



# THE MIRACLE WORKER

# Informer

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There's an old theater adage: Never do a play with either kids or dogs because they're so cute the audience will ignore everything else. Directors Terry and Sherry McConnell are daredevils. They are bringing *The Miracle Worker* to the Little Theatre, a play with two dogs and eleven kids.

The play has more challenges: a working water pump, hot food, including pot roasts and bacon and eggs, served on stage, enough silverware thrown against the walls to outfit a cafeteria, actors who must speak with either southern or New England accents and some who must also be able to "sign," and a tantrum staged by a child so strenuous a kid poked a hole in the theater wall during auditions. Most important, all of these challenges have to serve the play's purpose: to tell the true story of deaf, blind little Helen Keller and her "miracle worker" teacher, Anne Sullivan.

Terry and Sherry McConnell say the play's many challenges are what made them decide to do it, "because when you meet the challenges, it's fantastic." Sherry McConnell praises "the wonderful people working with us. Both the cast and crew are intelligent, talented, dedicated people, able to suggest interesting things to try." Terry adds, "We as directors have to have a certain vision of the play, but then we all work together."

Fifty-seven girls, boys, men and women auditioned, a Little Theatre record and a sign of how well known and loved this play is. In 1887 the Keller family hires Anne Sullivan, only 21 herself, to come to Tusculum, Alabama to teach their deaf, blind, angry daughter Helen. Anne senses the glowing intelligence buried deep inside the almost savage child. Through discipline, love, and amazingly creative approaches for any teacher in that era, Anne brings Helen into the human world of words.

Mark Twain labeled Sullivan the "miracle worker." The real Helen grew up to graduate from Radcliffe College, lecture worldwide, and write her autobiography.

William Gibson told their story first as a play and then as an Oscar-winning movie, both starring Patty Duke and Anne Bancroft. (The play opened on Broadway almost exactly 50 years ago on Oct. 19, 1959.)

At Little Theatre, eleven-year-old Cassidy Meliah plays Helen; Jessica Barkl plays Anne Sullivan; Shauna Lilly Bogley, Helen's mother; Gil Alden, her father; and Cody Hoffmann, her half-brother. Phyllis Bonds plays Aunt Ev, and Phyllis's dogs, Brody and Pepper, play the Keller family pooch. The dogs have their own dressing room.

Jan Torland is the producer; Cheryl Sutlick, set designer; Patricia Wilson and Dale Grogan, stage managers; Angelica Dimock, Christy Clark and Gloria Schille, prop mistresses; Becky Hatley, costumer; and Brian Hatley, sound and light designer.

Theatre majors, directors Terry and Sherry McConnell both graduated from Whitman in 1974. They acted in and directed many plays locally before partially retiring "to work real jobs and raise children." Both credit the late, wonderful Jo Anne Rasmussen for "almost forcing us to stay connected to theater, insisting we go to her rehearsals and give notes, discussing play problems with us."

Unfortunately we don't have space enough to list everyone in this marvelous cast and crew but check the program for names, and do come see *The Miracle Worker*. Those who watched cried during rehearsals of this play. Evening performances: Nov. 20, 21, 27, 28, Dec. 5 and 6. Matinee: Nov. 29.

Last summer Patty Duke, who at different times played both Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, gave the McConnells signed theater playbills and photos of scenes from *The Miracle Worker*. Raffle tickets for these autographed souvenirs will be sold during play intermissions.

Mary Hanna

# THE KELLER FAMILY MIRACLE

Three plays beside *The Miracle Worker* involve families and their relationship to society: *I Remember Mama*, *Life With Father*, and *Our Town*. Each play identifies an aspect of family life to illuminate its contribution to this ancient social structure. *I Remember Mama* is an homage to motherhood. *Life With Father* comically illuminates the growing pains facing parents and their progeny as they deal with everyday problems. *Our Town* projects family life into the community and narrates the impact of the interactions of families on the social structure in the town.

The family in *Miracle Worker* isolates itself from the community because of Helen. Even though Helen's father writes for the local paper, a career which might place him in a perfect situation to create a dialogue on the issue of the handicapped, he chooses to remain silent. Helen's mother displays a helpless love for her child but defers to her husband's judgment regarding Helen. Her brother displays the hostility expected of a sibling. The family is isolated by its own helplessness.

When Anne Sullivan demands that she and Helen live away from the family, she accomplishes two goals; she gets complete control of Helen and so can focus on the child's intelligence, and she gives the Keller family a chance to experience "normal daily life." Thus, social behavior is highlighted and becomes the dramatic element in this play.

The playwright, William Gibson, uses Sullivan's demand to separate Helen from the family as a dramatic device to heighten the conflict within the family. The fact that Anne Sullivan is a down-easter works perfectly, as her speech and manner clash with the gentility of the more sedate southern manners. As the play progresses, we are given sketches of Anne's own story which assist in encouraging the audience to side with her in decisions regarding Helen's education. It takes the genius of the playwright to put these elements together to dramatic effect.

The story of Helen and Anne is well known and often repeated, but the significance of this extraordinary duo goes well beyond their accomplishments. Ms. Sullivan's approach was completely original and thoughtful. Her success with Helen helped society re-

alize that there are those among us who, while handicapped, have value beyond imagination and expectation.

Awareness of the needs of the handicapped began to grow in social consciousness in the '60s. Gibson's play first appeared in 1957 on Playhouse 90, a popular TV show at that time. By 1959 Gibson had shaped the play into the influential classic it has become.

It's significant that *The Miracle Worker* stands among the first plays to underline the importance of our greater obligations to humanity, especially regarding the handicapped. In spite of the cacophony of opinion in the Keller household, the miracle took place. For those skeptics regarding Helen's recall of the word "water" at the end of the play, Helen confirmed that it was a notion she was aware of at 19 months, before her illness. Helen triumphed. In 1932 she advised a five-year-old blind child, "Never bend your head. Always hold it high. Look the world straight in the face." Society has taken notice.

Todd Oleson



## APPEARING NEXT ON THE LITTLE THEATRE STAGE

**EXIT THE BODY**, a hilarious mystery-comedy.  
Director Jean Weber. Auditions: Dec. 1-2. Evening performances: Feb. 12, 13, 19, 20, 26 and 27.  
Matinee: Feb.21.

**INTO THE WOODS**, a musical fairy tale where "happily ever after" is only the beginning of the story.  
Directors Becky and Brian Hatley. Auditions: Feb. 23-24.  
Evening performances: Apr. 30, May 1, 7, 8, 14, 15, 21 and 22. Matinees: May 9 and 16.

# Theatre News

Little Theatre's Gala Hostess Barbara McKinney invites patrons to come to our opening night Galas. Appetizers, desserts, and what Barbara calls "leaded and unleaded punch" are on offer. Barbara tries to tie the food into each play's aura. She offered Italian goodies for *Lend Me A Tenor*, and for *The Miracle Worker*, set in Alabama, she plans succulent southern delights. Our next Gala takes place Friday, Nov. 20, 7:00 p.m., in the Mildred Stewart Room.



Did you know that Little Theatre has a Safety Officer? He is Dale Grogan, a perfect choice for the (volunteer) position because he has both theater and emergency services experience. For the past seven years, he has worked backstage at Little Theatre, mainly with sound and lights, but more recently as stage manager. While still in high school, Dale spent hours riding along on ambulance and fire calls as an observer. He is now Homeland Security Planner for the Walla Walla County Emergency Management Office.

Dale is dedicated to keeping everyone at Little Theatre safe. "I'm concerned about the audience, but also about the actors, the stage crew--about safety for everyone, in and around the building."

The Theatre has always had fire extinguishers and first aid boxes, but Dale has increased their number. First aid boxes are available in the box office, production room, kitchen and backstage areas. He has attached a list to each box with the questions 911 dispatchers will ask callers, in the order those questions will be asked. "People get so nervous in an emergency they even fumble at first when simply dialing 911. I am trying to make things as easy as possible."

What most concerns Dale now are the fire lanes, giving emergency vehicles access to the back and front of the theatre building. "People parking in those lanes present a huge safety issue." Dale knows from his own work experience how vital it is that ambulances and fire trucks have quick access to our building in case of a fire or a stricken audience member. "We are looking for ways to better mark the fire lanes, and we urge people to pay attention to where they leave their cars."

Dale Grogan asks that anyone seeing a potential hazard or having suggestions for better safety email him: [dale.grogan@yahoo.com](mailto:dale.grogan@yahoo.com). He promises to respond. "Because improving safety benefits our patrons."



On March 5, 6, 12 and 13, Little Theatre will also stage a special FESTIVAL OF ONE-ACTS: six short plays showcasing talented, new directors. The directors' names and plays are: Dana Crist, *Pitching To The Star*; Gene Dahl, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*; Patty Leeper, *While Shakespeare Slept*; Todd Oleson, *Final Placement*; Gloria Schille, *Happily Never After: Tales From Far, Far Away*; and Brian Sheridan, *When God Comes To Breakfast, Don't Burn The Toast*.



**Editor's Note:** Last summer when I became editor of the *Informer*, my goal was to produce newsletters without a single mistake. In my first issue I misspelled the first and last names of a long-time Theatre volunteer. In my second, I omitted the name of a talented actor playing a major role in *Lend Me A Tenor*. In apology, I offer short biographies of Sonja Gourley and Brian Sheridan.

Sonja has worked backstage and on stage for almost thirty years. A voice teacher, she has sung in three operas at Whitman and in two outdoor summer musicals. She's done almost everything at Little Theatre, from playing in a combo for the musical *Ballroom*, to producing plays, to serving as stage manager, props mistress, set builder and box office attendant. Dial her phone number. Instead of the usual dull recorded message, you'll hear Sonja sing "Sorrrry, I Miss-ed Your Ca—ll...!"

Brian laughs that all his roles "seem to involve something outside the norm." He won his first part at fourteen, when no other boy would play a gay man. As a Whitman student, he played a bartender whose customers included Picasso, Albert Einstein and Elvis Presley. Brian has shown a penchant for parts requiring outlandish wigs and costumes at Little Theatre, appearing as a "lady" in *Leading Ladies* and, most recently, as a Clevelandite passing himself off as Othello The Moor. Brian says, "I love any role in which ordinary people do extraordinary things!"

Sonja and Brian were gracious about my mistakes. Readers spotting fresh errors in future newsletters should email [littletheatreofwallawalla@live.com](mailto:littletheatreofwallawalla@live.com), attention Mary Hanna.



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## 2009-2010 SEASON

### **The Miracle Worker**

Opens Nov. 20, 2009

### **Exit The Body**

Opens Feb. 12, 2010

### **Into The Woods**

Opens Apr. 30, 2010

## Gallery Artist

VIV SILVA

Long before Walla Walla started filling its streets with sculptures, Little Theatre showcased a different, wonderful artist during each play's run. On display in the Mildred Stewart Room during performances of **The Miracle Worker** will be Viv Silva's work, with the theme: "I'll Crazy Quilt Anything." Viv thinks she remembers trying to crazy quilt her umbilical cord while still in her mother's womb. She has done almost every known art form. Besides the usual watercolors and oils, she's enjoyed woodcarving and making miniature train layouts, something she did as a business for 15 years.

About six years ago, she developed a love of crazy quilting. Her friends dreaded leaving any small article lying within her reach, fearing they would find it crazy quilted into her latest creation. Viv has no formal art training, which she says accounts for her creativity in such a wide variety of art forms.

Until recently Viv lived in Milton-Freewater. She has fled the cold and snow, at least for the winter months, and is presently being creative in Quartzsite, Arizona.

## AUDITIONS: EXIT THE BODY

Little Theatre, 7 p.m., Dec. 1 and 2. Here's your chance to portray the most colorful characters ever to erupt on our stage. Director Jean Weber will be searching for five women and five men, ranging in age from early 20s to 50s and older. The characters include a batty maid, a top-flight designer, an Agatha-Christie-like crime novelist, a crusty sheriff who doubles as dogcatcher, an amnesiac, a "secret" husband, etc. This play will be fun!

### *The Little Theatre of Walla Walla Informer*

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