

# BROADCAST



## Ralph & Katie: How the A Word spin-off put inclusivity first

26 May 2022

The first British drama to feature two lead actors with Down's has raised the bar for accessibility on set

**Production companies:** Tiger Aspect; ITV Studios; Keshet Productions

**Commissioner:** Piers Wenger

**Length:** 6 x 30 minutes

**TX:** BBC1, 2022

**Executive producers:** Peter Bowker; Patrick Spence; Kathryn Pugsley (ITV Studios); Lucy Richer (BBC); Howard Burch (Keshet Productions); Avi Nir (Keshet Media Group); Keren Margalit

**Director:** Jordan Hogg

**Producer:** Jules Hussey

**Writers:** Peter Bowker; Amy Trigg; Annalisa Dinnella; Genevieve Barr; Tom Wentworth; Lizzie Watson

“Every set should give the crew name badges with their job titles,” says Peter Bowker, as he reflects on one of the measures put in place to help his latest production feel more inclusive. “It just feels friendlier. And I finally found out what a key grip does!”

As befits the first British show to have two actors with Down’s syndrome as its leads, and a predominantly disabled writing team, ITV Studios and Tiger Aspect put in place a host of accessibility measures from the outset on the production of BBC1’s *Ralph & Katie*, a spin-off from Bowker’s 2016 drama *The A Word*, which has run for three series.

On top of name badges, crew received large-print, picture-led call sheets, with maps highlighting the two on-set accessible toilets, while weekend work calls and emails were strictly discouraged.

Intimacy adviser Ita O’Brien worked with lead actors Leon Harrop and Sarah Gordy on scenes of close physical contact, while Access All Areas provided a coach to support the pair and also ran workshops for cast and crew about working with learning-disabled adults. This was also the first production to adopt the Call It! app, with everyone invited to respond each day to the question ‘how were you treated at work today?’.

## Changing the language

In a welcome email, producer Jules Hussey (*You Don’t Know Me*; *Guilt*) emphasised that anyone could request “reasonable adjustments” to do their jobs, declaring that “everyone on this production has a voice”.

In place of proposed disability passports, she introduced ‘adjustment and access passports’, encompassing everything from mental health to caring responsibilities and faith celebrations.

“By changing the language, people replied with things they’d never told anyone before,” Hussey says. “Nine times out of 10, their requests were simple, cost no money, took very little time and enabled that person to perform better. That was because they knew that at least one individual, usually the line producer, was aware of their needs and would make sure they were never put in a position that exposed the issue they were dealing with.”

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Bowker, who created the drama and served as lead writer, says this sort of open environment is exactly what's needed to drive progress: "Disabled writers and talent tell me the abiding rule is to ask how somebody's disability will affect their ability to do the job and what might be needed to help them do the job better."

For Genevieve Barr, part of the Ralph & Katie writer's room (see box, below), the relief in declaring all needs upfront was palpable. On the day Barr – a deaf actor and co-writer of BBC2's activism drama *Then Barbara Met Alan* with Jack Thorne – visited the set, a runner distributed see-through Covid masks to help her lip-read.

"I couldn't even talk to anybody when I was giving birth during Covid because everyone had to wear masks," she recalls. "To have that level of thought and care here was really nice – I didn't have to explain myself, or ask people to treat me differently."

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*"This was the most inclusive and diverse production I've ever worked on"*  
*Jordan Hogg, director*

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Director Jordan Hogg, a Bafta Rising Star born with cerebral palsy, says that having never met another disabled director in his 14 years in the industry makes him determined to push himself as hard as he

can: “When you’re born disabled, you’re born a fighter. This was the most inclusive and diverse production I’ve ever worked on and collectively we embody that desire to go above and beyond what we set out to achieve.”

True to form, Hogg didn’t let a mid-production Covid diagnosis stand in his way. “I insisted that the show had to keep going, so my first AD put an iPad around his neck while I directed the actors live over FaceTime, pacing around my flat. He looked like a Tellytubby with a screen on his stomach.”

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*“I’m excited to see whether other shows will take confidence from Ralph & Katie. It’s not necessarily about disability as much as creating a culture of care”*

*Genevieve Barr, writer*

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Positive steps like this can feed into the work of Underlying Health Condition, the disability in film and TV pressure group that Barr runs with Thorne. “Productions should ask, ‘Is there anything we can do to make your job easier?’” she says.

“I’m excited to see whether other shows will take confidence from Ralph & Katie. It’s not necessarily about disability as much as creating a culture of care. If a chair, for example, is going to make a camera operator’s day-to-day life easier when they’re working long hours, they should be able to ask for one.”

Through The A Word’s existing relationship with TripleC DANC (Disabled Artists Networking Community), Ralph & Katie also provided an opportunity to build the skills of disabled craft professionals. DANC teamed up with the BBC and ITV Studios to offer 30 deaf, disabled and neurodivergent trainees remote shadowing of the entire production – double their initial commitment of 15.

Over five months, these individuals had remote access to all key documents – call sheets, movement orders, scripts – the final edit of the first episode and a weekly Zoom meeting with a head of department. At one point, they received an entire week’s rushes.

## **Hands-on experience**

A further five trainees with disabilities – an assistant director, a costume assistant, a stills photographer, a casting assistant and a behind-the-scenes producer working on press materials – also received on-the-ground training for the entire production.

“It’s important to be doing this in these departments – shadowing usually takes place on the fashionable roles like director or producer,” says Hussey. “It’s astounding watching people develop. Having Claire May Minett, a woman with Mosaic Down syndrome, filming for the press kits meant that the lead actors, Sarah and Leon, were seeing themselves mirrored.”

But ensuring everyone was working to the best of their abilities went beyond conventional training. Heads of department put half of their £100 weekly car allowance towards driving lessons for disabled crew members, while the production matched the Covid supervisor’s offer of £1,000 towards an electric wheelchair adapter for one of the trainees.

Hussey also brought her own experiences to the table as a carer for her learning-disabled brother. It was crucial, she says, that *Ralph & Katie* was not something worthy and issue-led, but an accessible primetime comedy-drama that happens to revolve around a married couple with learning disabilities, and their friends and family. An idealised world, perhaps, as couples with Down’s are rare, but positive, unsentimental depictions of life for learning-disabled adults are important.

“In terms of the diverse stories TV is telling, we’re bottom of the pile behind gender, colour and physical disability,” says Hussey.

The intention is that *Ralph & Katie* will be held up as a primer in how to make TV production more accessible and the learnings – good and bad – will be shared. Hussey reflects, for example, that having two coaches, one for each of its leads, would have helped. She says there is work to be done, too, in encouraging users of the *Call It!* app to share the positives alongside the problems they raise.

Barr, meanwhile, is critical of the government’s Access to Work scheme. “Productions don’t have in-built budgets for disability and when you start, you don’t necessarily know how many disabled people you’re going to have on the production. It’s difficult to deliver on the level of accommodation that you’d like when they [the government] take six months to reply.”

One thing all the team agree on is that the approach taken on *Ralph & Katie* must become the norm. Executive producer Patrick Spence, who also oversaw *The A Word*, says: “I look back at every other show I’ve made and feel horrified. I think, ‘Why didn’t we do this on those?’”

## WRITING FROM EXPERIENCE

Pete Bowker pitched *Ralph & Katie* as a “cheap as chips” 6 x 15-minute iPlayer spin-off from his established drama *The A Word*, having observed viewers’ affection for the characters and the emotional reaction to their wedding in series three.

BBC drama chief Piers Wenger told him he was underselling it and committed to a primetime, properly budgeted 6 x 30-minute BBC1 show that airs later this year.

While Bowker had penned all 18 episodes of *The A Word*, he wanted to bring authentic experience to bear on this iteration and put out a call for pitches to around 60 current and previous members of the BBC Writers' Room access group for disabled writers.

The chosen five – Amy Trigg, Annalisa Dinnella, Genevieve Barr, Tom Wentworth and Lizzie Watson – formed a writers' room with Bowker on Zoom. None, including Bowker, had been part of one before, but it formed organically, with everyone knowing they each had an episode to write.

“The six of them sat down with a completely blank page and created a show together,” marvels executive producer Patrick Spence. “It’s a truly team-written show, not a ‘Pete Bowker team.’”

Indeed, while the latter wrote episode one, helped shape storylines and gave notes, he took no final pass on the scripts. “It’s the only show I’ve worked on where that’s happened,” says Spence. “Several writers with few or no TV credits are about to have their own work air, untouched, on primetime BBC1, and we’re working with several of them on their own shows now.”

Dinnella says that while the team have a variety of disabilities, they shared a collective shorthand that allowed everyone to pitch in. “There was so much that we all understood and didn’t have to explain to each other,” she says.

Trigg agrees. “As a disabled writer, you often get put on a project and they expect you to just write about disability. Without the freedom to expand on that, it ends up being a very small story. Here, it’s about Ralph and Katie’s lives, and their disability is only one layer we’re exploring. That gave us a lot of freedom to suggest ideas.”

Should there be a second series, Bowker’s hope is that he could hand the room entirely over to disabled writers. Wentworth finds this thrilling. “We need to keep poking, prodding and asking questions, and hopefully, in a few years’ time, Ralph & Katie will look like a relic of a series because things have moved on so much.”