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Art of the scam **'Bees' complements tour**

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When Clay and Sandy Cockrell, married Kentucky transplants who moved to Jersey City a decade ago, hit the off-Broadway scene, one of the first shows they took in was "As Bees in Honey Drown."

It knocked their socks off.

"It was just so funny," Clay recalled. "It's the kind of show that we felt we would be good at doing. There are very quick scenes and a simple set that has chairs, props and costumes."

Clay could picture his wife, a trained actress, portraying the villainess.

"There's a little con artist in my wife," he said with a laugh. "She's got something in her blood that can talk anybody into anything and that's what that character does."

The Cockrells, who run the fledgling Jersey City-based J City Theater company, figured that "Bees" would be the perfect vehicle to complement this year's Jersey City Artists Studio Tour.

The play, which is running this weekend and next inside the historic Brennan Courthouse, 583 Newark Ave., No. 62 on the tour map, was written by New York playwright Douglas Carter Beane.

"We wanted to pick a play that's about the art world and its community," Clay Cockrell said. "And this is a comedy about a con artist who scams the art world."

Sandy plays Alexa Vere de Vere, the scammer who tricks a young novelist into believing it's simple to take a shortcut to fame and fortune.

She disagrees, however, with her husband's assessment of her con artist skills.

"Maybe it's just my womanly wiles," she said. "But I got to do things I wouldn't do in real life. You know, it's always fun to play the bitch - and one with money!"

She plays the role a bit differently than J. Smith Cameron, who created it off-Broadway.

"At first I didn't think I could do it, but I found my own Alexa," she said. "It has my sensibility and choices. But we're both true to what's written. I'm a Douglas Beane fan and this is an amazing script."

The production actually opened last weekend in the courthouse, a venue the Cockrells find both thrilling and challenging.

"We're fans of the coffee house series that (County Executive) Tom DeGise has been holding there," Clay Cockrell said. "He's the one who approached us about doing a play there. We believe this is the first one

there. And it's been different because there's marble everywhere so the sound bounces off the walls. But we have actors who have done work outdoors and Shakespeare. Nobody has complained yet about not being able to hear us."

Actually, Sandy said, audiences are giving raves.

"You hear the laughter, the gasps, it's great fun," she said. "Because we're performing in this big wide open space, I think people don't quite know what to expect, and I think that puts us at an advantage."

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