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An infectious 'Helen Keller' from Reinking, Thodos

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By Sid Smith, Special to the Tribune

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Two sequences stand out in "A Light in the Dark," Ann Reinking and Melissa Thodos' collaborative dance about Helen Keller.

When young Helen is first introduced to her teacher, Anne Sullivan, she almost smothers her with gropes and touches--unmistakably the blind-and-deaf girl's only way of absorbing the world. The scene is visceral illustration of the power of dance to enlighten--not just Helen's isolation, but her feverish hunger to know and learn is telegraphed, a kinetic tribute to forbearance and curiosity.

Later, after the time spent alone with Sullivan that will change her life, Keller is given a solo, and both it and Saturday's performance by Jessica Miller Tomlinson at the Harris Theater proved unimpeachable. Executing Thodos and Reinking's jittery darts and races around the stage, conveying both Helen's frantic frustration and her untapped wonder, Tomlinson evokes both sadness and awe, as she believably enacts the reality of someone unseeing and unhearing swept up by dance.

"Light," subtitled "The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan," performed over the weekend by Thodos Dance Chicago, is not as sweeping or quite as effective as this duo's prior work on serial murder and a Chicago world's fair. That touched on epic history, civic vision, doomed virtue and lunatic evil. Understandably more personal, "Light" also relies a tad too much on spoken dialogue and episodes already chronicled in "The Miracle Worker" -- Helen's dinner table tantrum, the water pump, even the final, sweet embrace.

But the dancing is lilting and infectious, glossed with a warm evocation of the past, an old-fashioned storytelling art not often seen in choreography today. In one key element it goes beyond the famous film, detailing Sullivan's shared younger days with her brother, who died of tuberculosis but clearly played a part in inspiring the nurturing role that was to be Sullivan's remarkable destiny.

Kudos to Bruce Wolosoff's original score, a roaming, melodic tone poem of Americana evoking the 19th-Century time period; Nathan Rohrer's creamy, colorful costumes; and Nathan Tomlinson's dim, dream-like lighting.

The bill also included Brian Enos' smart, artfully designed "Lullaby"; KT Nelson's highly original, highly imaginative, but somewhat arbitrarily shaped "rest is not always possible"; and Thodos' "Subtle Passages," a beautifully structured and performed ensemble piece.

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