

Erika's World

Telephone Interview January 2016

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Dear Friends,

We hope you enjoy this recent chat that I had with Erika! We talked about what's been going on in her life now, as well as her early memories on OLTL, which I have always found so interesting. We may continue with this as well as discussing, in detail, some of Erika's more significant storylines throughout the years. We will publish periodically if this is of interest to you. You can email me your comments at: erikaslezakfc@yahoo.com

Here is one of my favorite photos (early 70's) of Erika leaving the studio. She was always carrying something in her hands!

While I still continue to miss seeing Erika on TV on a regular basis, I must say that she sounds great, happy and extremely content, and that makes me happy. Thanks, and happy reading!

Walter



How are you doing? I'm doing fine...I'm absolutely fine. It took me about a year to get over not being in a routine — that waking up in the morning and thinking, "Oh God, what do I have to do today?" And then I kind of calmed down, and now I think this is really nice! I went for an audition a couple of weeks ago, I guess, and I kept thinking, "I hope I don't get it because it would change my new schedule." And I didn't get it, which is fine. It wasn't something I was right for anyway. It's fine. I'm happy! We get to travel back and forth to Vermont, and I don't have to worry about anything — I can plan a vacation! I'm doing very well, I must say.

Besides the 41+ years on *One Life to Live*, you worked in repertory theatre for a handful of years. Yes, I worked for 4-5 years in rep. I worked a long time, and I'm kind of entitled to a vacation.

Without a doubt! I think in the beginning too, because you worked for so long, for so many years — you probably felt you had to work because that was all you knew. And then you get used to it and say, this is OK. Exactly, I'm fine.

The main thing is that you are happy and content. I am.

We would still like to see you every now and then in something. So you are still auditioning? Yes, but not a lot. I'm happy.

What does your day look like now? Well, I don't get up at 5 a.m. unless the dogs wake me up! I sleep until 8 or sometimes 9, depending on how tired I am! I get up, have a little breakfast, and take it easy. I have my regular errands, like going to the dry cleaners or the hardware store — which is where I am off to this afternoon. I've been trying to sort out my office downstairs in the basement. I have all the files that you are supposed to keep for 7 years. I'm now backed up to about 2003, so I thought, "I've got to get rid of some of this stuff." I've been sorting through everything. Things we have to

save, things to toss, things to shred — so I've been spending hours downstairs doing that. This is the kind of thing I have put off for the last 14-15 years. Along with that, I've been reading, doing my needlepoint, and I have my little room upstairs where I have my sewing. You know, the day somehow goes by — nothing is in a rush. The other day, we took the dogs for a nice long walk. Somehow the day becomes 6 p.m. and it's dinnertime, and we have a little glass of wine or something, watch TV and go to bed.

That's lovely to hear. That's something that has come your way — you've worked so hard, for so many years. Well, it wasn't hard work. It was delightful, easy, wonderful, fun work for the most part.

Fun work. Yes it was. You know, we've been up to Vermont a lot which is really nice. There is no time pressure. But when you have a house, which you know, there's something to be done. Today we had to hang around as I had Stanley Steemer coming first thing this morning at 8 because a couple of rooms needed to be cleaned. Then next we had a workman here because the fan that is in the room off the family room was not working, so we had to have a new one put in.

How are the children doing? The kids are good. Amanda was working at a very nice place in the Village called Swine — a very upscale, fancy restaurant. But she couldn't stand it anymore, so she quit at the end of November and said she was going to take a month or two and decide what she wanted to do. She wants to go and do something else, which I'm very happy about. I don't want her coming home at 2-3 in the morning. She's been doing this for years. And she lives down in Battery Park City with her fiancé. They keep talking about getting married but they haven't made any plans, so, I'm not going to push it. When they are ready to plan, they will. They are both very happy.

Michael is thinking of doing a whole different thing — hopefully going into real estate

development, which would be kind of fun. He's testing the waters, just looking around right now. Michael is staying with us — it is such a freaking pleasure to have him here because he does all of the heavy lifting, all of the work. He splits the wood, brings it in — anything to do with computers — he fixes, he changes, and he sets it up. He bought me a new computer for my birthday — I'm still learning how to work it, but he's there for everything, thank God!

What kind of computer? I now have a Mac. Michael had always had a Sony, I guess. Last time, about 2 years ago, he got a new computer he wanted to try — a Mac — and he said it is so fabulous. So he said, "When you are ready for a new one, you should get a Mac." My old one was so slow, and I know how spoiled we are because everything used to have to be done by hand. So I got a new one for my birthday. It's a Mac and it is wonderful. I love it.

He's your tech guy. Yes, he's my tech guy. But it takes learning because things are in different places. But anyway I'm very happy with it. I do all of the bills and I do whatever else I do on a computer and it is terrific. I'm not lazy, I'm just relaxed, which is nice.

And you are content, that's what it is all about — you've earned it! It's wonderful! And Brian — is he well? Brian is very well, thank you. He's been on this diet — he's lost 15 pounds already.

What kind of diet? Just not eating very much. He eats about half the amount he used to. He's cut out all sweets. He used to love ice cream after dinner and he hasn't had that in ages. He doesn't drink, he'll have a light beer every once in awhile. So, cutting all of that out has helped him to lose weight, which is great. He's healthy, thank goodness, and happy.

Have you been to the theatre? Do you go into town much? No — oh, God, we are so lazy. We went to see *Wolf Hall* — Brian didn't want to go because we had seen the TV

miniseries, which was brilliant. But Michael and I thought we wanted to go and so we went and it was disappointing. It was not as good as the miniseries, which was so fabulous. It was brilliant — six or eight episodes. Mark Rylance and Damian Lewis were great. That was the last thing we saw on Broadway. I would like to see *Hamilton* — Renee Goldsberry from *One Life to Live* is in that. It is hard to get tickets right now. But overall, I really have little interest — everything has become so expensive — the base tickets for a lot of the shows is \$150 and then you have to have dinner and park — then it is an hour into the city and an hour out. It's become horrendously expensive and so much of it is disappointing, so you kind of think, why? I can stay home and watch a really good movie.

And you sold the apartment in the city? Yes, and I'm glad we did, because we never went there anymore. We sold it to a lovely young couple (2 years ago now) who both worked on Wall Street and they were delighted to have it. So it was wonderful.

Could we touch briefly on Pat Elliott? (Renee Divine Buchanan) Oh, I was so, so shocked and saddened to hear about Pat's passing, I had no idea that she was sick.

Had you kept in touch with her? You know, Christmas Cards, and every once in awhile we'd email back and forth. I always called her Ms. Elliott, always — it just was between us, because she was such a lady. I would email her if I saw something funny or interesting and she would too. I hadn't been in touch with her for months, but I was just stunned, shocked — and equally so about Nathaniel (Marston) (Michael McBain). He was a young man who had really tried to turn his life around and then bang he's gone. A talented kid too — I was so sorry about that.

So sad, he was a young man — 40 years old. Yes.

How are the dogs and the cats doing? The dogs are fine. We have 3 dogs — big, medium and small. Archie is large, Alfie who is our English Cocker Spaniel is medium, and Harry, the Maltese, is small. And we have 2 cats — Emily and Lucy. And everyone gets along except for the cats, who don't much like Alfie because Alfie thinks the cats are awesome and wants to play with them and they have no interest in playing. They give him a swat on the nose when he gets too close, though they don't have front claws. It's fun — we probably have too many animals.

Have you been on vacation this past year? Nope — just Vermont, and it's like a different world. It's about 3 1/2 hours to get there and it is a fairly easy drive, with larger roads. The funny thing is that there is only one stoplight on the way there. It's all very pretty and scenic.

I'd like to talk about the very early days on *One Life to Live*. What would you say was your first scene that was very challenging

for you? Oh, I know exactly when that was. My very first day, I was very scared because I had never been on television and I didn't know anything about it. I remember my very first scene — I had to come down the stairs at the Lord house, Llanfair, go to the door, open it and let Meredith in, then we were to go into the library and have a scene. And that was fine, it was a simple conversation. Everything was like that for about 3-4 weeks. I had fairly simple, easy conversation types of scenes with no big drama. Then one day I get a script that says Viki is very upset, comes downstairs, flings herself onto the sofa in the Lord library, and is sobbing her heart out. I thought, what is she so upset about? Why do I do this? But I did it as well as I could. What I didn't realize was that that scene was my real audition. They hired me because they thought I could handle it, but Agnes (Nixon) wanted to make sure that I could handle the big emotional stuff. So she wrote this scene to see if I could do it, and I guess I passed because I was still there a long time. It was wonderful fun — it was so different. I had



Viki Early Years

only ever been in the theatre, and I have to thank God for David Pressman and Neil Smith, who was our other director. David taught me everything I needed to know about working on television. I had just done theatre-in-the-round, so I was constantly moving, arms waving, speaking much too loudly. He kept saying, “Bring it down, hold your head still, you are making the audio man crazy because you are much louder than all the other actors and you don’t need to be.” I was still projecting for the 100th row in the theatre. David taught me everything. As a director, he was one of the few directors who took the time to work with the actors, and I’m not criticizing the other directors at all, but there is so much technical stuff involved that they frequently don’t have time, and as we got longer, as we got to 45 minutes and then an hour, they had no time at all to teach. But David took time and he always said to me, “You’ve got to be vulnerable, you have to be vulnerable!” I could be very strong and very closed off — but he said, “No, you must be vulnerable. That’s what they want to see. They want to see the strong Viki, but they want to see the vulnerable Viki too.” It took me awhile to get comfortable doing it, but it was such a thrill and such fun. And all of the other actors were so nice. I made friends with Lynn Benesch who played Meredith, with Ernie Graves who played my father, and Bernie Grant who played Steve. We became chums. We didn’t hang out, Bernie and I, but it was a nice easy companionship. And then I hung out with a lot of the younger people — we’d go get a glass of wine after work because we always finished at 5 pm. You made friends and it was a really happy environment to be in.

Do you remember what storyline that scene involved? No, I don’t remember, only that I thought this comes out of nowhere, which was why I was kind of surprised. It was a test which somehow Agnes justified. Victor came in and said what’s wrong honey and I told him whatever it was — I don’t remember what, I just remember thinking, fly down the stairs, throw yourself on the sofa and sob.

In your opinion, was Viki always considered the main character on the show? No — She was one of the main characters but there were a number of main characters. Certainly Victor was, Meredith, Larry, and Carla, whose whole story was very important. It wasn’t actually until Joe Stuart took over that they kind of downplayed all of that, which is a shame because it was always interesting. Then they got Al Freeman in and he was fabulous. Agnes was one of the first people to deal with current issues — interracial and social issues. I think Viki became more central as the years went on, mostly because they gave me more and more to do. Which was nice.

In your opinion which writer was your champion and started to write good material for you? I would say probably Gordon Russell who came on in 1971. I loved Gordon. He used to laugh so much — he had the best sense of humor, he was charming and clever and a very good writer and smart, smart man. We had a lot of fun. Lee Patterson and I used to go up and talk to Gordon, especially when Joe Stuart was the producer. (Technically we were not allowed to talk to the writers — actors were not supposed to talk to the writers, that



Bernie, Erika and Lee Patterson

was Joe's thing and I know why, because he didn't want actors asking for story.) Lee and I loved Gordon and we used to go up the stairs and kind of crawl from the top of the stairs to Gordon's office so Joe couldn't see us. He was just delightful — he was a wonderful guy and died too soon and much too young. ABC was sending him to *General Hospital* but when he got on the plane to fly to Los Angeles, he started to feel really sick and asked to get off. He went home with his wife Merrie and then right to the doctor. They checked him in to the hospital and discovered that he had lung cancer.

I remember Gordon being a smoker from his *Dark Shadows* days. Every time he departed the studio he had a cigarette in hand. He was, he smoked a lot. A whole bunch of us from the show went to visit him in the hospital, and Brian went with me. Brian was talking to him and said, "I'm so sorry," and Gordon said it was his own fault. He said, "I'm an idiot, I've been smoking 3 packs a day for 25 years, so I *should* have lung cancer."

I think he really knew what you could do. He wrote for you — his stuff was great. He did — his stuff was fantastic. Of course, when Judy Light came on she became a very important character too. And it was Gordon again. He said, "Let's put people who are really good and can do it, in the spotlight!" and they did.

When you think about that whole story when Joe comes back and you have to chose between both of them and then you chose Steve and then Joe gets Cathy pregnant — it was typical, wonderful soap opera story. Oh yes.

Then you decide you want Joe, Cathy is pregnant, you are driving Megan to hospital — I mean that was wonderful stuff. Gordon was a really good writer. They still say that the whole Karen Wolek prostitute story was one of the best stories ever written for daytime. It tied so many people in.

What about TV shows — what do you watch? Well, right now we have been watching a lot of football, because, basically, I am not in charge of the remote. But, we do watch *Mom* and *Nashville*. Brian doesn't like *The Big Bang Theory* anymore, although I do. We also watch some episodic shows like *Elementary* — and we watch a lot of British shows that Brian gets on this one channel which is terrific. Of course we have seen *Downton Abbey*, the whole last season. Oh, and we still watch *Jeopardy* every night.

You've been a fan of *Jeopardy* for years. Oh, my God — I totally love it. It makes you smarter. Sometimes you are even smarter than the contestants although most of the time you are not. And we watch the news. Michael and Brian watch some sports show at 5 pm — I don't watch that.

Are you Patriots fans? Yes — Michael is a huge Patriots fan and Brian is as well. We also watch an awful lot of soccer. They are both enormous Arsenal fans and so we live and die with them. So, during the football playoff games I sit with the dogs, do my needlepoint, and glance at the screen once in awhile. But I'm happy to watch.

Thank you so much for taking your time to share your life with us. It was my pleasure. Thank YOU!

One Life to Live Script from 1971

Erika Stess
A large handwritten signature in the top right corner, with a large, stylized bracket-like scribble below it.

ONE LIFE TO LIVE

#817

TAPE DATE: TUESDAY, AUGUST 24, 1971

AIR DATE: TUESDAY, AUGUST 31, 1971

PROLOGUE: VIKIE'S OFFICE -1

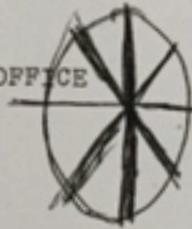
OPENING TITLE

1st COMMERCIAL

ACT I: VIKI'S OFFICE -4

2nd COMMERCIAL

ACT II: VINCE'S OFFICE
LIMBO SECTION OF MARCY'S OFFICE



3rd COMMERCIAL

4th COMMERCIAL

ACT III: VIKI'S OFFICE
LORD TERRACE -32

5th COMMERCIAL

ACT IV: SECTION OF DINER
LORD TERRACE -41

6th COMMERCIAL

TIME: MORNING TO 1P.M. - SAME DAY

CAST: CREATED BY: AGNES NIXON

WRITTEN BY: TED DAZAN
GORDON RUSSELL

PRODUCED BY: DORIS QUINLAN

DIRECTED BY: DAVID PRESSMAN
NEIL SMITH

CREATIVE HORIZONS, INC.

VIKI
MARCY
STEVE
ANNA
VINCE