

8D ■ SUNDAY, JUNE 10, 2018 ■ TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

'Barefoot' director brings life lessons to stage

Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

Actress and writer Michelle Nickens will never forget the story of a woman who had been stalked so intensely that she was forced to move, change her name, and start her life over again. This character lived inside the world of Rebecca Gilman's play "Boy Gets Girl."

Nickens recalls how the director invited the Tallahassee Police Department and the Sheriff's Office Victim Advocates to speak with audience members about stalking before the curtain opened. Weeks later, the cast was informed that a few audience members had reached out to the victim advocates after seeing the show and realized they needed help.



Michelle Nickens

"I think the greatest gift an actor can give is to make a positive impact like that on someone else's life," says Nickens, who has been involved with Theatre Tallahassee

for 20 years.

She has had the roles of actress, board member, and at one point, board president, but Nickens will be making her directorial debut for Theatre Tallahassee's "Barefoot in the Park," now playing. When the solicitation for directors went out a few months back, she decided it was time to try her hand at being on the other side of the table as she had a distinct vision for the show.

Her ability to get into characters' heads comes fairly easily and has given her decades of experience acting and her passion for writing. Nickens is a contributor to Tallahassee Woman's Magazine, and her first book, "Precious Little Secrets," was named one of Tallahassee's best beach reads. While much of her writing takes place on planes or at airports during delays, she also visits family near the water to write outside.

"Precious Little Secrets" encompasses the paranormal, romance, identity, and family dynamics, in a setting where dreams and fantasy begin to overtake reality. Nickens is not bound to any one genre or audience though, and enjoys having "no rules" when it comes to getting the story out.

For inspiration, Nickens looks to her parents, who she considers her greatest mentors. Her father served in the military, which gave her the opportunity to see the world and grow up in diverse en-



Paul (Jeff Hoh) and Corie (Taylor), a newlywed couple, have just moved into their new apartment. ABBY KINCH

If you go

What: Barefoot in the Park

When: 8 p.m. on June 15, 16, 22, 23, and 2 p.m. on June 17, 24

Where: Theatre Tallahassee, 1861 Thomasville Road

Cost: \$22 adults, \$17 seniors and military, \$12 for students

Contact: For more information, call 850-224-8474 or visit www.theatretallahassee.org.

vironments. These travels sparked a desire to record her experiences, as well as to capture characters and settings. A stream-of-consciousness approach gives Nickens the freedom to write with fluidity even as it elongates the editing process.

"I feel very fortunate I can write thousands of words about a fork and bring

that fork to life," jokes Nickens. "I'm always taking pictures, writing notes down, and documenting anything interesting that I see because you never know when you might need it."

The story of "Barefoot in the Park," authored by Neil Simon, is set in New York City in 1963, taking place on the precipice of the John F. Kennedy assassination and Martin Luther King Jr.'s, "I Have A Dream" speech. Nickens notes that it is also at the beginning of the women's revolution, which she sees reflected in the main character, Corie Bratter and her atypical embodiment of a newlywed and housewife.

Simon's comedy is nuanced with symbolism, even within the setting. Nickens envisions the six-story NYC brownstone as its own character. The cramped, cozy environment is both awkward and representative of life for the characters who inhabit it. Corie and her husband, Paul Bratter, are just married when they move in. They live in

close quarters with Corie's mother, Ethel Banks, and the man in the attic, Victor Velasco. Most interesting to Nickens is the skylight in the little apartment.

"That skylight in my mind represents the glass ceiling back then, being that Corie has some elements of what women are going to be," says Nickens. "That's laid the foundation of where I wanted to go with this play. The skylight can represent Paul breaking out of his shell, or Ethel being rejuvenated and engaged, or Velasco's understanding of himself."

She feels fortunate to have worked with talented actors in the process who are willing to take on the many gradations of character development. Nickens' process as a director was dedicated to identifying the backstories of these characters, and how they came to be the people audiences see portrayed onstage. Many rehearsals were spent deep in discussion about these personalities, and once actors got on their feet to block, or walk through the show, there was constant refinement of physical ticks and dialogue.

Before "Barefoot" hit the stage for its first weekend of shows, Nickens and the cast reflected on what new facts they learned about their characters in order to integrate those qualities into the final product. As an actress, Nickens says she would often base her portrayal of characters on personal experiences in order to give a more authentic performance.

Ultimately, knowing the characters inside and out, researching their life and career, and coming to understand how they interact in relationships is what creates the whole picture for Nickens. She's invigorated to see their chemistry coming alive onstage and hopes audiences will not only find humor in "Barefoot in the Park," but also consider its message about people.

"I think that art, theater, dance, and all the other performing arts are some of the most important things in our lives and communities," says Nickens. "It's not only educational and entertaining, but inspiring because you learn so much about yourself and others. When you're doing a show you have to have commitment, dedication, teamwork, and these are things that we all can then take into our lives and then apply."

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).