

A Miraculous Maven

Oscar winning actress Patty Duke has experienced miracles in her own life, now she's hoping to make one happen for Interplayers Professional Theatre

by Blythe Thimsen

ANYONE WHO HAS SPENT TIME "BEHIND THE CURTAIN" knows it's nothing less than a small miracle when a theatrical production successfully comes together. Lights dimming and flooding at the proper time, actors remembering their lines, the music cuing when it should, and the audience being instantly engaged and swept up in the story are all part of the miracle. Adding in an Academy Award winning actress who starred in the original Broadway production of the play, as the director, and having all this take place in downtown Spokane, Washington, is icing on the cake. Watch out Spokane, miracles are about to happen.

On May 5th, Interplayers Professional Theatre in downtown Spokane will be witness to a miracle of its own when *The Miracle Worker*, "the classic drama of determined teacher Annie Sullivan and her triumphant effort to reach deaf, blind and mute wild child, Helen Keller" comes to life on its stage. There will be excitement, as well as nerves, last minute preparations and final, down-to-the-wire, decisions and changes. And when the curtain goes up, no doubt, the memories will come rushing back over Anna Pearce, transporting her back to a moment so similar and yet so different, from 52 years ago.

If the name Anna Pearce doesn't immediately bring a face to mind, the name Patty Duke will. They are one and the same. Patty Duke is the stage name of the young actress who found fame in the 1959-1961 Broadway production of *The Miracle Worker* before going on to win an Oscar for her role as Helen Keller in the 1962 movie version of the story. She has worked in film (*Valley of the Dolls*), television (*The Patty Duke Show*) and theater ever since, carving out an impressive resume as one of the best-known and hardest working actresses, as well as a past president (1985-1988) of the Screen Actor's Guild. Her real name is Anna, and the last name Pearce was a gift that came compliments of her beloved husband of 25 years, Mike Pearce. Professionally, she most often goes by Patty Duke, but friends and family know her as Anna.

So how did Interplayers land such gem in the director's chair? Location, location, location! Twenty-one years ago, Duke and Pearce decided to move to North Idaho, from where Pearce's family originally came. It was a welcome respite from the hustle, bustle, expense and rat-race pace of life in Southern California, specifically in the Hollywood realm. Duke quickly adapted to the refreshingly non-Hollywood feel of her new community, yet she has never denied locals the chance to relish in a double take or to squeal "you're Patty Duke!"



Courtesy of Patty Duke

Above: Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke in the miracle scene from the 1962 movie version of *The Miracle Worker*.

"Really, it is that I care," she says explaining why she doesn't mind fans' intrusion of her daily life. "I care about people. I say I was born loving people. When someone asks for an autograph, I am happy to give it, because it means I have been able to interact in someone's life."

Able to commute for any jobs she took, Duke continued her career while adjusting to a relaxed lifestyle in the Northwest. As she grew more embedded in her life here, she discovered the incredible theaters in the area, including Interplayers Professional Theatre, in downtown Spokane, which holds a special spot in her heart.

"It started with me half kidding around," she says of the idea to bring *The Miracle Worker* to the local stage. "I love this theater and I knew that if I was going to direct, this was going to be the place. Over the last five years I've been interested in the success and longevity of this theatre." That success and longevity has been teetering on the brink, due to the strained economy. Duke hopes to help by bringing *The Miracle Worker*, an audience and, therefore, the money, to Interplayers. "I'm not business minded at all, but one of the few things I could come up with to raise money was to do *The Miracle Worker*."

"We'd been discussing it, but we were looking for the right time and venue," says Interplayers' artistic director, Reed McColm. "I also wanted to make sure we could do it justice, for Patty. It is a real risk on both our parts and is a big investment, what with a



Patty Duke, with the cast of *The Miracle Worker*, at Interplayers Professional Theatre

14-person cast, lots of set changes, and being a period piece, set in the 1880s in Alabama. It takes a lot to make such a professional endeavor. It's an ambitious show and we are proud of it."

"The board and I and Reed want to do a very professional job," says Duke of the upcoming production. "I find Spokane a very healthy place for theater; in fact, I've done things here I haven't done elsewhere. Bringing *The Miracle Worker* to this stage is an effort to support this theater, but also to support the deep and talented pool of people here in the area."

The Miracle Worker seems as much a part of Duke as Duke is of it. Starting at age twelve, she not only spent nearly three years performing the role of Helen Keller on Broadway, quickly followed by launching into the production of the film version, but she also starred in the 1979 television remake, this time in the role of Annie Sullivan rather than Helen Keller. Now, 32 years later, Duke is getting the chance to experience the production from yet another vantage point: the director's chair. If the past is any hint, don't expect her to claim a favorite of the three roles. "I haven't been able to choose a favorite, between Helen and teacher (Annie)," she says of the two roles she has tackled. "I am crazy about both of them." Directing the play she knows so well will give her the chance to fall in love with it all over again, from a new perspective.

The role of Helen Keller was her first "big break" and, along with the *Patty Duke Show*, is the role for which Duke may be best known. It was a role that she created, set the mold for others to follow, and in many ways owned. Having such a connection to a role is a rare opportunity, but it can also make it difficult to see someone else take on that role. "It was very hard not to be judgmental," says Duke of seeing Melissa Gilbert play the role of Helen Keller in the 1979 television movie. "I was fairly young during my movie version of *The Miracle Worker*, but when I was older, once I let go of judgment, I began to love Melissa's version." Equally challenging was to not compare her experience playing Helen to her role as Annie Sullivan. "It was a very big deal, after having to be silent (as Helen), to have a voice and put the words of William Gibson's story together. When I stopped comparing the two roles I was able to do my work."

Stepping into the director's role for this production will be challenging enough, but Duke has some added work cut out for her as she tackles what could be called Interplayers' achilles heel: its stage. While the stage, which juts out into the audience, rather than being a traditional flat in-front-of-the-audience version, is loved by fans because it gives them the sense of being "in" the production right along with the actors, it presents a challenge when it comes to directing and choreographing the flow of the production. "The stage is giving me some trouble," she says.

Stage problems aside, Duke will be able to do her work as director with ease, knowing the role of Helen is in the capable hands of 9-year old Sophia Caruso, for the upcoming performance at Interplayers. Caruso shares some similarities to Duke, including a passion for acting, and their petite size. (When Duke played the role of Helen on Broadway, she was a twelve year-old girl, playing the role of a seven year-old, and it was believable because of her small size and slight frame). Duke hopes the comparison ends there, though, and audiences enjoy this version for its own sake.

The 1959 Broadway production of *The Miracle Worker* was called "an emotional earthquake" by critic Walter Winchell, and hailed as "a beautiful play, a lovely and loving play," in the *New York Daily News*. With the great success of her Broadway version, Duke has hopes for what the audience walks away feeling after this version. "I hope that the play is viewed as it is now, with these



Patty Duke starring as Cathy (l) and Patty (r) in a scene from *The Patty Duke Show*.

Patty Duke with guest star Sammy Davis Jr., in a scene from *The Patty Duke Show*.



Courtesy of Patty Duke

Courtesy of Patty Duke

people," she says. "I want desperately for critics to avoid comparisons. We should be championing productions that display the remarkable talent in this city. If we do our jobs right, I hope any criticism is about the story, not 'I saw Patty Duke when she was a child and this girl is ten thousand times better or worse.'"

Duke herself may not want to compare her first experience with *The Miracle Worker* to this new one, simply because going back to that time seems like a lifetime ago. It was an amazing experience, but it also was a time of great difficulty in her life. Duke has not been shy about sharing the struggles she has experienced in her life, talking at length about the harsh childhood—or lack thereof—she endured, as well as her battles with manic-depression, with which she was diagnosed in 1982. This served as much of the meat for her 1987 autobiography entitled *Call Me Anna*.

Born in New York in 1946, Duke grew up suffering the pain of losing her father and dealing with the family's financial hardships. When her brother's acting coaches, John and Ethel Ross, met Anna Marie Duke, they saw potential in her and took her completely under their tutelage, something her mother agreed to because she was desperate for the needed income her children's acting gigs could provide. This meant Duke had to leave her mother and live with the Rosses.

"There certainly wasn't any enormous desire in me to become an actress. In fact, I hated it at first. If there was any desire, it was the desire to please, which was very important to them," wrote Duke in *Call Me Anna*. This is a belief she echoes today. "I was definitely drafted into it," she says, "but I did take to it like the proverbial duck to water. It is so much a part of my molecular structure, I have to do it now. It is not about fame or fortune; it is how I know to communicate. I don't ever want to lose it."

When her coaches first caught wind of the production of *The Miracle Worker*, and the role

of Helen Keller, they set their sights on it for Duke and put her through rigorous training. "John's approach was to work separately on the deprivation of each sense. The first was blindness. That meant spending a specified amount of time every day going about my regular routine—putting my schoolbooks away, or cleaning up my area of the foyer, or washing the dishes—but doing it all with my eyes closed," she wrote in *Call Me Anna*. They would blindfold her, making her find her way around the house after having rearranged the furniture. Though cruel, the approach certainly prepared her for her audition and for the performance of a deaf-blind mute.

Bleak, painful stretches were the nature of her childhood, but the time spent working on *The Miracle Worker* may have been one of the brightest periods, offering both an outlet for anger, and a launch pad to great success for Duke.

"I had a tough childhood, and no one knew," she says. "Playing Helen allowed me to take out and work through the horror going on in my life. I was able to beat up a grown up and be applauded for it. On Broadway, it started at 8 p.m. and finished at 11; in the meantime I'd beaten the hell out of two people."

One of those people who got beaten up every performance for nearly three years during most of



Patty Duke with her on-screen parents from *The Patty Duke Show*.

Courtesy of Patty Duke

Look who's smiling...



...her TMJ pain is gone!

Persistent headaches, popping/clicking, pain in jaw, neck, shoulders, ears, or face?

Dr. Brossoit's expertise in TMJ makes him a referral source for medical/dental professionals in Spokane.

OUR PASSION IS TURNING our TMJ patient's "HOPES" INTO "REALITY"!

Call today for a TMJ Consultation 509-466-6979



Doug Brossoit, DDS MakingAwesomeSmiles.com



Courtesy of Patty Duke

Patty Duke, starring as Helen Keller, in *The Miracle Worker*.

the 719 performances-run, became not just Duke's on-stage punching bag, but also one of her most deeply cherished relationships. "We became one," says Duke of her relationship with Academy Award winning actress, Anne Bancroft, who played Annie Sullivan in both the Broadway production and the 1962 movie. "We were even closer than a team. No, there was nothing like that relationship with Annie Bancroft; that was once in a lifetime. She was a gift for me. Not just because we were performers together, but because she treated me as an equal." This was something new for Duke. Though the years the two spent performing in both the stage and film versions of *The Miracle Worker* were some of the darkest years of Duke's childhood, she never confided in Bancroft about the exact pain she was going through. "I think she sensed something was wrong," says Duke.

The Miracle Worker launched Duke's career, with a highlight being when, at age 16, she won the Best Supporting Actress Award for the 1962 movie version of the play, becoming the then-youngest person ever to win an Oscar. The Patty Duke train was pulling out of the station at full speed after this success. In addition to other plays, she soon started work on *The Patty Duke Show*, where yet another record was set, with Duke being the youngest person in television history to have a prime time series named after them.

The Patty Duke Show, a comedy about identical cousins Patty and Cathy, who were both played by Duke, ran from 1963 to 1966, captivating the nation's television-viewing audience. It was once written, "every teenaged girl in America wanted to be popular like pert and pretty Patty, and smart and sophisticated like studious Cathy."

"Oh I don't believe that!" says Duke with a laugh and a slap of her leg, upon hearing that today. She knows the allure of the characters though, and in fact had her own favorite. "I didn't mind being like Cathy, but Patty embarrassed me. All these years—40 something years later—I have had a maniacal obsession about the bad hairdos I had." Though she may not have had as deep of a fondness for Patty, Duke doesn't shun either character when she stumbles across them on TV. "I watch!" she confesses. "I'll tell you what's weird, though is when it's 3 a.m. and you

can't sleep, so you're flipping through the channels and you watch yourself go from younger to older."

Aging is inevitable for all of us, actresses included. As Duke grew older, she also grew up. When she turned 18, during the final season of *The Patty Duke Show*, she freed herself from the controlling grip of the Rosses, severing the personal relationship with them and living on her own in California, where the show had relocated from New York.

The following years brought many ups and downs. While Duke had spent so much time with every aspect of her life being controlled, this was her first chance to have complete control of her life and be on her own. This newfound freedom did not guarantee a trouble-free path, though. Over the next several years, Duke endured highs and lows, personally and professionally. Several marriages and well-publicized relationships were to come, as were some monumental and some forgettable performances. The one thing that seemed to be ever present though, were Duke's deep, dark times of despair, peppered with few times of highs. This was something that had haunted Duke over the years and impacted her life profoundly, until she was diagnosed in 1982, as manic-depressive (also known as bipolar disorder).

While some would shy away from the diagnosis, Duke felt otherwise. "It was such a relief, almost like a miracle, really, for someone to give what I'd gone through a name and a treatment," she wrote in *Call Me Anna*. With the help of Lithium, Duke has been able to manage her manic-depression for 29 years, and has become a fierce advocate for mental illness and mental health.

"I would say more satisfying is the work I've done in mental health, but I am very grateful for the success I've known in acting," says Duke reflecting on her many areas of success. "To use my illness *and* my wellness as an example to others to let them know that they can be helped is satisfying."

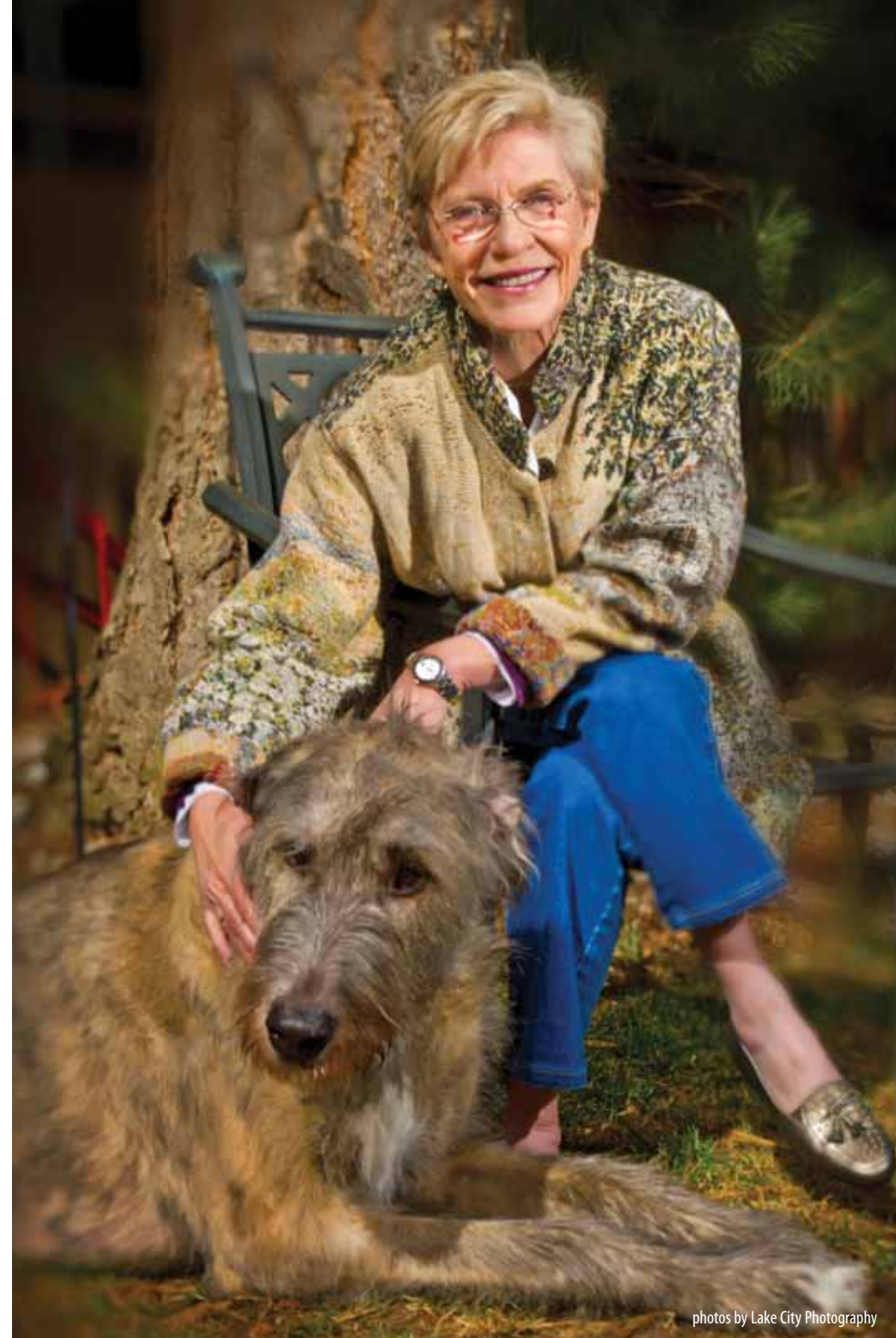
One of Duke's greatest desires is to educate the public about the help available for those with mental illness. "There is realistic help in the form of treatment for a wide variety of mental illnesses," she says. "More often than not, it involves medication, which some people rail against. People take almost a moral judgment against medication, and, while making this judgment they are not well. There are intelligent people who take medicine to get better, and then stop. I try to be cautious because I am not a doctor or a psychiatrist, but I think, generally, medicine for mental illness is not meant to be taken for just a little while."

"Somehow mental illness equals shame, and that's ancient thinking," she says. "It has that little stigma spin on it. I have seen progress in my thirty years of involvement. I also expect to see science advance [wellness] by leaps and bounds. People need to know that it is safe for them to get better."

Since Duke began treatment 29 years ago, life has miraculously become a more even-keeled, joy-filled adventure. One of the greatest blessings came four years after her diagnosis, when she married Mike Pearce. An Army-drill sergeant at the time, she met him when he was assigned to teach her basic training for a movie in which she was starring.

"I have to be honest," she says smiling at the memory, "it was superficial and physical at first. He was assigned to teach me basic training. The man walked out of the office and I thought 'Oh my!' We just melded together and we've been together ever since. His basic decency is [what counts]. The man has no hidden agenda. Who you see is who he is. That was all new to me. My children will tell you—and I have to agree with them—I am spoiled. Not a day has gone by that I haven't been handed a coffee cup first thing in the morning. That is just symbolic of all the indulgences he brings to me. We've had good times and some really horrible times (including the death of their daughter) and we don't pretend it's easy. It is what it is. With that kind of truth, I can do anything. I never take it for granted. Thank God it's a lesson I learned. We are incredibly polite to one another. There's always a 'please' and 'thank you.' That sounds simple, but it says so much about this relationship."

In a great place personally, and possessing an enviable career, Duke is able to look back on her life and see the miraculous blessings amidst the darkness. As she sets out to direct *The Miracle Worker* at Interplayers, she is reminded again of what the play means to her personally. "In some ways it sounds cliché, but I think 'look how they beat the odds,'" she says, referring to Helen and Annie. "But it is true, they did. When I was so, so, so ill, it was an inspiration to know



photos by Lake City Photography

Above: Patty and her Irish Wolfhound named Seamus, relax at home in North Idaho.

Helen made it out of her abyss."

Both Duke and Interplayers Professional Theater have struggled through tough times, personally for her, and for the theatre, as an organization that is fighting to keep community theater alive. Knowing the show must go on, they have come together for this unique opportunity to produce *The Miracle Worker*. Success will come when the curtain closes, the bows are taken, the lights go down, and the audience leaves with the message of the play, and of the life of Patty Duke, resonating in their hearts: the knowledge that miracles really do happen. **■**

The Miracle Worker runs May 5-22, 2011 at Interplayers Theatre in downtown Spokane. For more information, visit www.interplayers.com or call 455-PLAY (7529).



Great Lengths

The most immediate and effective anti-aging treatment doesn't come from a tube, jar or vial.

LOVE YOUR HAIR AGAIN...

In a private office, not a busy hair salon. We do more extensions than any other salon in western Washington and Idaho areas since 2005.



before



after

INSTANTLY THICKER HAIR WITH EXTENSIONS

Double or triple your own hair's volume in a few hours

Hair Extensions:

- Should not be visible or uncomfortable at any time
- Should not shed or lose their shine and texture

Ever wonder how celebrities get gorgeous hair that's long and thick?

For most of them, the secret lies in hair extensions.

Achieve thicker, shinier hair... and in the process, start protecting your own hair from the damaging heat process of flat irons, blowdryers, etc... and surround it with healthy extension hair from:

Adelante Studio

Extension Studio Only
Call for a Consultation 208.755.4120