Written by Mike Schulz
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On February 11, Geneseo's Richmond Hill Barn Theatre opens its 43rd season with Wrong for Each Other
, playwright Norm Foster's two-character comedy about a reunion between a long-estranged divorced couple. If, however, that seems an ill-fitting title to open over Valentine's Day weekend, know that the production's stars wound up receiving far more of a Happily Ever After ending than their characters did, as area actors Chris White and Jessica Nicol (White) were married this past Halloween.

Theatregoers are likely familiar with Chris through his performances as Randall McMurphy in the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the sexually conflicted Brick in Richmond Hill's* Cat on a Hot Tin Roof
, and the filicidal businessman in last summer's Phoenix Theatre Company staging of Bash
. (This October, he'll make his directorial debut with Richmond Hill's The Shape of Things
.) Jessica, meanwhile, took on dramatic challenges in two Pulitzer Prize-winners for Richmond Hill - portraying the tormented math genius Catherine in Proof
and the grieving mother Becca in Rabbit Hole
- and assumed a more lighthearted role in Playcrafters' production of the Pulitzer Prize-winning

Crimes of the Heart.

Yet since 2004, when Chris and Jessica co-starred in a presentation by the local interactive-comedy troupe It's a Mystery!, this off-stage couple has also been a frequent on-*stage one: For Playcrafters, they were bantering pals in 2005's*
The Nerd
, and for Richmond Hill, they were husband and wife in 2007's
King o' the Moon
, flirtatious scholars in 2007's
Arcadia
, and (in two separate vignettes) tentative lovers and contentious spouses in 2009's
Almost, Maine.

Over a recent lunch, the pair sat down to discuss their history, their past roles, and their new show. And guess what? The ease and chemistry they share on-stage is even more clearly evident off-.

Early Collaborations

Jessica: We met doing murder mysteries. We did two or three together. Maybe more than that.

Chris: The first murder mystery I ever did was with her. We actually played brother and sister in that show. Herbert and Holly. They were performance artists.

Jessica: But *The Nerd* was great, because we all spent a lot of time together. Nobody really wanted to go home.

Chris: We'd all sit out in the parking lot 'til, like, 3 o'clock in the morning almost every single

rehearsal.

Jessica: And just *talk*. It was nice out, so you'd just sit outside and smoke and talk and get to know each other ... .

Chris: *The Nerd* is where everything really started as far as the deepening friendship, which eventually turned into a *whole* lot more.

Getting Together

Jessica: I think we both felt the chemistry. There was definitely something there. But there was a lot holding us back.

Chris: At that point in time, it wasn't the most ... . I don't know how to phrase this ... . It wasn't the best thing, being that I was married and she was dating somebody.

Jessica: I had been with somebody for quite a long time. But even after my relationship broke up and his marriage ended, I still drug my feet. I was pretty sure that if I got into a relationship with this guy, that'd be *it* for me, you know? I'd be *done*. I didn't want to date anybody else, but I just wasn't sure I wanted to jump in feet first again.

Chris: Our first date was classified as a "non-date."

Jessica: "You know, this isn't a date. We're going out to dinner and a movie as *friends*."

Chris: I came and picked her up for dinner, and I paid, and we went to the movie and all that stuff, but it was a "non-date." Period. To this day, I *still* give her shit about that.

Jessica: Yeah, I'm kind of a weirdo.

Showmances

Chris: Obviously, it depends on the person you're working with and the subject matter you're working on. But no matter what you're doing, you have to create a bond. Whether you're playing romantic leads or you're at each other's throats or whatever, there has to be a chemistry there. So theatre's kind of a breeding ground for something like that [romance] to spring up.

Jessica: He's the first actor that I'd ever dated. I think there was a part of me that didn't want to *share* that. I didn't want to date somebody who also did theatre. But I ended up thinking, "Why *not*?" I mean, you have so much in common, and there's no fighting about "Oh, I've got to do this show and kiss somebody else ... ."

Chris: Although the first time *that* came up, there was resistance. She was doing *Proof* and there's a kissing scene, and I'll be straight up: I was like, "I don't know that I *like* that ... ." But then I wound up doing *Cuckoo's Nest* at the same time, and McMurphy has to kiss one of the hookers, and I was like, "Okay, well, I guess now I can't be shitty about this ... ."

Jessica: Right?

Chris: Once you realize how little emotion there is to it ... . You know, you're just a person up there pretending to be a person, and that person you're pretending to be has to kiss. So it's not an issue.

Fighting on Stage

Chris: Doing *Almost, Maine* was weird because we don't really fight. We have *arguments*, but we don't fight. And so to have a full-blown fight was a little awkward, because it was like, "I don't want you to think that *I* feel this way, because I don't. But for the show, I have to have this attitude with you." We had to learn how to make the characters' relationship vastly different from ours, and how to make the characters fight without hurting each other's feelings in the process.

Jessica: I think what kills you is when you look at the other person on stage and their face ... . They just look so *sad*. And it's like, "Oh, I can't feel bad for you, I'm doing this because I don't *like* you, but look at your *face*!" That's where it gets hard.

Chris: The show was really fun to do, and that scene specifically.

Jessica: Yeah, I think the two scenes with you were probably my favorites as an actor. Because the one character was so bubbly and goofy, and the other kind of fits into ... you know ... what I *do*.

Chris: Oh, so *that's* how we avoid having fights. You just do depressing shows.

Jessica: I get cast in those roles, and I can get it all out.

Wrong for Each Other

Chris: Nora and Rudy are the two characters. They happen to meet at a restaurant three years and nine months after their divorce. So they have an awkward initial meeting, and then they start to flash back to the different "firsts" in their life. We're sitting at a table, and then we get up and show how they first met, and then it goes back to the restaurant, and then we get up and act their first date ... . And it just continues, showing their relationship from beginning to end.

Jessica: There are more funny moments than there are sad - it's most certainly a romantic comedy. And we weren't going to do it unless we *loved* it, just because we've been so busy. But Craig [Michaels, the show's director] gave us the script, and we read it, and we went, "Oh, now we kinda *really* want to audition ... !"

Chris: I believe my exact response was, "God damn it, I didn't want to do anything other than direct my show this year!"

Jessica: But it's great. There are no scene changes - there's only one blackout, other than intermission - and everything kind of bleeds together ... . I don't know much about [playwright] Norm Foster, other than he's Canadian, and Craig's trying to get him to come down and see the show.

Chris: Yeah, no pressure there.

Jessica: No worries.

Favorite Performances

Jessica: We like working together, but I think we also really like working separately. It's nice to be able to go to rehearsals together, but it's also nice to have someone to come home to and talk about your show with.

Chris: My favorite performance of hers? I have to go with *Proof*. Hands down. I mean, she's fabulous in everything, and it's a very close second with *Rabbit Hole*. But *Proof* was my first experience seeing that kind of performance from her, so it's always going to stick out.

Jessica: For me, it's *Cat* [*on a Hot Tin Roof*]. *Cat* was so different from how he is, *ever*, that it was just a really great show to see. I lost *Chris*, you know? I think that was the best work that he's done.

Chris: What, you didn't like *Bash*? What was wrong with *Bash*?!

Jessica: *Nothing* was wrong with *Bash*. *Bash* is a close second. But he's so scary in that play. I didn't *want* to like him in that.

Future Projects

Chris: I'd like to direct her at some point. But I'm kind of glad that this show I'm directing [*The Shape of Things*] doesn't have a role for her in it, because I know how catty people can be. I'm glad no one can say, "Oh, gee, big *surprise*! He cast his *wife*!"

Jessica: Yeah, I'm too old for it. I wish I *wasn't* too old. I wish I knew about that script 10 years ago.

Chris: She *is* doing the costumes for it, though. But she said she won't stage-manage for me, and I think it's a really good idea that she doesn't.

Jessica: We don't fight, and I'd like to *keep* it that way.

Wrong for Each Other *runs Thursdays through Sundays, February 11 through 21, and information and tickets are available by calling (309)944-2244 or visiting RHPlayers.com*.