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GRATITUDE AND AWE

A STAR'S-EYE VIEW OF THE FERGUSON CENTER

by [Jim Hanchett](#) | November 25, 2024*Read time: about 6 min*

Erika Henningsen is a star. She starred on Broadway, originating the role of Cady Heron in “Mean Girls.” She lights up the screen on film and television - featured in Amazon Prime’s “Hazbin Hotel” and, most recently, in a Netflix series with Tina Fey. She recently brought that star power to the Diamonstein Concert Hall stage for a memorable one-night-only performance of Broadway show tunes and much more with the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. It was a very special night for the audience, of course, but it is also a cherished memory for Henningsen. The night was so rewarding that she actually wrote a long, eloquent thank you note to the Ferguson Center’s donors and staff. As the Center prepares to celebrate its 20th anniversary, we wanted to find out what it’s like for a Broadway star to perform on that stage. Here is how Henningsen answered our starstruck questions in a phone interview while she was in Hollywood for the Netflix production.

I. Your career has had many high points and yet the Ferguson Center debut was different. First, tell us about the lead-up to that show with the Virginia Symphony. How did it happen?

"I came to teach master classes with CNU students and was talking with Bruce Bronstein (Executive Director of the Ferguson Center). He asked me if I missed live performances since my focus had turned to television and film. I told him I didn't miss those shows, eight a week on Broadway, as much as I missed the music that made me fall in love with musical theater. And you don't hear that music on Broadway currently. He said, 'What would it take for you to be able to sing the music that you want to sing?' and I said, 'I want to do a symphony show.' He took that and ran with it, which is pretty wild, pretty wild.

There's a whole generation of young people that don't hear this music when they go to big concerts in arenas. If they don't hear the music, they can't develop a love for musical theater. So that's why I wanted to sing with the Virginia Symphony - so the young people in the audience, especially the CNU students, could hear what they may have never heard before."

2. What made the performance especially memorable for you?

"I haven't gotten nervous in a while and, just before the show, I had a backstage moment. Not panic, exactly, but definitely a moment.

Normally, if you're singing with a symphony at a Broadway show, when you walk on stage, you've rehearsed with them multiple times. With the VSO, we got to rehearse twice and we had never really run the show before, front to back. So walking out on that stage, I was apprehensive because I feel a responsibility to the audience and to the musicians and the crew because they're giving up their time to support me. I think that is such a massive ask for a solo artist to request. Something happened that night between the walk from backstage out to the front. Sometimes you feel like..I'm going to let these people down' and that night I felt like, these people have my back and my only job is to jump off into the unknown and all that we'll experience together for the next 90 minutes.

I'm so used to having the orchestra in the pit, as on Broadway. This was different because I literally had the VSO at my back. You just feel this swell of sound behind you. We started with the 'Carousel Waltz' (Rodgers and Hammerstein). It's eight minutes long and it was just magical. It began the evening by sending a message to the audience that you're going to hear this lush, sweeping sound that you don't hear anymore on Broadway. Orchestras are smaller, music isn't always produced with live musicians. I just can't quite comprehend that I could do it at the Ferg and it's got me itching to do it again."

3. We're proud of the Ferguson Center and the Diamonstein Theatre, of course. What did you think as a performer?

"It's just beautiful. The acoustics are incredible. I have to give a shoutout to Ketch (CNU Audio Engineer Eric "Ketch" Kelly). This was the greatest sound I have ever experienced on any stage anywhere, bar none. It's such a wonderful experience to know the person out there moving the dials is also taking care of you - it's a wild experience. As much as I'm the person on the poster, live performance is such a team sport. It's not possible without everyone there. That's the weird dissonance of live performance. I have to walk out there and have the confidence to say, please listen to me for an hour and a half, but to realize that the only reason I get to be there is that everyone on the inside is doing an incredible job on their end and supporting me and believing that this is going to be an evening worthy of everyone's time. Everyone on the inside at the Ferg does an incredible job."

4. The Ferguson Center opens the world of the arts to thousands of young people, including many who will see their first live performance there. From an artist's perspective, why is that important?

"When you're on stage you have a sense of whether the audience is with you but you don't really see them. When I went out to the lobby after the show to greet the guests, I realized that a lot of the audience were young, many of them under the age of 35. That doesn't happen very often. Usually, the vocalists at symphony shows are the legends and role models from the 1970s and 80s. That's no shade on them, they're fabulous. The industry has changed, we're not creating those kinds of stars on Broadway.

Knowing that there were young people who were used to listening to music on their iPods or headphones and knowing that they were seeing a peer on stage reminded me of why I do this. I want to encourage and hopefully set an example for the next generation of young artists and audience members who may never have been to a live



show. They decided to go to this one because they know about me from 'Mean Girls' or 'Hazbin Hotel.' That is huge to me. If I can get them off their screens and into a live entertainment stage, that is totally worth it."

5. You have a Netflix show coming up, and a long and impressive list of film and television credits. Yet you seem drawn back to live performances. Why?

"As opposed to a Broadway show, when something is a one time thing, you are asking everyone to be at the height of their focus and that's very rare. On Broadway, the danger is that you stop listening to the audience because you know where the laughs are going to be, when the applause is going to be. With a concert, the first time we're doing it is also the last time. You have to be so tuned in to how they're responding and constantly navigating their energy, not letting it affect the story you are there to tell but also knowing that as their host, you are responsible for their evening. You have to craft a show that will keep people surprised and guessing. We mixed up the styles and mixed up who was on stage. We had the incredible students from the Christopher Newport program come to sing. That one-night-only-energy creates zones where the only thing I'm caring about is this thing that's right in front of me and that's so rare. You feel like you're surfing on a wave and that's so fun. You get to lose yourself and that's the best thing - you can't do it the whole time. If you can just live in the song, that's the magic and it only happens every now and then."

6. After the Ferguson show, you wrote a heartfelt thank you note to the Center's donors and patrons. That's not something most of the stars who have graced that stage would do. Why?

"It is not a given that we get to do this. No matter how talented you are, there are many talented people in the world who never get an opportunity to sing with the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. When you forget as a performer that you're only on stage because of hundreds of other people who made choices that allowed you to get to that spot, I think when you forget that, not only does it stop happening, but you stop being a vessel for people to experience authentic joy. When you forget to be thankful to those people, it is no longer about the community of being a performer, it's about the selfishness of being a performer. I am forever grateful because everything that I have gotten to do in my life is because of a community of people who decided I could do it or supported me. I just think it's so simple to tell people that you appreciate it. You can be talented and have ownership of your craft and yet at any minute, it can be taken away. And when you get to do it, you have to be grateful to those people who allowed you to be there. It doesn't matter how good you are if you don't have humility. Some people get jaded or tired of performing. I think the more that you have gratitude, the more you can fight feeling jaded. I hope I am always just a little bit awestruck that I get to do this and that I get to be in spaces like the Ferg with the VSO."
