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WHETHER or not it denotes a waning of invention I am uncertain, but the American theatre seems to be expending a large part of its energy on the life stories (or episodes therefrom) of people still living or fairly recently dead. "The Diary of Anne Frank" and "Sunrise at Campobello" exemplify what I mean; so, among shows that are still running, do "Gypsy" and "The Gang's All Here," and we are promised, later in the season, entertainments based on the careers of Fiorello LaGuardia, Harry Golden, the singing Trapp Family, and Laurette Taylor. To lean so heavily on latter-day biography is not, I submit, an activity that one immediately associates with a healthily creative theatre. This reflection is prompted by William Gibson's "The Miracle Worker," at the Playhouse, which deals with the childhood of Helen Keller, and how she was saved from the lifelong solitary confinement that is the accustomed lot of those who are deaf, mute, and sightless. The rescue was performed by a young Irish-American nurse named Annie Sullivan, who had once been blind herself and knew from her own experience the horrors of life inside a state institution. She came, seventy years ago, to the Keller home, in Alabama, where she was able, by a mixture of patience, intuition, brute force, and love, to gain the confidence of a child who seemed at first little better than an animal, scratching and clawing in the silence and the dark. At length, she coaxed this tiny, hostile creature up to human stature by teaching her how to communicate with other people, and thereafter, as we know, there was no stopping Helen Keller. That is the story Mr. Gibson has to tell, and it could scarcely be nobler, or more squarely affirm the dignity of our wayward species. He does not sentimentalize the struggle between Annie and her charge. Chairs are flung about, plates smashed, arms wrenched, and faces slapped; short of maiming Patty Duke, the resilient child who plays Helen, the combat could hardly be more violent. Arthur Penn's direction is honest and lucid, and Anne Bancroft, all scrubbed cheeks and glowing purpose, performs devoutly as the Irish catalyst. Yet apart from the moment when Miss Duke, sniffing and groping, met Miss Bancroft for the first time, I was unmoved throughout. A few years back, I saw a documentary film about handicapped children. It was called "Thursday's Children," and it touched me more deeply inside ten minutes than "The Miracle Worker" did in two and a half hours.

My resistance to Mr. Gibson's play is partly due to the fact that it shocked me. It is, to begin with, very nearly describable as a barrel of laughs; some of the stage business that has been worked out for the child borders closely on the cute, and her guardian seldom lets a line go by without a snappy, indomitable Irish comeback. You feel that an agonizing process is being sweetened, discreetly softened, and made publicly palatable. Moreover, to

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add "dimension" to the exercise, the nurse is constantly being addressed by ghostly voices; the reproduction was so poor that I lost many of the words, but their general tenor seemed to be hortatory. Helen's family consists of an irascible father (Torin Thatcher), a wailing mother (Patricia Neal), and a scapegrace half brother (James Congdon), all of whom behave like characters out of a bad nineteenth-century play. Stereotypes themselves, they cast doubt on other aspects of the piece, which may, for all I know, be authentic. By the end of the second act, Annie Sullivan has taught her pupil to sit at table and fold her napkin. Just before the final curtain, she brings off a much greater feat; Helen learns to connect physical objects with the digital symbols that spell out their names. But a few seconds afterward, with no aid from her tutor, the child manages the infinitely harder jump from finger talk to speech; she pronounces the word "water." This certainly ends the play with a decisive thump, yet Mr. Gibson did not convince me that it happened like that—so swiftly, so simply, so conveniently. The events he is handling are too delicate to be submitted to Broadway tailoring, however well-intentioned. Perhaps inevitably, there hangs over the whole production a faint aura of exploitation. One of the early scenes, for instance, takes place in a home for the blind. The inmates are played by blind children. There is no logical reason why I should find this as objectionable as I do, but, equally, there is no logical argument against casting a tuberculosis victim as Marguerite Gautier.