

The Miracle Worker Works Miracles



With the recent passing of Patty Duke, Ocean State Theatre Company's current production of *The Miracle Worker* seems fitting, for she and Anne Bancroft immortalized the Tony Award-winning play both on stage and screen.

Dramatizing the volatile relationship between teacher Annie Sullivan and her student, the blind and deaf Helen Keller, OSTC artistic director Amiee Turner wonderfully captures their torturous struggle, keeping things tight and crisp and culminating in a powerful, tear-jerker of a finish.

The play's title actually originated from Mark Twain's description of Sullivan as a "miracle worker." The famed humorist was an admirer of both women and even helped secure funding for Keller's Radcliffe College education. While Sullivan's miraculous work goes without question, one also can't help but contemplate Keller's role in helping Sullivan exorcise her own ghosts and bringing the somewhat dysfunctional Keller family closer together. As her father later observed, "We don't just help our children, they help us." Playwright William Gibson certainly seems to suggest this throughout the play, and OSTC nicely threads the concept throughout its production.

The set designers also do their part creating a comfortable set without much need for manipulation: a loft style bedroom, a dining area and a comfortable sitting room that later converts into a garden house. Off to both sides, lattice work covered with flowers make for a serene outdoor escape complete with a working water pump. Changes in lighting mark changes in location.

Much of the play revolves around the tempestuous relationship between Sullivan and Keller, though Sullivan must also combat Keller's headstrong father Captain Keller and her extremely skeptical half-brother Jimmy, who believes his sister interferes with his ability to connect with his father. Sullivan does, however, find an ally in Mrs. Keller who remains hopeful and optimistic.

One of the most powerful components of OSTC's *Worker* is how Turner poignantly juxtaposes Keller's obvious physical limitations against her family and Sullivan's emotional limitations; in a way, they are all handicapped.

Unable to handle Keller's violent outbursts, her family treats her in a cold and almost non-human manner. Consequently, many of their issues with one another arise from their inability to control her. Whereas Sullivan, a recent graduate from the Perkins School for the Blind, brings her own emotional baggage stemming from her guilt in not being able to save her crippled brother, with his voice haunting her nightly. But it is Sullivan who ultimately realizes that there is indeed a spirit hiding deep within Keller waiting to be rescued.

This realization leads to some very spirited exchanges between she and the Captain. Not only does he doubt she can help, he is also put-off by her northeastern directness: "If you are to stay, there must be a radical change in manners!" he shouts. "By whom?" she asks.

Later, after tricking the Captain into giving her more time with Keller, she declares, "All is fair in love and war." To which he sharply replies, "This is not war!" But, counters Sullivan, "It is not love." It is only after securing time alone with Keller without family intervention that she finally succeeds in breaking the child's tortured silence.

Interestingly, the play concludes pretty much where Keller's life truly begins. She was the first deafblind person to receive a bachelor of arts degree. She would go on to become a prolific author, political activist and lecturer. She was also posthumously inducted into the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame in 1971 and the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame in 2015.

Youngster Laurel McMahan (Helen Keller) admirably tackles the very difficult task of portraying a handicapped person. Groping her way around the stage and wearing an expressionless stare, one feels Keller's isolation and frustration.

Brittany Rolfs (Annie Sullivan) handles much of the play's heavy lifting. With a quick wit and sharp tongue, she presents a very likeable character despite her bullishness.

While much of the interaction between Rolfs and McMahan is central to the play, they do also engage in some pretty intense physical confrontations, but they often come off as a bit too rehearsed, lacking raw intensity.

Kevin B McMahan (Captain Keller) serves as a worthy adversary for Rolfs with his southern stubbornness and booming voice. Kristin Wetherington (Kate Keller) makes for a wonderfully sympathetic and conflicted Mrs. Keller, juggling her maternal love for Helen while trying to remain loyal to her headstrong husband.

Joseph DiPietro (James Keller) is perfectly detestable as the sniveling and jealous half-son undermining everybody's efforts to help his sister.

OSTC's production of The Miracle Worker runs through April 17 at the company's Jefferson Boulevard theater. For more information, visit: oceanstatetheatre.org.