

On Sandy Duncan's Ears  
Robert S. Griffin  
[www.robertsgriffin.com](http://www.robertsgriffin.com)

At this writing, I'm working on an article on the 1969 film "Midnight Cowboy," which has become one of the three iconic films of the 1960s—the other two being "The Graduate" and "Easy Rider." My focus is on the ideas and messages in "Midnight Cowboy" and their impact on American culture and on me personally; I was as a young adult at the time.

Going through the film carefully the past couple of days, in a brief montage of television images that was a backdrop to a scene, I noticed a familiar face. "That's Sandy Duncan! I remember her from 'Cavett'." Dick Cavett had a late-night talk show on the ABC television network back in those days and Sandy was a regular guest on his show. I was a Cavett fan and watched him just about every night in my room at Dean Tjesvold's house in Minneapolis, where I was living at the time.

Sandy was in her mid-twenties back then and had a pixie/sprite look to her: small, blond, short haircut, cheerful, bubbly, upbeat. I checked out her Wikipedia write-up and it said she was born in Texas, played Peter Pan on Broadway, was a central character on the television show "The Hogan Family," and won three Tony Awards, two Emmys, and two Golden Globes. She doesn't have vision in her left eye, the result of surgery for a tumor. She's 73 years old now, how about that.

I found a YouTube of one of Sandy's appearances on "Cavett"; this was in 1972. Just as I remember her: all smiley, super perky, in trim dancer shape, making happy talk with Dick. Why did I sit alone in a darkened room watching two strangers a half-continent away engaging in innocuous chit-chat between commercials? Oh well.

Watching Sandy's "Cavett" appearance, I noted something new: her ears. Sandy isn't hurting for ears, let's put it that way. A thought popped into my head: With big ears like that, why didn't

she stay in Texas? What made her presume she could be on Broadway with those outsized ears? After all, you can't expect anything major out of life if you have big ears, or, in my case, a bulbous nose. Back to "Midnight Cowboy," I remember wondering, I'm serious, how Jon Voight, the star of that movie, got to be such a success—he had my nose (as did the actress Sally Field—how'd she do it?). This time going through the film, Voight's nose doesn't look all that bulbous, and looking at it in the mirror just now, mine doesn't either; but that's how I saw myself back then, and that's the meaning I gave it.

The crazy, self-defeating ideas we can get in our heads. Early on in my life, and I'm getting clear on how it happened, I picked up the idea that if I'm the least bit flawed—in any way, it was more than just physical appearance—if I did anything wrong, made the smallest mistake, if I put anybody off about anything for any reason, I was obliged, metaphorically speaking, to be a doormat: low-end, out in the hall (not even in the room), dingy and unswept, and walked on.

I wish that when I was young, with my life ahead of me rather than just about all behind me as it is now, I'd have noticed the size of Sandy Duncan's ears and thought through what they brought up for me. I think I would have come to the realization that I don't have to be perfect, completely unobjectionable, in order to be in the world fully as the person I truly am and to live well and be happy. Sandy Duncan hasn't let her big ears hold her back.

Even with her big ears, I bet Sandy is still going at life full out, and I bet she doesn't for a second put up with anybody walking over her. And if Sandy can live like that, so can I with my imperfections, which I'm not going to list in any detail here. Enough to say that everybody has flaws—Brad Pitt has a bad complexion and, so he recently revealed, a drinking problem. If people feel justified treating me like a doormat because they've found something, anything, objectionable about me--my perceived politically incorrect ideas, whatever--rather than a deferring smile and passively enduring it, I can square up with them and look them in

the eye and turn loose the personal formidability I have always possessed but was taught I didn't dare express—I'm getting clear about how that happened too--and then, keeping the home-furnishings metaphor going, get on with the business of becoming fine tapestry. And if Sandy Duncan and I can do that, so can you.