

## ONCE UPON A TIME...

Actress, mimic and raconteur, ESTELLE CONDRA, is forging a fine career for herself in America as a storyteller. She first started telling tales in Evaton, near Vereeniging . . . BY KENNETH ENGLADE

SHE was a most extraordinary child, a blue-eved. blonde, boeremeisle, who lived in a small town called Evaton, near Vereeniging. Estelle's father 'Ferry' Ferreira owned a grocery store and her mother Kate ran a small

To Estelle the most wonderful thing in the world was to escape from her chores and to travel, in her mind, to another time and another place where she could become a warrior, a lion, a bride-to-be, a village chief or a young herdsboy with a magical cow. Her day only really came alive when she could persuade her nannie, a SoSotho, to come out into the warm sunshine. 'Sit! Sit, kleinmles,'

down on the stoep of her cottage and plunging her gnarled, callused feet into a tub of hot water. 'Eendag was daar 'n wolf en 'n jakkals, Oom Wolf en Neef Jakkals . . . 'and she would be off, spinning a tale about the mischievous Cousin Jackal and the hapless lincle Walf.

Just when she was getting to the stage of knowing every wolf and jackal story her nannie could remember or create, and could recite them herself backwards as well as forwards, another storyteller came into Estelle's life. A Dutchman, Van Broek le Veen, a book-keeper by trade, was hired by her parents to help straighten out the increasingly complicated accounts of their she would say, settling two businesses. Brocksie

(as the children called him) lived with the Ferreiras and took his meals with the family. After dinner, when the table had been cleared and the dishes washed, Broeksie would become the centre of attention, spinning tales about a land and people thousands of kilometres from the veld and Estelle's Afrikaner neighbours. \*From Broeksie I first heard the stories of Hans Christian Andersen,' Estelle Condra (née Ferreira) says today with a nostalgic, faraway look in her eyes.

While most people measure their lives in years, Estelle measures hers in plateaux of the expansion of her imagination. In her family, storytelling was as much a part of everyday life as eating or sleeping.

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH, LEFT: Estelle Condra: 'There was never any question in my mind about what I was going to do when I grew up. I knew I was going to be a storyteller

BELOW: Estelle and David Gondra, an American engineer, met while he was working in Johannesburg. They now live in Nashville in the United States where David has a wholesale



LEFT: In July, Estelle was one of the performers chosen to appear at the Julliard Theatre in New York's famed Lincoln Center

BELOW: Estelle relaxes after waterskiing on Old Hickory Lake, just outside Nashville, Tennessee. She and David were married in the Condra family home, a nodified Old South mansion on the shores of the lake



and equally important. Stories were meant not only to entertain, but to impart valuable moral and social lessons as well. And that is Estelle's guiding principle today.

With South African folk tales as the basis for many of her performances, Estelle Condra has put together a new form of entertainment in the United States, one that is receiving increasing acclaim from educators (who recognise the instructive potential of a well told tale) and patrons of the arts.

In the few years that she has been in the United States. word of Estelle's talent has spread among school administrators, storytellers, entertainers, theatre directors, record producers, book publishers, television talent scouts and children of all ages. It is difficult to resist when Estelle, in a soft busky vaice begins to chant: 'Eyheh eyh, singulah lah, elhah, elhah . . . This spirit . . of the peoples of my country calls you . . . calls you to sit down and listen . . . listen to the stories of the Motabele people ... of the Sotho people . . . Bring your ears and let you . . . yourself hear.

If you listen carefully enough, what you hear beyand the mesmerising tale being woven in a silky whisper is the voice of a child practis. ing hour after hour, until just the right inflection is achieved. You can hear the child's voice begging for more stories and the rustle of pages as she turns to written words when she has exhausted the oral repertory of her friends and acquaintances. Many times. Estelle says, her family would gather around the dinner table, in the days before television, and spend the entire evening retelling familiar tales and making up new ones

'We would talk about things that happened during the day, about things that happened to us or to people in the hotel, My brother, Gerhard, would tell us about his day at school and it would be so funny it would leave us all rolling on the floor," she grins in remembrance, 'Sometimes we would make up stories about quests in the hotel and pass along little bits of gossip like: "Do you know who sent flowers to No 3 today?" and from that we'd make up a whole story."

When whe wasn't telling stories to her family, she was spinning tales at the kunswedstryd, a local story-telling competition. I almost always won first prize, she admits. There was never any question in my mind about what I was going to do when I grew up. I always knew I was going to be a storyteller.'
At 14 she left home for Help-

mekaar Girls' High School in Johannesburg, which specialised in the arts. Called 'Looks' by the other students because of her thick-lensed spectacles (necessitated by a hereditary, degenerative eye disease called retinitis pigmentosa, a disease that now prohibits her from reading without the gid of a special machine that magnifies letters a hundredfold), Estelle lived for her stories. While her classmates abandoned their childhood tales for acssip about parties. dances and boys, Estelle plunged deeper into the world of books to increase her repertoire. In addition to the stories she heard at home. she now added the prose and poetry of NP van Wyk Louw, D J Opperman, André Brink, Uys Krige, Breyten Breytenbach, Somerset Maugham, George Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare. Later she would include tales from Greek and Roman mythology stories of the macabre by Edgar Alian Poe. Roald Dahl and Alfred Hitchcock as well as some of the talk tales of the United States almost any kind of story, which would educate or elucidate.

After graduating from Helpmekaar, she studied drama at the University of South Africa under Professor Teunis Botha. When she got her 8A in 1964, she returned to Vereeniging and opened the Estelle Ferreira Sprack en Drama Skool which prepared students for the South African Speech and Drama Guild exams. She closed it less than a year later to go to London for a year to study children's theatre at the Toynbee Theatre School. When she returned to Vereeniging she re-opened her school.

In her spare time she travelled the country, taking part in plays or presenting onewoman shows. At the same time, she was perfecting her skills as a writer by beginning what would later become a long list of original children's plays, scripts with fanciful littles such as The Magic Cat, The Witches' Island, Cookies and Light the Candles as well as a more serious play called Sriedaura which drew its title from the name of her residence hall at Helpmekaar and was based on life at a boarding school. Like an incident from one of

her own tales, marriage irrevocably changed her life. Two years after she returned from London Estelle was attending a friend's party in Johannesburg, sitting quietly in a corner with a glass of wine, when a stranger plopped down beside her and introduced himself. He was David Condra, an American engineer then working in Johannesburg. They were married in 1973 in front of the fireplace in the main room of the Condra family home, a modified Old South mansion on the shores of Old Hickory Lake just outside Nashville, Tennessee.

Since Condra was reassigned to Atlanta, Georgia, the newlyweds' first home was in Carrollton, a suburb of the Southern capital. The physical change was minor compared with the professional challenge Estelle laced. From a tightly-knit Afrikaans society - an extremely reaimented and disciplined one - Estelle jumped to a disorganised and fragmented life style, especially where the arts are concerned. 'Looking back,' Estelle says with a small arin. 'I guess I suffered massive culture shock."

Americans are content, for the most part, to get the bulk of their entertainment from television and the movies; live performances are patronised by a relatively small proportion of the population and even that small number would have been woefully unprepared for Estelle's performance. Instead of trying to perform for adults. Estelle turned her efforts mainly towards children and writing. It was with the children that she was initially most successful. She found that American children, just like Afrikaners, were mesmerised by tales of Cousin Jackal and Uncle Wolf and, specially, by the stories of tribal life in South Africa. Never mind that they had never seen the country and probably never would.

During those first years in the United States Estelle plunged into children's theatre, writing her own plays and scripts, adapting the works of others so they would be understandable to youngsters and, in her spare time, acting in local productions while running an Allanta version of her South African school.

Gradually, Estelle and her work became known; her reputation spread through an influential circle, and her early work later formed a firm base for more elaborate productions. By the time she and her husband moved to Nashville, three years ago, so that David could open his own business (a wholesale computer firm), Estelle's career was well established.

in Nashville she pioneered her own radio programme (Ear to Ear with Estelle Condra, broadcast twice each week, teaturing tolk tales, stories of fanlasy or suspense), taught educators how to get their point across more efficiently and began refining her career as a performer for adults. She now does about 150 shows a year, 70 per cent of which are for adults, it is perhaps the latter which has been the blogest challenge.

in the last few months she has had excellent exposure. In June she was one of six artists chosen to perform at the North Atlantic Storyteller's Festival in Rockport, Maine, a weekend-long celebration in an old fishing village in the exfreme northeast corner of the United States. The festival is a laid-back affair with many patrons arriving by houseboat, hoofing it on foot from the docks to the nearby opera house where the performances are held, three times a day for two days. In July, she was one of the performers chosen to appear before educators and members of the arts community at the Julliard Theatre in New York's famed Lincoln Center. A simifar performance is scheduled later this year in Washington. and in March 1983 she will appear at the well-known Southeastern Theatre Conference in Savannah, Georgia, then again at the Lincoln Center. In late November and December this year, she planned to do a tour of South Africa.

In between showcase pertormances, there are presentations at the obscure theatres and clubs which are popping up like mushrooms in American cities. A good example is Nashville's Bluebird Café, a small coffeehousecum-wine bar which normally dispenses, in addition to the customary beverages, sugary pastry and cool jazz. For Estelle's performance the audience ranges in age from the early twenties to the mid-til-

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ties; in dress from jeans to sive Nashville humidity in jackets and ties. striped cotton, 'See my Afri-

ESTELLE, who has never before performed in cabaret, is neryous when she first appears on stage dressed simply in purple stacks and a purple sweater, but the uneasiness disappears as soon as she begins her tale, a long, complicated, humorous piece obviously chosen to put both the audience and herself at ease. Estelle simultaneously portravs two characters, a haughty, wealthy woman just returned from a long trip abroad and her reticent nearly toothless old maid. Estelle affects a bored look and lays on a heavy aristocratic accent when reciting the woman's lines, then scrunches up her eyes and her nose and talks with a squeak when reciting the maid's lines. The skit goes well and the audience laughs in all the right places, enthusiastically applauding the punchline. Estelle follows it with another humorous story about the mistresses of a pampered poodle and a mult who meet in a vet's waiting room. Again, Estelle plays divergent characters, switching easily from one accent to another, raising or lowering her voice and contorting her face like a rubber mask. That tale, too, is well received.

For the second set Estelle changes into a sambre black dress to suit the mood of two Roald Dahl stories and a grim tale about a man driven mad.

Estelle finally presents an African tale, but she does it so well the earlier performances pale in comparison. Again she takes on multiple roles. this time the parts of a young herdsboy named Japie and an evil warrior from a neighbouring tribe. Despite her earlier avowal that she can't sing, her voice comes clear and crisp when she chants to Japie's magical cow, Mahelane. When it is time for the evil warrior to speak, she contorts her face, drops her voice an octave and jabs the air menacingly with an imaginary spear. The audience hardly stirs during the tale and breathes a collective sigh of relief when all ends happily.

The evening has gone well: the audience requests two repeats: Estelle's agent hugs her lightly and gushes about the performance. Estelle is feeling drained and soon excuses herself to go home.

The next day she is cheerful, dressed coally for the oppressive Nashville humidity in striped cotton. "See my African artefacts," she laughs, pointing to an arnatelycarved drum in the window of ther glass and cedar house in Nashville's Harpeth's Trace subdivision. "My decarations are also my props.

'And this is my reading machine," she adds, pointing to a large TV-like screen in a corner of the darkened den. Next to the screen is a box on stills with a light projecting downwards. She slips a dictionary under the light and the letters appear, many times larger, on the screen. 'I usually use them this size," she says, 'showing a series of letters about five centimetres tall. But I can go this large if I need to," she says, turning a small wheel to double the size of the letters.

Later, over a cup of coffee, she asks not to have a big thing made about her diminishing sight, a problem with which she has been plagued since birth. It is, however, of so much concern to her that it was one of the major factors in her and David's decision not to have children; she didn't want to face the possibility of passing the disease on to her child.

One of the characteristics of the disease is that her irises jump uncontrollably, and she is obviously sensitive about this. "When I perform before children they always ask me about my eyes," she says lightly, twisting a blonde cut around her right forefinger. "Some of them must think I'm on drugs or something, so I tell them immediately what the problem is and then it's all right."

Estelle prefers child audiences. 'Stories create images and stimulate their minds. That's something video games don't do. I like them to participate in the telling; to feel the rhythm. When I tell them about building a fire, I want them to go sssszzzz, ssszzzz, ssszzzz. When I talk about grinding corn, I want them to go squish, squish, squish. I like to delight children, to show them new things. A lot of them are from the city and they can hardly conceive of a place like South Africa. That's why I want to bring them the sounds, the smells, the isolation.

In the same way, Estelle is trying to bring a bit of the United States to South Africa's youngsters. Just as she has taped African folktales for American children, so she has

translated a handful of United States folk tales into Afrikaans. These tapes are being distributed to South African schools and libraries.

While children are the same the world over, she says, adult audiences in the United States and South Africa are entirely different. So, too, are the career opportunities for an entertainer like herself. 'The South Africans' horizons are too narrow. My career has progressed more in the United States than it could have in South Africa.'

Does that discourage her from wanting to perform wanting to perform here? 'Not at all,' she says quickly. 'South Africa is my home. I'd like to share my talent. After all, these are our people i'm talking about.' She says her trip to South Africa late this year is more an exploratory venture designed to pave the way for a fully fledged tour later.

When asked if being South African brought problems in the United States, Estelle pauses and then admits that occasionally a militant member of her audience lets her know he's not happy with her being there. 'But they have nothing against me personally,' she says, 'They're just complaining because I'm a South African. Their protest gives me an opportunity to speak about the various tribes and after we get it all talked out, it's all right, I always give a short talk before I perform and then have a question and answer session so anyone in the audience who might have some hostility towards me can get it out."

And for all the detractors there are the converts, particularly block educators. They usually come up after my performance and tell me how happy they are that I could give them some background about Africa."

Some whites too criticise her for telling what they consider black stories. 'I tell them they need to know these tribal stories, I explain that I don't limit myself – I also tell stories about Greeks and Europeans. Besides, I know the stories better than anyone else and I can tell them better than anyone else.'

Although her immediate goal is to broaden her horizons by appealing to adult tastes, she admits her heart is still with the children. That is because deep down Estelle Ferreira Condra is a child, an adult who remembers what it was like to be four years old and have the world open up through a story.