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How Patty Duke Learned

On Monday, the famed blind and deaf educator celebrates her 80th birthday; that night, a Broadway audience will applaud a child actress who portrays Miss Keller at 7—a role that required a youngster to understand what many adults never do

By ISABELLA TAVES

ONE NIGHT during a performance of the Broadway play, "The Miracle Worker," an electric cable broke loose backstage, struck a bar, and broke another cable, making a terrific racket. People in the audience jumped, and the dog in the play let out a yelp.

But Patty Duke, who acts the role of a seven-year-old blind and deaf girl, didn't flinch. Even members of the cast had the eerie feeling that Patty really hadn't heard a sound.

Patty explained to me: "All I did was to squeeze the little dog I was holding. That's why he yelped. Everybody thought it was the noise which had scared him. But it was me."

In the theater, this is called "staying in character." It's also proof that Patty Duke is the outstanding child actress of the day.

Certainly the part she interprets is one of the most difficult ever demanded of a child. She is called upon to play young Helen Keller, who lost her sight and hearing as a result of illness at 20 months. Helen also was believed to have suffered serious brain damage, though in fact she had merely shut herself off from a world she couldn't understand.

It was up to Patty to dramatize this tormented withdrawal—and also to show how, under skillful guidance, Helen began to emerge as a full-dimensional person who would go on to become one of the most famous women of our time, an



Helen Keller as she appears today and, below, Patty Duke who learned to portray her as a blind, deaf child in "The Miracle Worker."

international leader in the rehabilitation of the handicapped.

To try to understand the inner agonies of Helen, Patty began researching into those early years. Research was nothing new to the youngster. In 1958, she won \$32,000 in the popular-music category on the TV quiz show, "The \$64,000 Question." But the bits Patty collected on Helen's first years didn't give much basis for characterization. Only one fact gave Patty an insight into Helen, the child: as a baby, she had been precocious.

At ten months, Helen had been able to say "howdy" and had pointed to the tea table and said "tea." Earlier than that, she was able to say "water" and was fascinated by shadows. Following her tragic illness, she grew up physically strong and healthy, but her adoring parents thought her mind was gone and consequently spoiled her by giving in to every whim and tantrum.

Patty says: "I decided that whatever approach I took to Helen as this difficult child, it had to start with the fact that she had an eager mind, that she had been very active."

In the beginning, it was so like a game that Patty didn't mind giving up afternoon dancing and swimming sessions with her friends. After school, she would go to the apartment of her manager, John Ross, and pretend to be blind by closing her eyes and stumbling around the apartment. She would

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD CHECANI



to Be Helen Keller

trip over furniture, misjudge distances, bump into the Rosses' tiny chihuahua. Other times, she would pretend she was deaf. The Rosses would let their telephone ring until she trained herself "not to hear it."

Then, one day, Ross gave her a copy of a television script written about Helen Keller. "We read it and realized that the part would be played with my eyes open," Patty says. "I don't know why we hadn't thought about that before—it was so obvious—but we hadn't. That made it easier. And when I found out that Helen was going to have her temper tantrums right on stage, I must admit I really loved the part!" Patty, you see, is a normal mischievous kid as well as a mature actress.

Blind adults often train themselves to move their eyeballs in the direction of sounds to avoid the characteristic glazed stare of the sightless. In reverse, Patty had to train herself to stare ahead, unblinking, as a blind child does.

"After a while, things really do go out of focus if you don't blink, and you really begin to believe that you live in a blurred world," Patty explains. "That was hard to learn. The fun came when the Rosses let me practice tumbling around on the floor, fighting. They sometimes showed scars after I came at them and they didn't get out of my way fast enough!"

As part of her preparation, Patty visited a school for the deaf to listen to the tone of voice of deaf persons and to watch how "it takes every inch of their bodies" to talk. She also met the four blind girls who were going to be in the play.

At first, trying to be natural with them was agony for Patty. Then she learned the marvelous and most important lesson of all—that they were "just like everybody else." By the time Halloween came along, they all dressed up and went "trick-or-treating" backstage. Now they are teaching Patty

Braille; she already has mastered the alphabet and short words.

The externals of acting, however accomplished, don't make a fine actress, just a mimic. Patty is more than a mimic because she has "reached" inside handicapped persons as perhaps only a sensitive child can. At first repelled by their handicaps, she is now one with them—understanding but not condescending, sympathetic but not sentimental. Inner feelings turn Patty Duke into young Helen Keller at certain time more than fixed stares or voice tones. In learning this deep understanding, Patty truly "learned" her role—and learned something few people ever do.

PROOF OF THIS is the number of handicapped persons who come backstage, individually and in groups. Patty is the one they most want to see—or touch. With blind people, she has learned to be polite and not over-solicitous. With the deaf, she practices the manual alphabet and beams like a proud pigeon when she makes herself understood.

Recently I was in the dressing room of Anne Bancroft, who stars as Helen's first teacher, when Patty knocked on the door and asked: "Annie, I have two deaf ladies who'd like to meet you. May we come in?"

When they were introduced, Patty explained to Anne, "This lady is completely deaf; the other one hears a little." And then to me: "They read your lips."

In the conversation, a misunderstanding came up, and Anne resorted to the manual alphabet, at which she is expert. Patty tried to follow and, not quite so expert, settled for letting the ladies teach her sign language for "thank you" and "good-by."

After they had shaken hands, Patty followed them to the door and made the floating gesture which means "good-by." One of the elderly ladies reached down and hugged her. And I felt like hugging her myself.



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