Back in the Spotlight: Alum Returns to CU Stage

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Kathleen Christal is a struggling actress in New York City. That's how she describes herself. The description is brief but telling. To be a struggling actress in New York City means baring your heart to perform, only to leave the theater with emotions locked tightly inside for protection in one of the most notoriously gruff cities in the world.

It means working so closely with your co-workers that you grow to love them, and then saying goodbye when the show ends.

It's a world of paradox, and it has been Christal's world for the past ten years. Within this world of constant change, Christal has hung on to the truth about herself.

"I'm still human," she said. "I'm a human being who's an actress."

After graduating from Creighton with a degree in theater in 1986, Christal was accepted into The Juilliard School's Drama Division in 1987.

Last year, Alan Klem invited Christal to return to Creighton to perform in the mainstage's first production, Shakespeare's "As You Like It."

"I was flattered, I mean really flattered," Christal said.

Christal has performed on Broadway, Off-Broadway, in regional theaters, on television, in a film and across the country with The Acting Company, a prestigious acting troupe founded for Juilliard graduates. When Alan Klem invited her to come back to Creighton and perform on a little university stage, out in the middle of Omaha, Nebraska, she was honored.

Despite all of her experiences, she's still the same person who performed here at Creighton ten years ago.

"We always think, 'If I just find the right person to marry, if I just get this promotion at work, I'll be happy. If I just get this house, I'll be really happy,'" Christal said. "We always find that when we get to a certain spot that we wanted to get to, we're still stuck with ourselves."

Discovering who she is and what she wants did not come easily to Christal.

As an undergraduate, Christal intended to become a medical doctor. But after a year and a half in the pre-med program, Christal discovered a career in medicine was not what she truly wanted.

"I didn't have as natural a talent at [chemistry] as a lot of other people who were studying premed," Christal said. "They really wanted it and they were really good at it. I had to work so much harder just to keep up with them, and I didn't keep up with them."

She became increasingly more unhappy, and because she was unhappy, she ate. Her depression grew worse.

"I felt really crummy about myself and how I looked," she said. "I was really self-conscious and confused."

Then, she switched to theater.

"I started losing weight without even trying just because I was happier," Christal said. "The teachers here - Susan and Bill, and then Alan came my last year - were really good teachers, really good acting teachers, and they were very kind to me."

honed her acting talents under the supervision of Juilliard faculty. After the program, Christal auditioned for Juilliard, again. This time, she was accepted.

Before every performance, every audition, and every practice, Christal warms up. She stretches her limbs and fills her lungs, purging her body of anxious thoughts and inhibitions. The practice leaves her open to her surroundings, ready to listen and to respond. It also leaves her vulnerable.

"Sometimes it's hard to get yourself to breathe and to open up," she said. "It's risky."

On stage this vulnerability is an asset. It brings life to her characters and expression to her words, but out in the real world, the uncertain world of an actress, it leaves her bare to pain.

"Someone estimated this: It takes fifty auditions for every job you get. That means forty-nine rejections," she said.

Auditions are cold and impersonal. "You go into a room. You audition. They say, 'Thank you.' You leave. Auditions typically last about two minutes."

For those who are not cast, that's it. There's no rejection letter, no rejection phone call and no explanation. "They just don't call you."

Christal once went a year without a casting call except for one for a small part on a soap opera.

Christal spent that year behind a hotel registration desk wearing a hotel uniform, a "cheap version of an expensive suit," and wondering whether she should remain an actress.

"It was just bad," she said.

PHOTO BY JASON BASH

Actress Kathleen Christal is a 1986 graduate.

At Creighton, Christal experimented with a host of different roles. She worked closely with the small theater staff to develop her acting potential. As a junior, she auditioned for Juilliard. She was rejected. As a senior, she auditioned for Juilliard again. She was rejected, again. But, she was accepted to a summer conservatory program called Chautauqua. At the program, Christal