

Arts help tell story of Soul of Southside Festival

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"I see it as bringing life back to the United States, bringing life back to the community," muses E. Marie Sissle, chair for the inaugural Soul of Southside Arts and Humanities Festival's kickoff event. "Colors always bring back life."



Sissle immediately volunteered when she heard about the vision for the brand new festival. As founder and executive director of the SoMo Playhouse, Sissle

lives and breathes theater and the arts. She relocated the playhouse from Midtown to South Monroe because she saw the potential for the arts to blossom in the community.

"It became very clear that more voices needed a spotlight on the southside of Tallahassee," says Sissle. "I wanted to get involved because this is my community, and you have to have a seat at the table."

The Soul of Southside Festival will take place from May 20-22, and features neighborhood history tours, a youth entrepreneurship expo and pitch competitions, food and entertainment.

Sissle is heading up the first day's "Drive-By Fish Fry," mural paintings by

If you go

What: Inaugural Soul of Southside Arts and Humanities Festival

When: May 20-22

Where: Anita Favors Thompson Plaza at Lake Anita, 116 W. Van Buren Street

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, please visit <https://sosfesttlh.com/>.

artist April Fitzpatrick and the evening's kick-off ceremony which aims to "set forth purpose and power of equity-in-practice" with invited speakers from the City Commission and FAMU.

Sissle says the goal is to feed 400

seniors with the fish fry. She adds that they have already begun delivering meals to those who are still quarantining away from COVID-19.

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SoMo Playhouse founder E. Marie Sissle is chair for the inaugural Soul of Southside Arts and Humanities Festival's kickoff event.

PROVIDED

Festival

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Honoring 'unsung' heroes with murals

Additionally, she helped to poll the community and identify "unsung" heroes who will become the featured faces of Fitzpatrick's murals. The honorees are U.S. Representative Carrie Meek, former NAACP Tallahassee Branch President and Leon County Commissioner Anita Davis, and community leader Steve Beasley.

During the kick-off, community members will also be invited to contribute additional names of family members and impactful mentors, as well as drawings and paintings to an adjacent mural. When it comes to the mentors that Sissle has had in her own life, she would add her theater professor Dr. Stan DeHart at Tallahassee Community College to that list.

"If I would not have had him as my first person teaching me theater, I don't know if I would have kept it up," admits Sissle. "He knew theater and was very passionate about it. He really awakened something in me and I owe a lot to him."

Sissle says she started in theater by accident. When she was looking for an elective credit in school, she decided to try a theater class and was immediately drawn to the art form's malleability when it came to inhabiting other people and diving deep into the mind. Sissle says theater changed her whole outlook on life, including her work ethic, vision and passions.

She didn't realize that the theater tradition might have been hereditary. When her father passed away, she found a plaque of his dubbing him as "Best Actor" from FAMU. She credits her father for giving her a voice and teaching her to sing. The night he passed away, she performed in a concert as a tribute to him at his insistence to always honor commitments.

Pursuing love of theater

"I was always an actress and didn't even know it," says Sissle. "I always pretended to be different characters growing up and had fun getting into the world of

what they were feeling and thinking. I feel like characters are all in me no matter who they are, good or bad. You just have to tap the right nerve so they can be exposed."

Her first production at TCC, "The Dining Room," challenged her with seven distinct roles. She is still holding out for her dream role as Rose in August Wilson's "Fences." At her core however, Sissle is an educator. She went back into the classroom full time during the pandemic and teaches theater and leadership at the Governor's Charter Academy and the School of Arts and Sciences on Thomasville Road.

She doesn't want any child to have to wait until college, like she did, to find out they have a love and passion for theater. It's part of her motivation with the educational programming at SoMo Playhouse as well.

All of her students keep actor's journals where they write down their roles, emotions and reflections in order to have a portfolio of work at the end of each year.

"Even in my leadership classes we talk about public speaking and representing yourself well," says Sissle. "I see so many leadership qualities in the kids, and I am always speaking joy into them and speaking positive thoughts into their heads. When I see them doing innovative things with their talents, that is what inspires me to keep going. That's when I find my joy, when I see something is awakened in other people."

Even as the pandemic has taken a toll on daily life, Sissle remains a strong advocate for keeping the arts alive as a salve for the soul. She is energized by the momentum of the Southside Arts and Humanities Festival and is most looking forward to seeing hoards of happy people.

"Art to me tells the story of who a generation is and what they believed in," says Sissle. "If we divest in the arts, we're losing our history. When we find people's cultures and go dig in the dirt, we're digging up pottery and someone's hands that made something. I hope the arts continue to show that we value people and their stories more than anything. Storytelling is what we do and who we are."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).