



MISGUIDED REVIVAL IS NO *MIRACLE*: Alison Pill and Abigail Breslin in *The Miracle Worker* at Circle in the Square Theatre
Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Poor staging, uneven direction doom revival of *The Miracle Worker*

The Miracle Worker

Written by William Gibson

Directed by Kate Whoriskey
Circle in the Square Theatre
235 West 50th Street
New York, NY
(212-239-6200), www.miracleworkeronbroadway.com

By David NouNou

I have always wondered why a wonderful drama like *The Miracle Worker* has never been revived on Broadway since its original opening in 1959. There is the magnificent 1962 movie version, which has preserved the brilliant performances of Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke portraying Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller, respectively. In an age where the same plays get constantly revived every few years— and most of them being mediocre productions at best—this show has never been done. The reason being, this play is thematically delicate, inherently visceral, and physically demanding. It has to be expertly mounted, brilliantly performed, and competently directed to truly work.

There is no experimentation with this play. It has to be performed on a proscenium stage, and no other stage will do. The viewer cannot be reminded of the audience fidgeting across the stage or be constantly distracted by furniture rising up and down on the bare stage to signify scene changes. The viewer's attention has to be focused on the two principal performers. Because the action/reaction between Annie and Helen is so crucial, compelling and significant, the viewer cannot miss a single gesture or nuance. You cannot truly appreciate all the anguish and frustration these two characters go through if all you can see, at certain moments, is the actors' backs.

The play is set in 1887 when Annie Sullivan (Alison Pill) enters Helen Keller's (Abigail Breslin) life. Helen is born deaf and blind. The affluent Keller family in Tuscumbia, Alabama, wanting to establish some order in Helen's unruly, disheveled, and self-indulgent existence, hires Boston governess/teacher Annie—who is partially blind herself. Annie's mission is more than putting order in Helen's world; she wants the troubled girl to be able to experience life. Abigail Breslin, best known for her Oscar nominated-role as Olive in *Little Miss Sunshine*, does an admirable job as Helen. She exudes Helen's frustration and anguish, but unfortunately for the audience, we miss a lot of it because the action is performed in the round. Although Alison Pill is an accomplished actress, and does a serviceable job as Annie, she is not convincing as the life-altering teacher. There is no chemistry between Annie and her student, and that is so essential in a delicate play like this.

Although *The Miracle Worker* is a provocative play, this version is misconceived in both production and direction. The cast has to be compelling and not just fill space on a stage. The set must be grounded and anchored, and not obstruct the performers with wires or doors that become intrusive and distracting. Indeed the fault in all this lies in Kate Whoriskey's lackluster direction. Instead of being treated to fireworks from the two leading ladies, we are witnessing choreographed movements. We should be riveted by the

action, but instead we are left feeling indifferent. Instead of witnessing a miracle taking shape on stage, I saw a little girl slouched in her seat in the first row across from me, licking a lollipop. What a shame to have this image in my mind instead of cherishing the final breakthrough/bonding and victory of student and teacher. I guess I will have to rent the movie again to witness that miracle.

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