

READER'S THEATER BASED ON

Helen's Big World: The Life of Helen Keller

Written by Doreen Rappaport Illustrated by Matt Tavares

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CAST:

Adult Helen

Young Helen, as a baby and child Arthur, Helen's Father

Katherine, Helen's Mother

Doctor

Annie Sullivan

Polly Thompson

Audience member 1

Audience member 2

Doreen Rappaport

Matt Tavares

Adult Helen: "We do not think with eyes and ears, and our capacity for thought is not measured by five senses."

Narrators 1 through 10: *Helen's Big World: Narrator 1: The Life of Helen Keller*

Narrator 2: Written by Doreen Rappaport, Narrator 3: Illustrated by Matt Tavares

Adult Helen: "The beginning of my life was simple and much like every other little life."

Narrator 1: At six months, Helen could crawl and talk. When she was one, she ran after a ray of sunshine, loved the mockingbird's song and the sweet smell of climbing roses.

Young Helen: (To Father) Howdy.

Arthur: Well, howdy. Come up here, little one. Haven't you caught that sunray yet?

Young Helen: Wah-wah!

Katherine: Arthur, will you get Helen some water?

Arthur: I'll get her some wah-wah, Kate, if you can peel her off my lap!

Adult Helen: "In the dreary month of February came the illness, which closed my eyes and ears. Gradually, I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me."

Doctor: I'm sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Keller. We have no idea what disease your daughter had nor how to restore her hearing, vision, or speech.

Katherine: There must be something you can do.

Arthur: She's only nineteen months old. How can she go through life not being able to hear or see or speak?

Doctor: I wish there was some way to help her.

Narrator 1: When her parents pressed her close, Helen knew their smell and touch. But she could not see them or hear them.

Adult Helen: "My failures to make myself understood were followed by outbursts."

Katherine: Oh, I know what she's doing, Arthur. When she pretends to put on glasses, she's talking about you!

Narrator 1: But she could not make up enough signs to have her needs understood.

Arthur: Can you figure out what she's trying to say now?

Young Helen: (screaming) Ahh! Ehhh! Ahh!

Katherine: What can we do? She's so frustrated she hits us, and we have no way to help her understand.

Arthur: We have to get help.

Narrator 1: When Helen was almost seven, a young woman named Annie Sullivan, came to teach her.

Narrator 2: Annie had been blind herself, but through a number of operations, the twenty-one-year-old could now see.

Annie: I gave Helen many objects and spelled their names with my fingers on her palm. At first she didn't understand what I was doing.

I gave her a doll to hold and spelled the word D-O-L-L, but she kept on screaming.

Young Helen: (Screaming) Ahhhhh!

Annie: I gave her a piece of cake and spelled C-A-K-E.

Narrator 3: But Helen still did not understand that Annie was spelling the name of the object in her hand.

Narrator 4: Helen kept on screaming and kicking her.

Narrator 1: But Annie didn't give up. She kept on spelling words on Helen's palm.

Narrator 2: Helen loved Annie's finger play and started to imitate the finger movements, but she did not understand that Annie was spelling words.

Adult Helen: "I was interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it."

Annie: I had a hard time teaching Helen table manners. She would flail out at me.

Young Helen: (screaming) Nahhhhhh!

Annie: When she threw the spoon on the floor, I took her hands and made her pick it up.

Adult Helen: "In the still, dark world in which I lived, there was no tenderness."

Narrator 2: Back and forth they went, until Helen finally used the spoon and ate off her own plate.

Narrators 1, 2, and 3: One month later, at the water pump in the yard, Annie put Helen's fingers under the running water, and spelled the word water in Helen's palm. AND Helen finally understood that Annie was spelling words into her hand.

Annie: W-A-T-E-R. She's got it.

Narrator 4: Then Helen touched Annie, and Annie knew that Helen wanted to know her name. She spelled the word Teacher on Helen's palm.

Adult Helen: "That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy and set it free."

Narrator 4: For the next few years Helen learned thousands of new words and practiced speaking them with her fingers.

Annie: I had to also teach Helen to see with her fingers.

I put a rose in her hand, and raised her hand to her nose. And Helen learned the word rose.

Narrators 1, 2, 3, and 4: With her fingers, Helen felt the vibrations of a person laughing, a chick bursting out of an egg, a horse neighing, and a baby pig squealing.

Narrator 4: And Annie spelled each new word or idea.

Adult Helen: "There is not a talent, or an inspiration or joy in me that has not been awakened by her loving touch."

Annie: I put paper on a writing board with grooves and showed Helen how to guide her pencil with her left hand and write in the grooves with her right.

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5: Once Helen learned to write she would not stop.

Young Helen: "Astronomer comes from the Latin word *astra*, which means stars. While we are sleeping quietly in our beds, they are watching the beautiful sky through the telescope."

Narrator 5: Helen learned so quickly, some people called her a genius. Narrators 1, 2, 3, and 4: Other people said Annie was the genius.

Narrator 5: Articles were written about Helen. By the time she was eight she was famous.

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6: Helen wanted to read books on her own.

Annie: So I taught her Braille. I spelled words into Helen's hand as she ran her finger over the Braille dots I made on pieces of cardboard.

Narrator 6: Helen practiced and practiced. Soon she read as quickly as sighted children.

Adult Helen: "At first I had only a few books in raised print. I read them over and over, until the words were so worn and pressed I could scarcely make them out."

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7: Very few people knew the manual language Helen used to communicate, so Helen learned to read lips.

Annie: She learned how to put her fingers on a person's lips, nose and throat. As the person spoke, I spelled what they said into her hand.

Narrator 7: Helen practiced and practiced. Soon she learned to read lips. Then she imitated what she felt with her hand. Again, she practiced and practiced, until she learned to speak.

Adult Helen: "It was my ambition to speak like other people. We worked hard and faithfully, yet we did not quite reach our goal."

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8: When Helen decided to go to college most people said that it would be impossible for her to keep up with the work. But she was determined.

Annie: I sat next to her in class, spelling what the teachers said. Because few of the books she had to read were in Braille, I read them and spelled them to Helen for five hours a day.

Narrator 8: Annie hurt her eyes doing it.

Adult Helen: "Teacher read many books to me. In spite of repeated warnings from oculists, she has always abused her eyes for my sake."

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8: Helen graduated with honors from Radcliffe College.

Narrator 9: While in college, Helen wrote her autobiography. She explained how Annie taught her.

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9: The book was a success. People marveled at how much Helen knew and what a wonderful teacher Annie was.

Adult Helen: "I have the advantage of a mind trained to think, and that is the difference between myself and most people, not my blindness and their sight."

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10: Helen read all kinds of books and met all kinds of people and thought about all kinds of things and spoke about what was important to her.

Narrator 10: She spoke out against war and against child labor. She spoke for workers' unions, and for the right of women to vote and for justice for black Americans.

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10: Many people did not like her ideas.
Narrator 10: But she would not be silenced.

Adult Helen: "I do not like the world as it is; so I am trying to make it a little more as I would like it."

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10: Helen starred in a movie about her life.

Narrator 10: She didn't like that very much, but she did like being onstage.

Annie: The audience asked questions, and I spelled them on her palm.

Audience Member 1: Does Miss Keller think of marriage?

Annie: Helen says, "Yes. Are you proposing to me?"

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10: (Laughing.) Hahaha!

Audience Member 2: Do you think women should go into politics?

Annie: Helen says, "Yes, if they want to."

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10: Some people felt sad that Helen was performing. But she needed the money.

Narrator 10: And she felt good earning it.

Annie: Helen and I traveled all over the world, giving talks on the needs of blind people.

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10: She spoke in people's homes and large halls.

Narrators 1 and 2: She met with lawmakers, teachers, and presidents.

Narrators 3 and 4: She insisted that eye doctors examine newborns.

Narrators 5 and 6: She insisted there be more books in Braille.

Narrators 7, 8, 9, and 10: And better education and meaningful work for people with disabilities.

Adult Helen: "The chief handicap of the blind is not blindness, but the attitude of seeing people toward them."

Narrator 2: For forty-nine years, Annie was at Helen's side, wherever she went, helping her do the things she could not do by herself.

Narrator 1: Annie's health weakened. Narrator 2: She died when Helen was fifty-six.

Adult Helen: "I often wonder what my life would have been like if she had not come into it."

Narrators 1 and 2: Some people wondered how Helen would survive without Annie.

Polly Thompson: I am Polly Thompson. I came to help in Annie's place.

Narrator 2: But Helen always used the strength and knowledge that Annie had taught her to face the world.

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10: She kept traveling and speaking, always saying what she thought was important to help those who needed it.

Adult Helen: "I love my country. But my love for America is not blind. Perhaps I am more conscious of her faults because I love her so deeply."

Narrator 10: Helen Keller died in her sleep at the age of eighty-seven.

Narrator 1: At her death she was known around the world as an author and speaker, an advocate for people with disabilities, a believer in the power of scientific research, an opponent of war as a way to solve problems, and a believer in civil rights and voting for all.

Narrator 10: Doreen Rappaport and Matt Tavares, the author and illustrator, made these observations about Helen Keller:

Ms. Rappaport: "[Helen Keller] remains an inspiration for all of us, for she reminds us that nothing is impossible if we put our mind to it."

Mr. Tavares: "The story of how she overcame her deafness and blindness is truly inspiring. But I think the real legacy of Helen Keller is how she made the most of what she had, and how she used the greatest gift of all, her mind, to try to understand the world and make it a better place."