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# 'Run' Hopes to Change the Conversation on Actors with Disabilities

The upcoming Hulu thriller, the first to star a disabled actress in decades, hopes to spur the conversation about actors with disabilities.



Kristen Lopez

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Kiera Allen and Sarah Paulson

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Gaslighting and the fear that the person we're closest to is lying always have been popular motifs in the horror and thriller genres — most famously depicted in 1941's "Suspicion" and 1944's "Gaslight." Features like 1962's "What Ever

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"Happened to Baby Jane" utilized [disability](#) to create an added air of helplessness to Joan Crawford's character; it's expanded out to the Munchausen narrative portrayed most recently in the 2019 series "The Act." With the addition of disability, these tropes take on added poignance.

Carrie Sandhal, Associate Professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago, explains the fear of being gaslit and disbelieved is a real concern outside of celluloid walls. From recent [run-ins](#) with the police involving the mentally ill or deaf to the historical associations of the insane asylum, able-bodied people watch horror as a means of distancing themselves, believing it can't happen to them. Sandahl references a 2003 article written by disabled writer Harriet McBryde Johnson, "[The Disability Gulag](#)," wherein Johnson writes about visiting friends of her in a nursing home. "[She] was mistaken for one of the residents," Sandahl said. "There's this feeling that we can always become trapped."

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Hulu's upcoming feature, "Run," treads this territory in its story of the teenage Chloe (Kiera Allen), whose relationship with her mother Diane (Sarah Paulson) becomes one of survival and uncovering buried secrets. It shows how the horror genre is one of the few refuges for tales about disabled women — if not in giving them great stories, at least by putting them on-screen.

Director Aneesh Chaganty and Allen see "Run" as a thriller as opposed to a horror film, but the two genres go hand-in-hand from a disabled perspective,

with Allen even telling IndieWire that if this was a horror feature Chloe would be a fantastic "final girl." And even within the thriller vein, like "What Ever Happened to Baby Jane," the thrills are often left to the able-bodied audience, leaving the disabled audience to draw on real-life experiences to manifest an added layer of fear.

One of the posters for "Run," inspired by Alfred Hitchcock, plays on the fear of inaccessibility, with Paulson's character looking down from the top of a staircase at her daughter. It's an image that gives Allen chills because as a wheelchair user

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herself, she has felt that terror. “When people consider things like accessibility, and other obstacles that are unnecessarily put before disabled people, I don’t think they [able-bodied people] see it as terrifying,” she said. “I’ve been trapped in a building because of inaccessibility. I’ve been picked up by strangers, in my chair, without my permission, because of inaccessibility [and] I’ve never seen a movie that portrays that fear.”

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**Sarah Paulson and Kiera Allen in “Run”**

Hulu

Because that terror is so specific, it was important for Chaganty to draw on Allen’s own experiences for the movie as well as examine his own privilege as an able-bodied person. “I spent a lot of time talking to a disability studies professor at Brown and she educated me on this concept of ableism [discrimination in favor of able-bodied people],” Chaganty told IndieWire. He said nearly every element of the script had Allen giving advice and input, even having her write down her thoughts, from a character perspective, in a series of journals. After these discussions changes were made — especially with regards to Chloe’s room, which Chaganty admitted was made purely from an able-bodied perspective and not necessarily from the mind of a teenage girl in a wheelchair.

The history of actual actresses with disabilities in this genre is rare. So rare, in fact, that Hulu’s advertising of “Run” emphasizes it’s been over 70 years since a disabled actress led a thriller for an American studio, that being actress Susan Peters in 1948’s “The Sign of the Ram.” It’s a statistic Chaganty is used to hearing in some form. When he debuted his feature “Searching,” starring John Cho, in

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2018 he learned at a film festival that it was the first mainstream Hollywood feature to star an Asian American.

“We [he and co-screenwriter Sev Ohanian] realized that everything we make, there’s no reason for it not to have a win associated with it,” he said. “The idea that we can cast somebody....in any project that we make [who] traditionally doesn’t get a hero role or main character was something very important to us. Or at least to me, growing up, and not seeing an Indian-American or a South Asian person.” And while Chaganty says home studio Lionsgate was incredibly supportive of hiring the best actor for the role, regardless of ability, the director said there were several Disney stars who auditioned for the role of Chloe.

Ultimately, hiring an able-bodied name or anyone who wasn’t disabled was anathema to him and it compelled him to realize what a broad word “disabled” is in the acting community. It wasn’t until he started watching audition tapes that he realized how limited his own purview was with regards to a wheelchair user.

Allen said playing Chloe helped get her away from inspirational narratives that are often the only genre where casting authentically tends to happen. She was drawn to “Run” because, while it was about a disabled character, it wasn’t making concessions for the character *because* she was disabled. The audience is never meant to pity Chloe, but to see her in that final girl light of a young woman who, through ingenuity and intelligence, overcomes the villain and dominates.



### Director Aneesh Chaganty and Kiera Allen

Hulu

It’s rare to find a role like that, Allen said, because too often directors want someone to play up how disabled they are. “I have often been asked to play parts [where] I feel like I’m being asked to play a disability. I turned down a lot of those parts,” she said. “That’s not why I want to be an actor, to play a concept.”

Wearing the mantle of disabled actor can be a hard burden, especially if you’re a

first as the marketing for “Run” situates. It’s something Chaganty said he felt bad about: “When you become one or the only of anything without being asked, you get this mantle of responsibility thrust on you.”

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Disabled writer and speaker Emily Ladau, who saw “Run” earlier in the year, said she was pleased to see a thriller wherein the disabled character isn’t someone to fear but is the hero. She certainly sees where it perpetuates stereotypes about mothers and helpless children, but in a landscape where those two concepts are played to extremes, Ladau was happy they weren’t. “You think it’s going to perpetuate the ‘disabled people have no agency’ stereotype, but when it turns it on its head that really excites me,” she said.

“I really hope this movie starts a conversation,” Allen said. “Right now the conversation about disability in media is next to nothing, so the fact that people will be talking about this and what good representation means is really exciting to me.” She hopes people will see that Chloe is not defined by what happens to her and her disability but, like Walt Whitman said, that the character contains multitudes.

*“Run” will be released on November 20 on Hulu.*

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