

## "Miracle Worker" shares Helen Keller, mentor's story

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The Clarence Brown Theater will present "The Miracle Worker," a play about Helen Keller's mentor, Anne Sullivan and her journey to Keller's Alabama home to teach her to communicate, opens Friday night at 7:30 p.m.

Rachel Finney, senior in English, will play the part of Keller. Finney herself is legally blind, but she, unlike Keller, can see light and has full use of her hearing. Despite the differences, she was still able to integrate her normal life into the role.

"It's really alarming not being able to hear," Finney said. "It's scary, and I have so much respect for those who overcome this to become teachers and become successful."

Finney said one of the most difficult aspects of her part is pretending she can't hear what is happening around her. She can't laugh when the other characters laugh or look when someone is pointing because Keller wouldn't be able to. However, she still has to listen to actor cues and remember when to do everything based on them.

"The entire cast kept forgetting that I can't hear or see," Finney said. "We had to rely so much more on taste and smell and touch to communicate."

Director Kate Buckley said the play was chosen in an effort to reach out to the community.

"Choosing a play is about more than just picking one that we like ... it has to fulfill requirements of the community, the Board of Trustees, MSA actors and MSA directors -- this show connects with the blind and deaf of Knoxville, because Helen Keller was," Buckley said. "It has the universal message of overcoming obstacles."

The actors and crew members began to understand those obstacles as they began to realize that while they thought dealing with lack of hearing and sight was difficult to act with, it's more difficult to deal with everyday.

"It's cool because all the actors got to grow together," Finney said. "We achieved at finding funny moments between the heartbreaking ones."

Finney emphasized the empowering nature of the play but also that it's light-hearted. The cast and crew "(don't) want people coming in expecting to cry."

"It's special and happy with sad moments," Finney said.

It took nearly a year for Buckley to pull everything together from researching in Alabama then casting in April, handing out scripts in early May then finally starting rehearsal in August and now, opening the show.

"(Over the year I did) research," Buckley said. "Lots and lots of research. Because it's a historical play we had to find out everything we could about the time period: about the location, Helen's parents, her family, their costumes, even what lighting would've been used at that time."

She laughed that every production is a challenge as she deals with different actors and different crew. But ultimately it's all worth it, because Buckley said it's "a beautiful, beautiful performance."

Both Buckley and Finney said they are ready to open the show and hope people will respond to it positively.

"Why see theater at all?" Buckley said. "It's a communal experience ... it's the only thing, besides a church, that can bring people together and have them experience something at the same time."