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Chambers moves to Wichita for full-time theater work

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

When Alison Bridget Chambers left her life as an actor in New York City and came to Liberal to teach drama at Seward County Community College, it was the settled nature of life in the Midwest that drew her. She longed to be geographically closer to her family, and the prospect of a steady paycheck with benefits was alluring.

“All my friends were unemployed and auditioning, like I was,” she said. “There was no reason not to take it.”

Four years later, Chambers is moving once more, to a life that combines the domestic and the artistic. With her soon-to-be husband, Lewis Mize, Chambers will reside in Wichita, as a full-time member of the Wichita Children's Theater. Mize, an actor himself and current member of the Depot Theater in Dodge City, has several interesting prospects, Chambers said.

"We need to live in a city where we both have jobs, and this will be so exciting," she said. "I've missed my identity as an actor."

During her time at SCCC, Chambers invigorated the drama department, staging ambitious pieces like an outdoor performance of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and, this year, Stephen Sondheim's musical "Assassins." She also directed well-loved plays like "Little Women" and "A Christmas Carol." She sponsored a drama club on campus, inspiring several students to settle on a theater arts major.

"It's been good," she said. "SCCC has been wonderful to me, and I feel I've made my impact here."

Though she has spent her life learning to perform, Chambers said teaching "has taught me a lot about what I want and what I don't want. I think I'm meant to work in the theater, and not in academia. It's been a good experience, but I feel it's time to move on and do something else now."

Chambers isn't worried about how her drama students at SCCC will get along in her absence.

"My very good friend Gloria Goodwin has just accepted the job as drama teacher at the college," she said. "I'm just thrilled, because she's so wonderful. They're lucky to have her."

Though Chambers' last day teaching college classes was the day she announced her resignation, she will be on campus through the end of this month, serving as camp director for the Broadway Academy of Performing. Chambers has a decades-long connection to the theater

camp for students ages 12 to 20. She began as a camper herself, then assumed the job of director when BAP still operated on the campus of Oklahoma Panhandle State University.

When BAP moved to SCCC, Chambers came along, and that connection was what brought her to the attention of the local college.

Because Goodwin is “a huge fan of BAP,” Chambers said, the long-running summer camp will continue to call Liberal home.

“That’s great, because it’s such a wonderful opportunity for the kids who attend, and it’s an investment in the arts for the community,” said Chambers.

Chambers has been pleased to see a renewed interest in theater at the local and regional levels. Juggling her teaching schedule with a desire to continue performing, Chambers logged highway miles to audition for and win parts in productions around Southwest Kansas. She appeared in local Rainbow Players productions like the recent staging of “Chicago,” the play “Steel Magnolias” in Garden City, and numerous shows with the Depot Theater.

In fact, she added, “that’s where Lewis and I met, when we were cast as a couple in a production of ‘Private Lives’ by Noel Coward.”

Mize, a Texas native, had been living in Dodge City for the past five years, and that’s where the couple plans to marry — in the same theater where they met and shared their first kiss.

“In the show where we met, our characters were in love,” Chambers said. “It’s common to mix the professional with the personal, but I never worried. I knew this was the real thing.”

Chambers will wear the same wedding dress her grandmother wore years ago, and the couple set a date on the grandparents’ wedding anniversary.

“It’s going to be a very family-oriented ceremony,” Chambers said.

Though meeting Mize undoubtedly tops the list of positive changes Chambers experienced during the past four years, she offered a list of revelations gleaned from teaching at the college.

“I’ve learned how much I hate attitude,” she said with a laugh. “I’ve learned what is easy to work with and what isn’t. I’ll take that with me as an actor. I don’t want to be that person. I can emulate those things that I’d want in an actor I cast and cast again.”

Another realization: “I’ve learned to go where I’m led. When the people at Seward County Community College asked me to apply for the job, I laughed. They had learned about me through BAP. I wasn’t about to leave New York, but it became clear to me when my grandmother became ill, that this was where I was being led,” she said.

Chambers’ grandmother recovered from her illness, after the two shared a house in Liberal for several years, a time Chambers counts as a rare privilege.

Being invited to SCCC also led to a sense of when a project would coalesce and succeed.

“I’ve learned to know when things are moving in the right direction. It might be part of living in a small community, where word gets out and people weigh in with their opinions. I had to make decisions about shows, with that in mind, and be attuned to how it would play to local audiences,” she said. In personal matters, too, Chambers developed a sense of timing and sensitivity.

“When I auditioned at the Wichita Children’s Theater,” she recalled, “I just knew it had gone well. I knew they would offer me the job, and they did.”

The job is particularly exciting because Chambers wondered “if I’d kept my skills as sharp as when I was in New York,” she said. “I’ve been working to keep the standards high, and I had been performing quite a bit. But I’d also gotten used to the rhythms of Liberal’s theater scene, and I’m ready to expand again.”

Chambers looks forward to a brisk performance schedule, with three shows in the next year, sometimes with four performances per day. The children’s theater often travels to schools and libraries throughout Kansas.

“I don’t know yet what the shows are, or what my parts will be. I just know that I’m cast in all three,” she said. “I will get my scripts when I show up for the first rehearsal.”

Chambers does know that since most shows take place on weekdays, she will be able to enjoy evenings at home with her husband.

“It’s just ideal,” she said.

Though Chambers intends to apply the strictest work ethic to her new position, she has already requested one day off — a move she never made before. However, the choice makes sense.

“I asked them for Oct. 26 off, and normally I would never, ever skip a performance,” she said, “But you can’t miss your own wedding.”

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