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RACHEL HUNTER TAPS PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN 'DANCING LESSONS'

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Art imitates life for performer and choreographer Rachel Hunter. ■ Hunter plays the part of Broadway dancer Senga in Theatre Tallahassee's upcoming two-person production of "Dancing Lessons," which will run from Jan. 23 to Feb. 2. Hunter will act opposite Jeff Hoh who plays Ever, a young man with Asperger's syndrome seeking help with an upcoming social event. ■ "I share a lot in common with my character," says Hunter. "I am able to pull from a lot of personal experiences to tap into who she is." ■ Just as Senga's career-altering injury is central to the play, a foot injury set Hunter on her own path in the dance field. Hunter first followed in her older sister's footsteps as a child, taking creative movement, modern and jazz classes at her local studio in Tennessee.

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Rachel Hunter is Production Manager and Adjunct Professor at Florida State University's School of Dance. RACHEL HUNTER;

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KAYLA FILION/USA TODAY NETWORK

Hunter

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She never saw dance as her primary career, however, as she also enjoyed playing soccer. Her sights were set on becoming a mechanical engineer in the army when she suddenly was out of commission.

"I almost lost my right foot from the ankle down," recalls Hunter. "I realized how much I missed dance from not being able to do it, and so after rehab I started up again."

Hunter credits her early teachers, Hatty Gill and Vena Champion, for challenging her abilities while providing a safe, therapeutic space in the studio. They were ahead of the curve when it came to body positivity in dance which Hunter says allowed for vulnerability from all students while teaching them how to give and receive constructive criticism.

Humor is another aspect to Hunter's style and how she chooses to filter information. She analyzes stand-up comedy specials for their text and experiments with applying similar devices in her choreography. Her evening-length work, "All The Much" was a genuine playground for these ideas. Inspired by her love of color-coding and organizing, the theater-dance work explored four characters, red, blue, yellow and green, using a wide variety of music lyrics to propel their relationships forward.



Hunter

All these experiences factor into Hunter's own teaching philosophy as Production Manager and Adjunct Professor at Florida State University's School of Dance. Lately, circular count structures have allowed her to explore softness in the body in opposition with dynamic shifts of weight. Hunter enjoys movement that takes her in and out of the floor, changing levels and working with her students on spirals.

"My voice is still evolving," says Hunter. "I haven't completely settled into a codified way of doing anything and I try to lean into that. I am influenced by the students as well when they come in so I think that shifts everything as I go."

Hunter earned her BFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and has been a performer, choreographer and stage manager for Starr Foster Dance Project, K Dance, Ground Zero Dance Company, Amaranth Contemporary Dance and Dim Sum Dance. She co-founded her own dance company before completing her MFA in dance and production at Florida State.

As an undergraduate student, she was required to work on production crews as part of her degree. She noticed many opportunities to work behind in the scenes in Richmond and slowly nurtured a passion for production work. Hunter's graduate thesis expanded on how to effectively use production in tandem with the choreographic process and she continues to wear these many hats in her current position.

"A lot of times in production, if you're not aware of it happening, it just appears," says Hunter, who plays a major part of ensuring this magic happens during countless faculty, undergraduate, and graduate stage productions. "I don't think it's always known just how much time and energy go into making that happen. The lights and costumes don't just show up, there's a whole process for them as well alongside the creative process



Rachel Hunter plays the part of Senga in Theatre Tallahassee's production of "Dancing Lessons," which runs from Jan. 23 to Feb. 2. THEATRE TALLAHASSEE



Rachel Hunter embraces the heightened energy that adds vitality and a pulse to the work. THEATRE TALLAHASSEE

with designers, production managers and stage crew."

Hunter won't be on headset or behind a curtain however for "Dancing Lessons." It is her first time in a two-person show and she appreciates the range of humor that is employed within the script. Sometimes light and awkward or sarcastic and dark, the relationship and banter that emerges between the two characters continue to captivate her.

As production elements get added in rehearsals, Hunter embraces the heightened energy that adds vitality and a pulse to the work. She believes theater shows the best and worst in people and hopes "Dancing Lessons" will start a dialogue with audiences about looking beyond labels. For Hunter, who did not think she would ever become a teacher on stage or in real life, taking those crucial, extra steps to understanding are all a part of the greater dance.

"Don't follow someone else's footsteps but know where the other person walked and know that you don't need to take the same path," says Hunter. "In the early part of my career I felt the need to follow a specific dance path just because that was what was highlighted in media but there are actually so many different ways to do the work that you want to do. I have learned more every day from my students, from messing up and from watching other people teach."

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).

Glenn Miller Orchestra

Monday, February 3rd, 2020 7PM
TCC Turner Hall
 444 Appleyard Drive, Tallahassee, FL 32304
 Ticket Prices: \$29-\$39
 Can be purchased at:
www.brownpapertickets.com or 800-838-3006
 Call 321-441-9135 ext 2 for Group Sales

If you go

What: "Dancing Lessons"

When: 8 p.m. Jan. 23, 24, 25, 30, 31 and Feb. 1; 2 p.m. Jan. 26 and Feb. 2

Where: Theatre Tallahassee, 1861 Thomasville Road

Cost: \$15

Contact: For more information, call 850-224-8474 or visit <http://theatretallahassee.org>.

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