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## Piano is key as local actress assumes role in HBO's 'Mildred Pierce'

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LOWER PROVIDENCE — Eleven-year-old Morgan Turner is a gifted actress, but she'd be the first one to admit she's not exactly a child prodigy when it comes to playing the piano.

With just a couple of years of lessons behind her, she wasn't quite ready to tackle Chopin's *Fantasia Impromptu* — a feat that would have been a piece of cake for Veda, the character she plays in the HBO miniseries, "Mildred Pierce," which debuts Sunday, March 27.



Just having Morgan bluff her way through it on the keyboards enough to fool the majority of viewers, who would probably never guess that she wasn't actually hitting the proper notes anyway, did not suit the meticulous plans of series producer Pamela Koffer.

So, to convincingly feign virtuosity, Morgan and her mother, actress Sandra Landers, and Koffer, turned to the girl's piano teacher, Lorraine Crist-Campman.



It was the first time in Campman's illustrious 35-year-career that anyone had asked her to give lessons on how to successfully pull off a grand pseudo performance.

But the Eagleville-based instructor was game for helping Morgan create a scintillating exercise in make believe.

"All of my colleagues I talked to about it said 'Wow, I didn't know a piano teacher could get that kind of gig,'" said Campman, laughing.

"Morgan had been a student of mine for about two years, and we had not yet played our first Bach Minuet, so when I heard that the pieces were Chopin's 'Fantasia Impromptu' and Rachmaninoff's 'Prelude in C-Sharp Minor,' and that we had about six or eight weeks before filming started, I assumed Pamela Koffer meant that we would do a simplified version of the themes." That was not to be the case.

Mastering the complicated process of artistic trumpery would pre-empt Morgan's regular lessons for several months during the remaking of the 1945 film noir classic that earned Joan Crawford an Academy Award as the title character.

In the five-part HBO version, which faithfully adheres to the Depression-era novel by James M. Cain, Oscar-winning actress Kate Winslet stars as Mildred Pierce. Morgan plays her daughter Veda at ages 11, 12 and 14; Evan Rachel Wood takes over as the character moves into young adulthood. It soon became apparent that director Todd Haynes wanted to be able to film Morgan playing the entire pieces, and that I needed to draw

more on Morgan's acting talent than her piano skills," Campman said. Campman and Morgan regularly met three times a week, when Morgan wasn't being called to Steiner Studios in New York for wardrobe and makeup calls or rehearsals. Since Morgan had already embraced Campman's Suzuki method of teaching - rooted in intensive listening - she had no trouble warming up to the classical piano recordings supplied by director Todd Haynes, who wanted her to emulate the tempos. "I took scores of Chopin and Rachmaninoff to the local UPS Store, where I had them enlarged so that the notes looked more like the ones in her piano method books," Campman recalled. "We then studied the musical gestures and rhythms needed for each section."

Campman recalled that her trained eye was not fooled by Ann Blyth's miming in the original movie version. "When I saw the Joan Crawford movie they showed Veda with the camera on the opposite side of the piano and she's moving her shoulders and I'm thinking, 'There's no way that woman is playing the piano.' So I didn't know at first what the producers were going to expect. But it became clear that the way they wanted Morgan's hands to look on the piano had to exactly match the way a piano player's hands would look on the keyboard."

With everyone gathered around the piano in Campman's home one afternoon, Landers gave the musical instructor credit for her "brilliant" idea of bringing in a Clavinova - a digital piano, similar in styling to an acoustic piano, but with many features that include the ability to save and load songs and to be connected to a computer via USB or wireless network. "Piano dealer Jacobs Music of Philadelphia provided Morgan with the Clavinova, and MIDI files of two pieces were loaded into it so that Morgan could use the 'follow lights' to convincingly play rhythmically and in the correct octaves," Campman noted.

Landers, who is also her daughter's acting coach, felt that Morgan needed to get in touch with her character's animated style of playing. "I think the thing I saw her having the most problem with was not necessarily learning where to place her hands, but how a concert pianist actually moves their body when they play," she noted. "The character of Veda is extremely passionate when she plays and her body was very much into the keyboard, and it took Morgan a while to understand that."

Campman would repeatedly stand behind the young actress and make her move her shoulders while she was playing, Campman recalled. "That was great, because it really helped her understand the passion that goes into playing the keyboard," Landers said. "Together, Lorraine and I were able to find a way to help Morgan accomplish this."

Morgan, who has appeared in numerous TV commercials and such films as "Invincible," "The Answer Man" and "Remember Me," said that at first she "didn't have a clue, because I just don't play like that. But learning the passion of her playing really did help me understand the character of Veda." She proudly recalled the day when she sat down at the piano and fooled a few crew members. "They thought I was actually playing and was that good on the piano," she said, laughing. "They didn't realize that it was muted and I was miming." Landers mused that Morgan possibly landed the role partly due to the fact that she so closely echoed physical characteristics of Evan Rachel Wood, who plays the older Veda. Her daughter agreed. "I couldn't get over how much we have the same movements and speech patterns," admitted the down-to-earth sixth grader, who said she disdains much of modern pop music in favor of classic rock and the Beatles, thanks to her mom's influence. "Talking to her was like talking to myself. It was almost freaky." "They wanted that kind of continuity for the character," Landers added. "And I think Todd Haynes was blown away by the fact that Morgan was only 10 years old. I think they were really surprised that they found her, and that she had a little bit of piano background. So I think it was fate that she got this part."

Campman remembered that during a film shoot in New York City Morgan was "performing" on a silent acoustic piano as the soundtrack - recorded by the film's musical director Robin Freund-Epstein - played, and that a passerby commented on the beautiful performance. "It's movie magic," Landers said. "It's amazing what they can make happen."

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