

BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

160+ Casting Notices

TM

Why Aren't You Working With Disabled Artists?

Talk Back

BY STEPHANIE BARTON-FARCAS

When the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "artist" as "a person skilled in one of the fine arts" or "one who is adept at something," it doesn't add that an artist must be a hearing, seeing, four-limbed, perfectly formed, white, English-speaking person. When members of our theatre company, Nicu's Spoon, take a walk on the streets of New York, that's not what we see. We see all races, colors, and religions. We hear many languages. That's what makes this city great!

But look again—at the blind lady with the guide dog, the two teenagers speaking sign language at the back of the subway car, the young man in a wheelchair with a briefcase tucked into his side pocket, the girl with the prosthetic arm. Don't look in pity. They have fine, rich lives. But the artists among them seek the work that we—the theatre community—can do with them. And whether we realize it or not, we need them as well: to enrich us and to help us create an onstage world that is more real and reflective of society. Our company has worked with

handicapped (yes, you are allowed to say the word, and it won't hurt a bit) artists

of all kinds for nearly six years. Each disabled artist (deaf, blind, with cerebral palsy, epileptic, diabetic, in a wheelchair, or with prosthetic limbs) creates a different physical challenge for the artist and for the company, and thus each has vastly different needs. Companies often think that meeting these needs will be expensive or time-consuming, but in truth it is no more time-consuming than dealing with an actor with memorization problems and no more expensive than having to pay an actor who needs to take the Long Island Rail Road into Manhattan.

As a theatre company, you have to want to work with these amazing artists. Don't do it just to get funds or to impress someone and seem politically correct. It demeans both you and them, and they'll know it in an instant. Be upfront about working with them

and ask about their needs and limitations. They know they're disabled, so your bringing it

up won't come as a surprise. Deal with what to call their disability, or say to the cast, "If you don't know, ask them. They'll tell you." Find out what they need at rehearsal in order to be their best. What are their technical needs? What medical needs, if any, do they have? What are the possible risks? (For example, if you choose to work with an epileptic actor, as we have, you will run the risk of a possible seizure on stage, and you must accept that.) And will that adorable guide dog really steal the show? Talk it out with them and the cast, openly and with humor.

Hire these performers for themselves and all their richness. Make the effort to seek them out. Seek out and cast all kinds of actors. Mix it up. Everyone could be playing all sorts of roles. Most recently, in our production of *Stumps*, I was asked by a deaf actor (in the nicest way possible) why

I hadn't hired only hearing actors who could sign, as it would have been so much easier for the rehearsal and production process. My gentle reply was that I cast him and the others for their talent, not their ears. I explained that their talent was worth any extra effort we had to put in. And I meant it.

My company is now ending season five and preparing for season six, and it seems we can't *not* think outside the box with regard to the amazing talent in this city and across the country. It does seem odd to me that some companies wouldn't want to work with all of that rich smorgasbord of talent. My advice? Do it. You'll find it easier than you thought.

I have always believed that art has the power to transform—to change us and the world we live in. I still do. But it's up to us to take the risk and make it happen. So go ahead. Sample the smorgasbord!

Stephanie Barton-Farcas is artistic director of Nicu's Spoon, a New York City-based theatre company.