

Director energizes Pyramid's 'Hotel 99'

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Jilian Wesolowski, performing arts coordinator at Pyramid Inc., dreams of living in a time where artists like Ella Fitzgerald and Dinah Washington dominated the charts. At only 28 years old, she pines for that distant era but finds joy in reliving what might have been as a thespian.

Her first role was in the Quincy Music Theatre's production of "Bye Bye Birdie" — a mid-20th-century time-warp with poodle skirts to boot — and she recently played the vaudevillian murderess Velma Kelly in a production of "Chicago."

Much of her inspiration as an artist comes from old movie stars and choreographers. She's a fan of Fosse and feels that legends who paved the way before her should be honored in song and dance. Community theater holds a special place in her heart, and she admires the collaborative qualities of the form as well as volunteering her talent and time with a group of like-minded artists who often work without pay.

For her, the dynamic differs from a day job and another level of work ethic comes into play with bonds based on trust building a stronger ensemble.

"In the same way people join sororities and fraternities in college, I joined community theater," says Wesolowski. "That became my adoptive Tallahassee family. I love meeting people who are really eager and I think that's why I'm so drawn to it because talking with someone who is excited inspires me to reach that level of motivation and excitement."

Entering the theater at a young age through church, Wesolowski was simultaneously a super fan of her sister's show choir involvement. Eventually, when she was old enough to audition, she joined as an alto singer in her Brandon, Florida, high school choir and was given leadership roles in her junior and senior years. Elected as assistant director, she conducted rehearsals, led warm ups and chose songs for competitions.

As she transitioned into a double major in theater and English at Florida State University, she began exploring the world of community theater as her primary performing outlet. She's been a part of Theatre Tallahassee, the Quincy Music Theatre, and New Stage Theatreworks, and has performed in over 20 shows from the "Producers" to "West Side Story." Her biggest role changeup came when she was asked for the first time to direct the quirky "Bat Boy, the Musical" for student theater company Leave Your Mark Productions.

"I would call myself an actor's director because generally, I think like an actor," explains Wesolowski. "Once the show is cast I sit down at home with the script, read over it, and become each character to see what they need to do in each scene. I'm also organized like a stage manager so when I get back into rehearsal it's all planned out."

Sitting on the other side of the table as director helped to sharpen her own acting chops. Being the leader, she depended heavily upon her own penchant for research, continually re-reading the script to come to understand the characters and their motives as well as deepen her knowledge of the play's time period. Though the technical aspects such as lights and set design did not come as easily, she relied on the expertise of others and her own willingness to learn as the show developed.

Wesolowski also appreciated the

IF YOU GO

What: The Pyramid Players present "Hotel 99," an original musical production

When: 5-7 p.m. Pre-show, Curtain at 7 p.m., Aug. 13

Where: The Moon, 1105 E. Lafayette St.

Cost: \$10

Contact: For more information, call 850-513-1733 or visit moonevents.com.



support of the company's founder, Christopher Brazelton, who mentored her throughout the process. In the final week of rehearsals, Wesolowski said it was his guidance that let her know when it was time to pull back the reins instead of fretting over every detail. In that moment her mantra to talk less and listen more came to the forefront. The show opened with high praise from the community and cemented Wesolowski's drive to continue directing.

"It was a lot more responsibility and a lot like being a teacher where you have to have a lesson plan and come prepared," explains Wesolowski. "As far as thinking about the show, I've always been the kind of actor who knows my lines and everyone else's. So it was pretty easy to transition into knowing the whole show in its entirety, and not just my own role."

For the past two years, Wesolowski has taken these same community theater principles and applied them to her work as a performing arts coordinator for Pyramid, Inc. She first came onboard as a dance instructor but was recommended to take over given her past directing experience and the opportunity to lead the organization's largest event of the year.

Pyramid's mission is to provide unique programs for an underserved and often invisible population of adults who face developmental barriers. Pyramid is revered for their arts program, offering visual and performing arts opportunities, one of which is performing a completely original production from creating the story to bringing it to life onstage.

"The students live for this, and even if they're not in the show, they come out to see their friends performing and people cheering for them," says Wesolowski. "I don't see this kind of professionalism from most actors, and once the students get into The Moon whatever they didn't turn on during rehearsals is up 10 notches. They're looking for people to say they did a good job and notice them."

This past fall and winter, Wesolowski led her playwriting class once again on the creative journey of writing a musical. She smiles, admitting that many of her students are far more experienced and confident with the craft, having written them for over 20 years with Pyramid. She remarks on how the theater teaches them to focus, which can be a challenge for many, improve communication skills through learning lines, and cultivate an awareness and



ANDRÉ PEELE

Actor and director Jilian Wesolowski is the head honcho for The Pyramid Players' "Hotel 99."

empathy for those around them.

This year's jukebox musical production, "Hotel 99" began with Wesolowski showing the writers vintage photographs. An image of a New York City high-rise with a butler out front sparked their imagination. Attendees will be transported to the 1970s and follow an arrogant rock star, in his purple Bowie-esque suit, and a slew of comedic hotel hijinks. Spending two hours a day in rehearsals all summer long, Wesolowski's students are highly committed to learning the songs, lines, and choreography, and are paid for their work as professional actors during the show. She's especially excited this year as some students will assist with set changes and facilitate a quick wardrobe change, both first-time ventures.

"A lot of those skills translate into everyday life and becoming more comfortable in society," remarks Wesolowski. "They take the scripts home, learn them on their own, and call each other at night to say their lines over the phone. I don't ask them to do that but they do it because it's important to them."

Wesolowski says many students will start the countdown in early spring and everyone, including the instructors, looks forward to the production that fills the Moon with music, dance, and drama. This year's all-night event will begin with a pre-show given by the student band, "The Electric People," while appetizers and drinks are served and guests are free to peruse hand-made artwork.



SAMANTHA ALGAZE

Second from right, Wesolowski directs another student in rehearsal for "Hotel 99."

She hopes that attendees will sing out loud and want to boogie the night away with her cast as they sing hits from the '70s. Additionally, Wesolowski wants the event to continue to raise awareness for a population that remains largely unrecognized for those who don't have a family member or a friend with a special need. She observes that with so much going on in Tallahassee, it's important to get involved and find your family as she has in both her realms of community-based theater.

"I think everyone at Pyramid does what they do because the students are so warm and welcoming," smiles Wesolowski, who remains delighted by their boundless energy. "They build you up."

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).