

Visually impaired actress sees inspiration cloaked in challenge

Actors have always adapted to varied circumstances, but in the late 20th Century they have done so in increasingly specialized ways.

One of the pioneer niche theater enterprises in Memphis was "Show of Hands" theater, which has been affiliated with Circuit Playhouse since spring 1979. The ensuing two decades have witnessed creation of companies showcasing artists performing and writing about senior citizens, African-Americans, lesbians and gay men, and mental health patients.

This weekend a Nashville actress with another specialized focus, visual impairment, will make her Memphis debut with three one-woman shows Friday and Saturday at Saint Francis Hospital's Longinotti Auditorium.

Each niche poses special challenges above and beyond the already demanding theatrical life.

Hers is no exception.

Estelle Condra not only writes and performs about visual impairment. She has developed rehearsal and performance techniques to overcome limitations posed by her sightlessness.

Condra says she does this for a living, but surely she inspires others to overcome barriers of their own.

A South African-born actress in her 50s, Condra says she was legally blind in her teens, due to a condition called *retinitis pigmentosa*, a term for a group of diseases, often hereditary, marked by progressive loss of retinal response, clumping of pigment and contraction of the field of vision.

Even as a student at a performing arts high school in Johannesburg, she had to maneuver around visual limitations. With her mother's encouragement, she did not let her eyesight stop her from performing roles in Greek tragedies and the lead in a Joan of Arc play translated into her native Afrikaans. Nor did it stop her from founding a speech and drama school called Imagination Station.

Yet it seemed at the time that she would eventually be forced to give up her chosen craft.

"I always knew I was going to be blind one day and I always



WHITNEY SMITH
Backstage

dreaded it," Condra said. "I never knew when it was coming. I think that, more than anything else, it drove me almost crazy. . . . Here I was in a full life of working. I had a speech and drama school. . . . Every Monday I went with trepidation, not knowing if I was going to see the faces of students at end of the week."

Twenty-six years ago she moved to the United States with her husband, a computer specialist. After living in the Atlanta area they moved to Nashville, where she said she has performed in a Tennessee Repertory Theatre staging of *Pygmalion*.

Through it all, Condra faced challenges beyond the tests most actors contend with.

Blocking, a technique directors use to ensure that players are in the right place at the right time, can be challenging even to sighted actors. Tape often is affixed to the floor, and if entrances must be made in the dark, glow-in-the-dark tape has been used.

Condra, of course, doesn't have that luxury, and over the last five years, devised her own system.

On her playing area onstage she places "various textured mats" and wears "very thin-soled shoes, so that I can always know where I am. I also use small fans all over the

stage, so that I can feel the air currents. The other thing is that I have little sound makers that create various tones of white noise."

Yet the barriers Condra deals with don't begin on stage.

"The first problem I have to overcome would be the memorization of my lines. When I start into rehearsal, I already have to know all my lines. I do not have luxury to sit there with a script and read. That's somewhat unfortunate, because I have somewhat set the character before the director has decided what I will do. I don't like that part of it, but I don't see any way out."

While rehearsing lines Condra sometimes uses a tape recorder. "I also have a reading computer. You put a script on top of the computer, it scans the script in and reads it back to me. I'm going on eight, 10 years using those."



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Technology also helped inspire Condra to put together one-woman shows, even as she lost her eyesight about five years ago. "At last I could hear what I was writing," she said. "Up until then, it had been such a pain."

Condra said she wrote her first one-woman show, *Caged*, in 1994. From behind bars onstage, she explores the

process by which a performer goes blind. "The bird is used as a metaphor," she said.

"Because I am like a bird which Sister Fate, with her big sharp scissors, is after, trying to clip my wings. When it finally happens, I end up in the cage."

She said she has toured the piece around the Southeast, often to raise money for groups that help visually impaired folks.

In Memphis, Condra is being presented by a nonprofit group,

Friends of TIPS (Tennessee Infant-Parent Services), which is a Tennessee Department of Education offshoot dedicated to helping families of children with visual, hearing or developmental impairments.

On Saturday Condra will perform *Through My Eyes* at 9 a.m., followed by her standup comedy piece, *Blind People Shouldn't Vacuum*, at 10:30 a.m.

At 7:30 p.m. Friday, she will perform *Vibrations of Laughter*, in which 19th Century teacher Annie Sullivan explains how she began communicating with Helen Keller despite the girl's multiple handicaps. Set at various locations from 1876 to 1886, the play takes its title from Sullivan's method of teaching the blind and deaf girl to laugh.

Sullivan is a historical figure Condra admires greatly. "I would say she was a very determined person, determined to be educated. It was her determination that got her out of (a sanitarium) and into an institute for the blind, and eventually with the Kellers."

Asked how her piece differs from *The Miracle Worker*, another play that explores Sullivan's work and her relationship to the Kellers, Condra said, "I have the audacity to start with the life of Annie at age 8. When the play starts, I'm in the asylum . . . with my little brother, Jimmy. You see me at the Perkins Institute, then at the hospital and the infirmary for the eyes and ears, where a doctor performed two surgeries so that Annie could see. . . . The last part of the play is me with Helen, who is an imaginary character."

During *Vibrations of Laughter* Condra wears four layers of clothing to do rapid costume changes.

But that doesn't seem to be the main reason she's proud of the Sullivan piece:

"I feel so strongly about the message of this play. The message is that Annie overcame, and she helped Helen overcome, and we can all overcome."

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