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Success Story

Don Putnam

Estelle Condra is quietly becoming Nashville's most sought-after cultural exchange. This month, at Maine's Rockport Opera House, she and six other hand-picked storytellers will make their debut at the North Atlantic Festival of Storytelling. She also is scheduled for special appearances for the Nashville Institute of the Arts' participating schools.

But "storytelling" does not exactly describe Estelle Condra's work. She is writer, director, performer, producer, teacher, singer and orator—all in the same performance, weaving folklore and drama together to provide a most unique form of entertainment.

"'Storytelling' sounds like a little old lady or a little old man sitting in a rocking chair with a little old cat telling stories to children," Condra explains in her British/South African dialect. "The stories I tell are much different from that."

Born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa, Condra comes by her stories and techniques "quite naturally." Until four years ago, there was no television in South Africa. Condra grew up being entertained by her nannie, Lena, a member of the SoSotho tribe. The tribal stories Lena told had been handed down from generation to generation in unwritten languages that relied on "oral scribes" or storytellers for survival.

At the age of four, Condra was diagnosed as having retinitis pigmentosa, a disease which gradually works on the retina of the eye to reduce sight. Since she could not see all of the world around her, her mother described scenes for her. This ability to create vivid images with words stayed with Condra, who now uses an opaque projector to help her read when researching stories.

Combining these two elements, Condra has elaborated the art of folklore, developing her own unique form of oral interpretation. Her technique and her stories have garnered the attention of representatives from the Lincoln Center, CBS, theatre directors and critics, book publishers and record producers. She has recorded her own "South African Tribal Tales" series and has recently translated several American folk stories into her



native language of Afrikaans for distribution to South African schools and libraries for the prestigious Weston Woods Company. Her work is broadcast in Nashville twice weekly over public radio WPLN's Talking Library.

Based on folklore, legend and myth, stories like "Nampti the Lion Woman"

and "The Evening of the Third Day" are woven into a repertoire that also includes monologues taken from such classic writers as George Bernard Shaw, Edgar Allan Poe, Alfred Hitchcock and Somerset Maugham. "The first thing ever published in my country was in 1905, and it was a poem," explains Condra, whose

love for English, German and French writers was developed in college.

This unusual combination of stories spellbinds audiences at more than 150 performances each year. She has been showcased by the Nashville Institute for the Arts, served as Artist in Residence at several local schools and performed and lectured at last year's conference of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling held in Jonesboro, Tenn.

After seeing a videotape of Condra's Jonesboro performance, producers from CBS flew to Nashville to get a first-hand look at her work. David Outerbridge, who co-authored actress Liv Ullman's autobiography "Changing," invited her to participate in the North Atlantic Festival of Storytellers—which he directs—after seeing the same videotape.

With perfect enunciation, Condra projects images and characters so vividly that "the audience sees movies," as one critic put it. "It takes a tremendous amount of focus for me," says Condra, who trained as a professional actress at the University of South Africa and the Toynbee Theatre School in London. "And when I am performing exceptionally well, I don't know what I do, because I'm not there. I'm in the story. I see the blood. I am the lion. I feel the fear.

"I like for things to work out economically," she says, tossing her head upward. "And I want to paint a portrait"—her hands open wide before her face—"building through the suspense" (her voice

strengthens) "until the audience is sitting on the edge of its chair gasping for breath!" She stops abruptly, and flips a blond curl out of her eyes to reveal the most sinister of looks. Eyebrow cocked, she continues, "And then..."—slowly now—"the very last line forces them to see the whole picture."

Condra views the art of storytelling as a dramatic stage production created, costumed and staged by the imagination of the audience and the storyteller's words. "I look at what I do as a mini, one-act, one-person play that takes the audience through all these moods and settings and feelings. I may even take them where they don't want to go because the suspense is so overwhelming. I force them to go there with me, and then the shocking last lines reveal the whole purpose with a twist at the end."

This strength of expression sets Condra apart from the yarnspinnors who told America's Uncle Remus and Paul Bunyon tales. Where American storytelling is usually reserved for bedtime, South African tales are for entertainment and for teaching social lessons. While Condra's work includes some light-hearted parables for young children, most of her stories are laden with heavy meaning that teaches a lesson about life.

Condra came to the States after marrying an American businessman she had met at the drama school she founded in South Africa. Before moving to Nashville almost three years ago, she lived in Atlanta, where she founded a second speech and

drama school "for children 4 to 40." The school's five yearly productions honed Condra's skills in every aspect of theater. In 1976, she earned the title of "Outstanding Young Woman in America" for her bicentennial production depicting the life of Atlanta's first citizens.

Having founded two successful drama schools, Condra now devotes all her talent and energy to the subtle profession of storytelling. "Storytelling is a very lonely profession," she explains. "I miss all the children crowding around my feet to talk about this play or to laugh about that performance. A storyteller only gets that adoration when there is an audience and, believe me, I have actually rounded up my own audience at times."

Although storytelling does not require daily trips into the theatre, when Condra does a performance, she creates grand theater on her own.

"A university in New Jersey invited me to do a performance last fall," she recounts. "People came from all over New Jersey and Pennsylvania. My tapes had preceded me. The teachers and the students had been studying South African culture with the second graders, and they had heard my stories from the tapes. When I walked into that school, there were walls and walls, from the ceiling to the floor, of pictures the children had drawn from my stories. Each child had drawn their own version of the Lion Woman, the Mysterious Bridegroom, and the Great Draught."