



## People with dwarfism continue to be typecast for comedy and satire on television

Gabriela Sardi / 14 de março de 2024 / In English, Uncategorizad

**Society | Representation profoundly affects the everyday lives of these individuals, who face jokes and prejudice. Experts emphasize the importance of depicting dwarfism as a natural aspect of human diversity.**

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\*Image: Corazón de León/YouTube

In a bathtub, scantily clad women are seen competing for a bar of soap with a celebrity. This was the concept behind one of the most popular Sunday shows in the 1990s. If it were broadcast today, it would probably face strong criticism from a segment of the audience. As time has passed, certain groups' concerns and demands have gained greater visibility.

Another TV event: seven men, all with dwarfism, dressed in costumes and competing for a hundred reais in a penalty shootout championship. This show didn't air in the 1990s or the 2000s; instead, it happened on August 17th of this year. "All themes evolve, except for dwarfism. Dwarfism is consistently played for laughs and stereotypes. It's time for a change," says Juliana Caldas, the first actress with dwarfism to be part of a global soap opera cast. She played Estela in *The Other Side of Paradise*, which aired in 2017. "It was quite different from the usual TV portrayal. Normally, dwarfism is used for mockery and humor," she points out.

### Laughing at the dwarf

On screen, it's customary: from the classic *The Wizard of Oz* (1903) to the two versions of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), dwarfism, with few exceptions, is associated with the comical or the mystical. The issue is historical and predates our time by far: in feudal Europe, people with dwarfism were court jesters in the nobility's castles; in 19th-century United States, they became part of itinerant "freak shows," alongside other people with disabilities exhibited as circus attractions. "We might no longer laugh at the 'elephant man' or the 'bearded lady,' but we still feel comfortable laughing at the 'dwarf,'" challenges Nisia Martins do Rosário, a Ph.D. in Communication and researcher in the fields of corporeality, imagery, and semiotics.

For her, relegating people with dwarfism to ridicule is a way of dealing with their otherness. "Unfortunately, we resist alterity. Many people who don't fit the hegemonic standard end up being represented as 'out of the ordinary.' Often, they end up in humor because it seems acceptable to laugh at them without straying too far from moral principles; I'm laughing 'with them,' but also laughing at them," asserts Nisia Martins do Rosário, a Ph.D. in Communication and researcher in corporeality, imagery, and semiotics.

In Brazilian TV, generally, individuals with dwarfism either work as stage assistants or in comedy programs. "And, in both cases, they're there precisely as the subject of ridicule," notes the researcher. "We might try to disguise it by saying they're producing humor. But their role is emphasized by their body, not by their subjectivity," says Nisia.

The moment when a host of a Sunday show refers to his stage assistant with dwarfism as "son," Nisia's statement becomes vividly clear. Surely, the resulting laughter wouldn't emerge if the term of address had been used for a person with a different body. "The idea people have is that we're eternal children. Our size makes us appear childlike, even foolish. Socially, the concept that we are people just like anyone else hasn't been established yet," says Andrea Faria, who holds a master's degree in Diversity and Inclusion from the Federal Fluminense University (UFF).

Andrea believes that the television representation of other groups of people with disabilities differs when compared to the portrayal of individuals with dwarfism. "You don't see, for instance, any TV channel making jokes about someone in a wheelchair. Let's be honest, why do they feel authorized to do it with us?" she asks. She emphasizes that it's up to TV networks to hire individuals with dwarfism to work behind the scenes and, in front of the cameras, portray roles that deviate from satire and stereotypes, depicting disability naturally.

In the everyday lives of people with dwarfism, this would have some effect since mockery towards them isn't limited to screens. Journalist and writer Lelei Teixeira knows this well. "Get up from the ground," "you look like a doll!" "I feel like taking you home," "what's the weather like down there?" are some of the phrases she's heard during her usual outings in the city. Worse still are the times when people pick her up without consent—it's happened on the street, on the bus, and even at a journalism award ceremony where she herself was being honored. "It's an almost daily confrontation. And I think we should deal with it, we should face it and talk about it. When we start talking, we pave the way for liberation," she asserts.

### Emblematic Case

"Corazón de León" is an Argentine comedy that narrates the involvement between a man with dwarfism and an average-sized lawyer. The film, already adapted in four countries, had a Brazilian version last year produced by Netflix, titled *Just Short of Perfect* (In Portuguese: *Amor Sem Medida*), employing the same technique as its predecessors: casting an actor without dwarfism as the protagonist and digitally altering their height, a process that requires substantial investment in computer graphics.

On social media, part of the audience accused the film of engaging in "crippface"—a practice where actors without disabilities portray characters with disabilities—and being ableist for discriminating against people with dwarfism. Juliana Caldas and fellow actor Giovanni Venturini led the discourse. "It takes courage to speak up, to put yourself out there," says Juliana. Recalling a scene in the movie where the size of the protagonist's genitals is associated with his short stature, she concludes, "That's gone too far. It's not okay to laugh at dwarfism."

Legally, there is protection: mocking dwarfism can be categorized under Article 140 of the Penal Code, which defines as a crime the act of offending the dignity or decorum of someone using elements related to the condition of a person with a disability. "Dwarfism is also covered by the law, but nobody knows, nobody takes it seriously. Unfortunately, there's a lack of information," protests Juliana, adding, "But we'll keep moving forward, slowly planting the seeds of knowledge and empathy."

There have already been some changes: in September, SBT began airing the American reality show *The Little Johnsons*, which follows the daily life of a family with dwarfism. Andrea Faria highlights the program as an example of a positive approach to dwarfism. Abroad, Disney announced that the traditional "seven dwarfs" won't be part of the new version of *Snow White*, aiming to avoid stereotypes linked to people with dwarfism. It seems that the seeds planted by Juliana (and also by Lelei, Andrea, and many others) are beginning to sprout.



Above, the actor Guillermo Francella, portraying the main character in the movie "Corazón de León" (2014), an Argentine production directed by Marcos Carnevale. A public success in that country and with versions in different Latin American countries, the film deals with the issues raised by prejudices related to dwarfism in a romantic relationship. Before and on the cover, actor Marlon Moreno in the Colombian version of the film (2015), directed by Emiliano Caballero (Images: Corazón de León/Reproduction Youtube).

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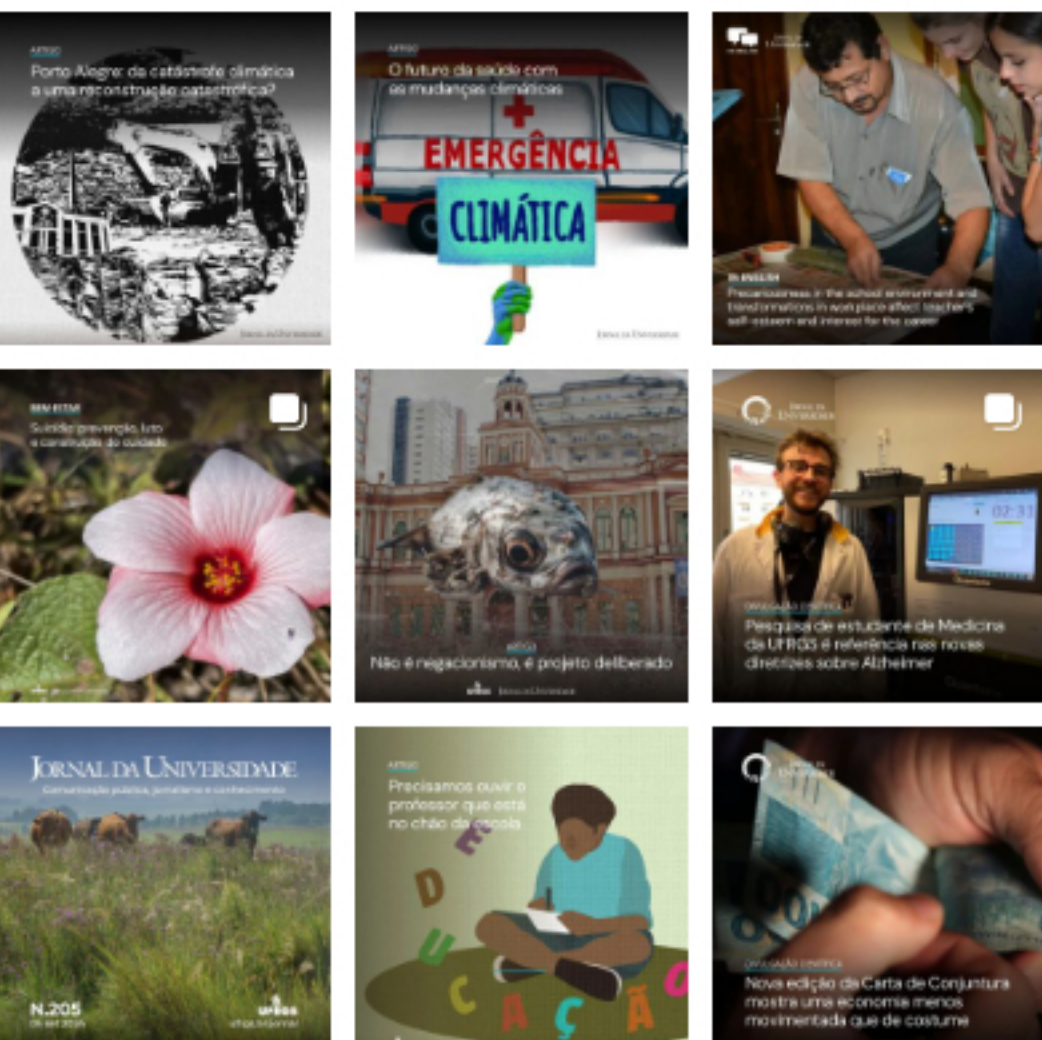
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### ÚLTIMAS

