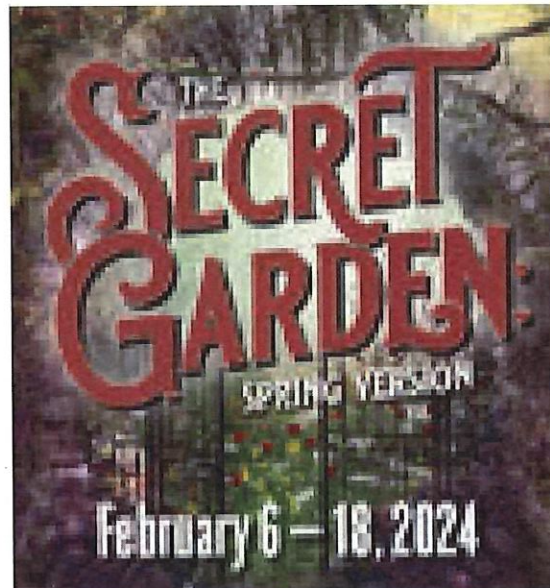




## Clintonians bring musical talents to *The Secret Garden*

By Sherry Lucas



A host of Clinton residents, including a trio of family members, are lending their talents to New Stage Theatre's upcoming musical *The Secret Garden: Spring Version*.

*The Secret Garden* runs February 6-18 at New Stage Theatre in Jackson. The musical reimagining of the children's classic shares the story of a young orphaned girl who goes to live with her reclusive uncle and his sickly son in Yorkshire, and the magical garden and spirits that guide her through her new life.

Nicholas Perna, a Mississippi College associate professor and executive director of Opera Mississippi, has a lead role as Archie, the forlorn uncle embittered in the wake of his wife's untimely death. Perna's son, Charlie, 14, and daughter,



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Olivia, 12, are in the show's Youth Chorus. Olivia attends Lovett Elementary School; Charlie is a student at Clinton Junior High School.

"The music in the show is so fantastic," Perna, a renowned tenor, said of *The Secret Garden*. "It's a sweet story, and the score is incredibly lush and charming — it's wonderful."

Both children have been involved in New Stage's summer programs, and Charlie was in last season's production of *The Sound of Music*. When Perna reached out about this show, director Francine Thomas Reynolds wanted the whole family to audition.

Perna said, "They've grown up around two parents who are professional singers and voice teachers. It kind of comes second nature to them." Their mom, Mandy Spivak-Perna, is a professor of voice at Hinds Community College.

Lovely duets and memorable, emotional melodies are all part of the appeal, Perna said.

"They remind you of operatic writing, in the sense of their power and beauty. While there are plenty of powerful moments, there's also an intimacy to some of these scenes that is just very sweet."

Musical accompaniment by just a piano, played by Tim Moak, really lets the voices soar, director Reynolds said.

Charlie has been hooked on musical theater since the summer following fifth grade, and Olivia was right on his heels.

"I like getting on the stage and singing or dancing," Olivia said, "and just seeing people smile. It makes me feel all warm inside." They've both found outlets in school, too, in previous years — choir and a few Clinton Arrow Theatre shows for Charlie, and Honor Choir for Olivia.

In the Youth Chorus in *The Secret Garden*, they've relished the deep dive into music that strikes just the right tone to make the house seem mysterious and the garden seem magical, Charlie said.

"It is definitely an opportunity to get this very classic book that many, many people hold dear, including myself, and experience it in a whole new way," he said.

"Not a lot of people get to do this kind of thing, especially with basically your whole entire family," Olivia said. "I like how we all sound together."

Clinton High School senior Natalie Pace, 17, and junior Austin Sampson, 16, are more Clinton voices in the musical's Youth Chorus, which embodies the spir-



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its in the garden and the house, and propels the story. Pace, a member of Arrow Singers at Clinton High, also brings a long history of New Stage camps to the task. It's her second main stage production at New Stage, and comes amid about thirty auditions to pursue musical theater at college.

"I've loved performing since I was little," Pace said. "It's just my favorite thing."

She, too, adores the music in *The Secret Garden*.

"This was one of my grandfather's favorite musicals, and he's one of the reasons I got into theater," she said. Her grandparents, Ralph and Janet Taylor, taught in the Mississippi College music department for decades.

"They would shove me in their shows there when they needed a little kid," she laughed. "That's kind of how I started. He passed away when I was in the fourth grade, so the music just makes me think of him."

The Youth Chorus exemplifies the importance of children in this story, Charlie said.

"In its core, it's a story about family and children and parents that's really beautiful, and can speak to so many generations."

"There's such a sweetness to it in the end, and a hopefulness," Perna said. His character starts out reclusive, despondent and not warm or kind. "It's the story of reviving not only Lily's garden — his deceased wife — but also reviving his spirit and also reviving his sick son."

"Through this little girl, his niece ... he is reminded that life is better than he thinks it is."



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*Three members of the Perna family — father Nicholas and children Olivia and Charlie — are in New Stage Theatre's The Secret Garden: Spring Version. Also pictured is Mandy Spivak-Perna. Clinton High School students Natalie Pace and Austin Sampson are also cast in the production.*