

Erika Kuhn Interview – January 2020

Erika is a Twin Cities based actor from Waterloo, Iowa. A 2017 graduate of the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), Erica received her B.A. in Theatre with a Performance emphasis and has worked steadily since graduation. Most recently she collaborated with New Arab American Theatre Works, Sheep Theatre, Full Circle Theatre Productions, Zephyr Theatre, Umbrella Collective, See-Saw Theatre Lab, and St. Croix Festival Theatre. When not working in the cities, Erika tours the one-woman show *Map of My Kingdom* with Swander Woman Productions in association with AgArts across the US. Upcoming productions include Open Window Theatre's production of *The World Over* and Collective Unconscious's production of *Maiden Voyage*.



ST – Taking that big step to pursue an acting career is sometimes a big challenge for a graduate. How did you prepare to take that step and what has been your process to building a career in the Twin Cities?

EK – Throughout college I had to be working and so it wasn't until my senior year that it became a priority to begin seeking out (theatre) work because suddenly I was going to have the availability. I took auditioning for a second time. I just really wanted to have a solid footing. And I think it was Matt Weedman that paved the way for getting UNI students to go to cattle call auditions and prioritize that as a group. During the Auditioning class we talked about going to the Unified Auditions in the Twin Cities (TCUTA). This audition really intrigued me because I really love the Twin Cities. Growing up in northeast Iowa it was really the only place I could go to see a high caliber theatre scene, museums, concerts and things like that. So, I really had just fallen in love with that city and I had friends from UNI that preceded me that have had really good experiences, so when the opportunity to audition at TCUTA came up, I made sure to get there. I got call-backs to a few different places and one of them was for the St. Croix Festival Theatre in Wisconsin. I had heard about them as (UNI graduate) Marjorie Gast had worked there before. I had a call-back with them and had a really great time, returned to UNI, had final exams and they offered me an apprenticeship. The apprenticeship was for the summer. I was involved in all three shows. One musical, two straight plays (one understudy role) and I was trained in their box office and picked up an additional skill and made a little extra money. So, I went up there for that after graduation, Marjorie was there as well and it was really very lovely.

I look back and feel very fortunate that it was my first step into summer rep or a professional company. It's just about an hour from the Twin Cities. The people that I met there were remarkably kind, generous and their Board President for the theatre provided free housing for me and Marjorie in this beautiful attic across the river from the theatre. It was a magical summer. My plan was to move to the Twin Cities after the apprenticeship was over. There were company members from the Twin Cities so there were people I could ask questions about living in the city and theatre opportunities.

At the end of that summer, the Interim Artistic Director approached me and asked me to stay on for their fall and winter season. It was an opportunity to make some money, receive free housing and do a couple of more shows (*Death of a Salesman* and *A Radio Play*) and at that time the contract became better in terms of compensation since I was officially a guest artist. My duties were specifically to be an actor. So, I accepted that and stayed for the rest of the year and I got to meet a fresh round of actors and meeting people who had been working out of Chicago or Georgia and a wealth of different experiences. In theatre you're constantly given this fresh wave of new faces and they'll talk to you about what they do, what they

love and what they hate and it's one of the best ways to learn about how our industry works and what role you want to play in it. They really like me and I could have perhaps stayed there indefinitely. I kind of toyed with that idea. I'm working with great people, making art, living expenses are low. But I was curious and wanted to explore opportunities in the Twin Cities.

UNI was incredibly generous in terms of scholarships so I didn't have a ton of debt, but I was able to save money while working that summer. I'd wake up at four-in-the-morning and stock groceries in town, go in to the box office and work and then get done with that and go do my acting duties until about ten o'clock at night. I did that for about six months before my body just kind of shut down. The people were so generous. They'd get me food between shifts or let me nap if we had a touring gig. Then the new Artistic Director offered me a show in the spring and ironically it would close the day when I first arrived a year earlier. I thought that was a good sign. So, I readjusted my bargain and I told myself I need to move (to the Twin Cities) because I told myself I would, and I was planning to move in January, so I said: "How about if I commute? I can get started there and then come back for the show." He said, "OK, stay here four-days-a-week and then go back and forth." As much as I was comfortable there I knew I always had home there but need to keep on moving and grooving and see what else I can do.

So, I did move in January of 2018 and I ended up locking down a very beautiful studio apartment in St. Paul. It probably took me about eight weeks to feel comfortable. But, it was scary. I didn't have a doctor or a dentist or a microwave and I'm discovering where things are, but I moved up here for theatre and so I said, "I have to go out for these auditions" and there's auditions all the time up here, because there are so many theatres. I was struggling a bit at the time because I had run my body so ragged and had chronic bronchitis and stuff and I wasn't having good auditions, but I was making myself do it anyway because I had prepped all these years in college to audition, but then that first year out of college I didn't really have to audition because once you're with a company they know you. So, now I have to learn "How do I audition aggressively and how do I learn to balance that with having to survive?" So, I just started auditioning like crazy and about two months into that I found a solid day job that paid the bills, was flexible and had free caffeine and was a great situation. And I'd say about three months after I moved to the city, I probably started having decent auditions. Because until you feel safe and comfortable and focused it's hard to have a good audition.

In the Twin Cities there's a balance of Equity and non-Equity jobs, far more non-equity theatres than Equity and the nice thing is they are all wildly accessible. I always tell my friends who may be moving here or are considering moving here that it takes no time to assert yourself and "this is who I am and this is what I do and I'm here now. Like, what can I do?" It was similar to UNI. "Hey, I'm interested in this" (theatre) and they (the professors) were there to help foster you and the Twin Cities is like that as well. There's resources that are super accessible. There's are a couple of web sites that I've found valuable. There's Minnesota Playlist (<http://minnesotaplaylist.com/>) and if you're an arts administrator there's a site called, Springboard for the Arts (<https://springboardforthearts.org/>). Very quickly there are these tools on the internet that I can go to and say, "What can I do today or schedule next week?" Companies may hold auditions of their own and some will have one audition for the whole year and sometimes it's a company or a person that has rented a church basement and it's "I want to do a show." There's a whole range of things you can do.

When I first got here I did a community theatre production (which I hadn't done since before college). However, I was new and I met some people and wanted to get into the swing of it. Being an actor, there's a lot of anxiety that comes with it. "Where do I get my next job?" "Do I remember what I do what I do?" But, as soon as you get into a rehearsal room your body just responds. It doesn't matter if it's the Strayer-Wood, a proscenium space, a black box or whatever. You know the rules of the space and move forward. So, I did that show and then it was like, "OK, now I'd like to get paid for my work." And I don't know how many auditions I had to go through before I got my next job offer, but I'd say the first good thing

that happened to me was I went to a call for a company called, Full Circle Theatre Productions and what caught my eye was that the show was being performed at The Guthrie in the Dowling Studio. Essentially, it's The Guthrie presenting outside productions. They aid companies that may not have the resources, but have a good story to tell and it's a really beautiful thing. At that point in time, my thought process wasn't "I'm going to audition and get this job." I very quickly learned that such a thought process will not work.

And I very quickly learned that I had to make myself enjoy auditioning if I was going to do this indefinitely because 95% of the job is trying to get the job. I think of it as working out. I'm not an athlete necessarily but I think of the play like running a marathon. No one just runs a marathon. They spend ages practicing. So, I just have this thought of auditioning as that's where I go to work out. It's where I get to flex, try out my muscles and new things for when I run that next marathon.

So, when I showed up my resume wasn't non-existent, but it was mostly college roles and roles I had done the at the St. Croix Festival Theatre which showed that people wanted to work with me more than once which was helpful, and so I went in did a monologue and they asked questions and were very personable and human with me and I got a call-back. And I remember getting a call-back and thinking, "Oh what a fluke. They called back little ole me." I'd been here maybe six months at that point. So, I go to the call-back and it's a classic situation of there's like two men for each part and for this one woman's part there's six of us. All of these women were so good. UNI didn't have a ton of people. And even though things were a little competitive it doesn't really prepare you for the real marketplace. It's not competing against fifty woman you may know, but it's hundreds of women who are also incredible at what they do and that's beautiful because those people are your friends, they're people you can learn from and I very quickly learned that everyone here is so good. Living in Iowa you have to spend time and money to see professional work. It's not something we have at our finger-tips or in bulk. After moving here I remember thinking, "Thank god I can see a play tonight. And I have to pick between twenty." So, I go to this call-back and there's these amazing women there and I get a second call-back. I'm thinking, "OK, they've picked the guys, but they must be down to like four women or something. And I get there and I was the only woman there for that role. I ended up getting that job. I was working as a barista at the time and I ended up managing that café and I remember getting a call or an email about that job and I just started crying really, really hard and I had to step out and have a cry in the walk-in freezer. As actors we love validation, but that was my first little kiss of validation. Being talented isn't enough because there's no shortage of talent anywhere. Everybody is working just as hard as you and can offer different things, or more specific things and I knew that coming out of college because I was this cohort of really talented women who all had different skills sets. So, coming out of that experience, my resume wasn't particularly stacked. Those people hired me truly off of an audition which you wished happened a lot, but sometimes it doesn't. It was nice for someone to take a chance on you. It was also my first show working with Equity actors in an Equity house and so I got to learn more rules and pick their brains about why they didn't like working in NYC or do it, but only half the time. This is why I'm legally allowed to have a cot to take a nap on now. Everyone in that production was so kind to me.

ST: You've obviously taken a variety of steps that is building a career. What have you the confidence that you can do this?

EK: When I think about the decision to pursue acting as a career, as a source of income, it wasn't something I always knew about myself. I've been acting since I've was 4 years old and it didn't even occur to me to study it in college until I was about to finish high school. I'm a deeply logical person, a worrywart you might say. I would always kind of work out of a system of agreements with myself. So, when I realized, "I can study theatre. I might even get a scholarship to do this." I could do the only thing I ever cared about that didn't feel like work to me. I could really try and do that for real. And honestly, what made me realize that I could do this was a little bit of validation. I went to Waterloo West High

School and was working with Bill Dawson and Richard Glockner came in to an IHSSA Ensemble thing I was doing and Bill had mentioned to Richard that I might pursue acting, which no one thought I would do because I had a reputation as an academic and thought I would do something that made a lot of money and had job security and I really surprised everybody as acting seemed like the only option. So, the bargain I struck with myself was, "OK, I come from a middle-class family. I'm use to having food on the table, health care and all of these things you want to be able to count on for yourself." And I grew up in a family where, "You're going to figure things out for your own." My choices were agonizing because I didn't want to ever struggle or fail or even ask for help, so for me the agreement was: "If I choose to pursue theatre, to study it, I need to figure out how to pay for it." Because I know for a fact if I graduate college with a ton of debt (which a lot of the colleges I wanted to go to, the private colleges, were so expensive), I don't feel I'm every going to get the chance to start, I don't think I'll have a fair shot as I'll be paying so much in student loans that I won't be able to accept a job with a theatre company.

Minneapolis is a day job friendly city. The assumption is that there aren't day-time rehearsals unless you're working for one of the handful of theatres that hire full-time actors. I didn't know that at the time, but what I needed was the validation. Am I strong enough to convince people to invest in me. I talked to my parents first. I wasn't asking for their permission. I was asking for their blessing. And they were like, "Oh, when you say that it just makes sense. We've known that about you forever." They were like, "How are you going to do it? How are you going to work that out?" And I was like, I can afford to go to UNI regardless of what I choose to study. In terms of cost of living, cost of going to school, that was the most affordable option for me and I knew a little bit about the theatre program. I was like, "I'm just going to study here." Now, there was that part of me that thought, "What if I'd gone to that conservatory? But part of that is the twenty-five-year old. When I was 18, I was scared that I didn't have the tools or the commitment I do now. So, I thought I'll go to UNI and if I discover this isn't what I want to do, I wouldn't have wasted a ton of money. So, I enrolled and auditioned for scholarships, wrote a ton of essays and again that next step was that little bit of validation. So, it was going to UNI and auditioning and getting cast and doing shows and doing shows with people that were all older than me. The first show was with UNISTA (UNI Student Theatre Association) and I was working with these older, awesome women. It was great. Trying to encapsulate it, every time I was scared to do something, I was more scared not to do it. And I also understand enough about myself that if I fail, I'll figure it out from there. Every time I would think, "Should I do this? Should I do that? I just have this feeling." My roommate, Dylan Martin would say, "Leap and a net will appear." And I understand not everyone can say that, but I'm the kind of person that if I really care about something, if I really put all my focus into it, I can't fail at acting.

I can't fail at something I'm compelled to do when I wake up in the morning. When you can identify where that art lives in your life, you can understand what choices you have within it.

As much as I love being an actor and want to make 100% of my living at it. If it comes down to it, I'll do a fifty-fifty split or I'll do what I have to do. But I think the decision to just jump in and doing something with it, I was set up for it. I didn't have a ton of debt and I immediately got a contract and housing where I wasn't paying rent and could immediately save money, these were golden opportunities to keep moving forward. Not everyone gets those. I had friends who after their first gig or after college needed to move home, needed to save money to get an apartment or go to auditions and the thing is, if this something you are going to commit a lifetime to there isn't a time crunch. Now, I think especially for women we may think there is, but for me there are some roles I can't wait to be old enough to play. There's no timeline for me if I really care about this. If it's a part of my identity moving forward. I'll just take my time, make the choices I can make. I want to be able to make bigger, bolder decisions. I want to be able to take a contract on the other side of the country.

I would say the biggest fear of moving forward is the hurdle of making the initial change. Moving from a single apartment to where I now have an apartment with roommates may seem like a step backwards, but

for me I view it as a step forward. My rent is cut in half. That frees me up to go out on auditions and the roles I could go out for increased. Setting your own standards for what success is important. The biggest hurdle is just the fear of doing it. While I can't advocate for anyone moving before they are fiscally able to be mentally prepared I would also say that at some point, change is always uncomfortable but you're just going to have to do it if that is what someone really wants to do. The career of an artist is always ebbing and flowing. You meet all these wonderful people that you may never see again. Or you spend all this time in a theatre space you may never work in again. So, I try to embrace it and cherish it as much as I can.

ST: In regards to auditioning, how has the process changed between auditioning in college and in the Twin Cities?

EK: It's not that the audition is so different it's that I am so different. Sometimes I think back to how I prepared for auditions in college or even a couple of years ago and I think, "I was really doing that?" I have such strong feelings about auditioning now because now I really like it. Auditioning outside of college is so important because for a lot of us, especially as young woman, that may be the only time that *you* get to choose to say good words. That *you* get to choose to present good material and that *you* get to direct yourself and make good choices. You might start working and then get scripts that are not strong or your director is telling you to do nonsense. In an audition room you're presenting yourself and material that you care about. I remember in college being like nineteen and searching for 50-second women's monologues online because there weren't a ton of resources. It's actually really expensive to be well-read. I remember asking professors, "Can I look through your scripts". Feeling starved for some good contemporary material.

The way I prepare now is not the same as the way I prepared in college. Up here there are companies that focus on different things. One company may focus on "devising" and they're going to tell you "dress for this, don't prepare anything, do this and that." There's still the cattle-call auditions and that's the classic, "prepare two monologues – 90 second time limit". And the auditioning class prepared me for that. Then there's the self-audition like I did yesterday (self-taping, like for a film) and sending that in. In college I knew the show, what role I wanted and I knew my competitors. I knew my friends that were going up for those roles and I knew the directors. Up here there may be more pressure because initially you don't know everyone. You don't necessarily know the director or the play if it's a new work. Honestly, I have access to so much more now. And now that I have some disposable income, I can invest in purchasing scripts and my friends do the same and we share our scripts and I make a new director friend and they have some scripts and I have access to so much more material. You also have access up here of just seeing art. So, I think I've grown because I've been able to watch people I wanted to aspire to be and read roles for woman whereby it's like, "Oh, oh, this is an option?" This was published in 2014 and I just didn't know. So, having time, perhaps a bit more money, things you may not have in college and having that now makes me feel so much more competitive and honed. The other thing is that in college we only auditioned like twice-a-year. Maybe more if you auditioned for a community show or UNISTA or something. But now, I like to be auditioning once-a-week. The repetition is so important. So, throwing yourself into the fire has made me stronger.

ST: How have you found the rehearsal process? Similar or different?

EK: It's about what I expected. The lovely thing about UNI is that you do get to work with a variety of directors and my baseline as to how I may think of a director is still at a UNI level. The processes are pretty similar. The process for me is what the company holds up or the director. I loved how Richard (Glockner) would spend so much time on table work, but there are other directors up here that are like, "I need to burn through the blocking in two days, so we can get you off book to opening." At UNI we rehearsed *Into the Woods* for like two or three months for a weekend of shows. Up here that's not going

to happen as they simply don't have the money or resources. UNI has a space. Therefore, UNI can take their time in regards to rehearsals. So, imagine you're a broke theatre company that lives grant to grant and can only afford to rent a rehearsal space for three weeks and can only afford a different space for your run for two weekends. People just work on different timelines up here because everyone has a different set of resources.

ST: Ultimately, theatre is a business.

EK: Yes. Thinking of summer stock, that was different as we might have rehearsals eight-hours-a-day. That was fascinating. I liked that. Another thing was rehearsing for the one-woman show (*Map of My Kingdom*), that was daunting for me because you're alone. I had one director who came in near the end of the process and she was amazing. But, I spent a lot of time alone in my apartment figuring out different things and it made me a better performer because the process was unlike anything else I'd done. That's probably the hardest thing I've done to date in terms of technical acting.

ST: And you're still doing that show?

EK: Yeah, I'm going to Fargo next week and I just got back from Colorado doing a show last month.

ST: As we wrap up, what advice do you have for students while they're here at UNI?

EK: I would say, take advantage of all that UNI has to offer and take a moment to just enjoy all that you have. Take a moment to really look at a beautiful rehearsal space, the comfortable bench seats, the bathrooms and air-conditioning. Take comfort in knowing that you're in a space that may be more professional than a lot of places you may eventually work at for a while. I remember walking back into UNI after a few months of working at some other places and being like, "Wow, we had a scene shop. We had our own dressing rooms and bathrooms in the dressing rooms." We had all these things. Theatre is not always glamorous. In addition to those material things, enjoy having mentorship. Because once you don't . . . there's not someone there to say, "This is what you did wrong in this audition." You have to figure that out for yourself. Similarly, when you're in college the work is about your growth. In the professional world you're not supposed to need a ton of help, you're fulfilling a service for a company, fulfilling a contract with a group of artists. It's not about process so much anymore. So, take your time while in college and enjoy that. Also, take advantage of those college resources like "LYNDA" (the online resource). And I still regret not taking other classes that would have helped me now. UNI has a film-studies minor or something and an Entrepreneur certificate and right now, just this week, I've been looking at grant-writing courses. I would say, enjoy college as much as you can. Take as much as you can. Get your money's worth. Learn everything you can. Ask the questions. Borrow the scripts. Talk to people. You might not know it yet, but you are surrounded by this community of people that truly want the most for you and are like-minded and want you to grow. And be willing to learn about things that aren't just for you. I've never regretted taking a stage management class. It allows me to communicate with stage managers better now and they have respect for me because I know their language. Take directing more than once. More than anything, learn how to learn.
