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Arts + Entertainment

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Triple Threat



Photo by Vance Gellert

“I grew up not being able to look white people in the face,” says Monk O’Connor.

An actor, a writer, and an educator, Isabell Monk O’Connor is not a jack-of-three-trades. She’s a master of each.

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By Dwight Hobbes

Isabell Monk O’Connor never planned to be an actor. When she left her father’s pig farm in Indian Head, Maryland, to attend college, her plan was to get a sensible education and make a good, practical living. At Towson University, outside of Baltimore, she took acting, she says, as “one of those silly electives. But, then I took another [course], and another”—she was hooked. Little did she know that those silly classes, combined with her talent, would earn her impressive theater, film, and TV credits.

Monk O’Connor also never planned to be a writer. In the early 1990s, two of her friends, actors Shawn Judge and Steven Yoakam, married. Several years later, the mixed-race couple (Judge is African American, Yoakam Caucasian) had a daughter and wanted to start

a library for her. When Monk O'Connor looked for books that reflected the family, she couldn't find any, so she decided to write one. "I literally had a dream, got up, wrote it down, and made it into a book for Shawn and Steve for Christmas," she says. The book, *Hope*, tells about a mixed-race girl by looking at both sides of her family tree. Carolrhoda, an imprint of Lerner Publishing Group, published the book in 1999.

After reading a *Pioneer Press* article about *Hope*, Richard Hitchler, artistic director of SteppingStone Theatre for Youth Development, had the idea to take the story from the stage to the page. He telephoned Monk O'Connor and suggested a production at his shop. In 2001, when SteppingStone premiered *The Story of Hope*, coauthored by actor-playwright-director Matthew Vaky, it was a hit. "In [the Twin Cities], there are 'alternative' families everywhere," says Monk O'Connor. "People gravitated to the play and grasped it, because it was a place where they could see themselves reflected in a positive light. There often is no room for people, especially children, who don't have cookie-cutter family lifestyles. They appreciate the acknowledgement."

This month, SteppingStone reprises *The Story of Hope*, this time directed by Maria Kelly. "I was attracted to *The Story of Hope* from the beginning," says Kelly. "My mother is Filipina and my father's Caucasian. I was often asked, 'What is your nationality?' My understanding of myself as a Filipina woman and a woman of Irish descent has changed over the years, from pride to confusion and all that may be in between. I hope to bring my personal insight into my work on the play." For his part, Hitchler says he brought the show back "for social reasons and because of its broad popularity" the last time it was produced. "It's an issue that children continue to deal with on a daily basis," he says, "and I thought the play made discussing the topic more accessible and real."

Growing up poor, Monk O'Connor also struggled through her parents' divorce when she was seven and the death of her mother when she was eighteen. But with emotional support from her mother's relatives and financial support from the government, she grabbed her bootstraps and earned a bachelor's in speech and drama from Towson, then a master's in theater fine arts from Yale School of Drama. After graduating in the early 1980s, she attended the League of Regional Theater Schools auditions, which drew candidates from elite schools, including Yale, Carnegie Mellon, Juilliard, and New York University, and artistic directors from premier theaters, including Garland Wright, then artistic director of the Guthrie Theater. The fledgling actor impressed him, and that fall, he cast her in *Candide*. Monk O'Connor eventually became a company member in 1989 and performs next month as the English Ambassador in *Hamlet*. Arguably the premier lady of the Twin Cities' stage, she's also a familiar face at Mixed Blood Theatre, the Jungle Theater, and the Children's Theatre.

But Monk O'Connor's acting credits extend far beyond the Twin Cities and the stage. She's worked with famed directors Lloyd Richards and Lee Breuer and such actors as Catherine Zeta-Jones, James Earl Jones, and Moses Gunn. She's graced the stage at The Kennedy Center, at Carnegie Hall, and on the Great White Way, with a 1985 performance in *Execution of Justice* and a 1988 turn in *The Gospel at Colonus*, with fellow luminary-to-be Jevetta Steele and Morgan Freeman, for which they won a Drama Desk Award and an

Obie Award. Off-Broadway, she received an Obie in 1990 for her role in *King Lear*.

Her first film role was a graduation present from one of her professors at Yale, George Roy Hill. He gave her and three other graduates Screen Actors Guild cards and speaking roles in his 1982 film, *The World According to Garp*. She's since worked with top directors on more than two dozen films, including Donald Petrie's 1993 *Grumpy Old Men* and John Singleton's 1997 *Rosewood*. Her film work developed in tandem with her television work, when she guest-starred on *Benson*, *Family Ties*, *The Equalizer*, and several made-for-TV movies in the 1980s.

Audiences will see a different side of Monk O'Connor with *The Story of Hope*. By affording insight into an issue profoundly impacting many of today's black youth—racial identity—the production expands the conventional take on Black History Month, which typically showcases African-American abolitionists, such as Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner, and pioneers in sports, science, the arts, and business.

An African-American phrase—"Neither fish nor fowl"—describes kids whose complexion is blended with that of another race, usually Caucasian, which is something that's been part of black culture since the days of slave owners. *The Story of Hope* mines this vein when Hope, a youngster on a schoolyard playground, is asked by another student, "Are you mixed?" An older schoolmate pulls Hope aside to tell her how she wound up the color she is as they look at both sides of her family tree from a point of view that educates theatergoers about both black and white history.

"Today, there's much more intercultural marrying and children who come out of various cultures, much like it's been throughout history [for] people who are German-Italian or Russian-English," says Hitchler. "[It's] treated differently, though, when it comes to color. More and more children, when they fill out these racial questionnaires will mark 'Other,' because they don't fit into one category."

The premiere of *The Story of Hope* broke significant ground. But not much else on the Twin Cities stage has addressed the topic of mixed race, with the exception of *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, which was mounted this past September by Penumbra Theatre Company, and focused on crossed blood lines between African Americans and Native Americans, and *Messy Utopia*, commissioned by Mixed Blood, which is an in-progress piece (with an undetermined production date) by biracial playwrights that will appeal to youth and adults.

Sixteen-year-old actor Leslie Barlow was twelve when she played Hope. "The play reminded me of me," she says. "Hope is biracial, and I am too. She faces an identity crisis. I [went] through that. But it's a good play for anybody to see, [not just] a biracial person. It goes back into the history of all kids."

Monk O'Connor, who says she "likes to do things in threes," followed up *Hope* with two more books for the series, also published by Carolrhoda, *Family* in 2001 and *Blackberry Stew* in 2005. Her books have garnered praise from *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly*,

and the National Council for Social Studies/Children's Book Council. She's currently working on her fourth book, *In a Child's Garden*. Carolrhoda executive editor Ellen Stein says, "Isabell is a natural storyteller. As a reader, you get the sense that her characters are real and easy to relate to."

Monk O'Connor is planning to be an educator. Already a respected instructor, she's led classes for Neighborhood Bridges, a workshop series in which kids write and see their scripts produced for a private audience at the Children's Theatre, and guest-read in Minneapolis Public Schools for the Guthrie's Book Buddies program. She's currently taking classes at the University of St. Thomas, and when she graduates in 2007 with a master's in education, she'll work as a literacy correspondent in public schools and private institutions, helping people of all ages improve their reading and writing skills. "I want to give back to the community, and I want to enhance lives," she says. "My father couldn't read or write. In his last two years, he suffered from throat cancer and couldn't communicate. If I can prevent that from happening to one little person, his life will be vindicated."

This past December, Monk O'Connor initiated two pilot programs for literacy. For Arts in Academic Achievement, a Minneapolis Public School initiative, she helped developed Reader's Theatre 1, a strategy to improve reading among kindergartners through third graders. For the Guthrie, she taught a workshop series at Lincoln Elementary School on *A Christmas Carol*. Using the Guthrie's traditional adaptation for their text, students did six weeks of reading and writing exercises that culminated in an afternoon at the production. Sheila Livingston, who's currently Guthrie director of community relationships, used to be the theater's education coordinator and was one of the first to read *Hope*. "Isabell is a remarkable, skilled teacher who's committed to children learning to read," she says. "The Guthrie is proud to have her as an advocate for literacy."

Almost four years ago, Isabell married Patrick John O'Connor, a St. Louis Park letter carrier. It's a first marriage for both, and though they have no children together, John has a grown daughter. "I'm from the Mason-Dixon Line," says Monk O'Connor. "I grew up not being able to look white people in the face, because you could get slapped or your house could get burned down. When I was growing up, if anyone had said that someday my name would end in 'O'Connor,' I would've said, 'Get real.'"

She probably also would've said "get real" if anyone had said that someday she'd be a successful actor, writer, and educator.

Dwight Hobbes is an essayist, critic, and playwright working in Minneapolis.