

Helen Hayes:
Bringing the Iron Lung Center Stage

Individual Performance
Junior Division

Zoe Zemmels

One of my primary interests has always been performing in theatre. My love for theatre also steered me when it came time to choose a topic for history fair. When someone suggested Helen Hayes to me, I was immediately drawn in: “The First Lady of American Theatre.” What a title to have earned. Here was a woman, an individual in history, who had completely changed part of the American Theatre into what I know it to be today. More importantly, Helen Hayes was an activist for children.

Helen Hayes is not as well known in our time as someone like Marilyn Monroe, so research focusing on her was rather difficult to find, especially in the area of primary sources. Luckily, Helen Hayes had taken the time during her life to turn her recollections into several books that served as wonderful assets, not only with facts but also with character development. To further embark on the area of first-hand recollections, I interviewed Jonathan Salk, the son of Jonas Salk, the man credited for the first polio vaccine. Jonathan was a wonderful resource as he gave me information regarding the correspondence between Helen Hayes and Jonas Salk. I also interviewed Dan Wagner, the associate producer of the Helen Hayes Awards and the Assistant Director of a documentary about her. Dan created a grandmother-type image of Helen for me. As I dug deeper into her life through the research, my main interest in her began to transition from her influence in the theatre to her extreme power as an activist and advocate of children.

With Helen being a famous actress, it seemed only natural that I fall into the performing category. The setting for my performance was an easy decision. The logical place for any actress to be while narrating her life is the dressing room. This allowed everything I wanted to incorporate in my performance to transition smoothly. I felt the

audience needed visual images to understand the impact of the Iron Lung and how polio affected so many lives, so I included pictures of Helen's children and of children in iron lungs. These pictures help us understand what it must have been like for the children and their families whose lives had been disrupted or destroyed by this terrible disease.

The image of the Iron Lung symbolizes the tragedy of the polio epidemic in the mid-twentieth century. Polio struck many households in the country including that of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Like President Roosevelt, Helen Hayes was an individual in history who personally endured the effects of polio by watching her daughter, Mary MacArthur, suffer and die while in the Iron Lung. Using her fame to raise awareness of the disease and money for research and treatment, she helped so many others who were suffering because of the disease. As an individual in history, she will always be remembered as the "First Lady of American Theatre," but also for "Bringing the Iron Lung Center Stage."