

Art and activism: Vital for our humanity

It is said that the eyes are the window to the soul. If that's true, then art is the soul's reflection. It not only gives the artist tools of expression, it shares intimately with purveyors a richness and depth of feeling, challenges them to think in new ways, and, if it strikes the right chord, art can serve to inspire change.

Beth Monhollen '97 knows this well and has been using art to her best advantage — co-founding a theatre company as a student, and writing and acting in plays — since she discovered the Theatre department while at Alverno.

"In college I fell in love with theatre and the Theatre department on campus became my second home, my second family," Monhollen said. "I worked on stage crew, volunteered for theatre projects, auditioned and performed in shows, and worked as a stage manager," she said, adding she was also involved in the College's literary magazine and wrote a short play. "Writing and performing were the center of my life."

In pursuit of higher education, Monhollen used her love of writing and performance to express her experience of growing up in a family that had been poverty stricken for generations. Despite hardships, or perhaps because of them, she turned to the arts for fulfillment

and enrichment. "I loved to read stories and poems as a child; I loved to act out scenes with my sisters; I loved to sing and listen to the grown-ups play music. I loved to imagine different worlds and to question the world I lived in. Art was my lifeline. I didn't know it as a child, but through my work with the Aesthetic Engagement ability at Alverno, I came to realize that."

Monhollen struggled with the futility of art, questioning its necessity in the face of human suffering. With so much pain and misery in the world — genocide, starvation, homelessness, overflowing refugee camps — how can art possibly be important? She soon learned how it can create awareness, raise questions and provide an outlet for expression.

"Art is not a luxury; it's a vital part of what makes us human. And I realized that it was *art* that helped me break out of a long line of poverty." She drew strength from this epiphany to weave together storytelling and riveting plays.

Monhollen's ebullient enthusiasm for theatre would not be contained within the walls of Alverno for long. She and her fellow students had been performing plays together that focused on key issues such as body image, AIDS awareness and

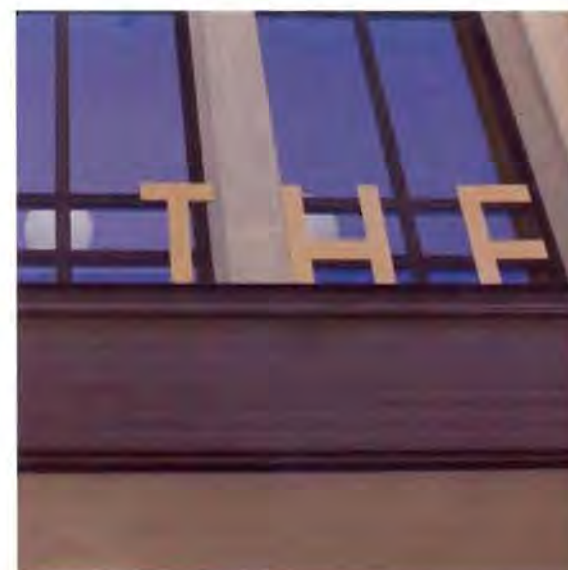


Photo of Beth Monhollen by Daniel Seung Pugliese.





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the media, and decided they wanted to expand their message by engaging more audiences. In the summer of 1995 they formed a feminist, improvisational-based theatre company called the Wind-Up Dolls. They performed at colleges and universities, and at professional conferences and public spaces throughout the Midwest. “In my years with Wind-Up Dolls, I wrote and performed many, many original monologues. Wind-Up Dolls provided a creative outlet for me and the opportunity to collaborate with amazing women — all of whom are still in my inner circle of friends.”

During her time with Wind-Up Dolls, Monhollen also found she was able to explore issues she considers critical “for people to live whole lives”: questions of identity in the face of prejudices; the role of class, religion and politics in our lives; gender as social construct; honoring our differences in the search for common ground; the personal versus the political; and, paraphrasing singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco, “how can art be activism?”

Monhollen explains, “My literature and theatre classes at Alverno, my experiences with aesthetic engagement, were the foundation for me to explore those kinds of questions. Through my study of literature and theatre, it became clear to me that our

lives are not lived in a vacuum. Artists do not create their work in a vacuum. We all have a context and so the art we create and respond to has a context.”

Since graduating, Monhollen held several positions until she became a professional adviser to undergraduate students in the Advising Office at Alverno six years ago. She also teaches a pre-professional seminar for the Career Education Center and an improvisation class for the Dance/Theatre department.

One of those jobs, waitressing, served to inform her latest well-received play, “Stations of the Cross.”

“I just wrote and performed a play called “Stations of the Cross,” which is about waiting tables. When I look at the body of work I’ve written, much of it is a way of giving voice to characters who often are voiceless or whose voices are misrepresented.” The play, produced by a professional theatre company, had an “overwhelmingly positive” response. “It has definitely been a highlight for me artistically. And there’s a possibility it may be produced by other theatre companies. In the meantime, I plan to continue writing and auditioning in the city. And to keep, happily, going to my day job.”

— by Jamie Rhodes '04