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Theatre 101

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“The Miracle Worker” Play Review

“The Miracle Worker” is the extraordinary story of how one lonely young woman was able to reach out to another lonely lost soul and make a difference. Although like many others in the United States, I had heard about and studied the story of Helen Keller and her teacher Annie Sullivan, seeing the account reenacted as a play was a new and enlightening experience. The plot is as follows:

Helen Keller, the youngest child of the Keller family, has been deathly ill, and although she survives – no thanks to the doctor – she is left blind and deaf as a result. The years pass, and Helen has grown into an unmanageable little girl whom Captain Keller has grown weary of trying to find cures for, only giving into his wife’s latest request when she promises that it will be the very last time. There is a healthy level of tension between those in the Keller household, and the arrival of Annie Sullivan, a previously blind student with a dubious past, only exacerbates the situation, causing tensions to rise so much that eventually, frustrated and at her wits end, Annie demands to be left alone with Helen, a demand that is granted her – but only for two weeks. By the end of that time period, Annie has failed to teach Helen words, but succeeded in making the child easier to handle upon which occasion the family happily welcomes Helen back, only to hit a last bump in the road before a miracle happens. Helen finally understands what Annie has been trying to teach her, and when Annie joyfully exclaims that Helen understands, everybody breaks down, and the story has a happy ending.

Often, it takes a while for me to really immerse myself in a play, but I was captured straight away by the wonderful acting of the man playing Capt. Keller. Although I had trouble really connecting to the emotional distress of Mrs. Keller, it was Capt. Keller’s reaction, his shouts of “Helen! HELEN!” that

drew me in. His reaction not only showed who he was as a character from the very beginning, but it also set the stage for the troubled relationships within the Keller family that emerged as the play progressed.

Aside from Capt. Keller, I most liked the depiction by the actress portraying Helen. The act was so convincing that by the time the final bow commenced, I was hard pressed to believe that the actress playing Helen could actually see and hear, and climb the stairs without help. I awaited Helen's arrival in great anticipation, and when she first appeared on the stage, was immediately persuaded that I was looking at a little blind-deaf girl. Here and there in the play, one of the themes that kept reoccurring was that of characters – when referring to Helen – saying “she knows.” Although this belief was mixed with pity on the most part from Helen's family, it was rather firmly believed, and while watching “Helen” I found I believed it too. There was something about the actress that made me certain that while she was deaf and blind and largely ignorant of the world around her, yet she knew who her mother and father were, and what it meant to be loved, and to be reunited with her family after separation.

The character of Helen is very interesting, because it contrasts and complements her brother's character. Helen is unable to properly communicate with the world and is locked inside her own self, whereas Jimmy has the means to speak his mind, but is unable to express his feelings to his father. Both children are looking for love and acceptance, and a way to belong, but neither is able to tell others what they want. On the flipside, Captain and Kate Keller both want to reach out to their children, but neither has the slightest idea of where to start. However, where Helen is clearly handicapped, James is seen as normal, and where more attention is thus paid to Helen – a seemingly useless part of the family – Jimmy feels neglected and forgotten. Helen knows no other love than that of her family, but her brother remembers and misses his mother, and struggles with the fact that his father's wife's deaf-blind child holds more importance than him, the oldest son.

James' struggle to accept Kate is not unnoticed by the woman, but she chooses to let it lie, focusing more on Helen. Throughout all of this, Capt. Keller withdraws further and further into himself,

becoming a defeated character, which fact is played up the more when the play points out that after the war his emotions lie more with the confederates and feelings of the old south. Capt. Keller does feel deeply for both his children though; his feelings about Helen are expressed most profoundly first when he grows upset when James crows about the silence in the house, and then when he grudgingly admits to Annie that he misses the child. Capt. Keller also talked to Helen about his confusion over his son, and I felt Capt. Keller's distress over James most keenly after the young man finally admitted to what he believed was wrong with the Keller household and stormed out. I could almost hear Capt. Keller thinking: *Wait, this is what was wrong? How on earth can I possibly begin to repair this broken relationship?*

All the tensions in play came to a head with the presence of Annie Sullivan. Although she was well portrayed by the actress playing her, I felt that her character was weaker than it could have been. "Annie" seemed a little bi-polar, at one moment defiant, the next sweet and simpering, the next harsh and cold toward Helen, and then on the edge of a nervous breakdown whenever she had a moment alone. Of course, all these elements were part of her character, but they felt somewhat disjointed, as if there were two Annies. The ending line too, struck me as being out of place, because although the play showed Annie working extensively with Helen, in her own thoughts she tended to express her frustration, and to others the fact that Helen needed to be taken away from love, as if Helen had to be deprived of emotion and feeling, to be remolded into Annie Sullivan's perfect robot which could at that point communicate with the world and tell it how wonderful the great Annie Sullivan is. And then Annie turns around and tells Helen that she loves her forever and ever, (echoing of course, the forever theme bouncing around in Annie's head in the words of her dead brother.) Again, as noted, that performance felt somewhat weak and disjointed, although it was executed rather well.

The other characters I liked, but they felt sort of plastic, just there to fill in scenes and give the main characters someone to interact with when needed.

The play itself was put together remarkably well; I was impressed by the lighting and sound effects, as well as the ease with which the actors and actresses moved about their stage. The costumes were quite convincing, and I rather liked the set design. I was even able to “see” the greenhouse where Annie stayed with Helen. I liked the props as well, and felt that they added quite a sense of realism to “The Miracle Worker.” The contrasting accents were also a nice touch, and I could feel the “southernness” that infused the play and lent an air of realism to it.

Overall, I felt that the themes of the play came through clearly, and that the actors and actresses did a fine job. I feel that Annie’s character could have benefited from a little more strength and unity, but the brilliant acting by “Helen,” “Capt. Keller,” and “James” duly compensated for any inadequacies. The production flowed seamlessly and the set – though small – was made to appear larger than life. “The Miracle Worker” is certainly a play that I would recommend to others, and I quite enjoyed attending it myself. I definitely feel that seeing the characters on stage makes them more than just names in history, and the issues that the characters all struggle with are issues that feel current and apply just as well today as they did in Helen Keller’s era.