

Real Tallahassee

Director sees 'A Town Divided' as way to discuss social issues

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Director Christina Rodriguez de Conte coaches her actors enthusiastically from the stage's sidelines. She writes out their coordinates like running plays on a football diagram — Xs mark the spots where actors will stand with arrows crisscrossing the page to show how they'll interact with one another on-stage. • "I play roller derby and coach, so it's in me as an athlete," laughs Rodriguez de Conte. "I never sit down, I'm always on my feet."

"A Town Divided," an original interpretation of 'Romeo and Juliet,' examines the racial divide in our city. Zira Brown and Zach Boltz as Juelle and Rob in SSC's 2020 production of the play.

ROBERT HOWARD



Rodriguez de Conte's process for directing Southern Shakespeare Company's "A Town Divided" has been similarly energetic. The play adapts "Romeo and Juliet" to present-day Tallahassee as it examines the racial divide in the city through Shakespeare's famous tragedy.

A community performance will take place on Thursday, Feb. 10, in addition to several educational, school shows. For Rodriguez de Conte, staging this play has been a unique opportunity to facilitate open and honest conversation with the community.

"Everybody knows this story so there's something about connecting something modern to the classics that already gives it a certain kind of status or richness," says Rodriguez de Conte. "When you look at this long-standing feud, it's the children that are the ones suffering. They don't see why there was a feud, they just know they're supposed to hate each other."

Directing and social issues

Rodriguez de Conte earned her Master's in Theatre Education and Community from Emerson College and Ph.D. in Theatre Studies from Florida State Uni-



Director Christy Rodriguez De Conte works with actors Matthew Thompson (Rob) and Pat Mauer (Sarah).

PROVIDED

versity. Her philosophies as an actor, director, playwright, and producer have always aligned with Brazilian playwright's Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed."

"I started to practice Theatre of the Oppressed and use theater as a way to

discuss social issues," explains Rodriguez de Conte.

"The idea is that you're practicing liberation and practicing ways to stand up to someone who is oppressing you and holding you down, and to practice as a community creating some civil aware-

If you go

What: A Town Divided: Community Show

When: 7-8 p.m., Thursday, Feb. 10

Where: Turner Auditorium at TCC, 444 Appleyard Drive

Cost: \$10 for students/seniors, \$15 for adults

Contact: For more information, call 850-728-8523 or visit southernshakespearefestival.networkforgood.com

ness. It helped in my directing to think about the social context of everything that we're doing and not just how can I put these characters on the stage. I can answer the question, 'Why this play? Why now?'

Rodriguez de Conte was first drawn into theater after watching her grandmother perform onstage in Miami during the 1980s and 1990s. She was fascinated by how her grandmother could transform onstage, and began to see how theater could be an escape to live in another character's shoes for a while.

See PLAY, Page 2C

Play

Continued from Page 1C

Incorporating 'the idea of community'

When she arrived in Tallahassee eight years ago for her doctorate, her work focused specifically on queer theater. Rodriguez de Conte co-directed "The Murderous Movable Macbeth" with Terry Galloway and Donna Nudd at the Mickee Faust Club. She considers both Galloway and Nudd as invaluable mentors, teaching her how to lead a group with compassion and an emphasis on community.

In "Macbeth," Rodriguez de Conte played Lady Macbeth at nine months pregnant in what she describes as a dream role.

"Working with Terry and Donna both as mentors in directing has really changed my vision of how I talk to people because they're just so warm," says Rodriguez de Conte. "I try to bring the idea of community in general into my directing space."

Another watershed moment in her career was in 2019, when she wrote, directed, and performed in her work, "The Mystery of the Violated Vagina." The musical comedy addressed the physical and emotional trauma of a rape survivor in tandem with audience talk-backs that included an invited expert in the field to answer questions.

Rodriguez de Conte says her goal was to write a comedy that had social resonance.

The production highlighted her quirky, campy aesthetic while addressing the deeply emotional content.

"It's powerful to sit in a large room and hear these stories," says Rodriguez de Conte. "I tell my students you can call

yourself a playwright, but unless you're producing your plays, you're just an avid journaler. You need to get it out there."

Getting arts into the classroom

Of the many roles she's played, Rodriguez de Conte considers herself an actor's director and an educator. She'll read the script thoroughly, but rather than give her cast the answers, she prompts them to ask questions and make their own discoveries.

Given that "A Town Divided" derived its script from the stories and histories of the city, Rodriguez de Conte prompted her actors to do research on the racial history of Tallahassee.

Rodriguez de Conte facilitated conversations with her cast for two days as they shared historical facts on the city's plantations and lynching trees. From there, she set them in motion, coaching them to remain true to the characters in these stories by having genuine reactions.

Beyond providing a space for the community to listen and interact with these stories, Rodriguez de Conte says her goal is for the students who will attend the performances to forget they're watching an educational play.

"I think this is how we should be using theater," says Rodriguez de Conte. "Let's get the arts back in classrooms. This play is not assuming that these students don't know what's happening, and that they're not living in this moment. It talks about it for real and shows it for real."

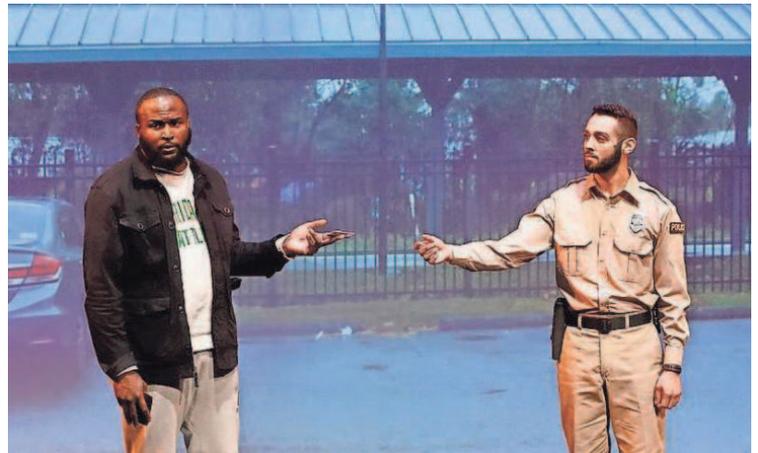
Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



Actor David Baucum during a costume fitting for a character in "A Town Divided." TALLAHASSEE PROVIDED



Actress Jamia Wright plays Elle in this year's production of "A Town Divided." TALLAHASSEE PROVIDED



DeShaun Green and Gerain Arias play Tyrone and the sheriff in Southern Shakespeare Company's 2020 production of "A Town Divided." ROBERT HOWARD