

NEWSROOM

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"THIS IS YOUR MOMENT. MAKE IT COUNT!"

CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT'S MUSICAL THEATRE STUDENTS SHINE IN NEW YORK CITY

by [Kelley McGee](#) | March 20, 2024

Read time: about 6 min

Tucked beneath the legendary Studio 54, the once iconic hub of 1970s nightlife, lies 54 Below, a venue showcasing a new era in musical entertainment. Known as "Broadway's Living Room," the club features a mix of established and emerging Broadway talent performing in an intimate and welcoming setting.

Echoes of the club's colorful past linger within the venerable space, including its famously selective door policy, although it now serves more as a nostalgic nod to the past than a barrier to entry. On this particular night, proud parents of Christopher Newport's performers "on the list" mingle on the rain-soaked sidewalk with Broadway industry professionals until the door finally opens, signaling the start of an unforgettable night.

Guests descend down the steep stairway and take their seats at the small, cabaret-style tables surrounding the stage. The venue's interior exudes an old New York, speakeasy-style ambiance, and the stage is illuminated by dissolving shades of gold, orange and blue, evoking a refined and sophisticated vibe.

In a quiet corner backstage, freshman Kylee Bates tries to ignore the rising din of clinking glasses and excited chatter. She steadies herself by mentally reviewing her performance one last time while the band warms up. It's her



Kylee Bates and her fellow musical theatre classmates performing on stage.

debut performance in New York – a goal she could have barely fathomed a year ago in high school. Yet here she is.

"I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little nervous," she says. " But we have all been rehearsing the show for weeks, and I'm ready to share that hard work with the world!"

Nearby is senior John Byrd, who is also silently reviewing his stage movements and lyrics. It's not his first time here, and in some ways that makes it more stressful. Tonight, he'll be performing a challenging improv number with fellow students Jimmy Grimes and Katie O'Shields.

"I'm trying to remain calm by keeping myself distracted right now. We only had a few hours to work with the producers on the piece's structure. But it will be fine...I know it will. There's something magical that happens on stage when you are simultaneously energized by the crowd in front of you, while at the same time forgetting they even exist. The stage lights blind you a bit, so your practice and training just kicks in and you drop into the zone. As they say, 'art is not art unless it's dangerous.'"

A brief drumroll gets the crowd's attention, and the hosts for the show, Christopher Newport Musical Theatre alums Peyton Townsend '22 and Madison Raef '23 hop on stage. Showtime has arrived. It's the crescendo of a long, opportunity-filled day for the students that began early that morning, appropriately enough, at a rehearsal studio.

OPEN JAR STUDIOS, 1600 BROADWAY, NYC - 9:00 A.M.

"Five, six, seven, eight... hats off, scoop, layout and turn. Let your movement express the story!"

Students start their day taking a master dance class from Broadway choreographer and performer Parker Esse. They meet at Open Jar Studios, a newly-built, modern rehearsal space on the corner of Broadway and 48th that provides both students and seasoned performers with intensive, one-on-one training with some of the industry's biggest stars and casting directors. John, Kylee and the other 18 musical theater students have the unique opportunity to learn new choreography, ask questions and seek advice from a Broadway veteran who has been in the business for decades.

"When you go to an audition, you need to really show up. Make an impression," Esse tells them. "That casting director may not see you in that role, but they are frequently booking several shows at once and might see you in another role. Always 'show up.' Believe in yourself tonight at 54 Below. Because all you have is this night. This is it. This is your moment. Make it count."

John and Kylee have both positioned themselves near the front of the class to take full advantage of the opportunity to soak up advice from someone who has done everything they hope to do.

"We've received so much terrific advice this week that's both useful and inspiring," John says. "Among what I heard is 'assume everyone can play a role or sing a certain note. What sets you apart is your genuine self, and your willingness to be vulnerable and connect with an audience. That's what the audience craves. They want genuine connection. They want to see you.'"

The opportunity for Christopher Newport students to perform at 54 below is an extension of the University's New Musicals Lab program, which provides space and resources for new musical ideas to be developed and brought to life. The lab serves as a launching pad for aspiring performers, giving them the skills and experience they need to succeed in the competitive world of musical theater.

"The New Musicals Lab and the Musical Theatre Program's annual 54 Below performance are the result of an incredible collaboration between the Ferguson Center and an academic program that truly defines what makes CNU special," says Bruce Bronstein, executive director of the Ferguson Center for the Arts. "Participating in the creation of new musicals and then showcasing that work in New York as an extension of a college academic experience is a one of a kind opportunity that is only available at Christopher Newport."

The New Musicals Lab allows students to gain practical experience while creating relationships with exciting, upcoming composers. The chance to perform these new works at 54 Below is an exciting finale to the creative process.

"Introducing these young actors to this space at an early stage in their careers is truly a unique and special opportunity because performing at 54 Below is a dream for so many in the theater community," says Colin Ruffer,

director of the Musical Theatre Program. "It is my hope that this once-in-a-lifetime dream becomes a first-in-a-lifetime of many for these students."

The main objective, Ruffer said, is for CNU students to "make their New York City debut. As the song lyrics say, 'if they can make it here, they can make it anywhere.'"

An offshoot of all this success has been the growing number of Christopher Newport Musical Theatre graduates who have taken advantage of the contacts and experience garnered from performing at 54 Below and with the New Musicals Lab, and moved to New York after graduation. Together, these Captains are building a network of support in the Big Apple, helping to lift each other up in a notoriously competitive industry.

FACES & NAMES BAR AND LOUNGE, 54TH STREET - 6:00 P.M.

It's just a few hours before showtime. Several blocks away from 54 Below, many of the New York City-based alums gather together for a pre-show, happy hour celebration. Some are now working professionals in the city, others are finding their way. All credit the Musical Theatre Department with providing a path for their dreams.

"I won't lie. It's hard at first. But we have been well prepared for this," says Ty Norris.

Norris, a 2020 graduate and Virginia native, now lives in Harlem Heights. Two of his three roommates are fellow CNU grads. "We are forming a strong community here, to help those coming after us and to support those of us here. Yes, most of us are still wandering, but we're wandering together."

Renee Kaufmann '23 is part of that network. Just a year ago, she was a Christopher Newport student taking the stage at 54 Below. Now, she is a performer working in the city, including an upcoming gig at the place where it all began—54 Below.

"I'm so grateful CNU prepared me for these opportunities," she says, quickly adding, "One of the things that really helped me when I moved here after graduation was knowing I had former classmates and friends here to lean on, and grow with."

"Trips like this are fundamental in training students," says Ruffer. "The relationships they form both with the New Musicals Lab producers, as well as with each other, will help them to flourish. Not many college-age students have the opportunity to do this level of relevant training before they enter this competitive business."

54 BELOW - 9:25 P.M.

The club is completely sold out. In addition to industry professionals, the audience is filled with supportive family members, along with President William Kelly, First Lady Angie Kelly, Provost Quentin Kidd— all of whom traveled to the city to cheer the students on.

At 9:30, the lights dim. Students gathered at the side of the stage take their positions.

"These students are feeling great," Ruffer says, his expression reflecting an equal mix of excitement and pride. "It's all in their hands now. They've worked so hard to get to this moment, so let's press play!"



One by one, the students take the stage, confidently singing and interpreting new musical compositions, many of which had never been performed publicly. If there are nerves among them, it's hard to tell. Ireland DiBacco '25, Alexis Holland '24 and Audrey Shoop '25 all say their excitement surpasses most other emotions when they enter the spotlight. Their top-notch performances on this night backs that up.

It's now time for Kylee, and then John to take the stage. Neither one hesitates. Like all of the theater students, they make the most of their moment and shine brightly.

"It felt amazing to be on stage performing. I have known since I was nine years old that I wanted to perform in places like 54

Below, so this is really a dream come true," says Kylee. "It was so surreal to be able to share new music with the world while simultaneously living out one of

my dreams.”

“It was the most rewarding experience I’ve had,” says John. “Colin trusted us to do complicated pieces, and pushed us out of the nest, because he knew we’d fly. And we all did!”

Featured student performers at 54 Below included:

- Kylee Bates
- Emma Brooks
- John Byrd
- Taylor Cannon
- Hannah Cecil
- Ireland DiBacco
- Jimmy Grimes
- Anthony Hearn
- Alexis Holland
- Tim Johnson
- Mia Kennedy
- Lizzy Maisel
- Makenna Mitchell
- Sara Moore
- Katie O’Shields
- Kimberlie Pagán
- MaryAnn Richardson
- Bella Schaub
- Audrey Shoop
- Fiona Sullivan

Photos courtesy of Jose Miranda.
