

The Miracle at Ivoryton

By Joan Valentina

In October of this year I had the great pleasure of doing a production of The Miracle Worker at Ivoryton Playhouse in Connecticut. What made the production special is that the actress playing Helen Keller was deaf. The following are comments from our director Jacqueline Hubbard, other cast members, and my own thoughts about the production and the rehearsal process.

Jacqui Hubbard:

For most small professional theatres outside of major cities, this tough economic climate has made producing a well-rounded season a challenge. Comedies and musicals are in; dramas are usually waiting in the wings. I knew that choosing a drama was a risk, but *The Miracle Worker* had the appeal of being a story that everyone knew. I knew that local schools included it in their curricula. Also, I felt strongly that the play should be signed for the deaf population in our community. So I approached Aaron Kubey of The National Theatre of the Deaf. When he asked me if I had considered using a deaf actress to play the role of Helen, I confess I was taken aback. I had not considered the possibility and the fact that it had not even entered my mind made me feel uncomfortable. How could I direct someone that could not hear me?

After meeting Jenilee Simons Marques, I knew that she had to be Helen. She had the intensity, the fierce will and the passion needed. She also had the distinct advantage of understanding a large part of Helen's world. I knew casting Jenilee would make my

job more complicated, but I had no idea of the incredible joy and miracles that it would bring.

Joan Valentina:

Day 1 of rehearsal: The cast sits in a circle and each person says his or her name and tells something about themselves that we might not know upon first meeting them. Jenilee signs that she is 12, an award-winning poet, and that she is deaf.

The cast has all been told that the actress playing Helen is deaf. I suppose we had all prepared in different ways. I learned the American Sign Language (ASL) alphabet, volunteered for a day at a school event for deaf children, and had many conversations with my neighbor Mary Lee who had taught sign language. Mary Lee's best tips were never to hold your hands too high when signing, and use your whole body—especially facial expressions—to convey your thoughts.

Day 5: We are almost halfway through the two-week rehearsal period. The process has been slower because everything has to be signed, but spirits are high. I have not yet had a conversation with Jenilee. This day she has a very large bag of gummy worms (one of my favorite candies) and I watch as she consumes massive amounts. All I can think is—she has removed her braces to play Helen and oh, the cavities. She must have caught me staring because she crosses the room and offers to share. I sign thank you. We continue to eat candy on the break, and at the end of the night we hug. Just like that, the ice is broken.

Day 7: Our director tells us we are not accepting the challenge of entering Jenilee's world. With the exception of our stage manager and the actor playing Annie Sullivan, both very good signers, most cast members still have not had a lot of interaction

with Jenilee. She spends most of her breaks alone in a corner doing homework or reading. So, we all take the plunge big time. I ask her about her school (I bring the candy this time) and we have our first real conversation. One actor and Jenilee discuss music. He will bring in his guitar to give her a lesson. The younger cast members and Jenilee giggle as they look at photos of The Jonas Brothers.

Day 9: I feel that our two wonderful rehearsal interpreters, Rick Farndell and Betty Beekman, have become our life support. We seek them out to help us fully engage with Jenilee. They teach us the shortcuts of signing and they re-sign when Jenilee does not understand something we have tried to communicate. Jenilee now takes my hand and corrects my fingers when I misspell. She also writes notes when she is excited and wants to tell us something quickly. Jenilee tells us that we must all come up with a sign nickname which consists of the first letter of our name and some expression that is key to our personality. There is much laughter and hands are flying.

Day 11: Rehearsals are going great, but Jenilee has not used her voice. We all assume she can talk, but we have never heard her voice words. The director encourages her to be verbal during the play, especially in the fight scene. We all do a group improv. The object—to express anger and frustration with our entire body and voice. Everyone is rolling on the floor, screaming, stomping and mostly just being silly. Jenilee makes the most amazing sounds. She thought we would think she sounded strange. I marvel at the fact that she has learned her language (ASL) and mine.

Opening night: Our director says in her speech that she knew doing this production would be challenging. However, she had no idea how rewarding working on the show would be for all of us. She is right. A Miracle has happened. We have come

together as a cast in a most amazing way. We have all had to re-think our methods of communicating. Everyone is backstage signing cues and spelling lines. We use touch and movement. There is nothing that can keep us from communicating with Jenilee. Even the dog in the show, Argyle, gets into the act. Jenilee signs into his paw on and off stage.

I ask some of the other actors how they felt about working on this production.

Michael Raver (James Keller): Working with Jenilee was rewarding because it forced us to look past ego and self-reward and to work towards making *The Miracle Worker* into an ensemble piece. It's fascinating how something that at first seems like a disadvantage can propel a production into a place of complete unity and strength.

Andrea Maultlela (Annie Sullivan): Working with Jenilee was a privilege; bringing this story to life with her, an honor. Jenilee is as hard a working actor as I have known. Her commitment, consistency, and compassion on and off the stage inspire me. What a wonderful example for young people. My hope is that she will come to find and to create work that unites our communities.

To my director, fellow cast members, stage manager and interpreters—thank you for allowing me to travel with you on a most joyous and transformative trip. To producers—please take note that you, too, can take bolder and more authentic choices when casting. We really are more alike than we know.

As Helen Keller herself said, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.”