

Paper Mache for 10-9-26 by David Read

Audrey Hepburn gave a memorable performance as Susy Hendrix, a blind woman threatened by intruders, in the 1967 film *Wait Until Dark*. Susy is resourceful, and the film's suspense depends on her finding ways to outwit the men in her apartment. Hepburn was sighted. Would the film have been different with a blind actor in the role? Almost certainly. Would it have been better? That's a harder question.

The play version of *Wait Until Dark* opens at the Sutter Theater Center for the Arts on October 16. We were planning a dinner experience at one of the performances where patrons would be blindfolded to experience sightlessness firsthand prior to the show. The idea caused some backlash on social media, so we decided to cancel the dinner. Turns out, there are many "dining in the dark," "sensory experiences," or "theater in the dark," events being held around the country. Some use blindfolds while others place patrons in completely dark rooms. One group called Fever's Dining in the Dark hosts dinners at participating restaurants in various cities. Guests wear blindfolds while eating a multicourse meal, concentrating on taste, aroma, and texture. Guess it's more of a big city thing and a non-starter here.

But back to the main question, is it acceptable for a non-disabled actor to portray a disabled character including physical, intellectual, and psychiatric disabilities? It's a question we can ask of many celebrated performances. Dustin Hoffman played the autistic Raymond Babbitt in *Rain Man*. Daniel Day-Lewis portrayed Christy Brown, the writer and painter who had cerebral palsy, in *My Left Foot*. Both films introduced large audiences to lives they might otherwise have known little about. Both also gave prominent roles portraying disability to actors without those disabilities.

Actors portray people unlike themselves all the time. That is their craft. For decades, disabled actors have faced barriers to training, casting and even getting onto a stage or set. When a rare leading role depicting disability goes to someone else, it's reasonable to ask whether a performer with that specific lived experience was considered.

Then again, there is no single experience of blindness, autism or cerebral palsy. One actor cannot speak for everyone with the same diagnosis. And these are distinct conditions. Autism is not a loss of intelligence, while a person who acquires a brain injury may face entirely different challenges. The writing matters as much as the casting. Is the character funny, stubborn, ambitious or occasionally wrong? Or does the script give them little to do beyond teaching another character a lesson?

More recent films show what becomes possible when disabled performers do get substantial parts. Zack Gottsagen, an actor with Down syndrome, stars in *The Peanut Butter Falcon* as a young man pursuing his dream of becoming a wrestler. In *CODA*, deaf actors Marlee Matlin, Troy Kotsur and Daniel Durant play members of a family with work disagreements and plenty of personality. These films aren't interesting simply because of their casting. They give their characters real lives to lead. There are also working blind actors, though few are household names. One of my favorite performances by a blind actress playing a blind character was in the 2023 Netflix miniseries, *All the Light We Cannot See*. It starred Aria Mia Loberti who is blind as is Nell Sutton who played the character as a child in the same series. Loberti has said she wants to be known simply as an actor, rather than be limited to blind roles.

For a community theater company like ours, the issue is more complicated due to a more limited talent pool. But we shouldn't assume that a non-disabled actor cannot play the part of a character with a disability. It's called acting after all. Tickets for *Wait Until Dark* are available at yubasutterarts.org.