



The Miracle Worker

(1962, d. Arthur Penn)

Helen Keller is deaf, blind and dumb because of a childhood illness. Her bewildered family have indulged her and she lacks all discipline and is becoming unmanageable. They write to a school for the blind in Boston for help.

The school sends one of its students, Annie Sullivan, who is partially blind. She assesses the situation, realising that Helen is intelligent but needs to be managed and to find some structure and discipline to communicate. She clashes with Helen, their struggles becoming violent.

Annie Sullivan persuades the Kellers to allow Helen to be with her alone in their small garden house, to be away, especially, from the family. Gradually, Helen accepts Annie and learns to do basic things for herself. But the key element is language for understanding and communication.

Annie's lessons helps Helen to spell with her fingers and then to connect this spelling



and these words with real objects. But it is not easy and there are more fights with Helen throwing a jug of water over Annie. Annie makes Helen fill the jug. Feeling the water, she starts to make the connections - and Helen Keller's amazing life as an intelligent woman and communicator begins.

The Miracle Worker is the celebrated movie about teacher, Annie Sullivan, and her blind and deaf student, Helen Keller, who went on to be one of the most celebrated American personalities of the 20th century in her breakthrough in communication and making it possible for disabled people to exercise their right to education and to communication.

Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke had been performing William Gibson's play on Broadway before they made the movie version. They won the Oscars for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress for 1962.

The film is both austere and melodramatic as directed by Arthur Penn (who before the end of the 60s was to direct Bonnie and Clyde). It is not sentimental at all but still provides a highly emotional experience. It may seem unbelievable now that young, disabled people could be treated so inhumanly, seen as little more than animals, at that time. However, it shows the heroism of Annie Sullivan in her work and the movie pays tribute to the extraordinary success of her perseverance and work.

The play was remade as a movie for television in 1979. This time Patty Duke took the part of Annie Sullivan with Melissa Gilbert, star of Little House on the Prairie and many telemovies as Helen.