

# Milbre Burch

STORYTELLING AS AN ARTFORM

## Mommy Monologues:

Columbia Storyteller Milbre Burch's Tales Explore the Mysterious Power of Motherhood

By **MARCIA VANDERLIP** of the Tribune's staff

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*G.J. McCarthy photos*

Milbre Burch, a local, internationally known storyteller, will present her one-woman show, "Mom's the Word: A Journey in Meters and Centimeters," at 7 p.m. tomorrow at the Missouri Theatre. The performance, which is in two acts, will feature Burch in a variety of roles as she explores motherhood across cultural and historical lines.

Milbre Burch is aching to tell a story. Though she has many to tell, she is homing in on one that will be told at the Missouri Theatre tomorrow.

She is a storyteller, after all. But as she prepares for her upcoming performance, she is telling a side story about a recent conference called The Future of Birth, a gathering whose themes had much in common with those of her production, "Mom's the Word: A Journey in Meters and Centimeters."

Michael Odent, a French obstetrician who helped pioneer water birth, spoke at the conference, and Burch - who, at 51, is by most measures past her birthing days - is beaming.

"I couldn't believe that Michael Odent came to Columbia!" she says.

"This conference helped me realize that it is only in America that natural childbirth is considered *an alternative*," she says. "You know, pregnancy is not an illness, delivery is not a procedure, unless there are complications. In which case - salute the flag! - I am glad women have medical options."

Between conference workshops, Burch performed a portion of her 90-minute meditation on motherhood. After rubbing elbows with an army of midwives, doulas, pregnant women, breast-feeding women and La Leche Leaguers at the three-day event, "I was reminded - so viscerally! - with what it was like to take care of a baby."

"But I haven't nursed in eight years," since 1996, when her daughter Elizabeth was born. Her first daughter, Katy Blake, is 13 and the subject of a nursing story in her "mom" monologues.

"Just being around these people, I felt 'I'm going to let down,' " Burch says, referring to the here-comes-the-milk reflex. Special occasions aside, she says, we live in a culture that is not friendly to suckling babies in public, and women tend not to share their birthing stories. "That is why I wanted to do this in this piece."

"I wanted to look at creativity and motherhood from a lot of directions. I have friends who adopted children, dealt with infertility, lost children in pregnancy," she says.

She wanted to address motherhood in the broadest possible sense, including traditional tales and legends and "combining my experience and the experiences of those I knew and loved," she says.

When "Mom's the Word" is presented at the Missouri Theatre, a portion of the proceeds will go to the Future of Birth Alliance, one of the sponsors of the Future of Birth conference.

The show, which is infused with poems, fairy tales and folk tales, also deals with Burch's relatively late entry into motherhood at the age of 39.

"People still mistake me for my children's grandmother," she said, a fact that might prove fodder for future stories.



Burch holds a copy of "The Fairy Tale Book," a collection of tales from around

## Coming up

Storyteller Milbre Burch will perform her one-woman show for adults at 7 p.m. tomorrow at the Missouri Theatre with musical guests Leela, Ellie and Win Grace. Tickets are available for \$10 at the Missouri Theatre or online at [www.mosymphony.org](http://www.mosymphony.org).

## A Milbre Burch selection

Milbre Burch's recordings include "Mom's the Word," "In the Family Way," "Saints and Other Sinners," "The World is the Storyteller's Village," "The Ready Heart," "The Mary Stories," "Sop Doll and other Tales of Mystery and Mayhem," "Metamorphosis and Dragonfield," "Touch Magic ... Pass it On," "Mama Gone," "Other Stories to Trouble Your Sleep" and "Treasure on the Tongue."

Recordings will be on sale at the Missouri Theatre performance. Burch's recordings are also available through Kind Crone Productions. Visit [www.kindcrone.com](http://www.kindcrone.com) for more information.

As a child, Burch loved reading fairy tales, particularly "The Fairytale Book," a large, "strangely and wonderfully" illustrated Golden Book.

"Global folk tales are the stories that have driven me all of my life. The reason a folk or fairy tale lasts is because it has something to say to people in any culture," she says. Her home office sports a wall or "cathedral of books" - mostly folk tales.

"The Fairytale Book" makes an appearance in the "Mom" piece through her retelling of "The Wild Swans" by Hans Christian Andersen. At one point, she invents a motherless Irish immigrant girl who comes to see the Statue of Liberty as her new mother. She talks about the mysteries and wonders of pregnancy, her own difficulties in conceiving and the trials of nursing. And she explores the dark side of motherhood by briefly becoming the spirit of La Llorona - The Cry - of Hispanic legend.

Her meditation on motherhood has evolved, she says. This is not the same piece she performed first in 1998 at the Los Angeles Women's Theater Festival, nor is it the version she intoned at the National Storytime Festival in 1999.

She heeds the words of a good editor because she loves language.

In March 2002 she visited her "mime mentor," the late Tony Montanaro, who founded Celebration Barn in South Paris, Maine, where she now teaches in the summer. His suggestions helped her pump new life into the performance, adding a stronger physical element and "opening some doors that I had left ajar." In 2003, she worked with theater and dance critic Byron Woods, whose suggestions helped give her performance "more juice."

She says her stage is set vaudevillian-style, with scene titles placed on a tripod. A white belly cast, which she had made while she was pregnant, is used as a prop at one point. She calls the performance "an exploration of the many mysteries of birth and child rearing and an invitation into some of the best-kept secrets of being a woman."

The stories have not always been so close to home.

Burch had been telling stories for 15 years before she decided to add personal narrative to the mix. She was very cautious at first because "personal narrative can be very powerful, and it can be very clunky," she says.

Her father's death 15 years ago inspired her to invest more of herself in the stories she tells. "In the Family Way" was her first performance piece about growing up and her relationship with her father.

"I had woven together folk, literary and personal narrative material for that show. It was wonderful. I found that I could drop in a folk tale or a fairy tale or a poem, and I could get at the emotional element I wanted without telling a specific story about my family," she explains.

At 33 she married Berkley Hudson, who teaches journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Two years ago, the family moved to Columbia, where they have settled into a newly renovated home with their border terrier, Zoé.

"I'm from Georgia, Berkley's from Mississippi, and we met and married in Providence, Rhode Island," she said. They have also lived in Pasadena, Calif., and Chapel Hill, N.C., where her husband completed a doctorate.

Burch is a graduate of Duke University. Before her storytelling career began and after making an independent film about her former dance teacher, Meli Davis Kaye, she realized the importance of dance in her own life.

"There came a moment when I realized that the combination of movement and language was my calling," Burch says. "I grew up to be what I always was."

Over the years, Burch's wit, candor and graceful stage presence have earned her a number of "spoken-word" gigs from coast to coast. She has toured for state art councils and continues to lead storytelling workshops around the country. The calendar on her wall is filled with dates through the rest of this year.

"My daughter Elizabeth was looking into the yard ball one day and said, 'Let me look into my crystal ball. You will be spending more time at home with your family,' " Burch smiles.

She still spends many Saturdays at soccer games, still carves out time with kids at home from a busy touring schedule. Many expressions come to mind in describing Milbre Burch's vocation, but - in the broadest sense - "mom" is still the word.