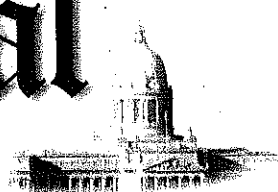




The State Journal



FRANKFORT, KENTUCKY

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Frankfort Faces: Freida Vinegar



Actress never tires of her ghost role

"Frankfort Faces" is a series that highlights people from within the Frankfort and Franklin County community. Each feature follows one of the city's most unique personalities and includes a story, photos and video, which can be found by clicking the TV icon attached to the story online at state-journal.com.

BY KATHERAN WASSON
STATE JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Each October, Frankfort actress Freida Vinegar performs by candlelight instead of spotlight. Freida is in her ninth

year narrating the historical Halloween play "Ghosts of Frankfort" as Hannah, a slave in the home of Sen. John and Margaretta Brown.

Using the foyer at Liberty Hall as their stage, Freida and her fellow "ghosts" tell the story of the Browns' arrival in Frankfort and the joyful and tragic years that followed.

Acting amid dim lights and delicate antiques can be tough, Freida says, but it's not the biggest challenge she's faced.

Since hitting the stage for

a church play in 2000, she has landed lead roles, portrayed a 90-year-old woman, and acted sans script in improvisational comedies.

Last month, she even performed on a moving train for an audience of 72 passengers.

"I've learned something from each play, each performance, each director," said Freida, a systems consultant at the Commonwealth Office of Technology.

"I think that I am a mentor simply because I've been there a while, but not because I've got all the an-

swers - by any stretch."

A Frankfort resident since 1990, Freida has worked in state government for 20 years.

Her acting debut came nearly a decade ago, when she got a lead role in "Flying West."

"That's when the theater bug hit," she said.

The play, a fundraiser for her church, sold out three performances at the 144-seat theater in Lexington's downtown library. But the spotlight didn't intimidate

See FRANKFORT FACE, A7



STATE JOURNAL/KELLY MAC

Freida Vinegar and Michael Ghant rehearse a scene from "Ghosts of Frankfort."

For video, go to state-journal.com

FRANKFORT FACE | Freida stumbled upon the role by accident

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the brand-new actor.

"I didn't know what in the world I was getting into," she said. "I think I enjoyed learning so much, that I didn't really have time to be nervous about what I was doing."

She went on to play family matriarch Lena Younger in "A Raisin in the Sun," a production of the Actor's Guild of Lexington. She based the character on the film version, but also on her mother and aunts.

"I could pull all of those folks together and come up with a composite that I thought would be well suited for Lena," she said.

"It just deepened the bite that I'd gotten, and I really enjoyed it."

It also helped her learn theater terminology and the ins and outs of acting.

She continued to work with the Actor's Guild, and has since taken roles with Anderson County Community Theatre, Woodford Theatre, Lexington Children's Theatre, Farmington Historic Plantation in Louisville and Bluegrass Mystery Theatre.

Freida says her role in "Ghosts of Frankfort" — like her entire acting career — happened by accident.

The role of Hannah was added to the cast after Liberty Hall staff members learned about her through Margaretta Brown's letters. Freida's friend recommended her, and they asked if she would audition.

"They wanted to try to change the direction of the play a little bit, and tell the story of the house from the servant's point of view," she said.

"She would have been there at all times and seen all things."

But that uncharted first year brought apprehension among her cast mates. When she asked her first director if she should portray a stereotypical slave, he said no.

"I think there was an uneasiness there because I would be playing a slave," she said. "It's a part — this is theater. Of course, slavery was controversial throughout the South, especially

here in Kentucky.

"But as a matter of fact, I rather enjoyed it. It didn't bother me at all."

Early on, Freida gave the play its signature closing. Hannah thanks the audience and warns the children that ghosts like Snickers bars — if they don't want to be haunted, they'll have to bring some next year.

"There have been several times when young kids returning bring Snickers bars back with them to next year's performance," she said.

"It was spontaneous, and it has been almost the signature closing of the play since I've been involved."

Nine years later, Freida says she still enjoys playing Hannah. The role has changed each year, as staff members transcribe more letters from Margaretta Brown.

"It's not like playing the same role each year," she said. "The part grows, the knowledge about the part grows, so it's an ongoing thing."

Not much is known about Hannah's early life. She was married to Miles, and the couple had seven children. She guided Margaretta, especially through times of tragedy and loss, and kept the household going.

She also watched Frankfort grow up around her. From dirt roads to paving, horse-drawn carts to trains, a city was born out of frontier wilderness.

"While she could never envision or embrace the idea that she would be free, she could envision that for her children," she said.

"But I don't think Hannah was one of those types to be walked on either. She didn't have an abrasive personality, but she did have a forceful personality."

The Browns treated Hannah and Miles well, Freida said, and eventually set them free.

The 30-minute play is part of a three-part Halloween tour that includes stops at the Orlando Brown house, Liberty Hall and Port Hill.

The cast performs five shows a night, with 10-minute breaks. They aren't paid for their participation, aside



STATE JOURNAL/KELLY MACK

Jeffrey Mosser directs Freida Vinegar and Michael Ghant as they rehearse "Ghosts of Frankfort." This is Freida's ninth year playing the role of Hannah, a slave in the Orlando Brown House.

from a dinner between performances.

As the evening progresses, the room gets darker and spookier, Freida says. There have even been thunderstorms during the play.

"Sometimes we have had claps of thunder punctuate different parts of the show," she said. "And I don't know if our director and the good Lord up above talked, but sometimes it's been right on cue."

There is no separation between the actors and the audience in "Ghosts of Frankfort."

"I think it involves the audience more in that there is no separation, and it also gives us license to break that fourth wall — and break it with impunity," she said.

"We are talking to the audience, and instead of standing away from them at a distance, it's much more intimate and believable."

But there can be challenges too. Sometimes teenagers try to irk the actors, or friends or family members are watching from the audience.

"You have to be very

careful about not breaking character," she said. "Seeing someone you know is one of the fastest ways to break character because you want to socialize with that person."

One evening early in October, cast members gathered in the foyer of Liberty Hall to rehearse.

They started, sitting in a circle of folding chairs, reading through lines from their scripts. Freida begins to tell the tale of "happiness, sorrow, birth and death."

Freida sits next to her on-stage husband, Miles, played by Michael Ghant. As he hits a tough set of lines perfectly, she gives him a discreet thumbs up.

Commonwealth's Attorney Larry Cleveland is there. So is Rick Paul, owner of the White Light Diner. The actors in "Ghosts of Frankfort" run the gamut of seasoned spotlight holders to new performers, she says.

Without hesitation, Freida says her favorite roles are in comedies or improvisational theatre.

"It is amazing what the human brain can come

up with when it isn't constrained by a script," she said.

"You always have to be in the moment and depend on your fellow actors, and they have to depend on you."

Even veteran actors can be intimidated by improv theatre — they're used to the security of having a script to follow. But as a relatively new actor, Freida says she likes the freedom of just winging it, even if it means drawing a blank sometimes.

"That's when your fellow actors come to your rescue," she said.

In her spare time, Freida writes poetry and creative prose, and she is in charge of her church's newsletter. She plans to keep acting as long as she is able, with a goal of landing more lead roles.

"Plays are truly an ensemble cast, but I like the responsibility and the challenge of being in the lead role," she said.

She'd also like to see more roles for older actors and multi-cultural productions, either in storyline or casting, to represent the

changing American family

Either there aren't enough minorities auditioning or they aren't being chosen, she said. She says it's a shame that no one else has ever tried out for her "Ghosts of Frankfort" role.

"When a director tells me that I'm not cast because I can't be someone's sister or mother or aunt," she said, "I take that as a hard pill to swallow."

Twenty years after moving to Frankfort, Freida says the city is now her home. That gives special significance to telling part of its history each fall.

Still, many residents don't know about Liberty Hall or its history. When she joined the cast, she had never heard of "Ghosts of Frankfort."

She hopes to stay with the play as long as possible, but she would like to go on the tour at some point.

"There's a great treasure right there, but you never bother to go and visit that treasure," she said.

"I love being able to do this play in Frankfort. It's part of me at this point."