

## **“The Miracle Worker” Is Just That**

by Glen Creason, Los Cerritos Community News, January 30, 2003

The story of Helen Keller, the deaf and blind girl who rose to be one of America's most celebrated women, and her heroic, dedicated teacher Annie Sullivan is a wonderfully inspiring tale. Indeed, the original Playhouse 90 teleplay, the stage version and the film are all classics. The story will live on to inspire those facing impossible odds as long as the printed word exists.

While this work was chosen by the most excellent Montana Rep to be produced and tour the U. S. this year, including a stop in Cerritos, that doesn't guarantee success. It's possible that the drama may never get off the ground or that it may be undercut to the detriment of the material. At the Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts, any negative possibilities were put aside by a particularly effective, economical and emotionally powerful mounting of this classic. This production brings honor to the great Helen Keller, pays proper homage to Annie Sullivan, and is true to the words of playwright William Gibson.

The Montana Rep is marvelous at keeping focus on the play and their approach is perfect for taking on serious works of art and important stories. No one lies back in this ensemble and every part of the troupe is important. The sum of the parts of lighting, sets, costume, direction and very fine acting is a whole of admirable brilliance. It helps to have a truly gifted actress in the extremely demanding role of Annie Sullivan. Miss Kate Czajkowski plays the physically and emotionally challenging part with skill and intelligence beyond her young years. One could say that she might go on to stardom in New York or Hollywood but what was far more important on this night in Cerritos was that she made the entire hall feel the drama of this important story. The audience literally experienced the haunted childhood, the struggle to teach, the frustrations and the glory of her accomplishment in reaching this little girl who was assumed to be more animal than human. Coupled with another marvelous and younger talent, Jordan Watson as Helen, the pair locked in on the monumental battle to “find the light of words.”

There are many lessons here: the value of perseverance, the harmful patronizing or ignoring of the physically challenged and the genuine miracle of discovering real love. When Annie drags Helen out to the water pump and unlocks the key to “connecting the word with the thing” it is a moment of sheer theatrical exultation. When the little girl touches the water, then the wet ground, and finally makes the connection, it is thrilling. When she then hungrily races from object to object, gaining vocabulary, it is wonderful. However, when she touches – and has spelled the words “mother,” “father,” and finally, “teacher,” it is cause for tears of joy.

It was heartening to see many enthusiastic young people in the audience finding wisdom and humanity in this century-old story. Much of the credit can go to the fine company that had absolutely no weaknesses. Nancy Watson as Helen's mother was right on the

mark with her conflicted maternalism and Michael Kane as the brother James showed strength that kept the subplot crackling with energy. Also, in the difficult roles of interpreters, Ondine Barnt and Libby Traynor-Torgerson were much more than conduits, adding to the drama and poignancy of the staging.

In the end, we were all reminded of the courage of two women, alone on a farm in Alabama, whose actions made life better for everyone else on the planet. As Helen said later, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." This night was pure adventure.