

Periodical Supplement to Cleveland Jewish News, August 16, 2024

CANNVAS

NORTHEAST OHIO | arts | music | performance

Fall 2024



WHO'S NEXT.

EMERGING THEATER ACTORS IN NORTHEAST OHIO ▶

Cleveland is home to a thriving theater scene within and beyond the primary Playhouse Square district, extending to east- and west-side organizations putting on top-notch productions each season. At the heart of all successful plays are star actors who create special experiences for their audiences, in addition to those who work skillfully behind the scenes. Northeast Ohio has a long list of rising actors who work hard in an industry that can be competitive and challenging to break into, but who continue to raise the bar for what local productions can be. As such, in this fall stage issue of Canvas, we highlight a few talented and dedicated actors, all associated with different area theater companies which shared their names as important ones to watch.



Photo / Roger Mastroianni



Photo / Steve Wagner



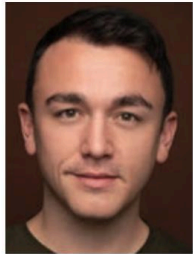
Photo / Kierstan Kathleen Conway

CHRIS RICHARDS

Age: 37 • **Home:** North Canton • **Performs:** Beck Center for the Arts, films, television

By Amanda Koehn

Chris Richards may have been initiated into the world of acting when he saw Disney's "Aladdin" on New Year's Day in 1993. A child, he "thought Robin Williams as the Genie was the most incredible thing I've ever seen in my life," he says. "I was hooked."



Leaving the movie stunned, when a family friend told him he could act, too, the wheels started turning.

A few decades later, he's acted in numerous plays locally, in New York City and beyond, as well as in film and television.

"You do all the community theater and you find different reasons to love it and why you are in it, and you keep going," he says. "For me, it's been great. I love the whole aspect of being a storyteller and telling the stories."

Most recently, he played Don Kirshner in "Beautiful, The Carole King Musical" at Beck Center for the Arts in Lakewood from July 12 to Aug. 11. He also starred in the indie short film "Higher Lows," which was featured in the Indie Gathering International Film Festival in Cleveland from Aug. 9-11.

The North Canton native graduated from Kent State University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in musical theater performance in 2009. After college, he saw much of his class move to New York City to try professional acting there, but took a different path.

"I noticed everyone seems to move to New York and then move home within a year," he recalls. "I don't want to do that, I want to do a longer arc here."

He worked his way through the Cleveland theater scene, making valuable connections and performing on stages at Great Lakes Theater in downtown Cleveland, Dobama Theatre in Cleveland Heights and Beck Center.

"I'm sure glad I did because now looking back, it's like I have all of these friendships and relationships in place," he says.

He eventually went to New York in two stints, totaling 10 years altogether. During that time, he performed in off-Broadway productions, did improv at the Upright Citizens Brigade and acted in film and television roles.

Back in Cleveland, he filmed "Cherry," the Anthony and Joe Russo crime film starring Tom Holland. Richards played a cop who the Russo brothers told him served as an "ideal version" of Holland's character, a drug addict who robs banks.

"I was like, 'Oh my God, this is the only time in my life I'm ever going to be the idealized version of Tom Holland,'" Richards jokes, adding that he may have cursed himself with that thought as his scene didn't make the final edit.

Notably, he also was featured on the CBS television drama "Bull," and has starred in many indie and short films.

Shifting things up again, he moved back to North Canton in July 2023. Being married with three sons, he took the opportunity to move his family into his childhood home and reacquainted himself efficiently with the local theater scene. That fall, he starred in the political thriller "Cat's-Paw" at Beck Center.

Richards says while some actors can immediately point to a favorite role, he's valued each experience in different



▲ Chris Richards stars in the short film "Spray Away." Photo / Pete Capó

ways. He likes a part he can leave his mark on and working in small, intimate theater spaces. He also calls playing Kirshner in "Beautiful" a "top, top, top" highlight.

Richards has also dealt with the challenges all actors face within a competitive industry, constantly trying to build meaningful connections and create opportunities for himself.

"There's no escaping that, and every actor probably feels that," he says.

However, Richards considers himself fortunate to consistently call himself a working actor.

"My hero actors in interviews, Bryan Cranston in particular, talk about, 'Look, I just want to work,'" he says. "... I feel like I've been able to do that, and I feel very grateful for that."

WHAT'S NEXT

- Richards' film "Spray Away" (the 2023 winner of Best Comedy at Myrtle Beach International Film Festival) is an official selection and showing at the Bridgeport Film Fest in Bridgeport, Conn., from Sept. 13-15. For information, visit bridgeportfilmfest.org.

- He can be seen in "First of Seven," an official selection and showing at the Burbank International Film Festival in Burbank, Calif., on Sept. 26. For more information, visit burbankfilmfest.org.



"I have known Chris as a performer for almost 15 years. We first worked together on 'The Producers' where Chris played the outrageous house boy Carmen Ghia. It was clear that Chris as an actor was what we call in the industry a 'fearless choice maker.' This basically means that during the process, you can count on Chris to give you 25 different options. Directors adore working with actors who bring so much to the table, and such is the case with Chris. The role of Don Kirshner in 'Beautiful' is conceived as comic relief as well as being integral to telling Carole King's story, so I knew Chris could harvest both facets of that. He's a tornado, but as far as natural disasters go, he's a fun one."

Scott Spence, artistic director, Beck Center for the Arts