



Back in the 'Burg

Niki Lindgren ('98), B.A. in theater actor/improv/er/comedian The Second City Touring Company, Chicago

What is the best part of working with The Second City?

I get to make people laugh. ... There's nothing like it.

Tell us about The Second City.

I'm a cast member of Second City's national touring company. There are three touring companies based out of Chicago that travel nationally and internationally. Each company is comprised of three female performers, three male performers, a musical director and a stage manager. The Second City also has two resident stages in Chicago, the Mainstage and the E.T.C.

What did it feel like to be back in the 'Burg?

I loved being back in the 'Burg; it's weird how the dog food smell can be comforting! I'll always love visiting, because I had such a great time in college.

Did you visit with your professors or talk to any classes?

I saw all my professors. They also came to see the show, which was so amazing. It had been at least four years since I'd seen them. I did talk to classes, and it was fun. ... I don't really think they understood why I was so thrilled to be back in Harrisonburg.

Where did you work before you joined The Second City?

Right out of college I started working for Theatre IV, which is a national touring children's theater based in Richmond. We went through Chicago on tour, and that's when I first saw a Second City performance. I knew right then that The Second City was what I wanted to do. I moved to Chicago, studied long-form improvisation from the Annoyance Theatre, ImprovOlympic Theater and The Second City Training Center Conservatory. I started performing sketch and improvisation at the ImprovOlympic and auditioned with The Second City a few times. I also wrote a one-woman show and was hired by Second City producers after they saw it.

Before joining The Second City, I had worked at a consulting firm called Centerprise Advisors as an office coordinator for three years. I still work at Centerprise whenever I'm not touring. They have become a family to me and have supported me since day one. I was first hired as a temp, but they created a full-time position for me. I was delighted, especially since they hired me knowing that my first priority was acting. So they were prepared to let me off for auditions or any gigs that I booked. They were also very receptive to any weirdo things I did in the corporate environment -- recording the office greeting in different accents [and] making intercom announcements like, 'I need a lead on register ...' (I don't know what that means, but I heard it in a grocery store once.) ... I also ran around the office one fine April afternoon in a Spiderman costume!

Working in a corporate environment can be suicide for an actor, but Centerprise went above and beyond in making me feel at home. I had a really hard time getting to work on time; and everyday that I came in late, I'd stick my head into Bob Basten's office (the chief executive officer at the time) to apologize. One day he called me into his office and said, "Niki, I want you to pick a time that makes you feel good about being here. I don't care if it's 9 a.m. or 11 a.m. I just want [you] to pick a time that you think you can make, so you feel good." That was Bob's way of saying, "Please get here on time." I'm so thankful to have worked under him. He's the most charismatic, intelligent man I've ever met and defines what a leader should be. He was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS) two years ago. Even though he has stepped down, he remains a dear friend. In fact, everyone at Centerprise is a dear friend. I would not be where I am now if it weren't for them. As you know, actors don't make enough money to support themselves when they are first starting out. Centerprise gave me [the] power of having financial stability while still pursuing my dreams. I could work during the day and go to rehearsal, class or shows at night. My Centerprise family still comes to see my shows. ... I love seeing them in the audience.

While touring with The Second City, do you have a favorite place where you've performed?

So far: Haley, Idaho. It was such a cute city, and the people were so nice to us. We traded show tickets for ski rentals and got to hit the slopes for a day.

Who was your favorite JMU professor, or who influenced you the most?

Bill Buck [presently director of the JMU School of Theatre and Dance] was one of my theater professors and my adviser. He was very patient with me when I first started the theater program. At the time, I felt like I didn't fit in; and I was really depressed about not getting cast in any of the shows that I had auditioned for. He reassured me, and told me to keep working hard and to be patient. To this day, I think those are two things I live by: working hard and being patient. Things fall in place when *they* are ready.

Dr. Tom Arthur was my acting professor. I feel like I know what I'm doing because of him. I also feel prepared and professional because of him.

Believe it or not, my favorite professor was Dr. L. Scott Eaton. He was my Geology 100 professor. I loved that class 'cause it was so different from any of the other classes that I was taking. I believe it was the only class throughout my entire college career that I had almost perfect attendance in. I liked seeing how enthusiastic Dr. Eaton was about everything he was teaching. I knew I wanted to be the same way -- living out my dreams.

What were your extracurricular activities at JMU?

I was very involved with the theater department, so I didn't really have time outside of shows to do much of anything except study. Sometimes, I wouldn't get done with rehearsal until 2 a.m. So after rehearsal, I'd have to walk back to my apartment, barefoot through blizzard conditions, without eating a crumb all day. And as soon as I felt the warmth of the single candle I had to light the apartment with, I'd say, "Time to

study." And that's just what I'd do -- study all night long till class the next day, which I never missed. I mean, what would be the point of missing class when I was so prepared from studying as much as I did? Oh my goodness! I just remembered ... they used to call me "Ole book-head Betty Niki." ...Yeah, those were the days.

What's your favorite JMU memory?

[I have] too many wonderful memories. Probably doing weird photo shoots with my two best friends Hunter and Siobhan. We'd dress up in weird clothes and then take black and white pictures all over Harrisonburg. Oh ... and my roommates, Danny, Bryan and Brian. I have yet to find more perfect roomies.

JMU will build the \$10 million Dorothy Thomasson Estes Center for the Arts, which will house the theater, dance and music programs. Why is it important to give to the arts and keep the arts alive in communities?

Without the arts, life has no flavor. Theatre II was converted from a chicken hatchery. Come on! Even though I will cherish the time I spent in that building, I think it's about time to have something new.

MORE ON THE SECOND CITY

Perhaps best known for its classic Emmy-award winning series *SCTV*, which played for 10 seasons and made stars of alumni such as John Candy, Eugene Levy and Martin Short, The Second City operates resident live theaters that create original comedy revues in Chicago, Toronto, Las Vegas, Detroit and Cleveland.

Second City touring companies from the United States and Canada perform at venues all over the world. *Best of Second City* revues feature some of the greatest scenes, songs and improvisations from the vast archives of The Second City. The Second City Touring Company alumni roster is a Who's Who of comedy giants such as Bill Murray, Mike Myers, Tina Fey and Julia Louis Dreyfus.

Throughout its history, The Second City has used improvisation as a training and education tool both on stage and off. In addition to the many actors, writers, directors and producers who have trained with the company, scores of people from nearly every walk of life have participated in its programs. Second City training centers offer classes and workshops for children and adults of all experience levels in improvisation, acting and writing. In addition, Second City Communications trains business people to communicate, create and collaborate more effectively in the workplace.

By Michelle Hite ('88) and Elaine Stroupe