them to being straight or CIS. But would that be ok? Like if there's no actual harm and you're just mind controlling people is that OK? No it's not. It doesn't matter. You're taking away her identity. You're forcing her to be something else it doesn't matter whether it's torture or not. And for me I think it's really effective because it says the problem isn't whether or not you're hurting people physically or whether or not you're hurting people mentally even if you have a perfect Ray that could just fix people. It's terrifying. You saw who she was stripped the way and that hurts.

SUE

That in and of itself is torture.

AMI

Right. You're taking away someone's humanity. Star Trek like especially TOS did this all the time with their like societies that are controlled by computers mind controlling people and taking away who they are. And I think it's effective to viewers some viewers. I mean like it depends but I think there is an effective narrative there where it's like... even if it was perfect, a lot of people empathized and were rooting for them. I think that's sort of effective where it's like, "Oh no she's gone. That's terrifying. That's that's awful."

ANDI

Yeah. That leads right into one of another one of our Facebook comments that kind of reacted to Peter's view that the conversion therapy part was not well done. And that was from Keith who said, "I think the conversion therapy was the best part because it came off as a horror movie reveal. For me before this episode I was against gay folk, all for conversion therapy and all that shit. So this episode showed me the humanity of people of any orientation. And what if you got what you wanted. Keith behold she's been cured. So not only do I learn what a piece of shit I've found about the topic. I get to see the sad horror of what it would look like if I got what I wanted for gay folk back then. The conversion was the great final punch that was needed for myself and others to never forget the lesson." So I think that's really interesting.

GRACE

Wow.

ANDI

Yeah. I mean he commented a couple of times in a couple different places and he straight up said that this episode changed how he viewed gay people.

SUE

Yeah. And one of the comments the one I remember the most clearly he said, "it made me realize I was the bad guy."

ANDI

Which is really powerful and which is why this stuff matters. We get some criticism sometimes that we are just you know trying to find things to be upset about. No. Storytelling matters. Media Matters how we show humanity in our stories matters and can change minds. And so Star Trek is an amazing vehicle for that. and here is a great example of someone who went into that episode thinking one way and it changed his mind. Which I think is one of the most effective ways to teach people to have empathy for others is to have them see stories like this.

AMI

Yeah. The person says it's like a horror episode. It is because it's like it's like Invasions of the Body Snatchers, right? There is a genre of horror about losing your identity and being part of the whole. The Borg play into that.

ANDI

Yeah

GRACE

Absolutely yeah.

AMI

I think this episode plays into that too. So the whole way she's been subsumed back into society, even if conversion therapy leaves no scars, is terrifying to people. Like that sort of losing your identity thing is the most terrifying thing to me and it resonates with me and I think it resonates with other people. It doesn't resonate with everyone. It's really interesting for me to read the comments that you showed us and how different people react to it. But for the people who are like really sensitive to the whole losing your identity thing, being subsumed like the Borg. Yeah I think that this is another episode about losing your identity, like "The Game" scares me because of the whole your friends and family have been have been turned against you and sucked into this other thing.

And this episode is also terrifying for that too. So I think at the end when it's like oh she's just been subsumed by the whole, she's been changed. She's no longer her. That hits hard for some people. This is the argument that's happening society now where it's like what happens if one day they have a way to like fix you or like to fix trans people or fix gay people. And if it was just like zappa-ray and your fixed you no longer have the arguments that you're really torturing people you are making people do something they don't want to do then it's like... Is that OK? I say no. And so this is why I think this episode is so strong.

ANDI

I actually do want to talk a little bit about the various audience reactions. Like even just on this one thread on our Facebook. The reactions veered from "I was left sobbing" to "this episode makes me sick" to "I never rewatch this episode because it upsets me too much" ... like ... ran the gamut. OK? And I wanted to talk about something that kind of occurred to me while I was reading some of these comments is that although there are definitely exceptions I feel like there was a difference in the way that straight audiences reacted to it in a way that queer audiences reacted to it.

GRACE

Most likely, yeah.

SUE

And this was self-identified in the comments.

ANDI

Yes. It felt to me like it was more effective for straight people than it was for queer people. For me it's always been a mixed bag. I think there's a lot of good in it and I think there are a lot of problems with it too. But you know for me it's also one of a few episodes of Star Trek that really tries to answer any of these questions whether or not it meant to. Or explore them whether or not it meant to. So for that I always am going to give it at least some credit and it's always going to be special to me. But I thought it was kind of interesting to kind of look at some of the reactions and you saw a lot of people who self-identified as queer in some way who really reject this episode so I thought that was interesting.

GRACE

Well, it's trying to do a lot. But at the same time so much of this episode get tripped up on this idea that gender identity and sexual identity are like joined at the hip.

AMI

Yeah. Yeah.

GRACE

And that really muddles the message they're trying to make like you can really clearly see it as being an allegory for trans acceptance for gay acceptance. But at the same time because of the wording and because of the writers' lack of understanding of the difference of gender identity and sexual identity. They just kind of flip the two like they're interchangeable. Again it makes the lack of knowledge that the writers have very distracting. But it does really force you to think to yourself a bit about both of them even though you know that you're not having those ideas suggested to you in quite the right way.

SUE

That lack of knowledge in an episode like this is an excellent argument for diversity not only on the show but in the writers room.

GRACE

Absolutely. Abso-freakin-loutely!

ANDI

Think about how different it would be if they had had Tina in the writers' room helping them portray agender people, you know?

EVERYONE

Yeah.

ANDI

Seeing them behind the scenes like one of Rick Burman's quotes on this was, "we thought we had made a very positive statement about sexual prejudice and a distinctively Star Trek way. We still got letters from those who thought it was just our way of washing our hands of the homosexual situation."

GRACE

I kind of agree on that point actually because I think this was in some ways their way of saying, "we addressed that we're done we don't have to pick that thread up again. We already did our part."

ANDI

Yes. Because for me that quote says to me like, "What do you want? We did an episode about it." You know what I mean? It feels very much like, "we did our token episode, queers, shut up!" You know? And that to me that misunderstanding of the queer community plus like the dismissiveness kind of runs through the episode and like... yeah they tripped over a lot of really interesting ideas but how many of them did they trip over through sheer ignorance? You know?

GRACE

Yeah. Also get to go back and watch this episode with that wonderfully fun feeling of, "Oh! How much of this was just them kind of thinking this will appease them and then we don't have to ever deal with it again?"

ANDI

Well they did it. So you know?

GRACE

Yeah.

AMI

I think that's the problem. Which is that in a vacuum this episode is... like I like it. I totally get all the criticism against it, but they don't do anything else. Like if this was a stepping stone then that would be one thing but it is very much like, "Yup! We did our queer episode. Good bye."

GRACE

Yeah exactly.

AMI

And I think that's a real problem. I think this episode is sort of a "death of the author" thing where you've got like you understand the back ground you take from it stuff they don't even intend. Right. But you gotta understand that this is also like you when you see all this stuff they said behind the scenes and Rick Berman it's like oh that kind of sucks.

GRACE

Yeah.

SUE

Yeah. I mean like we said at the very beginning people are going to take from it what they take from it and read it how they read it. I mean that is how art works. Right? And in the most broad sense authorial intent doesn't really matter because once you put something out into the world it's there for consumption. Right? So we're going to talk about it and we're going to maybe criticize it but it makes me think of one of the tweets we got about this episode which I think like really sums up this whole idea really well. Neil wrote "this one gets bashed today for not going far enough but it spoke volumes to me at 10 years old when I first watched it."

AMI

Yeah.

GRACE

It definitely wasn't the stepping-stone it could have been but it was still a stepping stone.

SUE

Oh sure. And even if it has its problems. It spoke to people and it changed people. We know it changed Keith, we know it changed Neal. I was probably around that same age when I first saw this episode. I have to tell you I don't fully remember my reaction to it but I can tell you that for my entire life I've been like, "let people love who they love. What's the big deal?" And maybe I have Star Trek to thank for that. Who knows.

ANDI

We also got a comment from Maria that said, "Just like a lot of the groundbreaking episodes in TOS are no big deal now or even are regressive for its time this episode is pretty remarkable compared to what else was on TV viewed in today's context it really falls short but that's a good sign of progress."

GRACE

It's a sign of progress.

ANDI

Yeah I think that's kind of a nice way to look at it. Like yeah it maybe fell short... but they tried?

AMI

And it's like I'm a queer-identified person too and I see all the problems at the same time. Like I also do LGBT education. I do a lot of training in helping agencies work on their trains and queer policies and stuff like that. I do a lot of one on one. And it's like this episode is not bad for a one on one and especially not bad for children. It's like a lot of children watch TNG. And because it's like the like it is very adult. But it's also like they've got the colorful uniforms. It's very bright. The characters generally don't fight. So I feel like a lot of children watch it and therefore I think it's impactful. It's not perfect. Like ok I'm not going to do the "it's not perfect" defense but I'm saying that it affects a lot of people and trying to help them realize things is also a positive thing.

ANDI

Absolutely. One part that I think holds up amazingly well is Soren's final speech and I think it's basically timeless like it means as much to me now as it probably meant to people back then. Thoughts on the final speech?

GRACE

There's a reason that we've used it to defend our opinions on our Facebook page so many times before

SUE

We made a graphic of part of the speech after the Pulse shooting in Orlando.

GRACE

Yeah.

AMI

Oh my god!

RECORDING OF SOREN

I'm tired of lies. I am female. I was born that way. I have had those feelings, those longings, all of my life. It is not unnatural I am not sick because I feel this way. I do not need to be helped. I do not need to be cured. What I need and what all of those who are like me need is your understanding and your compassion. We have not injured you in any way. And yet we are scorned and attacked... and all because we are different. What we do is no different from what you do. We talk and laugh, we complain about work and we wonder about growing old. We talk about our families and we worry about the future. And we cry with each other when things seem hopeless. All of the loving things that you do with each other - that is what we do. And for that we are called misfits and deviants and criminals. What right do you have to punish us? What right do you have to change us? What makes you think you can dictate how people love each other?

AMI

So this is where... like because I've been sort of softly defending this episode... and this is where I say actually...

GRACE

OK go for it.

AMI

OK. So I love this speech like this is something that I would totally clip, and I have, to show people like that like sort of gender identity because like it is sexuality love who you love. It's also like she says, "I am tired of lies. I am female. I was born that way." I've had those feelings, those lines, all my life and it's not unnatural. Like so right there is a statement of gender identity. Right? And this is who I am, this is who I've always been. Not that I've become female. And then it's all perfect all the way up to end when she says, "what makes you think you can dictate how people love each other?" And this is when it ties sexuality to gender identity.

GRACE
Exactly.

AMI

And like yes that episode is about sexuality and tied to gender identity. But for me it's like it feels tacked on just, "oh we've brought this a little too far. We've got to bring it back." This is about how people love each other. It's not about the fact she identifies as female which I get is the episode but that's always been sort of a downer for me. I was just like, "oh... OK. It's not about trans stuff." I remember.

ANDI

Well, as you're saying it's that very last line where they tie gender identity to sexuality. That is what makes it so clear that they were writing their gay episode.

AMI

Yeah.

GRACE

Yeah.

AMI

For me also like it's sort of a meta for me and always has been sort of a meta version of Soren's conversion at the end. This part is sort of where it brings me down. And I remember that what the writers really intend for this episode. Where it's like, "oh you're so great. Oh my God. This is like the perfect trans speech. Oh right, this is what you people think behind the scenes." And so there's a let down there for me personally. That's my "but". Like I think it's perfect in terms of like talking about being gay and stuff. But it conflates being trans for who you are attracted to. And so that's a little bit of an issue.

ANDI

Exactly. I think it's a great sentiment if you're taking it out of context like that's still a great line and it's a great idea. But then like if you're putting it back into context the way you're viewing it Ami it's it makes it the context changes everything.

AMI

But I think the speech is really good because it gets the core of the thing and I think the portrayal of Soren was really interesting. As I said because she's very likable, she and Riker great chemistry, because she is also like, "I'm a great pilot" and I thought that was cool.

SUE

Yeah.

AMI

And then as a gamer girl it's always really cool. And because Riker is also like he's got that pilot thing but also that she is just like, "look we just want to live our lives we want to complain about work too." Like I love that part because it's not just like everything is roses it's just like look we just want to be who we are. And it's like we have no delusions about what this is going to be. Right? It's just going to be life.

ANDI

I was thinking more about this conflation of gender and sexuality. And I wonder sometimes if that continues to this day because you know the way that we as humans like to divide things in that we have in a way created

this for ourselves where there are CIS straight people and then there is everybody else and everybody else isn't under that one umbrella.

GRACE

Yeah.

ANDI

So the issues that lesbian and gay people have are going to be different from the issues that bisexual people have are going to be different from the issues that trans people have are going to be different from the issues that asexual and agender people have. And we're not we're not all the same. And I think that you know because, especially because, the four letters everybody uses are LGBT and the T is so much different than the other three letters that it just everything just kind of gets tacked on and muddled together. Especially if you don't know a lot. So for people outside of the community who might still just be learning it's hard. There is a lot to know and you're probably going to mess up and if somebody points out that you've messed up don't get upset about it but maybe go and learn more.

AMI

Like I did also want to mention about after her speech. Because I also think that the conversation between Noor and Ryker is really interesting because this is again what happens when you moved real Earth issues to another planet so that people can see a little more clearly. And it's good and bad because again agender people actually exist and this becomes an issue because you're not making something up, right? So you're saying like they're the bad society. But also I like what Noor says when Z says, "Commander after Soren's diatribe, you must think we are cruel repressive people. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are concerned about our citizens. We take our obligations to them seriously. Soren in the sick and sick people want to get well." This has always been the most powerful part of this episode. "You see commander on this world, everyone wants to be normal" and that is always been really powerful and really scary because yes that's our world. We believe everybody wants to be normal.

GRACE

But other people are defining what normal is.

AMI

Right exactly. And that's when I think some people might have been like, "oh my god this is our world. Like what we've been saying is normal? Why do we try to make people fit that?" And this is where people who want to get rid of queer people who want to do conversion therapy who want to fix trans people who want to fix gay people say right which is that, "we just want to make you normal. This is not going to hurt you, you're going to for you be happier after it. We're not repressive." Like after the thing where Noor even says like, "after hearing this speech. You must think we're bad but we're not." And this is also what conservatives here are now saying. Right. And say, "oh well after hearing them talk while these things you must think we're evil but we're not we're just trying to help them." And I think it's pretty powerful but unfortunately it's also conflated that the fact that you know when Z says, "here everyone wants to be normal" and Riker says, "she is." And it's conflated by the fact that she's fitting our version of normal and their society is obviously alien and abnormal so there's also unfortunately that dynamic that happens.

SUE

When we were talking earlier about, you know, 1992, 1992 I went and was trying to find... like... the first positive depictions of a gay character on TV which is a really difficult thing to find. It appears that the first gay character was 1971.

ANDI

Yeah the only contemporary show that I can think of that even touched was the Golden Girls.

SUE

Yes yes I remember that.

ANDI

And they did a pretty good job because the *Golden Girls* is amazing and ahead of its time like hell. But I mean it's still out of the norm for sure. I mean you had Sophia Petrillo sitting at her kitchen table making a case for gay marriage in what year? It's Blanche's son right? Somebody in Blanche's family.

SUE

OK so the episode in which he comes and announces that he is marrying his quote special friend Doug aired in 91.

ANDI

Yes. So it is contemporary. Yeah.

AMI

Wow. Also totally by accident again in 1992 you have a positive portrayal of a alien transwoman and I know that it's accidental and everything but it's like she's not portrayed as a joke.

GRACE

No.

AMI

When she talks to the crew of the enterprise and Crusher's trying to explain gender. It's like what makes someone male and female because... that's something that happens with trans people... where it's like "what does gender identity mean and what the society thinks gender identity means and..." But ultimately it doesn't matter because that's what I sorta think is accidental strongpoint because she doesn't make herself more feminine there's not a scene where she shows up to Riker with long hair and makeup or anything. She's just her, right?

ANDI

If you look at it that way instead of "a very special gay episode" way... if you think about trans portrayals like this is one of the best ones then because you start thinking about other trans portrayals not even just then but now? And there's like no comparison.

AMI

Yeah. Well I mean and unfortunately the reason is because she's female because she's attracted to men like that's really unfortunate. That's how we know. But at least it's not like she has a makeup scene. Right? And you know so many trans portrayals do where it's like a trans woman is like that scene where they put on makeup or a wig or try on a dress... and she doesn't do any of these things. She's curious about how humans construct gender and it kind of exposes how are ridiculous it is. Like when Riker's like, "well when you dance who leads?" I'm like, "oh this is still a thing in the future?" Like really?

ANDI

Well Ami thank you so much for joining us. That was amazing. And you were an awesome guest and we can't wait to have you back. Where can people find you on the internet?

AMI

My Twitter is @ami_angelwings. On Tumblr it's eschergirls.tumblr.com. Although I am going to be moving it soon to an actual domain and probably another site. Probably Twitter is the best way to follow me because I also do video game streaming but my channel name is going to change soon and I'm going to be setting up a Patreon for Escher Girls and stuff like that. So if people want to follow me and pay attention to what I'm doing that's where you do it.

ANDI

and I can attest that she's a great follow so should definitely follow her. And Grace, where can people find you elsewhere on the inter-webs?

GRACE

You can find me on Twitter at @bonecrusherjenk.

ANDI

And Sue?

SUE

I am on the tweets at @spaltor.

ANDI

And I am Andi you can catch me on Twitter at @firsttimetrek where I'm live tweeting through my first time through Star Trek. Thank you so much for listening to this very special gay episode.

GRACE AND SUE

[laughter]

ANDI

Bye everyone.