



Hollywood North Magazine

Insightful Commentary from and on the Canadian Film World



Talent On Tap – Nicole Oliver – Flipping the Script

December 27, 2019 Darren Wiesner

Once in a shooting star you meet tenacity, ambition, prowess, confidence, kindness and class all packaged into one. It happened to me at a Starbucks in Vancouver recently and the encounter reminded me of how unique and special each one of us are. We all contribute to society, in large quantity and in sometimes meager ways, but we all create our own ripple at some point. Nicole Oliver has created a wave! A veteran of film and television, with the skill of a wizard with great hair; I believe her blood type is Red Bull but I haven't confirmed it... yet.

The coffee was good but speaking with Nicole was an early Christmas gift. She is inspirational, she is transparent and warm with a generous helping of bubbly. As we spoke and immersed ourselves into the language of film, it felt like it had all started with a big hug. In my mind, we hugged it out but Nicole may have envisioned a cold splash of water... it's hard to tell how people perceive you.

Nicole Oliver has had a bountiful and ever evolving career to put it mildly. She is not one to be pigeonholed or to sit idle while the film industry sheds its skin. With the finesse and wonder of a Martha Stewart key-lime cheesecake recipe Nicole has reinvented herself by utilizing ingenuity, wisdom and by adding more tools to her arsenal. From

acting in film and TV to voice acting and voice director, Nicole is a force... with a great smile and a huge heart. She is one of the most respected talents in the film industry and steadily climbing as a go to voice director in animation. She is appearing as the supporting lead alongside Patti LaBelle (*Star, Christmas Everlasting*) in Hallmark Movies & Mysteries "A Family Christmas Gift," a new original premiering Sunday, December 22, (9 p.m. ET/PT), on Hallmark Channel as part of the network's annual "Miracles of Christmas" programming event.

Nicole plays the role of Leah Andrews a cheerful stay-at-home mom who is Amber's (Holly Robinson Peete) close friend and who is delighted when Amber comes to town for the first time in years. A parent volunteer for the big fundraiser, Leah is a natural organizer who is the wind beneath Amber's wings when it comes to the heavy lifting for the "chemistry" developing between Amber and Alan.

Nicole has also played the role of Zina in two episodes of the hit series *Man in the High Castle* season 4. Nicole also steps behind the camera voice directing three projects for YouTube, Netflix, PBS/CBC, including *Molly of Denali* as well as continuing to voice numerous characters. She has worked alongside impressive A-list actors with a role in *Wonder*, starring Julia Roberts, Owen Wilson and Jacob Tremblay. Other career highlights include a lead role in the acclaimed film festival circuit indie-gem, *Marrying the Family* and she's expanded her diverse entertainment career in the role of Britney Spears' mother Lynne Spears in the Lifetime Movie *Britney Ever After*. Nicole Oliver is one of the most sought after voice over actors for her roles in cartoons, both on the small screen (*My Little Pony*, *LEGO Nexo Knights*, *Kate & Mim Mim*) and the big screen (Seth Rogen's "*Sausage Party*"), Princess Celestia on "*My Little Pony: The Movie*"). She is the recipient of the UBCP/ACTRA award for Best Voice for her work in animation.

Nicole Oliver has worked for over twenty-five years in the entertainment industry as an actor, producer, and director. This incredibly busy mother and professional has mastered the balance between family and work, and has furthered her education with a Masters of Arts in Communication from Royal Roads University in 2011 and I've only begun to scratch the surface of her ambitious career. I am honoured to have the opportunity to speak with her and very grateful for her time.

"You've had an amazing journey that has fostered many productions as an actress and now voice-over in animation. That sounds very fascinating and I'd love to hear about that work but I'd first like to go back to the beginning to hear how it all began."

"I went to York University, I thought I was going to be a lawyer."

"I can definitely see you as a lawyer."

"I've played a lawyer a few times. I thought maybe entertainment law; I'd starting dancing when I was three and I was dancing about 40 hrs. per week. I performed in a high school play and that's what changed everything for me. It was in Ottawa and we did *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and Maggie Smith played Jean in the movie, she's one of my favourite actors. I just remember saying the first line and then bowing at the end of the show. I was hooked. I told my parents I wanted to be an actor and they said it was fine but as long as I also get an education. I auditioned for York University's Theatre Program and got accepted. I trained there for 4 years and graduated with a BFA, got an agent and was pretty lucky to start working right away."

"Did you end up doing any law while at York?"

"No I didn't but I did decide to go back to university to get my Masters in Communication. The kids were little and I don't think I'd recommend going back when you're kids are young (laughing). I needed to feel that hard work paid off in a way that was tangible, which was something I really needed. The fact that I'm an actor obviously means I'm a sadomasochist (laughter) because you never get that as a performer. You can do so much great work and so many great auditions but if you don't get the job you never know if you did well."

"What was the first show you were on?"

"It was *Kung Fu the Legend Continues* with David Carradine. I played a cop and was the lead actors girlfriend. My first day on set was a shower scene. I remember thinking, 'what did I get myself into?' I was wearing shoes on my feet so I wouldn't step on dry ice being used to create steam. I'm sure they have other methods to make steam now."

“Are you quite comfortable on set?”

“I am, I really like it a lot and love being there. If you’re number 1 or 2 on the Call Sheet you can be there for a very long time. If you’re a guest star or have a recurring role you pop in and pop out. What I like most about directing is, I’ve had a chance to be with a group of people for a long period of time. Being on a set/sound studio and being able to make those relationships is everything, it’s the fun part. Because of those relationships, often it can translate to magic on the screen. It can be very nerve wracking being on a film set but to have those personal connections, makes it super comfortable.”

“When you’re directing you’re holding all the eggs in one basket. Are you comfortable being the one to keep oiling the machine?”

“I’ve done some on camera directing back in the day on a reality show, *Crash Test Mommy* for 52 episodes/5 years. I was producer, director and host of the show and I’d like to transition to that again. My kids are getting older now, so the idea of being gone for 16/17 hours a day would be easier than when they were younger.”





"They must miss mom."

"Yes, and I miss them. They keep me grounded. With the animation, I work with the director. They direct the animators, how to pose the characters and what colours to use, the lighting and other effects. My job is to bring the performance to life, so I direct the sound side of it. The animation director will be there and the producer to ensure we're getting the tone that we need. The animators will then have those tracks to listen to for inspiration that will dictate the pacing of the scene. It's a real collaborative job and I love it."

"As a visual director, it would seem easy to maintain the vision but as a sound director, how do you maintain the tone?"

"I think by being really familiar with the material. With *Molly of Denali* for example, we have recorded 76 11 minute episodes and it's been over 2 years of my life. We're at the point where we're doing pickups/fixes and we're really hoping to see if we'll get another season ordered. Being in that environment you get to know your characters intimately and I know how my character relates to other people. As a director, I need to know every character intimately and how they interact; that's how you maintain the consistency. I really need to know each character's wants, intentions, desires and motivations to make sure we stay on the story. Like any director, you have to break down the script and know the flow of the story, know how the boxcars line up. You have to know why this happens and that happens while giving the actors room to play but making sure that we're getting the performance we need and it fits the tone of the story so that our Molly is going to be Molly from beginning to end. People fall in love with the character and if there's a huge character change, unless it's part of the character arc, it can throw people off especially kids. It's the consistency that keeps bringing them back."

"In order to stay on track of the characters, would you have illustrations of characters for reference?"

"When I direct I have a big binder that has sketches of what they look like and a log book that provides the characters description and what their journey is, as well as adding adjectives to describe them. I also make notes when I'm breaking down the script. Molly likes to sing, so there might be a line where she has to sing it instead; things like that."

Nicole just sang a line of dialogue for me in Molly's young girl voice. Goosebumps!

"That sounds like a lot of fun to be able to bring that out of a character."

"It is great, I love working with all actors, I really love working with kids and it's one of my strengths. I also like working with actors that are new to the genre and helping them shift into a different method of performing."

"Would you have to emphasize your voice/words more?"

"I like to say to people/actors to imagine the person you're talking to has their back turned to you, so you have to work a little harder to get their attention. There's also sounds we make in our lives when we sit down, 'huhhhh' or how we sigh or laugh, so to bring those extra/life sounds into your performance it sounds and feels right. It helps to paint a picture of how you're feeling and how you want your audience to perceive you."

"Has your experience been a big help in acquiring that skill?"

"Absolutely, I was pretty lucky right out of the gate. I started with The Characters Talent Agency right out of Theatre School in Toronto. Murray Gibson was my agent at Characters but then moved to Red (Talent Management) so I moved with him. I've been with him for 25 years, so I can honestly say I've had the same agent my entire career, which is uncommon. My agent told me I had a great voice so I booked my first voice-over gig, which was a Vaseline Intensive Care commercial. Shortly after that I started doing voices for *The X-Men* that was recording in Toronto. I remember thinking, 'this is fun' because you can go in as you and what you look like doesn't have to dictate how you sound. You can be a toothbrush; you can be a teddy bear, an older woman, a little girl or little boy. That freedom and playing with people like that in the room, had me hooked."