

ENTERTAINMENT

'Evening with Condra' was powerful, moving one-woman show

By Sue Horn

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If there were space for only one line to describe Saturday night's performance of "An Evening with Estelle Condra," that line would contain the adjective "powerful" over and over, and with capital "P"s.

This was a one-woman show, an autobiographical, chronological account of Estelle Condra's gradual loss of sight.

The performance was sponsored by the Rotary Club of Carrollton and held at the Townsend Center for the Performing Arts at West Georgia College.

It was an intense performance, serious, many times uncomfortable, right on out to hilariously funny, with the audience.

And like a roller coaster ride, once you're on, you can't get off until it's over. You're hooked, you want to cover your eyes with both your hands, but you don't want to miss anything.

One sign of a good movie or a well done play is the degree of emotion vicariously experienced by the viewer. Estelle accomplished this. She MADE you feel the darkening of her world, forced you to see the insensitive and pompous people she knew, drew you into the loving, protective childhood world she had in Johannesburg with her parents.

Initially, the stage scenery seemed to be lacking. But, the furniture pieces were verbally molded into many faraway places and things — among

them, a busy London street, an elevator, the front seat of a European car, a childhood treehouse. Her comic dialog was delivered well, but kept you wishing for more. The voice of the mother was convincing, but were the religious lines just for us in the Bible belt?

She used the analogy of birds throughout the performance from the first line to the last. This was an appropriate choice. Will the "bird" fly? Can it fly with clipped wings? Or will the bird be kept caged?

Even her name, Condra, seems to be a distorted form of condor, another bird that has had its struggles. The "why me, Lord?" dialog ran a little long. "Why did this have to happen to me? Why am I the one who is handicapped? What did I ever do to deserve this," etc. This point was understood and felt early on, while the "I can do it" point was not developed enough. After an audience endures the very painful, and the incredibly funny, (who will soon forget "lavender HANKie, lavender SHIRT, lavender aPARTment" or the "Blind Skier"?), after being drawn down, emotionally down, the audience needs to feel in equal amount of time and intensity the happy upside of the ride, not just one or two concluding quick paragraphs.

American moviegoers have been long trained to expect a good 15 minutes of a glorious two tissue ending. We aren't prepared for a quick conclusion.

The bird analogy of an

abstract form of success used in conjunction with the abstract scenery was pulled off well. But, when combined with the realistic details of our town of Carrollton and using the names of actual people Estelle has known, brings the audience's roller coaster ride to an abrupt halt. You're no longer riding, you're home. Although this was a special performance just for those of us of Carrollton, these details could have been included in the production flyer as added background information for the viewer to be aware of as the performance unfolded or discussed with fellow audience members beforehand. It's too distracting to think, "Do I know these people she is talking about?" as the play is underway and the dialog has moved onto something else.

This play would also be a wonderful vehicle for children to learn about overcoming struggles. If another version were written just for a child's audience by removing some of the more uncomfortable dialog and the local details, this would be a

rich story for children to learn from and be inspired. A tale of what you can accomplish if you really want to try.

It takes a greatly experienced and accomplished performer with more talent, Hutzpah and stamina than most of the rest of us ever hope to have to pull off a one person show, not missing a single choreographed movement (remember, this was a blind woman moving deftly and confidently about the stage) or written line. Taking an entire audience of adults through such personally painful and embarrassing details as Estelle successfully did, well, perhaps that's what's so uncomfortable.

The fact that this was the actual person, the actual sufferer, was too close for our American movie training comfort. Maybe if we were one step removed from our emotions by having another actress playing the Estelle Condra role, and the distracting local details omitted, we could watch this inspiring story without looking between our fingers.



Estelle Condra