

Blind actress shares marvelous insight



SUE WEISINGER
ON BROWARD
ARTS

Our only barriers lie in our mind's eye; if we can perceive a thing, we can see it.

That is the lesson actress-playwright Estelle Condra is bringing to some 5,000 Broward students this week in the play *Annie Sullivan*. Condra wrote and stars in the play, which has a special performance at a Friday evening gala.

Condra accepts no barriers in her own life; she is totally blind. So in real life was the young Annie Sullivan until surgery restored her sight at age 20. Sullivan was the so-called miracle worker who taught Helen Keller to communicate though Keller was blind,

Having adjusted to her blindness, Estelle Condra sees things in a different way.

deaf and unable to speak.

"We had such a good laugh, my director and I," Condra says in the rich accent of her native South Africa. "because in the beginning of the play, I as Annie Sullivan am blind. Now, I have worked hard in my life so that

nobody can tell, if you walk up to me on the street, that I am blind. So I have to really work on stage at how to look blind. Then, when Annie can see, now I have to act as though I can see and people have to believe it."

She laughs at the irony. In fact, she laughs often throughout the phone interview from her home in Nashville.

"At first I called the play *Vivacious of Laughter*," she says, "because for a blind person that is part of learning what laughing is. But no one could tell what it was about, so we changed it."

The play, presented free to students as part of the Broward school district's Student Enrichment in the Arts and

Sciences, focuses on Annie Sullivan's life story, beginning with Annie's desperate childhood and her own struggle with blindness.

"When I played Annie in *The Miracle Worker*, I learned such interesting information about her that I never knew, and I think the public doesn't know," Such as: At age 8, Annie was taken from an alcoholic father after her mother and three other siblings died, and placed into an asylum. When a younger brother died in the asylum, Annie was alone in the world.



BRINGING MESSAGE: Actress and playwright Estelle Condra.

PLEASE SEE BLIND, 3B

Blindness no barrier to perception

BLIND, FROM 1B

"She had a glandular growth across her eyes and she was blind. She stayed at the asylum until she was 14. She couldn't read or write, but she was a vivacious fireball," Condra laughed, clearly identifying with the character. "Oh, she got so punished, because she had that spirit, you know, that spark."

The play follows determined Annie into an institute, through successful eye surgery, and finally at age 20 to the Helen Keller home.

"It was the right match," Condra says of teacher and student. "They locked horns. They were both stubborn. She was determined she was going to make contact with Helen's mind."

Condra herself suffers from retinitis pigmentosa, an incurable decay of the retina that started in her childhood and took about 30 years to completely blind her, though by the end of high school she could no longer focus well enough to read. "Every day, all the time, I knew it was coming. It was terrible waiting."

As a youth, she had this urge to cram as much as she could into the years when she could see. "It was a very subconscious thing, you don't know it. I worked very, very hard. From time to time, I'd have therapy and they'd say, 'Oh, are you running away from something?' I'd say, good gracious no."

She giggles. "Of course I was running away! Eventually when it catches up with you, you just have to make peace with it. It's a tremendous effort to deal with the desire to see."

Her failing sight didn't keep Condra from earning a degree in drama from the University of Pretoria and performing at the Toynbee Theater School in London,

where "I chased doctors for awhile" and became enchanted with children's theater.

Condra has written a previous play, *Caged*, which she says is about how she lost her sight through the years, "and how I tried to make peace with it." The play uses the symbol of a bird, caged and full of self-pity after its wings are clipped, that is one day set free.

"One day somebody opens the cage door and you discover you can fly again, though in a different way," she says.

Just as Condra still flies: She hikes, climbs, horseback rides, snow- and water-skis, and bikes with her husband, David. He is a U.S. citizen whom she met in South Africa while he was there on business; they moved to the States in 1973, and to Nashville in 1980.

Besides writing and starring in plays, including at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, she has written two children's books, *See the Ocean and Miracle in a Shoebox*, and a videotape, *Stories for Christmas Eve with Estelle Condra*.

She has run schools for children, including one called Imagination Station, teaching children innovative thinking and creative drama.

While Monday through Thursday she will perform at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts' Amature Theater, on Friday she will bring her gift of overcoming personal challenges to Broward's Bright Horizon School

for multidisabled children.

Condra also gives motivational seminars and interactive workshops to businesses, teachers and parents, especially parents of disabled children. "It is such a dreadful thing to hold a baby in your arms and be told your child cannot hear or see. They need to know there is life after blindness or deafness. I show them through my eyes. How I see things. How I deal with things."

Condra also likes to perform comedy skits "about the insane things that happen to a blind person, like arguing with someone when you are absolutely confident an object is red."

One favorite skit illustrates why blind people shouldn't vacuum (as a room full of props gets sucked away), and another recalls the time she wanted to show off her horseback riding skills to friends. As a joke, they turned the saddle backward. She caught on when she felt for the reins and got a hand full of tail.

On stage and off she uses techniques of perception of floor textures, sounds, tactile sensations and air currents to "see." She often talks about "seeing" someone or something. "Absolutely I use those words. It's not gone from me. It means I perceive a person. It feels to me that I see him."

So it was no surprise when Estelle Condra ended this phone conversation with: "I look forward to seeing you."

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY SHOW

Blind playwright-actress Estelle Condra will perform her play, *Annie Sullivan*, at 7 p.m. Friday at a gala celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Very Special Arts program.

Among those attending will be John Kemp, president and CEO of Very Special Arts International, based in Washington, D.C. Very Special Arts is an international organization that provides learning opportunities through the arts for persons with disabilities, especially children and youth.

The gala will also honor Rose Miniaci, who has just established an arts and education endowment fund for the Broward school district, according to Sharon Brooks, head of the schools' Student Enrichment in the Arts and Sciences.

The gala, at the Broward Center for the Performing Art's Amature Theater, 201 SW Fifth Ave., Fort Lauderdale, is open to the public but seating is limited. Call 954-712-1620.