

'Miracle Worker' Is Compelling

By Jim Lowe, *Times Argus* Staff - Published: April 25, 2009

MONTPELIER – "The Miracle Worker" seems to be one of the most popular plays in Vermont these days, and there are good reasons why: It's a true story about people overcoming extreme difficulties, and it's beautifully crafted theater, full of anger, excitement, humor and finally tenderness and joy.

Lost Nation Theater opened a production of William Gibson's drama about the youth of deaf and blind Helen Keller, Thursday at City Hall Arts Center, that had all those qualities in spades.

Keller (1880-1968) became blind and deaf through an illness at the age of 2, but went on to become a celebrated author, lecturer and champion of the blind. The key to opening up Keller's life was Annie Sullivan (1866-1936), once blind herself, who managed to teach Keller to learn speak. They were to remain companions to the end of Sullivan's life.



Annie Sullivan (Kate Kenney) attempts to control the wild Helen Keller (Liz Gilbert) in Lost Nation Theater's production of "The Miracle Worker."

Gibson's powerful but tender drama was based on letters written by Sullivan in 1887 and Keller's own autobiography, "The Story of My Life" (1903). Originally a television drama in 1997, it moved to Broadway in 1959, and then, in 1962, was made into a hit film, winning Anne Bancroft an Oscar for best actress for her portrayal of Sullivan, and Patty Duke the Oscar for best supporting actress for her performance as the young Helen.

Gibson's play graphically chronicles Keller and Sullivan's breakthrough when Keller was still a child. When Sullivan, herself a product of the inhuman treatment of "mentally defective" children (for being blind), still a naive 20 year old, arrives at the Keller home, she finds Helen to be, at best, a spoiled little pet, and, at worst, a wild animal. Sullivan uses her own obstinacy to match Helen's, to teach the little girl something. Sullivan must not only fight the parents' doubts about her, but of her own doubts about herself.

In short, it isn't pretty, but it is real – and wonderful.

Lost Nation's production, directed by Kathleen Keenan, the Montpelier professional company's producing artistic director was – at its core – a splendid piece of powerful theater. Peripheral weak performances, though, prevented it from being consistently excellent. Nevertheless, Thursday's preview performance was a truly moving experience.

At the core of the production were the unusually convincing performances of Annie and Helen by Kate Kenney and Liz Gilbert. Kenney is an experienced professional actress and Gilbert is a U-32 eighth grader, but their performances would convince just about anyone that these two had long been together, constantly competing to best the other. Their physical fights were so authentic-looking that it became downright scary. (Fight choreographer Dan Renkin gets special credit here.)

Conversely, their interpersonal relations are so convincing and real that they become heart-wrenching and heartwarming.

The portrayal of Helen's parents, Heather Nielsen as Kate Keller, and John Alexander as Capt. Keller, were convincing and nuanced. Larry Lambeth was quite successful in double duty, first as the diagnosing doctor, then as Annie's gruff but caring teacher.

Scenic design by Donna Stafford, costumes and sound by Shawn Sturdevant and lighting by Kim Bent, Lost Nation's founding artistic director, all were supportive. But, it was the strong interpersonal interaction between Annie and Helen, and between them and Helen's parents that made this truly compelling theater.