



Punch Down

In a blog post titled “[Saturday Night Live’s Problematic Send-Up of HIV Medication Ads](#),” POZ contributing writer Shawn Decker spells out what he believes the long-running NBC variety show got wrong. Below is an edited excerpt.

March 27, 2023 By [Shawn Decker](#)

The 2023 season debut of Saturday Night Live (SNL) was hosted by Aubrey Plaza, star of *The White Lotus* (season 2) and *Parks and Recreation*. The episode featured a send-up of the recently ubiquitous TV ads for HIV medications. You know them. They’ve played during football games, cooking shows and even during Christmas movies.

No matter where you’ve been or what you’ve watched, you’ve seen these ads for HIV medications. They are so relentless that, right now, I think people are more familiar with the folks living with HIV in those commercials than they are with the current cast members of SNL. Kenan Thompson, of course, is a notable exception.

I still watch SNL. Well, on and off. When it’s good, it’s a fun watch. When it’s not, I’m ready. See, I’ve got a Spidey sense for when a sketch is looking to spin in the mud for five or 10 minutes. Like, if a character is a screamer who hasn’t been suitably introduced or written into a funny scenario, I’ll scan them without a second thought. I watch SNL the way Simon Cowell watches contestants on *America’s Got Talent*— with a scowl and a raised eyebrow that doubts I will be sufficiently entertained.

One of the areas in which the writers at SNL are the most consistent, unfortunately, is when it comes to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). “I have herpes” or something to that effect is regularly used as a punch line with no setup. So I should have been a little more on guard when the send-up of the HIV ads began.

Foolishly, I thought it would be about how omnipresent the ads are. One of the reasons why they’re doing the sketch is because everyone has seen the source material. The skit is set at a gay club with Aubrey Plaza as the director of an HIV ad. A guy in the ad keeps ad-libbing that he’s straight, and Plaza’s character keeps imploring the actor not to ad-lib.

But he keeps doing it. To his logic, he’s straight, and he’s trying to bring that into his character. Clearly, the joke is he’s an actor taking a gig that he’s not entirely comfortable with. There’s comedy in that concept, clearly, but it wasn’t mined in favor of the hilarity that is homophobia. One of the last of the beleaguered troubadour’s ad-libs was: “I got HIV the same way Magic

Johnson did—from a basketball.”

We haven’t seen so many not-hot takes on Johnson’s HIV status since the early ’90s. For instance, former UFC fighter and current professional blabbermouth Brendan Schaub recently “joked” about not wanting to be near Magic Johnson, alluding to his HIV status.

A recent story from POZ.com debunks conspiracy theories: “Magic Johnson Did NOT Contract HIV From a Hepatitis Vaccine.” My point is, the general public is already still tragically uneducated when it comes to HIV.

Admittedly, I loved hearing one of the cast members in the skit say that taking his HIV medications helps him keep his viral load undetectable, and I think the constant bombardment of HIV ads is doing a good job in educating the general public about Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U).

It’s not going to change anytime soon, but I hope that someday the SNL staff will resist the urge to punch down when it comes to STIs and those of us who are living with them or loving someone who is.