

LITTLE ISLAND OF JOY

- synopsis -

In 1916, the blind and deaf Helen Keller, 36, an acclaimed author and arguably the most famous woman of her era, arrives in Hollywood with Anne Sullivan Macy, 50, her teacher and lifetime companion, in order to make a motion picture about her life. Despite protestations from Helen and Macy, the filmmakers spice up the script with romance and adventure, essentially falsifying her story but reminding Helen of an unfulfilled yearning for a romantic partner in her life.

Upon return to their home in Wrentham, Massachusetts, Macy and her husband John separate, this time irrevocably. Deprived of their customary support, Helen and Macy hire Peter Fagan, 29, to act as their secretary during Helen's national speaking tour. Addressing large crowds, she presents her radical socialist ideas and argues against America's entry into World War I. When Macy falls ill with a diagnosis of tuberculosis, they must return to Wrentham.

Out of the blue, Peter Fagan uses the manual sign language to tell Helen that he cares for her, deeply. Yearning for intimacy, Helen responds to his entreaty and they begin a passionate love affair. At Peter's urging, the lovers keep their tryst a secret. When Macy, per doctor's orders, departs for a sanitarium to recover her health, Helen's mother Kate arrives to watch over her daughter. Despite feeling guilt over their deception, Helen feels great joy, experiencing this first sexual relationship of her life.

Shockingly, the affair comes to light when Peter and Helen apply for a marriage license in Boston and a newspaper prints the story. Frightened by her mother's vehement objections, Helen denies the relationship, to her mother and to the newspapers.

No longer trusting her daughter, Kate informs Helen that she intends to bring her to her ancestral home in Alabama.

Devastated by her mother's interference, Helen conspires with Peter to disappear together during the steamship passage to Savannah. Just before embarking, Kate spots Peter aboard ship and thwarts the elopement plan.

Kate and Helen arrive in Montgomery where they settle into sister Mildred's home. Despite finding joy in her beloved niece, 'Merry Sunshine,' and reuniting with her childhood friend, the black Martha Washington, Helen is bereft, feeling that she 'betrayed' her lover. When Peter secretly makes himself known through an intermediary, the lovers again conspire. The Kellers abort the second elopement, this time at the barrel of a shotgun.

Helen and Kate continue to wage spiritual battle -- Helen believing in her right to love, Kate believing that it's essentially wrong and inappropriate for a handicapped person to marry, not to Peter nor anyone else. Unbeknownst to Helen, Kate warns Peter to give up his pursuit, for her daughter's sake and for his own. On the night, Helen waits in expectation on the porch, eager to begin her new life. This time Peter doesn't come. As the sun rises, she trudges back to her bedroom, devastated, where her mother consoles her.

One year later, the reunited Helen and Macy perform to great acclaim on the Vaudeville stage, Keller's words serving as inspiration to an adoring public.