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## Denice Hicks receives chance to fly in spirited 'Tempest' production

By Fiona Soltes  
FOR THE TENNESSEAN

Denice Hicks has been flying in her dreams for years. So when the <http://www.nashvilleshakes.org/>>Nashville Shakespeare Festival offered her to get those feet off the ground while fully awake, she jumped at the chance.

As Ariel, a spirit bound to serve Prospero, a duke with magical powers, Hicks will soar through the air in the January production of Shakespeare classic *The Tempest*. She's training with ZFX Flying Effects in Louisville, Ky., working on justifying the character's ability to take wing so it's not just a gimmick. And she's also learning to let go, trust others to guide her and fully enjoy the idea of freedom, a constant theme in the work.

"I have no fear of heights whatsoever," Hicks says. "The higher the better. The faster the better. But what's intriguing and terrifying is that I will have no control over the height or lateral movement. There will be two people on the fly rail controlling my up and down, back and forth who will have to work as a team with me, making sure I hit my marks while doing choreography in the air."

The play centers on Prospero (played by Brian Russell). Marooned on an island, he uses his powers to raise a storm and shipwreck the enemies who wronged him. It's a rich story of forgiveness, complete with drama, comedy, romance and recognizable Shakespearean dialogue. In addition to Russell and Hicks, it features Jon Royal, Robert Marigza and Belmont University students, plus original music from Mario DaSilva, choreography by Andrew Krichels and costumes by June Kingsbury.

And there's something else that figures into Hicks' delicate balance of freedom and control: director Claire Syler. Hicks, as artistic director for the company, finds herself in the place of being an actor under Syler's guidance while at the same time overseeing the continuity of the production as a whole. As artistic director, she's been directed by the likes of Mark Cabus, Jill Jackson and Brenda Sparks. Each time, she says, it presents new opportunities for "great communication and a lot of trust."

"My self really has to be divided," she says. "I think it's challenging for any actor who also directs to not try to direct."

Syler, however, is known to be a collaborative director, and early rehearsals for *The Tempest* were spent exploring themes and characters with the actors' input. One of those actors, Christiana White, is a Belmont junior who takes on the role of Miranda, Prospero's daughter.

She says she finds it "crazy" that she's come to the point in her training that she would share the stage with professionals in a major role and has appreciated the opportunity to explore Miranda as a character with more depth than is often presented. White came up through the company's apprenticeship program, starting after her graduation from Nashville School of the Arts.

"I've always enjoyed Shakespeare, but this has helped me think of it as a real play," she says. "Like a contemporary play, instead of some unattainable thing. When I was younger, I thought of Shakespeare as one of those books at the library that you can't touch. But not anymore."

*The Tempest* marks the third winter production for the Nashville Shakespeare Festival, which is continuing its efforts to present Shakespeare's works in innovative yet accessible ways. About 2,000 students are expected to see the production, in addition to the evening and weekend runs, and Hicks is happy to present "a revenge story that ends up with everybody being forgiven, instead of all the bad guys being killed."

In between, however, audience members just might pick up on the firm foundations — and longstanding, trust-filled relationships — that allow the piece to reach new heights. Miranda's love interest in the show, Ferdinand, is played by White's real-life boyfriend, Steven Berryessa, and Hicks and Russell consider themselves siblings, having worked together for more than 25 years (including having done *The Tempest* together in the past). Finally, the piece involves three of the Festival's four full-time staffers.

"I'm really thrilled about all of it," Hicks says. In fact, she's ready to see it fly.

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