

## nytheatre voices

### Stephanie Barton-Farcas

#### *To Kill A Mockingbird*

**Stephanie Barton-Farcas** is artistic director of Nicu's Spoon, a nonprofit theatre company in its second year. She has acted for many years, traveled the world and now is directing her company's production of *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

Stephanie filed her cyberspace interview Tuesday, March 12, 2002. The interview was conducted by Michael Criscuolo.

*To Kill A Mockingbird* plays at The American Theater for Actors beginning April 3, 2002.

#### **What was the impetus for Nicu's Spoon?**

A small core group of artists found ourselves in 2001 frustrated with companies that proposed to explore theater and be diverse - the reality was that you would see their shows and see many pretty white people on stage and nothing further than that. If they explored an "issue of color" it was always via the white central character - and these companies get funds for being diverse! We decided that we would begin a truly diverse company, one which spoke to and for those marginalized by society- people of all colors and ethnicities, genders, ages, physical abilities, nationalities, etc. We refused to give "lip service" to this ideal, but instead to practice it and thus was born "Nicu's Spoon, Inc."



#### **What is the significance of the company's name?**

In starting a company - now in its 2nd year - I was aware of the many companies which fail each year, which do not think long term, which don't plan for a future, which do not register and become non-profits and therefore can't get funding. Beginning this company was then such a daunting and impossible task but I was drawn back to another impossible time - I worked with abandoned kids in Romania in the 1990's and the most amazing one was Nicu, who was 5. Nicu was in diapers and did not walk, talk or feed himself. They told me he was deaf and retarded. Nicu had spent 5 years on his back in a crib. I got angry and said "I'll take him." Six months later he did all the things they'd said he couldn't. He and I fought some big, bad battles together to get him there - to get him to choose life. And in the process he changed my life. Though he was mentally and physically challenged, Nicu viewed the world with wonder. He spent hours bouncing sunlight off of a spoon. When he began to eat solid food at the age of five, his spoon was everything to him. Nicu's spoon became the symbol for all the impossible things that were suddenly possible. things like walking, talking, thinking, and living. But he was HIV-positive and we lost him in 1996. Nicu's life was about quality, not quantity, about the impossibles becoming possible. He now stands as a reminder for the company that anything can be done - and it is all about quality, not quantity.

#### **How does *To Kill A Mockingbird* satisfy the company's mission statement?**

Again, there is the obvious - that it speaks to a situation where a man has been marginalized because of the color of his skin. He is accused of rape and his conviction is certain - why? Because of his color. But in a secondary way - our production, which involves a multi-racial cast, offers a further examination of who really is marginalized

and who is not - it then becomes a commentary of the strength of spirit - rather than just the standard examination of racial bigotry. It is also a story of community - a community torn apart and rebuilt again - a theme that for now means so much to us all.

**What appealed to you about directing *To Kill A Mockingbird*?**

Well, it is such a classic, and a real favorite of mine, but I also became intrigued by what never made it to the screen or play text. There are so many things in the book, that are only in the book, that are valid for exploration by a cast - an example is the relationship between Mayella and her father, an obviously incestual involvement (and stated as such in the book) which never made it to screen or play text as at the time that was a tough issue. For us, now it is a valid path of exploration. Also, the multi-racial cast we have, who are fabulous, give new resonances to many lines, normally said by a white actor, because of who they are and the talent and spirit they bring to us. The beauty of opening this piece to many colors and kinds of actors moves it beyond the "classic" stereotyped production and imbues it with an exciting new life.

**What's the toughest thing about directing a piece that is so recognizable to the public?**

Well, I think it will be interesting to see how an audience will initially react to a certain actor - having in their head the movie they saw 9,000 times, and perhaps the actor bears no resemblance to what they expect. But after a moment of adjustment you believe the actors and follow their paths and then the true journey for the audience begins, as they forget who is white or black or Asian or Hispanic and look into the spirit of the piece - the true meaning. And frankly I do hope we shake a few people up, alter a few perceptions. Our last piece *Displaced* dealt unflinchingly with the lives of refugee women and children and thus shook some people up - but it also did extremely well, so much so that we are still doing special presentations of it. That is who we are. We want to entertain, of course, but we also want to change how you perceive the world and yourself.

**How did you first get involved in show business?**

Oh, Lordy, it was so long ago, wow. I was about six when I did my first show but didn't direct my first piece until I was 18 - *Zoo Story* by Edward Albee. So about 30+ years in the field on and off. Mostly as an actor, as that was my first love - but now I'll be directing a bit more as the company is in its first three years or so - just to shepherd the clarity of our mission.

**I understand that you have both a degree in theater, and a Doctorate in Business Administration. How did one lead to the other?**

My undergraduate work was in theater and then there was a time where I lived in Eastern Europe and worked in Asia, Africa, etc. -- for about eight years. In that time period I got my doctorate in business, initially working with marginalized countries and people. Both degrees were really unconnected, but the time of travel for eight years and all the places I've been taught me lessons which guide this company today. To sit in a hut in Africa with another woman and laugh together and "connect" even though you do not speak the same language - my, God, that is what our company does as art! It's all about connection for us. Connection and education - we are all the same in our hearts and dreams, no matter what our color.

**What's up next for Nicu's Spoon after *To Kill A Mockingbird*?**

Well, during the run of *Mockingbird* we'll also be doing a reading series of four plays - all the information is on our website at [www.spoontheater.org](http://www.spoontheater.org) - and probably one of those will be our fall show. We also are working on more educational theater presentations like the one we did in early March at the American Museum of Natural History - where we presented *Displaced* and then did a workshop on refugee issues the following day. We are also in beginning research stages for our next company generated piece - like *Displaced*- which we think may be about the vastly ignored population who live in the subway tunnels of New York City. We have intern programs, playwright programs; are working to begin to include interpreted performances in our shows - whew! We're busy! So, a lot on our plate - but we love it and look forward to our continued growth and development.