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She'll even pronounce 'Iphigenia,' if you ask Director has solid ideas on making theater

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Looking at **Melissa Foulger** (pronounced Folger, like the coffee), you wouldn't guess she's got wild ideas percolating inside her agile brain. Then she throws back her head, widens her eyes, frees a throaty laugh and lets you glimpse the risk-taker inside.

She's the one directing the world premiere of a Greek play with a glam update and a 16-word title --"Iphigenia Crash Land Falls on the Neon Shell That Was Once Her Heart (a rave-fable)" -- at 7 Stages through Feb. 15, www.7stages.org.

The one who can talk about Anne Bogart's ensemble-driven SITI Company making theater and the special effects in David Fincher films in one breath and ooze excitement over Anne Rice's bloody debauchery in the next.

And you wonder, what makes this chick tick? Here's at least a partial answer.

> **Born:** Aug. 24, 1973, in Washington. A Virgo and an only child whose parents now live in Beaufort, S.C. Mom's a nurse and hospital administrator; dad's an accountant.

> **Educated:** In and around D.C., including a talented-and-gifted program in third grade where she was introduced to Will Shakespeare. Bachelor's degree from George Washington University, 1995; master's degree in education, same school, 1996; master's in directing from the University of Memphis, 2003.

- > A career begins: As a child, she playacted on her grandparents' hearth; in high school, she directed one-acts and assisted on the musicals "Annie" and "Hello, Dolly!"
- > Acting vs. directing: Went to college on an acting scholarship but " . . . went in with guns blazing and told administrators: 'I already know I want to be a director. I know I have an acting scholarship. I'll do what I have to do for that, but I want to do everything I can do to start directing classes earlier than I'm supposed to so I can start directing.' "
- > And . . . Took basic directing a year early. Did an independent study her senior year, directing "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune," and playing Frankie. It requires nudity. Which she did, modestly. It was a college campus. There was a limit. For it, and her.
- > Teacher! Teacher! Spent three years teaching drama and English to inner-city, at-risk youth in Prince George's County, Md. Quit when two students she trusted were involved in the shooting of a pizza deliveryman.
- > Why Atlanta: She's in her second year at 7 Stages, under the tutelage of artistic director Del Hamilton, through a grant program called "New Generations Mentoring the Leaders of Tomorrow." Her grant -- from the Theatre Communications Group, a national organization for professional, nonprofit theater -- is worth about \$88,000. It pays her salary for two years, up to \$15,000 against student-loan debt and as much as \$3,000 for travel. About 200 applicants compete for 10 spots each grant year.
- > Day by day: **Foulger** does a little -- make that a lot -- of everything and anything, from answering phones to running errands to solving visa problems for visiting artists trying to get into the country and 7 Stages artists trying to get out. Early on she filled in wherever she could when the theater was without a managing director and a development director at the same time co-founders Hamilton and Faye Allen were out of the country. (She calls it "a real-life lesson in 'This is what happens in theater' and 'How much can you pick up of any given job?' ") She pitched in on logistics and as an assistant when director Joseph Chaikin became ill during preparations for "Broken Glass" last spring. She toured with Belgrade's Dah Theatre in Serbia, Bosnia ("wonderful people, a richness of culture") and Romania ("probably the lowlight of the experience") with "Maps of Forbidden Remembrance"; networked in June in Milwaukee at the national conference of the TCG, where she met "Iphigenia" playwright Caridad Svich; then returned to Belgrade for classes in physical theater at Dah. And then this season began.
- > After "Iphigenia"? She'll sleep, then assist German director Walter Asmus, who's coming to 7 Stages for "Waiting for Godot" (opening March 4).
- > The workweek: Six days, 60 to 70 hours. Sometimes more, sometimes less. Handles e-mail at home. Returns phone calls on her day off. "It's the nature of the life," she says. "It's not a 9-to-5 job you can turn off at the end of the day."
- > Still, she gets around: She's seen work at or by Horizon Theatre, Actor's Express, Dad's Garage, the Alliance, Jack in the Black Box Theatre Company, Synchronicity Performance Group, Fly-By Theatre and Out of Hand Theater. "As an artist," she says, "I think I need to see other people's work."
- > For fun: Movies ("Big Fish," most recently). Reading. Playstation 2 (she just whopped her new "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" game). Karaoke.
- > Reading: "Wicked," Gregory Maguire's 1995 twist on "The Wizard of Oz" tale, and books on directing. Especially likes authors who rethink classical stories (i.e., "Iphigenia").
- > Writing: Yes to poetry and prose. No to plays. An attempt in school was not successful. Finds dialogue frustrating. "That's why I so respect playwrights and their words."
- > On her CD player: "Live Through This" by Hole. "It's speaking to me about 'Iphigenia,' " she says, "about being used and spit back out." Her own mix of Bjork songs that other artists have covered and a little David Bowie, "who's important to 'Iphigenia' and the androgynous rock star character," Achilles.
- > Why "Iphigenia"? "Much of theater is graying, aging. I found something that might be of interest to a younger audience, pull some fresh blood in here, people who don't normally go to theater."
- > Her dream career: "Ultimately, I want my own company. I would like it to be more of an ensemble, and I would like to have it look at new work written by playwrights as well as the creation of work through more European means, starting with physical training. I like the idea of an ensemble, because you can create a language with the people and a working relationship that's not this shopped-in thing where you spend half your rehearsal time figuring out who an actor is and how they work."
- > Where she'll be next year: Still at 7 Stages, she hopes.

To suggest someone for this column, e-mail kjanich@ajc.com.

Photo: **Melissa Foulger's** favorite plays include "Cloud Tectonics" by Jose Rivera (done at the Alliance in 1997) and "Iphigenia," because it's such an enigma. For next season she's looking at a gender-bent take on "The Wizard of Oz." / LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff
