

# HORIZONS

WEEKLY GUIDE TO ARTS, IDEAS, AND EVENTS IN CENTRAL VERMONT

## the GIFT of DANCE



***Gallaudet Dance Company at The Barre Opera House***

story on page H.3

**APRIL 30, 2009**

## THEATER REVIEW

**The Miracle Worker Brings a Message of Hope**

by Alex Brown

In *The Miracle Worker*, playwright William Gibson tells the story of Helen Keller's emergence from a life without language, a capacity that deafness and blindness initially kept from her. It took remarkable strength from two people to give it to her: Helen Keller's own will, and the stubborn expectations of her teacher, Annie Sullivan. These powerful people start out at cross-purposes but, by what truly can be called a miracle, they come together to triumph over Helen's isolation from the world.

Lost Nation Theater presents a polished production. Kathleen Keenan directs with a vigorous emphasis on the remarkable physical struggle that is the first bridge between Helen and Annie. With contributions from Dan Renkin in the staging of primitive, physical battles for control, Keenan finds powerful ways to show the indomitable will of the two main characters. There's both great emotion and a pure theatrical elegance in telling so much of the story without words.

Without speech, Helen is reduced to savage frustrations and primal desires. Liz Gilbert, an eighth-grade student at U-32, portrays Helen with ferocious energy. Theatergoers will remember her from last season's fine work in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Gilbert is a courageous performer, losing herself in a character who craves love and combat in equal measure. It's powerful, intense work, and we feel a little agony realizing we can't tear our own eyes away. Gilbert is especially successful at portraying Helen's keen, secret intelligence as she struggles to live fully in a world that confuses and infuriates her.

As Annie, Kate Kenney shows the character's headstrong capacity for hope. We sometimes wonder where her persistence springs from, as she meets each new defeat from Helen and her parents. Kenney shows us Annie's keen will to overcome obstacles, but the struggle with self-doubt that Gibson tries rather clumsily to weave into her story is not so sharply drawn.

Kenney has great strength on stage, and for the most part the production makes her small stature an expression of iron will in a compact body, but in the end there's something a little too adorable about this Annie Sullivan. The critical moment when she decides to match Helen blow for blow in

Scene from *The Miracle Worker*. Photo by Alex Brown.

tyranny, when she must terrify the family as well as her student, is missing. Kenney's Annie never frightens us; we simply root for her. It's a complete portrayal of Annie's compassion and commitment, but a limited look at the darker fears and sorrows she had to channel to get there.

John D. Alexander stitches together the two sides of Helen's father with bountiful bravado. Captain Keller loves his daughter tenderly, but in the end his highest hope for her is that she become obedient enough to fit in with his ideal of a genteel household. As the character vacillates between master and pushover, Alexander comes down firmly on the creampuff side. It would have been nice to have greater tension in the struggles between him and Annie or his wife over Helen's welfare, but Alexander makes up for it with an intoxicating measure of southern charm.

As Helen's mother Kate, Heather Nielsen does a fine job of making her character powerless without being useless. Kate loves her daughter, and though she has an understandable tendency to see Helen as an irrational pet instead of a seven-year-old girl, she refuses to give up on her. Nielsen sparkles when conspiring with Annie to try every possible method to reach Helen. But she isn't afraid to show Kate's weakness either, ready to trade any expression of love from Helen for the more uncomfortable as-

pects of her discipline.

Michael Bresette plays Helen's older stepbrother James, the overlooked family member. James wrestles with his father for affection, for recognition of his deceased mother, and for respect. Bresette has a solid presence on stage, all the more remarkable because he's playing a character usually cast about 10 years older. This young actor portrays the tension with both parents well, though he can lapse into strident exasperation. Bresette is masterful at taking in what's around him, but when called on to respond he can lose that same subtlety. Overall, he's quite impressive, and builds on the skill he showed in last year's production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The cast includes four other young performers: Katie Gilmartin, Sam Biondolillo, Kaleigh Saunders, and Karli Robertson. All are excellent onstage, and proof that Lost Nation is a vital community presence as it provides a great introduction to theater for budding actors. Keenan gave them good direction and utilized them well, and the young actors respond with engaging work.

Keenan's direction aims the play unerringly at Helen's climactic deliverance. We know it's coming, and some of the obstacles along the way can look like matchsticks to be blown aside. The play is especially intense in a monumental battle in which Annie imposes the rudiments of table man-

ners on Helen. Kenney and Gilbert go all in, and the scene is very powerful. But Keenan raises the volume too early—the action does not build and the actors simply hold their positions throughout. Annie, for example, should be prompted by despair at what isn't working rather than obstinately maintaining her certainty that she'll win out. If the scene moved from Annie begging to coaxing to teaching to demanding, we'd see more clearly the burden of the limited channel of communication, and Annie's necessary adaptation.

Still, with fine performances from Kenney and Gilbert, the heroic project of spelling words into Helen's hand takes on an inspiring power. What we're witnessing is the craving for communication that ultimately breaks down every wall. The fact that empathy, with a true measure of hard work, can connect Annie and Helen is a beautiful, hopeful story. You will exult as Helen first grasps the abstraction of language.

Annie's transformation is not handled as completely. The struggles in her life are mentioned in montage mode, and even the horrors of her young life in an asylum become a list of miseries rather than character-shaping experience. Keenan relies on some atmospheric voice over and spooky lighting to show us that Annie is bent under the weight of bad memories, but the stylized voices aren't intelligible enough to convey the story.

We can fault the playwright here too. He has in mind a magnificent character arc in which Annie overcomes obstacles as large as Helen's, but Annie's battles happened in the past and never become present on stage. Still, the enriching climax has Kenney and Gilbert exhilarated by the discovery of language. Their joy is uplifting, and it's as if Annie, too, sees herself as a whole person for the first time.

The set design by Donna Stafford combines an abstract space with well-chosen furniture pieces. The result is a large expanse that gives the actors plenty of space to connect physically and emotionally, but stints a bit on texture. Shawn Sturdevant designed the costumes, with good attention to period and character. Kim Bent's lighting design was simple and effective.

*The Miracle Worker* is a good play to see right now. Its message resonates especially well today, and Lost Nation delivers the story in a way that will make you leave the theater enriched and hopeful.

**News from the Abbey**

by Duffy Gardner

Join us at The Lamb Abbey Art Society in Montpelier for an eclectic evening of music. Ben Roy will present music from four of the projects he is currently involved in. Hot Flannel, (acoustic jazz grass) features Jen Wells on bass, Doug Perkins on guitar, Patrick Ross on fiddle and Ben Roy on drums. Ben's other bands are: Town Wide Yard Sale (thrash new timey folk), Presence (surf punk), and another band, yet to be revealed, that will also perform. Here at the Abbey we have recently completed a new 32-foot wide stage and 700-square-foot dance floor. We encourage artistic expression, creative growth, economic prosperity, and audience happiness. Sound good? That's because it is good. And it's time for more goodness!

See you Saturday at 8 p.m. Bring your own refreshments, and please don't park in the VFW parking lot. Spread the word. We need people to support these shows if this project is to continue.

Thanks, Duffy

*The Lamb Abbey Art Society is located on Pioneer Street, next to the VFW Hall. For further information, call 229-2200 or visit "Lamb Abbey" on Facebook. Lamb Abbey is currently reserving studio time for teachers looking for space for dance classes, for theater groups needing a rehearsal theater, and for events (wedding receptions, etc.), as well as yoga, tai chi, and martial arts classes. If you need a space to hold a class, do it here!*

# The Gift of Dance

## The Barre Lions Club Presents The Gallaudet Dance Company

by Adam Rosen,  
Rumney School principal  
photos by Astrid Rieken

The Barre Lions Club will present the Gallaudet Dance Company in two benefit performances at the Barre Opera House on Saturday, May 9.

The Gallaudet Dance Company is a performing group of approximately 15 dancers. All members of the company are undergraduate or graduate students at Gallaudet University of Washington, D. C., the world's only accredited liberal arts university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and the world leader of liberal education and career development for their academic community. Each dancer's background is different—in terms of hearing loss, preferred communication mode, secondary school education, and current major field of study as a University student. But all the dancers are excellent communicators. They rely on their vision as their primary mode of communication and communicate through their dancing in a range of styles, including dance that uses American Sign Language as its foundation. Gallaudet University itself is a bilingual community where students, faculty, and staff communicate with each other in both American Sign Language and English. The Gallaudet Dance Company celebrated its 50th anniversary in the spring of 2005.

Under the direction of Dr. Diane Hottendorf and assistant director Sue Gill-Doleac, the company performs a wide repertoire of dances—ballet, jazz, hip-hop, tap, and modern, many of those genres Hottendorf recently added to broaden the appeal of the company's already remarkable repertoire. She has also incorporated American Sign Language in the company's performances and created the addition of a dance minor to Gallaudet's curriculum. "Our aim is the same as that of the rest of the activities that Gallaudet provides: to produce a well-rounded person," says Hottendorf. And Assistant Director Gill-Doleac, an alumna of Gallaudet and its dance company adds, "More than 745 dancers have been involved over the life of the company." Gill points out that many dance companies fold after a few years due to funding problems, while the Gallaudet Dance Company has been in existence more than 50 years.

The Barre Lions Club, an affiliate of Lions Club International, has long provided support services for those in our community who have vision and hearing impairments. In addition to collecting and redistributing used eyeglasses, the club assists in the purchase of eyeglasses and hearing aids for people with limited resources. The club has also been an active partner with the Central Vermont Medical Center in creating a center for evaluation and treatment of special



impairments related to hearing and vision.

All the proceeds from the two performances, matinee and evening, will be returned to the central Vermont community in the form of services to the vision and hearing impaired. Seats for the performance on Saturday, May 9, 7:30 p.m., are reserved (\$24 for adults, \$10 for students). Seats for the matinee at 2:30 p.m. on May 9 are not reserved and are free to children 15 and under. Matinee adult tickets are \$15. To purchase tickets in advance call the Barre Lions Club ticket hotline at 479-6257.

Finally, if you wish to support this worthy endeavor, the Barre Lions Club is inviting local businesses and individuals to share in underwriting the expense of producing this unique benefit performance by sponsoring or advertising in the program book. For further information please contact Alban Richey at 479-2009 or e-mail: arichey2009@charter.net

*Editor's Note: A look at the Barre Lions Club website reveals that the slogan of the association is "Liberty, Intelligence, Our Nation's Safety," with the alternate suggestion of "Loving Individuals Offering Needed Services." The Motto of every Lion is "We Serve." And what better way to express the association's true vision than by presenting these spectacular performances by the world-renowned Gallaudet Dance Company to benefit our central Vermont neighbors in need.*



### GALLAUDET DANCE COMPANY Barre Opera House Saturday, May 9

Matinee: 2:30 PM EVENING: 7:30 PM

To purchase tickets in advance and for more information call the Barre Lions Club ticket hotline at 479-6257.

### Business Recognition Breakfast on Thursday, April 30

Two high-profile performing events happening in Montpelier and Barre are raising public awareness about what it means to deal with and transcend disabilities.

Right now through May 10, Lost Nation Theater in Montpelier is performing the William Gibson play, *The Miracle Worker*. In the current production, we witness the blind and deaf girl Helen Keller interacting with her teacher Annie Sullivan, and we watch with rapt attention as Annie leads Helen through a learning experience that takes us to the end of the play when Helen breaks through to understanding and speaking language.

On May 9, the Barre Lions Club will be presenting the Gallaudet Dance Company in two benefit performances (one a matinee and the other an evening performance). Gallaudet University is the world's only accredited liberal arts university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The Gallaudet dancers rely on their vision as their primary mode of communication. These May 9 performances promise to enlarge our understanding of what it means to use dance and the human body to communicate.

Now, here's something else that's happening just as this paper hits the street. On Thursday, April 30, beginning at 7:30 a.m., the Central Vermont Job Developer Coalition will be putting on a Business Recognition Breakfast to honor all the central Vermont businesses that are providing jobs and supporting people who come from a number of different situations. Some people have various limitations; others are on public assistance. Still others are in transition from time spent with the Department of Corrections, are still in high school, or are looking for work experience.

Jet Service Envelope Company in Berlin is one such business that will be thanked and honored on April 30. Jet Service has worked for at least three years with part-time employee Kris Medina. In addition to his part-time work with Jet Service, Medina is also a full-time student, and Jet Service has worked around his schedule so that Medina could continue his employment. For his part, Medina has successfully carried out a number of work assignments: washing trucks, recycling, working in the warehouse, and various other tasks.

The Central Vermont Job Developer Coalition provides comprehensive staffing to a wide range of local businesses and the Coalition consists of these participating organizations: the Department of Labor, VocRehab Vermont, VABIR, United Employment Services, Green Mountain Workforce, DVVI, Vermont Adult Learning, Vermont Associates, JOBS, and area high schools Union 32, Montpelier, and Harwood. For more information, please contact (802) 793-8309.

—Nat Frothingham

## Two Choirs Celebrate the Music of the World

courtesy of Larry Gordon  
and Patty Cuyler  
photos courtesy of Village Harmony

Montpelier World Music Chorus and Boston Harmony, both led by Patty Cuyler and Larry Gordon, present a joint concert on Mother's Day, Sunday May 10 at 3 p.m. at Montpelier Bethany Church. The Montpelier Choir also presents a concert on its own on Friday, May 15 at 8 p.m. at the Plainfield Community Center.

Both concert programs present South African songs and dances, traditional music from Caucasus Georgia, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, Italian renaissance laudae, and American shape-note and gospel songs. Now in their fourth season, these two choirs of 30 mixed adult and teen singers are both open to any interested singers. Both groups are particularly notable for their ability to radically change their sound as they range through these different genres: from the dark and sonorous Georgian timbre to the ultra-bright Bulgarian hard-voice, from straight-ahead shape-note singing to the rich and mellifluous South African sound. In Montpelier the groups will each perform



on their own, and also join together 50 voices strong on a few numbers to "raise a mighty sound."

Directors Gordon and Cuyler are also the directors of the larger organization Village Harmony, which sponsors singing camps and workshops throughout the world that

study traditional polyphonic singing styles first hand. Many of the singers have participated in these camps.

Cuyler says, "In all the work we do we strive to reach the essence of the musical traditions we study and perform; not just the melodies and the harmonies, but the distinc-

tive singing timbres, the body language, the sound of the language itself, and the place of the music within the culture. In most cases we have sung these songs alongside native singers in these countries, and we try to share this visceral understanding of the music in our teaching."

Gordon adds, "We are really pleased with the sound that these groups have developed this year. They are a very adventurous and plucky bunch of singers, completely unafraid to try new sounds and new ways of using their voices."

Admission to either concert, at the door, is \$10, \$5 for students and seniors. For further information call (802) 426-3210 or visit [www.villageharmony.org](http://www.villageharmony.org).

**SUPPORT  
Local Art**



## VCFA and Hunger Mountain Journal Announce New Literary Prize

courtesy of Stacy Theberge, VCFA

Vermont College of Fine Arts and *Hunger Mountain: The VCFA Journal of the Arts* announce the Katherine Paterson Prize for Young Adult (YA) and Children's Writing

*Hunger Mountain*, the arts journal at Vermont College of Fine Arts, announces a new writing contest for writers of young adult and children's literature. The contest, which is open to all writers, awards \$1,000 and publication in *Hunger Mountain's* new online arts journal, due to launch this summer.

"We created the Katherine Paterson Prize because we wanted to support the work of young adult and children's writers," says *Hunger Mountain* managing editor Miciah Bay Gault. "We wanted a new way to honor the writers in this exciting field." The Katherine Paterson Prize is open to writers of young adult fiction, middle-grade fiction, and picture books. Entries must be unpublished and no more than 5,000 words. There is a \$20 entry fee. Entries must be post-marked by June 30, 2009.

The prize will be judged by Vermont resident Katherine Paterson, critically acclaimed author of numerous children's books, including *Bridge to Terabithia*, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, *Jacob Have I Loved*, and, most recently, *Bread and Roses, Too*. Katherine Paterson has won the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, and scores of other awards and honors.

*Hunger Mountain: The VCFA Journal of the Arts* is both a print and online publication that aims to cultivate engagement with and conversation about the arts by publishing high-quality, innovative literary and visual art by both established and emerging artists, and by offering opportuni-

ties for interactivity and discourse. *Hunger Mountain* has traditionally published fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and visual art. With the launch of its online arts journal this summer, its scope will expand to include video and web-based art, writing for stage and screen, and YA and children's literature. The YA/children's literature portion will include feature articles on hot topics and trends in YA and children's literature, interviews with publishing industry insiders, and fiction selections by well-known and up-and-coming YA and children's authors.

*Hunger Mountain* also offers the Howard Mosher Short Fiction Prize, the Ruth Stone Prize in Poetry, and the Hunger Mountain Creative Nonfiction Prize annually, each of which is judged by a guest writer. Past judges have included Wally Lamb, author of *She's Come Undone* and *I Know This Much Is True*. To learn more about the journal, visit [www.hungermtm.org](http://www.hungermtm.org).

*The MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts was the first of its kind in the country, and the college has been at the forefront of children's writing for 11 years. Vermont College of Fine Arts is the only low-residency graduate school in the country devoted exclusively to fine arts education, offering three Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees in Visual Art, Writing, and Writing for Children & Young Adults. Visit [www.vermontcollege.edu](http://www.vermontcollege.edu) for more information.*

And, for more information about the Katherine Paterson Prize for YA and Children's Literature, e-mail [hungermtm@vermontcollege.edu](mailto:hungermtm@vermontcollege.edu), or send a self addressed, stamped envelope for contest guidelines to Katherine Paterson Prize, *Hunger Mountain*, Vermont College of Fine Arts, 36 College Street, Montpelier, VT 05602.



Katherine Paterson.