



Film abets intolerance

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BY LYNNE AZARCHI

"Retard. Imbecile. Moron. Idiot." A top-grossing movie, "Tropic Thunder," still in some theaters after its release more than six weeks ago, is the pop culture vehicle that perpetuates cruelty, stereotypes and disrespect for persons with developmental and mental disabilities. The cruel edge of "Tropic Thunder" is the language and derogatory visual gags that educators, health-care professionals and the families of persons with disabilities have been trying for decades to purge from the national vernacular.

In "Tropic Thunder," there is lots of bathroom humor, which you would expect, but we -- in the "battle for respect" -- didn't expect an actor to portray a character named Simple Jack in such a persistent, cruel and sadistic way.

Simple Jack is a character with mental retardation. Today, educators say "a person with mental disabilities (or developmental disabilities)." We phrase it this way to stress that a person with a disability is a person first, and then we communicate his or her disability. Ergo, we express it as such: she is a "mother who is blind" or he is a "child with cerebral palsy" or she is a "young adult with a mental disability." Person first.

The ongoing debasement in the movie worsens the plight of real people with disabilities struggling to survive amid a culture of prejudice against them. This movie and others perpetuate the myths to our next generation. We learn, and our children learn, that a person with mental retardation is stupid, can only do simple things, is not to be respected, is to be made fun of and jeered at. We learn this on TV and cable also.

Though this movie has an "R" rating and no children should attend, we know that many of our youth under 17 have seen this movie, will continue to watch this movie in movie theaters, as uncaring, financially motivated theater owners neglect their age-appropriate rating enforcement duties. We know that our children will see this movie again when it comes out on DVD and cable.

The next generation's culture is shaped by the media at hand; they will learn that it is OK to use the word "retarded" and to make fun of persons with disabilities, fine to sneer at people who are gay -- and the belittling statements "she's so retarded; he's so gay" will persist in our popular youth culture.

Steven Cook, the executive director of Arc/Mercer, a nonprofit organization that serves people with developmental disabilities in Mercer County, said, "We ended up with an opportunity to let people know that this is offensive language." Mr. Cook and others from Arc/Mercer and the community made a show of force by organizing a rally and asking local movie managers to stop showing the movie. Not surprisingly, the requests were denied.

The film has grossed more than \$120 million. A spokesperson for United Artists said, "We do not take positions based on the content," which I extrapolate to mean that they do take

positions based on the money. Arc/ Mercer then requested that the theater provide short educational segments for the audience. Not surprisingly, these requests were also denied.

What to do? Throw up our hands? We can challenge DreamWorks and other Hollywood companies to make future movies that don't pick on others. We challenge them to cut the cruel and cheap scenes when the movie comes out on DVD and cable and invite them to make donations to relevant organizations to reverse the mess and the offense they have created.

I wish I could tell you to see this movie with your kids, and after the movie, to discuss the issues that the movie brings up, but unfortunately persons with mental disabilities and persons of diversity are trashed so consistently that we think it would be a waste, because the movie characters never come to a positive resolution about disparaging such persons.

The best thing we can do is vote with our feet. Boycott the movie and take the \$20 or \$40 you would have spent and send it to your local or regional association for persons with mental or physical disabilities. Until we signal the movie makers, the advertisers and the manufacturers by boycotting their drivel, the same violent, sexually inappropriate and cruel products will be sold on our shelves.

But wait -- a shining teaching moment is revealed.

Ask your kids if they have seen the movie or plan to see the movie. If they have, talk to your children about treating others with respect. Discuss how the Simple Jack character is portrayed as stupid and pathetic; discuss how a person with a disability would feel watching this movie, to try to reach for empathy and "be in someone else's shoes." Google "disabilities" and explore the sites that are listed there and discuss them. Developmental disability and other social service agencies and the persons they serve have an uphill battle; help them and use this as an example to your kids.

Challenge your kids to come up with a better ending without disrespecting others. Could this movie have been just as entertaining without disparaging persons with mental disabilities? Would the movie have been compromised? Could it have been funnier without Simple Jack? How does it benefit our society to make fun of others? Why do human beings do this and what does it say about our nature? Our culture?

We are working so hard to eradicate the vocabulary of de basement, ridicule and belittlement from our language and our attitudes. Please join us.

One small step for humor; one giant step backwards for humanity, unless

Fight for your children, for the children down your street and the others in your community. Let's advance to a time and place where we respect others who might be different and teach the next generation now.

Lynne Azarchi is executive director of Kidsbridge (kidsbridgemuseum.org). Kidsbridge has created a tolerance museum/learning lab on campus at The College of New Jersey in Ewing. The museum features the exhibit "Face to Face: Dealing with Prejudice and Discrimination," and includes additional exhibits on name-calling, heroes, community service and sensitivity to persons with disabilities.