

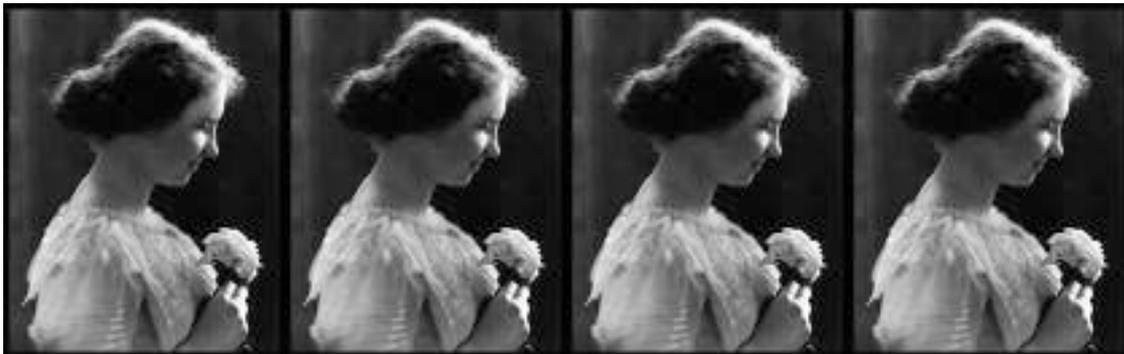
Théâtre  
**Fools  
& Feathers**

present

# Out of the Dark

A new creation inspired by the life of Helen Keller

Written and performed by Sophie Brech and Louis Fortier



Show available in English as of January 2012.

**Preparation Document**

# Théâtre **Fools & Feathers**

Theatre Fools and Feathers is a Quebecois, French and British company. Its founding members, Louis Fortier and Sophie Brech studied at *The International School of Jacques Lecoq* in Paris from 1997 to 1999, a physical theatre school which specialises in movement analysis, improvisation and creation. It has inspired many incredible artists including Robert Lepage, Ariane Mnouchkine and Geoffrey Rush. Louis Fortier and Sophie Brech subsequently became assistants to Mario Gonzalez, at the National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts in Paris. Their artistic careers have led them to travel from Canada to France, via Bosnia, Italy, South Korea, and England. In addition to creating their own shows, they have also been actors in other theatre companies such as *Teatro Malandro*, directed by Omar Porras, and *Company Act*, directed by Andrew Wilson.

Fools and Feathers Theatre Company is strongly influenced and inspired by Louis and Sophie's training at the Jacques Lecoq School in Paris. Choosing plays, stories and characters that everyone can recognise and relate to, their aim is to touch the hearts of the public through simplicity and sincerity. In a constant search for beauty and truth, they take the public on a poetic and imaginative journey, during which they feel they have experienced something new, and perhaps questioned the world in which we live.

In choosing to use the physical body of the actor as an essential tool, Fools and Feathers is interested in creating non-realistic theatre nonetheless rooted in sincerity, namely through highly theatrical means such as clowns and masks. They wish to take ordinary, everyday characters, and make them extraordinary.

In « ***Out of the Dark*** » they aim to focus on the actors, without the use of any tools, in



order to bring to stage this melodramatic story in it's purest form.

*Drawing : »Out of the Dark « by Lawrence Watson*

## Out of the Dark



*photo : Sophie Brech*

### **BIOGRAPHY HELEN KELLER**

Helen Keller was born on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1880 in a small rural town in The United States of America. When she was only 19 months old, she contracted a fever that left her deaf, dumb and blind, enclosing her in a dark and silent world, devoid of any human communication, which she later described as a "No world". She was considered mentally disabled until her parents engaged Anne Sullivan to be her teacher. She was almost 7 years-old. With dedication, patience, courage and love, Anne Sullivan was able to evoke and help develop Helen's enormous intelligence. By writing words into the palm of Helen's hands, she not only taught her a vast vocabulary, but also devised a method whereby Helen learned to speak through lip-reading.

By the age of 10, Helen had learned to read, write and speak. When she was 20 years old she attended Radcliffe College, and with the constant help of Miss Sullivan who patiently spelled all her textbooks and everything that the teachers said, she was able to graduate. Helen dedicated her life to helping other blind and deaf people. She travelled the world, 3

gave lectures, learned to speak several languages including French, Latin and Greek, wrote many books of which her most famous is called « *The story of my life* ».

She won many honors, including honorary university degrees and the US presidential medal of freedom and in 1999 was listed in «*Times* » most important people of the century.

## **ANNE SULLIVAN**

Anne Sullivan was born on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1866. She died in 1936. She spent her whole life dedicated to teaching Helen Keller. Her mother died when she was 8 years old and her father was an alcoholic who abandoned her. When Anne was just 3 years-old she contracted an eye disease called *trachoma* which left her almost blind. She underwent many surgeries but they were unsuccessful. In 1880, she entered the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind in Boston where she managed to regain some of her sight thanks to another operation. On March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1887, she met Helen Keller for the first time. Her life was never the same again.

### **Why choose Helen Keller as a main source of inspiration for a theatrical creation ?**

The famous American writer Mark Twain felt that two most remarkable personalities of the nineteenth century were Napoleon and Helen Keller.

The meeting between Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller created the beginning of a renaissance, which would change their lives forever. Helen Keller was a lecturer and author, and therefore learned to speak, read and write. Until the end of her life, she sought to transcend her own limits as she fought for freedom, in a continuous movement towards her opening to the world.

Helen Keller can be seen, rightly, as one of the first heroines of the twentieth century.

*Photo : Helen Keller*



## EXTRACTS FROM « THE STORY OF MY LIFE » WRITTEN BY HELEN KELLER

The Beginning : when Helen became deaf and blind :

*« ...Then, in the dreary month of February, came the illness which closed my eyes and ears and plunged me into the unconsciousness of a newborn baby...The doctor thought I could not live. Early one morning, however, the fever left me as suddenly and mysteriously as it had come. There was a great rejoicing in the family that morning, but no one, not even the doctor, knew that I should never see or hear again... »*

How Helen first learned to communicate despite her handicap :

*« ...My hands felt every object and observed every motion, and in this way I learned to know many things. Soon I felt the need of some communication with others and began to make crude signs. A shake of the head meant « No » and a nod, « Yes », a pull meant « Come » and a push meant « Go ». Was it bread that I wanted ? Then I would imitate the acts of cutting the slices and buttering them. If I wanted ice-cream for dinner I made the sign for working the freezer and shivered, indicating cold... »*

Helen's relationship with her teacher, Anne :

*« ...Gradually I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different – until she came – my teacher – who was to set my spirit free ... »*

*« ...The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan came to me. I am filled with wonder when I consider the immeasurable contrasts between the two lives which it connects. It was just before I was 7 years old... »*

*« ... I stretched out my hand...some one took it, and I was caught up and held close in the arms of her who had come to reveal all things to me, and, more than all things else, to love me ... »*

*« My teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her. How much of my delight in all beautiful things is innate, and how much is due to her influence, I can never tell. I feel that her being is inseparable from my own, and that the footsteps of my life are in hers. All the best of me belongs to her – there is not a talent, or an inspiration or a joy in me that has not been awakened by her loving touch. »*

### Creative Writing/Role-play

Anne Sullivan was undoubtedly the most important and influential person in Helen's life.

Think of someone who you admire/who strongly inspires you in your life, and write a short description about them.  
Think about the following :

- a) What is your relationship with this person ? (Is it a teacher, parent, friend, relative?)
  - b) How long have they known you ?
  - c) Why is he/she so special to you ?
  - d) How do you think your life has changed because of this person ?
  - e) What qualities have they given you ?
  - f) How have they influenced your life in a positive way ?
- Act out your first meeting with this person with a partner.

When Helen first learned to speak :

*« It was in the spring of 1890 that I learned to speak. The impulse to utter audible sounds had always been strong within me. I used to make noises, keeping one hand on my throat while the other hand felt the movement of my lips. I was pleased with anything that made a noise and liked to feel the cat purr and the dog bark. I also liked to keep my hand on a singer's throat, or on a piano when it was being played... »*

The first connected sentence that Helen Keller ever said was

*« It is warm »*

and she used to repeat, ecstatically :

*« I am not dumb now »*

### Creative Writing/role-play

In small groups, choose one of the following situations in Helen Keller's life, and write a short dialogue with a partner. Think about how you would stage it (what props and objects would you use), where you are (inside/outdoors), and how you would choose to portray the different characters in your scene ? (how would you play Helen as a baby/Helen when she is blind/Anne ?) .

Situations :

- a) When Helen Keller is a baby, and her parents discover that she is blind and deaf for the first time.
- b) The arrival of Anne Sullivan at the Keller household. When Helen first meets Anne.
- c) The first time Helen Keller learned to read/write/or speak.



Photo : Helen Keller

The following are extracts from Helen Keller's letters :

**Letter number one : This is an extract from a letter that Helen wrote to her teacher Anne Sullivan, when Anne was apart from Helen for three months, during the Summer :**

**TO MISS ANNE MANSFIELD SULLIVAN, Tusculumbia, Ala., August 7, 1889**

*Dearest Teacher – I am very glad to write to you this evening, for I have been thinking much about you all day...Mildred\* is the dearest and sweetest little maiden in the world...I think she would like to put her two soft arms around your neck and hug you...*

*I read in my books every day. I love them very, very, very much. I want you to come back to me soon. I miss you so very, very much. I send you five thousand kisses, and more love than I can tell,*

*From your affectionate little pupil , Helen A. Keller*

**Extract number two : This is an example of Helen learning to speak other languages, and in this case French :**

**TO MR. MICHAEL ANAGNOS, Roxbury, Mass. Oct. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1888.**

*Mon Cher Monsieur Anagnos,*

*I am sitting by the window and the beautiful sun is shining on me...*

*When I am thirteen years old I am going to travel in many strange and beautiful countries. I shall climb very high mountains in Norway and see much ice and snow...When I am in France I will take French. A little French boy will say, Parlez-vous Francais ? And I will say, Oui Monsieur, vous avez un joli chapeau. Donnez moi un baiser...*

*Now I am too tired to write more. Je vous aime. Au revoir.*

### **Creative Writing**

Write a short letter as if you were Helen Keller. Who would you choose to write to ? (her teacher/mother/father/friend/fiancée). What would you write about ? Would you choose to write as Helen the child or young woman or old lady ?



*Photo : Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan*

\* Mildred was Helen Keller's little sister

## Links related to the lifetime achievements of Helen Keller

Read the following extract by Helen Keller from *The Story of my Life*:

*« My teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool steam gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other word « water » first slowly then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought ; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew that water meant the wonderful cool something flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free ! »*

1) Now watch the following scene from the film *« The Miracle Worker »*, directed by Arthur Penn, which shows the incredible moment when Helen Keller understands that every object has a name :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-EyORUICT4>

2) Anne Sullivan demonstrates the method which she created for Helen to learn to speak and to understand others speak :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gv1uLFF35Uw>

### Creative Writing

Watch this scene, and in pairs create your own lesson between Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller, based on what you have just seen.

### Drama Activity (optional)

- How would you choose to portray Helen ? Think about how you would represent her physically/ what age you would choose to be/ how would you show that she was blind and deaf ?
- How would you choose to portray Anne ? Think about her posture. How would you show that she is a teacher ? What would she wear ? How would she interact physically with Helen ?
- What would you choose to teach Helen Keller first ?
- Present your scene to the rest of the group.

### **Further research :**

3) Helen Keller « listening » to the world's greatest opera singer of her time, Caruso, who sings a song written by Saint-Saens :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CkU6yPApgM>

Helen Keller « reading » :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIaMgD1VmmY>

## Research : Braille

- a) With your class have a look at some examples of Braille.
- b) Try making your own sentence in Braille.
- c) With a partner, close your eyes and try to read their sentence using braille.
- d) How easy/difficult is it ?

## **SIGN LANGUAGE**

Helen Keller actually never used **American Sign Language** because American Sign Language requires sight; however, she did communicate with people in several different ways. Many deaf or hearing impaired people talk with their fingers, using a system of manual signs, or fingerspelling. The basic system was created by Spanish monks to communicate without breaking their vow of silence. The alphabet was modified in the 1700s by Abbe Charles Michel de l'Epee in France and then brought to America by Laurent Clerc, a teacher of the deaf, where it is known as the **American Manual Alphabet**. **Anne Sullivan taught Helen Keller this fingerspelling method** in which words are spelled into the palm of one's hand. This was Helen's primary means of communication with those around her, and she described fingerspelling in : *The Story of my Life*

*"I had better explain our use of the manual alphabet, which seems to puzzle people who do not know us. One who reads or talks to me spells with his hand, using the single-hand manual alphabet generally employed by the deaf. I place my hand on the hand of the speaker so lightly as not to impede its movements. The position of the hand is as easy to feel as it is to see. I do not feel each letter any more than you see each letter separately when you read. Constant practice makes the fingers very flexible, and some of my friends spell rapidly—about as fast as an expert writes on a typewriter. The mere spelling is, of course, no more a conscious act than it is in writing."*

Helen Keller also learned to read lips. She would place her fingers very lightly on an individual's lips and her thumb on their larynx or voice box, and from the way that their lips formed words, and the vibration of their voice box, she could understand what they were saying, and therefore be a part of the conversation

## Research

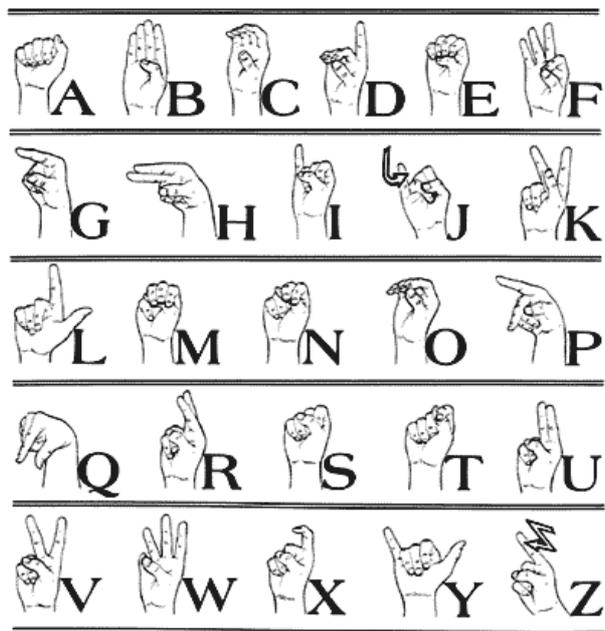
- a) In pairs, take a look at

<http://www.lifeprint.com>

- b) Look at the American Sign Language (ASL) **fingerspelling introduction**
- c) Practise the alphabet in pairs, and try to construct sentences.
- d) How easy/difficult is it to understand each other ?
- e) Have a look at the **first 100 signs**. Test each other on the new words that you have learnt.

- f) Take a look at the **fingerspelling introduction**. Then try the **fingerspelling practise tool**. How did you score ?
- g) Image that you are deaf, and try to create your own sign language in pairs.
- h) What different methods could you use ? (can you use objects, mime etc...)
- i) Repeat the same exercise as above, but this time, imagine that you are blind and deaf.
- j) How are you be able to communicate with each other ?
- k) What difficulties do you come across ?

## The American Manual Alphabet



### Discussion :Film : « The Miracle Worker »

Watch the film, « *The Miracle Worker* », which was written by William Gibson, and based on the life of Helen Keller. The film explores her childhood, up until the first time she understands that words have meaning .

William Gibson

*« ...I have been asked a hundred times how I came so interested in her 'Helen Keller' ? I reply patiently that I was never interested in her, the play is about her teacher, and for that reason is not named THE MIRACLE WORKEE »*

- a) What does the word « miracle » mean to you ?
- b) Do you think Anne Sullivan was just as much a miracle as Helen Keller ?  
If so, why ?

- c) What is our attitude towards deaf and blind people today ?
- d) Do you know anyone who is blind/deaf ?
- e) What type of characteristics do you think Helen had to possess in order to overcome her obstacles?

## A note on creating « Out of the Dark »

A theatre **creation** is very different from rehearsing a play which is already written, and which already exists. Our intention with « **Out of the Dark** » is to create a play using only two actors, who are able to change roles and become different characters during the play. We are inspired by the life of Helen Keller, but we might also invent and imagine other situations and characters that are not linked to Helen Keller herself, but are more generally linked to the themes of being blind, deaf and dumb.

We are interested in how human beings, through their need to survive, can develop enough strength to triumph even when they are confronted to apparently insurmountable difficulties.

We will improvise and explore in rehearsals, creating the text and dialogues as we go along ; we intend to give a lot of importance to the use of sound, as well as senses in our show ; and we would like to use minimal set, so that we can focus more on the art of acting.

## A selected chronology of Helen Keller's Life

**June 27, 1880** : Helen Keller is born to parents Captain Arthur Keller and Kate Keller at Ivy Green in Tuscumbia, Alabama.

**February 1882**

Helen contracts a fever and loses both her sight and hearing.

**Summer 1886** : The Keller family meets with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, who tells the family to contact Michael Anagnos, director of Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston. Captain Keller asks Anagnos for a teacher for Helen. Anagnos sends Anne Mansfield Sullivan to teach Helen.

**March 3, 1887** : Anne Sullivan meets Helen for the first time. She starts by teaching Helen manual sign language.

**April 5, 1887** : An incredible breakthrough happens when Anne teaches Helen that “everything has a name”. This « miracle » happens by Anne spelling W-A-T-E-R into Helen’s hand as water from the pump flows over their hands.

**1888** : Helen attends the Perkins School for the blind under director Anagnos.

**May 1888** : Anne, Helen, and Kate Keller meet President Grover Cleveland at the White House.

**November 1891** : Helen sends Anagnos the story “The Frost King” as a birthday present. She is accused of plagiarism. By 1894, Anagnos ended his relationship with Helen and Anne.

**October 1896** : Helen is accepted as a pupil at the Cambridge School for Young Ladies, in preparation for Radcliffe College.

**September 1900** : Helen becomes a member of the freshman class of 1904 at Radcliffe.

**March 1903** : Helen writes *The Story of My Life*.

**June 28, 1904** : Helen becomes the first deaf-blind individual to receive a bachelor of arts degree, graduating from Radcliffe.

**January 1913** : Helen and Anne begin their career on the lecture circuit, which is to last more than 50 years. Helen writes and publishes *Out of the Dark*.

**October 1914** : Polly Thomson joins Helen and Anne's household.

**November 1916** : Peter Fagan, John Macy's assistant, proposes to Helen, and they take out a marriage license in Boston. Helen's mother forces her to publicly renounce her engagement. The marriage never takes place

**May 1918** : *Deliverance*, a silent film based on Helen's life, is produced.

**February 1920** : Helen and Anne begin their vaudeville career.

**October 1924** : Helen and Anne begin their work with the American Foundation for the Blind.

**December 1932** : Helen is elected to AFB's board of trustees.

**October 20, 1936** : Anne Sullivan Macy dies.

**January 1943** : Helen begins her visits to the blinded, deaf, and disabled soldiers of World War II in military hospital around the country.

**October 1946** : Helen and Polly make their first world tour for the American Foundation for the Overseas Blind (AFOB) In the next 11 years, they would visit 35 countries on five continents.

**1948** : Helen visits Japan, Hiroshima

**1950-1953** : Helen and Polly continue to travel all over the world, including Europe, South Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

**Winter 1953** : A documentary film of Helen's life, *The Unconquered* (later renamed *Helen Keller in Her Story*), is released.

**June 1955** : Helen receives an honorary degree from Harvard University, the first woman to be so honored.

**Spring 1956** : *The Unconquered* wins an Academy Award for best feature length documentary of 1955.

**Winter 1956-57** : William Gibson's play *The Miracle Worker*, based on Helen's early life with Anne, debuts on television and on Broadway.

**March 21, 1960** : Polly Thomson dies.

**October 1961** : Helen suffers her first stroke and retires from public life.

**September 1964** : President Lyndon Johnson awards the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, to Helen. She is unable to attend the ceremony.

**June 1, 1968** : Helen Keller passes away in her sleep. Over 1,200 mourners attend the funeral at the National Cathedral. Helen's ashes are interred there with those of Anne and Polly.