

Democrat writer acts, sings, in 'Jesus' musical

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Neil Coker knows what it means to be on both sides of a proscenium arch. A writer since third grade, inventing narratives in a worn composition book, he's always been fond of a pen and paper and felt a pull toward the arts.

For a time, he considered being an opera singer, receiving vocal training at age 16. He continues to sing for his health and own enjoyment, and hopefully, he remarked, the enjoyment of others.

His father, a trumpeter who earned his master's degree from Florida State University, was one of his first musical influences. Coker recalls hearing him sing in church and inherited the same deep vocal range that he now puts to use in his acting. The 27-year-old Tallahassee native admits to being painfully shy growing up until theater ramped up his extroversion and provided a much needed outlet.

"I wanted a novel experience and I was searching for that elusive thing within all of us that feeds our soul," said Coker. "I always saw theater from a distance and was curious about it. When I finally auditioned for a school play, I felt a sort of spark inside of me and I knew that it was something that really spoke to me."

Eleven years ago Chiles High School drama teacher Shannon O'Bryan plucked him out of her homeroom class and cast him in the musical "42nd Street." Coker has been deeply embedded in the Tallahassee community theater scene ever since, attending Tallahassee Community College and continuing to perform around town.

Coker was acting in the play "Stop Kiss" at Theatre Tallahassee when he fell into theater reviewing.

From editor-in-chief of his high school newspaper to freelancer, and eventually staff member at the Tallahassee Democrat, his writing allows him to play dual roles in the theater world. As a critic, he aims to objectively analyze all aspects of the medium, paying attention to variables such as the characters, set design, and lighting that come together to make a performance. Coincidentally, seeing so much theater around town has bolstered his own chops.

"Since I started writing theater reviews, I feel more of an impetus to perform at the standard to which I hold others," remarks Coker. "We're all our own worst critics, but I'm inspired every day by people who do things that I can't. As an actor, I take in what I've seen and naturally pick up things I like or don't like, and what I want to em-



RYAN DAILEY

Journalist, theater critic, actor, and singer Neil Coker at work in the Tallahassee Democrat newsroom.



ulate and adopt."

As a journalist, his inclination to observe and people watch allow him to pull energy from those around him and translate it into his acting onstage. Trained in the Stanislavski methodology, the culmination of his experiences has served as his greatest teaching tool, and he often relies on intuition and adaptation.

Though he tends to favor dark cerebral dramas, Coker isn't one to fall into typecasting. He feels a responsibility as an actor to diversify and stay flexible in order to develop his artistry, looking up to movie stars like Leonardo DiCaprio and Daniel Day Lewis.

In terms of taste, he is most drawn to the classical pop operas like "Phantom of the Opera" and "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street." He finds the intensity of psychological, dramatic plays such as "Closer" by Patrick Marber and "Proof" by David Auburn equally intriguing, and enjoys playing roles in both genres.

In his own career, Coker took on the unique challenge of a more lighthearted role in Steve Martin's "The Underpants," tried on some dancing boots in "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," grizzled characters as Babbybobby Bennett in "The Cripple of Inishmaan," and took on the lead in the musical "The Fantasticks" as El Gallo.

"I played the character that drives everything forward and the responsi-



QUINCY MUSIC THEATRE

In June 2016, Coker played El Gallo in "The Fantasticks", the longest-running Off-Broadway musical on record.

IF YOU GO

What: Jesus Christ Superstar

When: 7:30 p.m., 2:30 p.m. matinee on Sundays & Saturday Oct. 15, Oct. 7-9, 14-16

Where: Quincy Music Theatre, 118 E. Washington Street, Quincy, FL, 32351

Cost: \$18 for adults, \$15 for students, seniors, and military

Contact: For more information please call 850-875-9444 or visit www.qmt.org.

bility of having the whole show on my shoulders was daunting but equally inviting," said Coker of El Gallo. "Sometimes smaller roles are the meatier ones, too. I like plays that have intimate casts because it narrows the focus as a performer and there's so much more room for bonding and exploring your relationship with everyone onstage."

While embodying different archetypes comes with its own set of challenges, Coker is always up to the task. In Quincy Music Theatre's production of "Jesus Christ Superstar," Coker will take on a villainous role for the first time as Caiaphas, the high priest of Israel and Jesus' greatest enemy. The show, which is entirely sung-through, has tested his vocals as well. The bass notes peppered throughout the score helped him to uncover a part of his range he didn't know existed.

To prepare for the role, Coker conducted a fair amount of historical research into the time period and main players. He's intrigued with how the musical presents well-known figures like Judas and Pilate, portraying them as human beings with a multitude of motives and desires. Additionally, Q.M.T. will take a unique spin on the

story, setting it in a cyber-punk dystopia in the style of "Blade Runner."

"It's one of those shows where you can switch the setting and it still works, which speaks to its endurance, longevity, and timelessness," said Coker. "As far as tackling this role, I'm looking forward to eliciting a reaction from the audience and feeling their collective hissing when I'm out there. That's how I'll know I'm doing a good job."

Coker empathizes with that collective, one of a kind experience—whether he's seated in anticipation and awaiting the main rag to be pulled out or entering fully costumed from the wings. He recounts the special energetic experience of being in a theater as unparalleled to any other art form he's viewed. Coker has sights set on directing some day, and even has drafts tucked away, inscribed with his own exercises in play-writing.

Above all, he connects with the live storytelling aspects of the art form as a writer and performer. He says the kindest comment he's ever received came after a "Fantasticks" performance when a reader of his newspaper column remarked that 'the voice is mightier than the pen.' For Coker, his love of writing, the arts, and sharing information have all come together to create his greatest role yet.

"Not many people can say that they find work that intersects all of their interests," said Coker with a smile. "Each night is inevitably its own unique breathing animal and that is what really captivates me. It's such a dynamic craft that can speak to people the world over."

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).