

Actress explores social issues

Student Nicole Barrett Sangsuree graduates with myriad plays, musical shows and a movie under her belt

Jacquelyn Lewis
Pulse Editor

Some graduates might look back on their college experiences to recall Ramen noodles and ramshackle apartments. However, senior theater arts major Nicole Barrett Sangsuree will most likely remember the spotlight.

Sangsuree, a seasoned actress and musician, has performed in countless productions at the University, acted with Lord Leebrick Theatre Company and directed several plays, including "The Vagina Monologues." The singer/songwriter also performs publicly on a regular basis, including at feminist events such as Take Back the Night. Sangsuree has also opened for such notable musicians as Stix and Toshi Reagon.

Lately, the limelight has intensified for Sangsuree, in the wake of her movie debut in Kurt Voss' "Down & Out With the Dolls," a film released in March. The movie, a hip, humorous look at the struggles of a Portland-based all-girl punk band, appeared at several film festivals nationally and abroad and had its Hollywood debut in February. Sangsuree said she hopes the Bijou will pick up the film in the future.

Sangsuree plays Kali, one of the movie's main characters. She said she auditioned for the film after stumbling upon an ad in Willamette Week three years ago. Sangsuree added that, although "Dolls" is a spoof of sorts, she enjoyed portraying a woman who matures and transforms throughout the film's duration.

"My character is actually the only one who goes through a change," she said. "So I'm glad that I got to represent kind of a real person, not just some stereotype."

Sangsuree, a women and gender studies minor, said the film, despite its inherent silliness, can be empowering for women. Kali's character reflects Sangsuree's real-life Thai heritage; musician Kinnie Starr plays Reggie, a bisexual band-mate.

"We're making our own band; we are totally going for it," Sangsuree said. "We all have strong characters in some ways."

Sangsuree added it's important for



Caleb Fung for the Emerald

Nicole Barrett Sangsuree plans to work on her music career as well as her acting career after she graduates.

her to ponder the societal implications behind all her performances.

"At this point, I can't do theater without considering social issues — not just gender issues, but racial issues," she said. "I feel like I don't want to make art that I'm questioning what it's saying. I want to make art with a specific purpose."

Sangsuree said she began exploring women's issues and social justice in high school, but her interest in music and theater began even earlier. Sangsuree and her brother sang together as small children. She and a friend learned to play guitar in middle school, where they performed impromptu locker-room shows.

"We made a Christmas tape using a karaoke machine," she said, laughing. "We sold them to give money to the poor and buy a tambourine."

Middle school antics evolved into high school cafeteria and "battle of the bands" appearances, and college led to myriad other opportunities. Sangsuree said her current musical focus is on finding a compromise between the personal and political.

"I think because I'm a woman of color who is actually trying to be confident with music in general, that's already a feminist thing," she said. "It's hard to find a balance be-

tween 'this is honestly me when I'm weak' and wanting to write songs that are about racial issues. I want to do that more, but it's easier for me to write about love."

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Nicole Barrett Sangsuree
Senior theater arts major

"Down & Out With the Dolls" co-writer and University alumnus DD Cheriell said she thought Sangsuree was the right actress to portray Kali because Sangsuree's music and personality mirrored those of the character.

"(Sangsuree) played in coffee houses and was very pure about her music, which was exactly what we wanted," Cheriell said.

Cheriell added that Sangsuree was eager to do her own stunts, which included being hit repeatedly in the head with a garbage can lid.

"It was a very stressful shoot, and when someone comes in with that much enthusiasm, it can make or break a project," Cheriell said. "In her case, it really made it. It was a pleasure to work with her."

The film is now preparing for release in Australia, and Sangsuree said her plans after June graduation include traveling to Thailand, pursuing theater and focusing intensely on music — something she hasn't yet had the opportunity to do.

"I'm so busy I can't see who I am musically," she said.

Sangsuree will perform at this weekend's Willamette Valley Folk Festival on Friday at 6 p.m. in the EMU Amphitheater, and she will also judge the new song contest, which she won last year. Sangsuree will also appear at Cafe Paradiso on May 31.

Sangsuree attributes her success in "Down & Out With the Dolls" to the University theater department and just plain good fortune.

"People try their whole lives to get what I've got, and for me, it was like I didn't even realize it," she said. "It was fun, which I think is lucky."

Contact the Pulse editor at jacquelynlewis@dailyemerald.com.

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