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Movie Review

The Miracle Worker (1962)

Screen: 'The Miracle Worker' Opens William Gibson Drama at Two Theatres

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THE absolutely tremendous and unforgettable display of physically powerful acting that Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke put on in William Gibson's stage play "The Miracle Worker" is repeated by them in the film made from it by the same producer, Fred Coe, and the same director, Arthur Penn. The picture opened at the Astor and the Trans-Lux Fifty-second Street yesterday.

But because the physical encounters between the two in their strongly graphic roles of trained nurse and deaf-and-blind pupil seem to be more frequent and prolonged than they were in the play and are shown in close-ups, which dump the passion and violence right into your lap, the sheer rough-and-tumble of the drama becomes more dominant than it was on the stage.

Indeed, one may well leave this picture with the feeling that the triumph achieved by Annie Sullivan with the child Helen Keller (which are the roles the two actresses play) was more a matter of muscle over sinew than of a strong mind over a raw, young, uncurbed will. One may well feel that Annie has just been winner in three falls out of five.

This has advantages and disadvantages in working toward the aim of a powerful emotional experience, which is the obvious object of the film. It is clear that the bold decision the stalwart young Annie makes when she arrives at the Southern home of the Kellers to try to train their desperately afflicted child is that she must go about it with the brute force one would apply to the breaking of a head-strong colt.

To "disinter the soul" of the youngster from the depths of the little animal that darkness and silence since infancy have cruelly made of her, the nurse sees it will take more than patience. It will take miraculous skill and energy. That's what she gives to the project. Thus the bruising encounters between the two, even from their first meeting—the knock-down-and-drag-out fights in which the child wildly bucks against the efforts of the nurse to reach her mind with crude hand signs—are intensely significant of the drama and do excite strong emotional response.

But the very intensity of them and the fact that it is hard to see the difference between the violent struggle to force the child to obey (which is the nurse's first big achievement) and the violent struggle to make her comprehend words makes for sameness in these encounters and eventually an exhausting monotony. This is the disadvantage of so much energy.

However, Miss Bancroft's performance does bring to life and reveal a wondrous woman with great humor and compassion as well as athletic skill. And little Miss Duke, in those moments when she frantically pantomimes her bewilderment and desperate groping, is both gruesome and pitiable. Inevitably, the young actress has grown since she did the play and she now is a shade too uncomfortably formidable as an adversary for the nurse.

Mr. Penn, who directed with great vigor, has also let Victor Jory play the father of the child a bit too harshly and loudly for the already loud tone of the whole, and Inga Swenson performs the mother a bit too softly and winsomely, in turn. Andrew Prine is impressively malicious and caustic as a grownup half-brother.

On one point, we file a strong objection. That is the flummery at the end that has the barely communicative youngster signaling a handy "I love you" to the nurse. This seems a trick by Mr. Gibson to work a hackneyed heart tug into the film, which by this time has either got you with its concept of humane conquest or it hasn't got you at all. Pathos is superfluous at this point, and such sophistication is unthinkable.

The Cast

THE MIRACLE WORKER, screen play by William Gibson, from his play of the same name; directed by Arthur Penn and produced by Fred Coe for United Artists release. At the Astor, Broadway at Forty-fifth Street, and the Trans-Lux Fifty-second Street, Lexington Avenue and Fifty-second Street. Running time: 106 minutes.

Annie Sullivan Anne Bancroft
Helen Keller Patty Duke
Captain Keller Victor Jory
Kate Keller Inga Swenson
James Keller Andrew Prine
Aunt Ev Kathleen Comegys
Viney Beah Richards
Mr. Anagnos Jack Hollander
Percy Michael Darden

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