



Banner photo by John McCormick

Sherry Keeton (left) as Mrs. Keller and Estelle Condra (right) as teacher Annie Sullivan try to control an unruly Terry O'Onofrio, who plays the blind and deaf Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker*.

# This play is still working miracles

By Beth Stein  
Banner Staff Writer

There's nothing more wondrous than seeing the mysteries inside a child's mind evaporate into discovery and understanding.

That wonder is amplified both on stage and throughout the audience during Nashville Academy Theatre's production of *The Miracle Worker*, their newest offering for children which runs through January at the 724 Second Avenue S. theater.

Directed by Guy H. Keeton, William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* is the moving, true story of Helen Keller, a deaf and blind child born in the late 1800s to a well-to-do Alabama family. The action takes place mostly in the dining room, back yard and garden house of the Keller's antebellum estate, a set artfully designed by Russ Bralley to look as if it were in a yellowing photograph album.

Helen is little more than an uncivilized animal when the play begins, having been so totally indulged out of pity and misunderstanding by a well-meaning family that she knows nothing of communication or discipline. Her family has given up hope of her learning even the most basic skills until the strong-willed Annie Sullivan arrives as Helen's live-in governess.

Annie immediately recognizes Helen's inner intelligence and determines not only to civilize this unruly child through suitable discipline, but also to open the shutters of Helen's dark world by

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teaching her language

The play follows the fierce battle of wills between the spoiled child and her determined teacher, as Annie treats Helen with a firmness the child has never known.

The success of NAT's production of *The Miracle Worker* is largely due to Estelle Condra as Annie Sullivan and Terri D'Onofrio as Helen. The relationship between this truly loving teacher and her reluctant pupil develops naturally so that we experience every phase. The scenes that rely solely on the interaction of these two characters are the play's best, like the wild dining room scene where Annie teaches Helen her first lesson in discipline — how to eat like a normal child.

The rest of the cast is satisfactory in supporting the action with their respective characters, but lend little of interest to the play. Sherry Keeton portrays Helen's loving mother Kate; John Olive, the ruling father; Artfred Giles, her impertinent brother, James; and Fran Austin plays Helen's Aunt Ev. Perhaps it is their effort to imitate more formal attitudes, as were typical of that era, that makes these characters appear forced. Whatever, they evoke little feeling in us.

*The Miracle Worker* plays Monday through Friday at 10 a.m.; Nov. 28 through Dec. 9 and Jan. 9-27. There will be 8 p.m. performances Dec. 1 and Jan. 19 and noon matinees Dec. 3 and Jan. 21.