

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – November 2 – 6, 2009

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Should Deaf actors play deaf characters in plays and movies?

Yes

No

It depends if the deaf person can speak

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: I guess the answer to this question depends on your point of view and values. I would answer “definitely yes.” Others may have a different opinion. Historically the Deaf acting community has struggled to assert that Deaf actors should be cast in roles representing deaf characters. This struggle has been ongoing for at least the last 25 years.

A recent case in point indicates that this struggle is not over. In NY recently the Deaf community protested the decision to use a hearing actor to play a deaf character. See this article from the NY Times, October 13, 2009 which describes protests from the Deaf community over hiring a hearing actor to play the role of “Singer” a deaf character in the adaptation of Carson McCullers novel “The Heart is a Lonely Hunter” for the stage.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/14/theater/14deaf.html?_r=1

The playwright, in adapting this novel for the stage, bestows speech on the character (who did not use speech in the novel). In the final scene of the play the character speaks alone on stage (a soliloquy). Taking this “artistic license” with the character precludes many Deaf actors from playing this role, a double affront to the Deaf acting community.

I guess the casting director for the adaptation of this novel to the stage would answer the question above “It depends if the deaf actor can speak.” An audist attitude to say the least, wouldn’t you agree?

A deeper question is this: Should any Deaf actor take this part if it were offered to him? Would accepting this part in the play be tacitly supporting audism?