By William Gibson
Directed by Dámaso Rodriguez

THIS PLAY WILL RUN APPROXIMATELY 2 HOURS AND 10 MINUTES WITH ONE 15 MINUTE INTERMISSION

STUDY GUIDE

Study guide prepared by Rebecca Nguyen
Portland’s premiere mid-size regional theatre company is led by Artistic Director Dámaso Rodriguez and Managing Director Sarah Horton. Founded in 1982, Artists Repertory Theatre is the longest-running professional theatre company in Portland. Artists Rep’s mission is to engage diverse audiences in fresh, thought-provoking and intimate theatre. We are committed to world-class acting, directing, design and stagecraft that support new playwriting and aspire to embody great literature, moving audiences to truly feel — to experience — storytelling in a way that only the best live theatre can.
SYNOPSIS
(INCLUDES SPOILERS!)

ACT I. We are in Alabama, at the Keller home. A doctor informs Captain Arthur Keller and his wife, Kate, that their infant daughter Helen will survive her bout of “acute congestion”. Kate quickly discovers, however, that the illness has left Helen deaf and blind. Five years later Martha, Percy, and Helen play outside with paper-doll cutouts. Helen, now six, is wild and unkempt. She is visibly disturbed by her inability to communicate and attacks her playmates in frustration. These violent outbursts are common and the Keller family argues, not for the first time, about Helen’s future and care. Aunt Ev suggests the Keller’s consult a famous oculist in Baltimore, and Captain Keller agrees to write him.

In Boston, Mr. Anagnos and Annie Sullivan chat about her new position as governess for the Kellers; Anagonos is concerned for his former pupil. Annie, a teacher at a school for the blind, says a tearful goodbye to her students. The children gift her a pair of dark glasses, alluding to Annie’s recent eye surgery. As the children shuffle out of the room, we overhear Annie’s flashback of a painful childhood memory: at nine, a virtually blind Annie is separated from her seven-year old brother, Jimmie, by asylum wards.

At the train station, an excited Kate and her stepson James meet Annie for the first time; we learn Annie is only twenty and was once blind – the aforementioned surgery, the last of nine, which partially restored her sight. Annie and Kate quickly bond. Back at the Keller home, Annie meets the family and takes Helen to her room for their first lesson. Captain Keller is off-put by Annie’s youth and brusqueness, but Kate is hopeful. In Annie’s room, Annie gifts Helen a doll, signing D-O-L-L into Helen’s cupped palm. She is pleased to discover that Helen is responsive and intelligent. The child is also undisciplined; James enters, mocking Annie as the lesson dissolves into a violent struggle. Annie will not be beaten and, wrestling Helen to the floor, manages to show her a second sign, “cake”. Helen imitates both signs without comprehending their meanings, and promptly hits Annie with the doll. Helen manages to lock the distracted Annie in her room and James ignores Annie’s pleas for help. As Annie nurses her injuries we hear another flashback: It is nighttime at the asylum. Jimmie is in pain and begging Annie for help, other residents scold them for the noise. Annie shuts out the voices before we learn Jimmie’s fate. At suppertime the Keller’s finally discover Annie locked in her room. They cannot find the key and Captain Keller must rescue the humiliated Annie from her window. The family retreats back into the house and alone Annie watches, with shock and admiration, as Helen reveals the key’s hiding place – her mouth.

ACT II. Annie writes a letter, wondering aloud how to discipline Helen without breaking her spirit. She continues to sign to Helen, using facial expressions and other gestures to guide Helen but the Keller’s are becoming disillusioned. At breakfast Helen puts her hand in any plate she chooses; her parents allow this behavior to avoid a tantrum but Annie refuses to coddle Helen, ordering the Keller’s to leave. Outside Captain Keller, livid, demands Kate fire Annie. The dining room, meanwhile, is a warzone but by the end of their brawl, Helen has eaten with a spoon and folded her napkin. Kate recognizes the triumph, but Captain Keller is furious. Annie convinces them to give her two weeks as Helen’s sole caretaker; with a servant to help her, Annie will raise Helen in the garden house, away from her parents’ counterproductive compassion.

Two weeks later, Annie has managed to discipline Helen, who has even learned to crochet. Annie is exhausted and discouraged; Helen still does not assign meaning to the finger spelled words Annie is teaching her. Annie wants more time but the Kellers want Helen home. At dinner, back with her parents, Helen resumes her terrible behavior. When Helen dumps the water from a pitcher, Annie forces Helen into the front yard to the water pump. As the water splashes from the spout, Annie signs “water” into Helen’s hand. Suddenly, Helen comprehends the meaning of the sign. It is revelatory - for the first time, Helen understands the concept of language. She signs, madly, eager to learn the names of objects and people. The Kellers rush into the yard, in awe of their daughter’s transformation. Annie is elated, triumphant. With newfound recognition, Annie and Helen walk together, lovingly, into the house.

Synopsis by Rebecca Nguyen
Why stage *The Miracle Worker* in place of Christmas or holiday-related fare? This miraculous and true tale of hope, redemption and triumph is exactly in line with the spirit of the season, while being a story that believers (and non-believers) of any faith can share with loved ones of almost any age. Our production of *The Miracle Worker* features a remarkable cast and creative team of some of Portland’s finest professionals and continues our long-time commitment to staging first-class productions of classics alongside the best new, contemporary writing. I hope you’ll find Gibson’s account of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller as surprisingly fresh as I did while working to tell this inspiring, ever-powerful story.

Told through the dream-like lens of memory, *The Miracle Worker* is a play based on the lives of Helen Keller, who became DeafBlind as an infant, and her teacher, Anne Sullivan, who enabled her to become one of the most influential women of the 20th Century. As the play begins, Helen is a wild child with almost no ability to communicate with the world around her. Nearly at the point of giving up all hope, the Keller family brings the determined, once-blind and sign language-skilled Sullivan into their home in a final attempt to reach Helen. Together with the Keller family, the characters make a transformation that powerfully attests to what the human spirit can achieve.

*The Miracle Worker* offers two famously challenging, visceral roles (originated by Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke) that require highly physical, intense staging and a high skill level regardless of age. Artists Rep Resident Artist Val Landrum plays Anne Sullivan, and one of Portland’s very best and most experienced child actors, Agatha Olson, plays Helen Keller. These two performers arrived to the rehearsal process already having built a close acting relationship that began with Artists Rep’s production of *The Big Meal* (2013), which Rodriguez also directed. They are supported by an extraordinary cast of some of Portland’s finest actors including Susannah Mars, Michael Mendelson, Don Alder, Joshua Weinstein and Josie Seid, alongside an outstanding design team to give this American classic the high-caliber production it deserves.

-Dámaso Rodriguez
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

WILLIAM GIBSON was born in the Bronx neighborhood of New York City in 1914. As a child, he fell in love with the library and read whenever he could. He was determined to avoid a soulless desk job, and spent his early years roaming, writing and taking odd jobs: acting, playing piano, and organizing for the Young Communist League. After he met his wife Margaret Brenman, an eminent psychiatrist and social activist, he was able to write full-time. Her work in mental institutions inspired Gibson’s first novel, The Cobweb, about the intricate politics of a psychiatric hospital. Hollywood fame quickly led to two Broadway hits: The Miracle Worker (1958), which was originally written as a television movie, and a two-person romantic drama, Two for a Seesaw (1959). The Miracle Worker takes its title from a quote by author Mark Twain, who was a friend of Helen Keller: "Helen is a miracle, and Miss Sullivan is the miracle-worker."

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

DÁMASO RODRIGUEZ is a Cuban-American director born in Miami, Florida. Rodriguez is in his third year as Artistic Director of Artists Rep and is Co-Founder of the Los Angeles-based Furious Theatre Company, where he served as Co-Artistic Director from 2001-2012. From 2007-2010 he served as Associate Artistic Director of the Pasadena Playhouse.

His directing credits include work at Artists Rep, the Pasadena Playhouse, Intiman Theatre, South Coast Repertory, Laguna Playhouse, A Noise Within, The Theatre@Boston Court, Naked Angels and Furious Theatre. Dámaso is a recipient of the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award, the Back Stage Garland Award, the NAACP Theatre Award, and the Pasadena Arts Council’s Gold Crown Award, and his productions have been nominated for multiple LA Weekly Theatre Awards and LA Stage Alliance Ovation Awards. In 2012, he was honored by the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation as a Finalist for the Zelda Fichandler Award. He is a member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC).
ABOUT THE PLAY


RENEE MONTAGNE, HOST:
A young man stumbled on a book in a Massachusetts library and it changed his life. The man is William Gibson. The book was the autobiography of Annie Sullivan. She was the woman who opened the world to a little girl named Helen Keller who could not see, hear or speak. Inspired by Annie Sullivan’s notes William Gibson wrote one of the most performed plays of the 20th century, The Miracle Worker. It brought him fame, fortune, and a Tony award. To this day, though, he refuses to take credit for it. Pippin Ross reports.

PIPPIN ROSS: William Gibson lives in a house on a dirt road in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.
(SOUNDBITE WILLIAM GIBSON IN HIS HOUSE)
WILLIAM GIBSON: This is the kitchen.

ROSS: At 89 he no longer has the energy to walk to the local library, as he did on a very important day about a half a century ago.

GIbson: And that’s how I found Annie’s ledgers, and the genius of Annie Sullivan worked for me on several levels that I was not aware of at the time.

ROSS: A time when Gibson was in-between jobs and almost broke with a second child on the way. Partly out of desperation, mostly from inspiration, Gibson checked out Sullivan’s autobiography and called a director friend.

GIbson: I called Arthur Penn, who was doing television work also at that time, and I said I think I have a script, an idea for a script that will make a television sale for you. He said send it down to me on paper, so I wrote out a bunch of Annie’s quotes from what she had done and sent it down to him. He called up in one day or two days and he said, “I’ve sold it, how soon can you write it?”

ROSS: Despite the fact that he hadn’t a clue how to write for television, it took Gibson just three weeks to write The Miracle Worker. The teleplay became an instant hit. No big deal, he says, considering it took a 19 year-old with no education and only introductory sign language only four weeks to teach a deaf, blind, and mute little girl in Alabama how to communicate. Annie was operating simply out of the intuition of an
intelligent, insightful, hitherto illiterate woman herself, and she was partially blind for many years also. And when I look at the rehearsal of the play, I think ‘what an extraordinary story these two ladies created’.

ROSS: A story that’s currently onstage with Tabitha McKown in the role of Annie Sullivan.

(SOUNDBITE OF PLAY REHEARSALS)

ROSS: It was in 1887 that Annie Sullivan improvised a method that remains the foundation of how to teach people who can’t see, speak, or hear to move, communicate, and function in the world around them.

(SOUNDBITE OF PLAY REHEARSALS)
GARY ENGLISH: Okay!

ROSS: Gary English is the director of the Berkshire Theatre Festival’s production of the miracle worker. He says the play’s success is that Gibson made Sullivan, not Keller, the central character.

ENGLISH: He [Gibson] became fascinated with and in his words fell in love with Annie Sullivan in terms of her ability to insist on herself in a world that wasn’t perhaps kind to people from her background.

ROSS: The story of an orphan who became a teacher went from television hit to Tony-award winning play to Oscar-winning film. William Gibson thinks he just lucked out. It could have been anybody who could have stumbled upon what had been published for decades but largely ignored on library shelves.

GIBSON: I served as a scribe for this story. Now all of this is very pragmatic, it-it doesn’t have to do with this inspirational, y’know, magic that you hinted at.

ROSS: The way Gibson sees it, the only thing he added to Sullivan’s story were details she never committed to paper. He found out, for instance, that Sullivan was hired by the Keller family to calm down their wild little girl, and maybe teach her a few manners. What the family never expected comes in the final act when Sullivan forces their daughter to refill the water pitcher she’s thrown across a room. The moment when Helen Keller finally speaks:

(SOUNDBITE OF PLAY REHEARSALS)
JUSTINA TROVA (as HELEN KELLER): Wah!
MCKOWN (as ANNIE SULLIVAN): Yes, yes, oh my dear.

ROSS: The miracle they created has become almost standard operating procedure in treating the blind and deaf, and the story Gibson created out of their four-week improvisation has been a fixture on stages across the country. William Gibson thinks the secret to his play’s longevity is the fact that it’s a story about Keller and Sullivan’s rebellion against a world neither of them could understand, or in certain ways wanted to.

GIBSON: These two kids created a miracle in the midst of a really hostile adult environment. I mean, it’s an epic story of the young against the old, in a way. It’s also a metaphor for each of us growing up and learning what the reality of life is, and adjusting to it better or worst, successfully, unsuccessfully, creatively, destructively etc. And that’s what the play, unwittingly done by me, echoes with.

ROSS: Helen Keller ended up an international celebrity. Her life-long friend Annie Sullivan died in 1935. A memorial fountain was erected at Radcliffe College. At its dedication, though she could fully speak by then, Keller uttered just one word: “water”. Today, William Gibson can’t hear as well as he could when he wrote The Miracle Worker, yet he attended almost every rehearsal of his play to offer tips to the cast and crew on the work based on the notes he found at the Stockbridge library, less than a mile away.

Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR’s programming is the audio.
Anne Sullivan Macy was born Johanna Sullivan in 1866, in rural Massachusetts. From a very early age, Sullivan was forced to take care of herself, her little sister Mary and her brother Jimmie, who was born with tuberculosis of the hip. At the age of five, Sullivan also contracted trachoma— a bacterial eye infection that thrives in overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions and causes blindness. Her mother died when Sullivan was eight and her father, an abusive alcoholic, abandoned the family two years later. Healthy Mary was taken in by relatives. Sullivan and Jimmie, being disabled, were sent to Tewkesbury Almshouse: a state institution for orphans, unwed mothers and out-of-work immigrants, as well as people with disabilities.

Disease, violence and malnutrition were common in Tewkesbury; Jimmie died soon after he arrived. Sullivan survived four more years there, before she persuaded a visiting official to enroll her in Perkins School for the Blind. After a series of operations, her sight was restored well enough to read. She graduated as valedictorian of her class, despite starting school far later than most children.

Sullivan then accepted a post with the Keller family as a tutor to their deaf, blind and mute daughter, Helen. Through a long series of trial and error, Sullivan managed to teach Keller manual sign language. The two women would be inseparable for the rest of Anne's life.

Sullivan went with Keller to Radcliffe College, helping with her studies as well as Keller's literary career. There, Sullivan met John Macy, who helped Keller edit her first two books. Sullivan and Macy were married in 1905, but their relationship quickly fell apart; they separated in 1914.

After leaving her husband, Sullivan returned to working with Keller full time. Together, they traveled across the country as Keller advocated for her different causes and agencies. Among them were the needs for sanitary living conditions in poor communities and equal civil rights for disabled citizens— the same social problems that had impacted Sullivan's childhood. Sullivan died in 1936. She and Keller worked together for nearly 50 years.
The Miracle Worker shows Helen Keller’s accomplishments up to age seven, but the rest of her life was just as extraordinary.

After mastering manual sign language as a child, Keller quickly learned to speak, type, and read Braille. She went on to graduate from Radcliffe College *cum laude*—the first deaf-blind person to do so. While a student at Radcliffe, she published two books: *The Story of My Life* and *Optimism*. During her lifetime, she would receive honorary doctoral degrees from universities in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa.

Soon after graduating college, Keller jumped into a life of advocacy. She traveled the country, with Anne Sullivan Macy always at her side. Together, they fought for deaf-blind people’s rights to full citizenship, education, employment and healthcare. She was also a vehement suffragette, a fierce socialist and one of the first supporters of both the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP. She understood that what kept disabled people oppressed (and, similarly, people of color, women and the lower classes) did not come from their personal failures, but from systematic, institutional disenfranchisement.

"The welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all." – Helen Keller

During WWI, Keller was a staunch pacifist and protested American military involvement. However, she also helped establish agencies for blind and deaf veterans in the United States, and then travelled to Europe to provide the same assistance to veterans and refugees alike. She was one of the founding members of the American Foundation for the Blind in 1924, and expanded the foundation worldwide as she and Sullivan advocated for disabled rights across the globe.

During WWII, she again worked with blind and deaf veterans on their recovery and transition back into civilian life, although she was over 60 at the time. In 1964, Keller was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She died in 1968, and is still remembered as one of the most important activists of the 20th century.
AN INTERVIEW WITH AGATHA OLSON

Meet the young actor who portrays Helen Keller in Artists Repertory Theatre’s 2015/16 production of The Miracle Worker

The blind and deaf Helen Keller of Artists Rep’s upcoming The Miracle Worker is a serious role for a serious kid. Fortunately, 12 year old Agatha Olson’s prepared for it, having spent the last several seasons delving into some of Portland theater’s most challenging child roles—from a horror victim, to a homeless girl, to a spooky Shakespearean fairy. Artslandia asked Agatha some of our usual questions and got the kind of thorough, mature answers that bode well for a thrilling performance.

Last Seen in: The Pain and Itch, Third Rail Repertory; The Lost Boy, ART; The Big Meal, ART; Carter Hall, Fertile Ground Fest; The Turn, The Reformers; A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Fall Festival of Shakespeare; Dear Galileo, Playwrights West/CoHo; Street Stories: Homeless Hearts and Minds, Readers Repertory.

Hobbies: Writing short stories, songs, poetry, plays and theater reviews, painting, drawing, and stop-motion animation.

Likes: Animals both wild and domestic, spending time with friends and family, eating banana cream pie, music, road trips, learning new things, hearing people’s stories, floating down the river, getting postcards, helping others, parties and holidays.

Dislikes: Unfairness, a messy room, violence, knowing that people are living on the streets, prejudice, cold tea, the thought of animals suffering, bad karaoke, when people don’t stand up for each other, and fireworks.

Training and Awards:
I haven’t had any training so far, but I’m hoping that I can maybe take some classes over the summer. I’m really lucky because I have a chance to work with some of the best actors, directors and creative teams. I’ve learned so much from all of them! I’ve never won an award, but I was nominated for a Drammy, and that was super-exciting. I also was one of six finalists for Oregon Children’s Theatre’s Young Playwrights for Change playwriting contest. I’d like to mention that all of the finalists and the winner were girls.
Your favorite plays: *The Big Meal*, *The Liar*, *Blithe Spirit*, and *Broomstick*, all at Artists Rep; *Static* at Third Rail; *Dear Galileo* at CoHo, *The Tempest* by Portland Shakespeare Project—I like that it was Prospera instead of Prospero! *The Piano Lesson* at Portland Playhouse. *Up The Fall* by PHAME—if you haven’t been to one of their productions, you’re missing out!

Dream roles: Someday, I’d like to play Juliet in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It would also be very interesting to play someone who goes from young to old or the other way around. I’ve [also] been thinking that it would be a lot of fun to be in a comedy.

Playing Helen Keller:
There’s a lot to love about Helen Keller. She didn’t let obstacles stand in the way of her learning. I think that’s why she’s an inspiration to people all over the world. She fought for the rights of people with disabilities, and the right to vote for women. If she ever felt like giving up or felt sorry for herself, you wouldn’t know it. I can only imagine what it must have been like for Helen when she was my age. Helen would get really frustrated and throw epic tantrums, because she couldn’t communicate before Annie Sullivan came along. I don’t have any lines, so I’m going to have to get all of those emotions across by making sounds and using my body. So, this is the most physical role I’ve had so far. There are a lot of things that are very new to me. I have to convince people that I can’t see or hear. I also have never been in a play where I get to fight. There’s plenty of fighting in *The Miracle Worker*.

The challenge itself is the most exciting thing about playing Helen Keller. I admire her, and I’m going to do my best to honor her. It’s important to me to share her story.
One day, while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan put my big rag doll into my lap also, spelled "d-o-l-l" and tried to make me understand that "d-o-l-l" applied to both. Earlier in the day we had had a tussle over the words "m-u-g" and "w-a-t-e-r." Miss Sullivan had tried to impress it upon me that "m-u-g" is mug and that "w-a-t-e-r" is water, but I persisted in confounding the two. In despair she had dropped the subject for the time, only to renew it at the first opportunity. I became impatient at her repeated attempts and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor. I was keenly delighted when I felt the fragments of the broken doll at my feet. Neither sorrow nor regret followed my passionate outburst. I had not loved the doll. In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no strong sentiment of tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth, and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed. She brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down the path to the well house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow. I learned a great many new words that day. I do not remember what they all were; but I do know that mother, father, sister, teacher were among them—words that were to make the world blossom for me, "like Aaron's rod, with flowers." It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my crib at the close of the eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, and for the first time longed for a new day to come.

"Language is to the mind more than light is to the eye."

- Annie Sullivan, *The Miracle Worker*

Annie Sullivan used a system of hand signs called the manual alphabet (or fingerspelling) to teach Helen Keller how to communicate. Because Helen was also blind, Annie had to finger spell into Helen’s palm. While Helen quickly learned to imitate the signs, she did not initially assign understand their meaning. Using the chart below, try spelling D-O-L-L or W-A-T-E-R with your hand.
**Annie:** Cleanliness is next to nothing, she has to learn that everything has its name! That words can be her eyes, to everything in the world outside her, and inside too, what is she without words? With them she can think, have ideas, be reached, there’s not a thought or fact in the world that can’t be hers. You publish a newspaper Captain Keller do I have to tell you what words are? And she has them already-

**Keller:** Miss Sullivan.

**Annie:** -eighteen nouns and three verbs, they’re in her fingers now, I need only time to push one of them into her mind! One, and everything under the sun will follow. Don’t you see what she’s learned here is the only clearing the way for that?

(Act 3, The Miracle Worker)

1. What important thoughts or ideas are prominent in the play?
2. Describe Helen’s relationships with her family members. How is her relationship with her mother different than her relationship with her father? How does Annie Sullivan change Helen Keller’s relationships?
3. Words are an important motif in *The Miracle Worker*. How have words changed life for Helen Keller? Do you think her tantrums will continue? Why or why not?
4. In the play, Annie Sullivan is haunted by the death of her brother Jimmie. Why are these flashbacks important to include? How do they affect the play or your understanding of Annie Sullivan and why, at the end of the play, are they gone?

**Annie:** I wanted to teach you – oh, everything the earth is full of Helen, everything on it that’s ours for a wink and it’s gone, and what we are on it, the-light we bring to it and leave behind in words, why, you can see five thousand years back in a light of words, everything we feel, think, know and share, in words, so not a soul is in darkness, or done with, even in the grave.

(Act 3, The Miracle Worker)

5. Why do you think William Gibson chose to make Annie Sullivan the play’s central character?
6. Conflict is a struggle between two or more forces that creates a tension that must be resolved. Identify the point(s) of conflict in *The Miracle Worker*. What are the primary and secondary conflicts in the play? Be sure to consider for both internal and external conflict.
7. Which character do you most identify with? Why?
8. What is the main question or problem of the play? Is it solved or answered? Is it left unsolved?