

Getting Out

Marblehead Little Theatre's 'The Miracle Worker' astounds audiences

BY SHEILA BARTH
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At last Friday's opening night performance, Marblehead Little Arts Theatre's director, Anne Lucas, excitedly talked to me about her two-hour production of William Gibson's two-act play, "The Miracle Worker". Versatile Lucas is a former theater arts teacher at Salem State University, singer, performer, and director, whose passion for theater arts and education is boundless and infectious. She had important reasons for helming this powerful play about Helen Keller, the famous deaf, blind, mute heroine who overcame her afflictions because of her persistent teacher, Anne Sullivan's tenacity. Lucas is concerned that many of today's younger generation are unaware of Miss Keller's battle to overcome her limitations, especially at a time when her only alternative was to be warehoused in an institution - specifically, a horrendous insane asylum - until Sullivan was recruited to travel to the Keller household in Tusculum, Ala., and work with undisciplined young Helen. When Helen Keller was born June 27, 1880, she was a normal infant, until she became



sick at 19 months old and lost her sight and hearing. Because she couldn't hear, she also lost the ability to form words and connect them to people, places, emotions, and items. Medical resources were limited. Although Helen's parents took her to several doctors, her care was restricted to her home, until Sullivan arrived from Boston's Perkins Institution for the Blind. Headstrong, Irish-Catholic Sullivan had her own problems. She had been orphaned, with poor eyesight, due to an untreated eye disease, and had been poverty-stricken. As a child, she and her younger brother, Jimmie, were sent to a Tewksbury, Mass. poor (alms)house, where Jim-

mie succumbed to disease. Partially blind, Anne had undergone several operations, and was later sent to Boston's Perkins School for the Blind, where she worked with the children, and traveled alone to Alabama, determined to help young Helen avoid her fate. Gibson's touching play, "The Miracle Worker," is a heart-warming, compelling account of Sullivan and Helen's early relationship and miraculous breakthrough, that led to Miss Keller's ability to speak, earn a bachelor of arts degree from Radcliffe College, and become an internationally celebrated, inspiring author, lecturer and activist. When Miss Keller died June 1, 1968, she became an ever-

lasting, universal beacon of hope to the deaf and blind. Today's progressive technology and treatment have vastly improved, but Lucas wants this youthful generation to know about Helen Keller, her struggle, and triumph over her afflictions. She also wants to share the triumph of the one woman who refused to give up on Helen. Sullivan was the consummate teacher. She spent her lifetime watching Helen's incredible rise to international fame as a treasured speaker and advocate for the afflicted. Lucas sought not only actors, but performers who could handle tough, physical, emotional roles. She successfully found an ideal combination - 13-year-old rising star-ballerina, Grace Studley of Boxford, a seventh-grader at Masconomet Middle School, and accomplished actress-exercise specialist, Alex Alexander of Marblehead. Aided by sign language coach, Nneamaka Mordi, (who portrays Viney), this dynamic duo evokes gasps, tears, and amazement during several physically challenging scenes and scuffles, when Annie tries to discipline wild, little Helen, teach her sign language and its connection to words,

BOX OFFICE

Two-act, two-hour production of William Gibson's "The Miracle Worker," appearing through Feb. 7: Friday-Sunday, 7:30 p.m.; Feb. 6, at 2 p.m. Marblehead Little Arts Theatre 12 School St., Marblehead. Tickets, \$25; student matinee tickets, \$15. Visit www.mltlive.org.

items, and emotions. The duo received appreciative applause after powerful scenes involving Helen's tantrums, and their intense physical battles. During the finale, the cast, director and crew earned an enthusiastic, well-deserved, standing ovation. The reason? This production easily rivals any professional one I've seen. Andrew Barnett's set, with its outdoor setting, doors, makeshift eaves, and dual platform, is impressive in this cozy, black box theater, as is Elvira Schoenthal's post-Civil War, early 20th century period costumes, and Len Schnabel's, lighting. Olivia Maerz's sound effects punctuate Annie Sullivan's stream of consciousness and memories, haunted by her little brother's pleas and heart-rending death. Eloquently performing as Helen's mother, Kate, Kaitlin Eggers delivers a fine portrayal of conflicted maternal-

ism. "How do you discipline an afflicted child?," she asks, heartbroken. Kate loves Helen, comforts the child, and forgives her unbridled behavior, yet reluctantly agrees to let Annie have total control over Helen for a period of two-three weeks. Ron Amon is blustery, but also conflicted as diehard, anti-Yankee, Southern newspaper publisher/Helen's dad, Capt. Keller, a proud cousin of rebel leader, Robert E. Lee. Rene LaPlante adds pathos as James, the captain's grown-up, estranged, wise-cracking son and Helen's older half-brother. The rest of the cast, including a winsome group of youngsters portraying blind children, provide touching support. Take the family to see "The Miracle Worker" before it closes Feb. 7. Lucas and Co. have created an eye-opening, jaw-dropping production that is guaranteed to gather accolades and make stimulating dinner conversation.