

A Theater of Diversity: Nicu's Spoon Launches New Season With *Lost Formicans*

by Amy Krivohlavek

March 29, 2007



Michael Hartney and Jovinna Chan in
"Tales of the Lost Formicans"

"I need a wheelchair," Stephanie Barton-Farcas once heard a casting director say during a panel discussion on casting diverse actors.

"You personally need a wheelchair?" she queried. "Or do you need an actor in a wheelchair to play a role for you?"

"They're not called wheelchairs," she corrected him. "They're called human beings."

Since 2001, Barton-Farcas's theater company, Nicu's Spoon, has worked to de-objectify its diverse base of performers to create a dynamic and proficient group of artists. With a proven commitment to working for social change in theater by populating it—both onstage and backstage—with performers of all shapes, sizes, colors, ages, and abilities, Nicu's Spoon has produced risky and thought-provoking productions, earning kudos from both audiences and critics.

And now, following its production of Constance Congdon's quirky and poignant comedy *Tales of the Lost Formicans* (which opened March 28), the company will move into a new home—an entire floor at 38 West 38th Street that is, by design, fully accessible to anyone.

Formicans kicks off a season dedicated to investigating disability issues onstage. A creative reimagining of Shakespeare's *Richard III* will premiere in the new venue this summer, followed by *Kosher Harry*, an absurdist comedy animated by both hearing and deaf artists. (Previous seasons have focused on the lives of female refugees and the multiracial casting of classic dramas; next season will address women and identity.)

Congdon's play focuses on the breakdown of communication within a family, powerfully underscoring the destruction of community on a more global level. When a woman discovers that her husband has been cheating on her, she leaves her life in New York to move back to her childhood home in suburban Colorado. With her angst-ridden teenage son in tow, she arrives home to help care for her aging father, whose health is decaying rapidly from Alzheimer's.



Nico Phillips and Rebecca Challis in "Tales of the Lost Formicans"

As the father moves in and out of lucidity, the family must confront a world in which their most vital anchor is drifting away. And when a group of aliens arrives, they provide an objective and almost anthropological perspective on the sometimes twisted ways in which human beings cope with life and death.

With *Formicans*, Brett Maughan makes his mainstage directing debut in New York after helming several readings for the company, and he has uncovered plenty of incendiary topics to probe within the script. "It's a question that doesn't go away for us," he says. "What do we do now that our community and families are falling apart?"

The company's namesake is an abandoned boy whom Barton-Farcas took care of in Romania in the 1990s. Although Nicu was 5 years old, he couldn't walk, talk, or feed himself. "They told me he was deaf, autistic, and retarded," Barton-Farcas remembers. "I got angry and said, 'I'll take him.' "

Six hard-fought months later, he could both walk and talk, and Barton-Farcas was captivated as she watched him bounce sunlight off of his spoon, the first utensil he was able to use and the tool that brought him back to life both physically and emotionally. Although he would die from HIV complications five years later, he was able to enjoy his brief life to the fullest.

"Nicu's spoon became the symbol for all the impossible things that were suddenly possible," Barton-Farcas says. A theater company was born—and christened.

Recently, Barton-Farcas began working with Nico Phillips, who is playing one of the principal roles in *Formicans*. In addition to their similar first names, Phillips has demonstrated much of the resilience and tenacity that came to define the orphaned Nicu.

In fact, Phillips's trajectory with Nicu's Spoon has been something of a Cinderella story in itself. When the actor playing Eric (the edgy and tormented son) had to leave the production suddenly because of complications from his cerebral palsy, Barton-Farcas immediately remembered Phillips, who had begun to express interest in working with the company.

Phillips, who has a different form of cerebral palsy (spastic dysplasia, which affects coordination, balance, and muscle control), has been thrilled over the opportunity to perform, and Barton-Farcas is ecstatic about what he brings to the role and the production.

"We like to cast disabled actors in [stereotypically] nondisabled roles," she says. "Nico is playing a typical angst- and rage-filled teenager, and the disability creates different levels and layers within that rage, angst, and pain—both in his mother's anger at him and in his anger with her."

Nicu's Spoon offered a similar opportunity to another disabled actor in last fall's production of

Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, in which Darren Fudenske, who is deaf-mute, appeared onstage in his first speaking role. His presence intensified the level of denial in a family that—in this production—couldn't bear to acknowledge that their own son and brother was disabled.

Although Barton-Farcas concedes that "it's exploitative when you have a token disabled person" in a production, she quickly points to Nicu's Spoon's continued commitment to capitalizing on the multiple strengths of its dedicated artists. She stresses that she never casts actors only because they are disabled—she casts them only if they are brilliant artists.

For her part, she draws out the multitaskers and encourages people to contribute in whatever way they can. In the case of Phillips, who at first was only interested in participating in the technical side of theater, Barton-Farcas encouraged him to push himself even further.

When she asked him what else he could do, he replied, "Well, I used to act ..." That simple defeatist phrase, Barton-Farcas says, is one that she constantly hears from disabled theater artists who have been repeatedly told that they can't (or can no longer, if they've recently been disabled) participate fully in theater—or, by extension, in life generally.

"I'm a big advocate of, 'Well, you can do it now!' " she says, laughing.

The work is sometimes easier said than done, however, and she admits, "It's challenging when you have to convince them that they're still artists."



Brian Coffey and Celia Bressack in "*Tales of the Lost Formicans*"

But it's a challenge Nicu's Spoon will be able to address on an even larger scale from its new permanent location. Barton-Farcas looks forward to sharing the company's space and resources with other like-minded groups (such as the Brooklyn-based New York Deaf Theater) that might not otherwise have the means to put on a production in Manhattan. Free from the added physical and financial stress of loading in and out of various venues, she is eager to focus her energy on answering the needs of the community, including facilitating audition classes for disabled actors.

As she looks to the future, Barton-Farcas cites this year's Oscar nominees (the most diverse pool to date) as an example of how the entertainment industry is slowly evolving to embrace a broader, more expansive range of artists that reflect the country's diversity.

"The future of theater and film is going to be a meshing of everybody," she predicts. "Our job is to take all of those people and put them onstage."

Tales of the Lost Formicans is playing through April 15 at Theater 54 (244 West 54th Street). Tickets are available at <http://www.smarttix.com>. For more information, visit the company's Web site: <http://www.spoontheater.org>.

Click here to watch actor Nico Phillips in a clip from Sesame Street when he was 6 years old: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y82OZmlypIQ>

