

# STEPPEWOLF HALF HOUR

## Season 2, Ep: 6 – Erin Cook: “Friend to All”

**Air Date:** 6/22/21

**Featuring:** Erin Cook and Caroline Neff. With Audrey Francis, James Vincent Meredith and Christine D. Freeburg

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**Erin Cook:**

On paper, I do not qualify for this job. *[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois.

**Erin Cook:**

You know, I think I got hired on my attitude and my history already built with our artists and I'm forever grateful for that.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*. I hate having the first line of a play. *[Laughter]* It's the worst!

**James Vincent Meredith:**

Do we keep this in? That'd be great.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay. Welcome back, y'all.

**James Vincent Meredith:**

Hello.

**Caroline Neff:**

Hey everybody.

**Audrey Francis:**

Another beautiful day in Chicago, another beautiful episode of *Half Hour*. This week, we've got me, Audrey Francis—

**James Vincent Meredith:**

James Vincent Meredith—

**Caroline Neff:**

And me, Caroline Neff.

**Audrey Francis:**

And I just, I want to say that pretty much as soon as we started talking about producing a podcast here at Steppenwolf, today's guest has always been at the top of our list to have on. Steppenwolf's company manager of more than 10 years, Erin Cook, is universally adored by the ensemble, staff and patrons. Caroline, what was it like talking to Erin Cook?

**Caroline Neff:**

She has always been one of the easiest people to talk to because she is so genuinely curious about everyone, so it was really fun to sort of flip the script a bit and like, I got to ask her all the really genuine and interested questions. And, I mean, first of all, I sort of can't believe that she even had the time to do it. As you'll hear on top of helping with this podcast, she has about 15,000 other jobs that are not easy, so to have the gift of her time, to be able to really like— I don't know— hear her talk about her job and hear her talk about her journey to Steppenwolf is really fun and really special.

**James Vincent Meredith:**

I think that's the thing for me just because I, I'm used to being asked, "What do you need" from her, and so I rarely get to hear anything about what she might need or what, what makes her tick, and so that kind of excites me. The idea to actually listen and have her have a chance to cook for a bit rather than just making sure we're all taken care of. So I'm excited to hear, hear more about her like, like the real deal, like the real spill, as it goes.

**Audrey Francis:**

You know it's kind of that feeling of like, every time Erin Cook walks into the green room or into the dressing room, I feel a little bit like Santa Claus is coming to visit us.

**Caroline Neff:**

She does bring paychecks and so that might be part of it.

**Audrey Francis:**

But she, and she brings so much more! Like, I don't know how on earth she does every little thing that she does at Steppenwolf, like she's, she's just so involved all over the place.

**Caroline Neff:**

Right? And it feels like she maybe has a little bit of that Hermione Granger like, time warp where she can be doing sort of two things at once. She's rearranging one of the artist housing apartments while also doing payroll while also you know, assisting Anna Shapiro and it's just, she's amazing.

**Audrey Francis:**

Alright, then here it is. Caroline Neff with Erin Cook

**Stage Manager:**

Good evening, everyone. This is your half-hour call. Half hour til top of show. This is your half-hour call. Please make sure you sign in for this evening's performance. Again, this is your half-hour call. Thank you.

**Caroline Neff:**

Oh my god, Erin Colleen Cook. I cannot believe that you are here doing this podcast.

**Erin Cook:**

You called me by my full name. You threw it out there.

**Caroline Neff:**

I did. I feel like the people should know. So, Erin Cook for those of you that don't know is our company manager, I would say is your primary title. Would you agree with that?

**Erin Cook:**

Absolutely. Yep.

**Caroline Neff:**

And yet you also do— please list your other hats.

**Erin Cook:**

Yes. So, I assist Anna Shapiro so, it's one of those ampersand titles— company manager and assistant to the artistic director, which is just too long for a badge. You know, too long for a desk nameplate.

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah, you got to make it into like an anagram of some sort.

**Erin Cook:**

Yeah. *[Laughter]* Yeah, exactly. But those are my two official functions. And then, you know, I think as anyone who's worked in nonprofit in any capacity probably realizes everyone here and there picks up some other duties and projects and, and things to do, and that has definitely happened with me over the years, almost always for the, for the best, for another learning experience.

**Caroline Neff:**

When I first came to Steppenwolf you were actually my first experience as a company manager. I did not know what that title was. Do you mind just giving kind of a rundown of what like, a company manager does at a theater?

**Erin Cook:**

Yeah, well, first of all, I don't think I ever knew that! That's so— that's wonderful!

**Caroline Neff:**

You were my first.

**Erin Cook:**

Oh, I'll cherish that.

**Caroline Neff:**

I engraved it on a necklace.

**Erin Cook:**

*[Laughter]* Well, I always like to half joke, but it's half real, because my family, no one is in theater and doesn't know, you know, the job descriptions and stuff. So they hear company manager and they're like,

“Wow, so you're like, the manager of the whole company. Wow.” And I'm like, “No, no, that's a misleading title.” [Laughter] So company manager refers to, like, the word “company” refers to the company of a play— the cast, the actors, director, playwright, designers. And so my primary function is to make sure that when we are doing a play, the people who are here doing the play with us are happy to be here, feel good, have all their needs taken care of, are getting paid on time, you know, living— if they're coming from out of town they're happy with their apartment, they got on a plane to get here and they felt okay about that, and that's kind of what that word “company” refers to. I will say at Steppenwolf and I think at a lot of other theaters that also blends into staff. So I do, I do a lot of communication and caring with the staff as well, I think, of just keeping people informed of the things that are going on and— a friend to all, if you will. [Laughter]

**Caroline Neff:**

That fits on a badge.

**Erin Cook:**

Yes, yes. [Laughter] Erin Cook— a friend to all.

**Caroline Neff:**

A friend to all. So, what would you say— so yes, now, now, like, with a little bit of like, experience under my belt having worked with other companies that also employ company managers, I will say that my experience with you is very, very different, and that's not only because we have a friendship and because we have, you know, a longer-term relationship, but I do think that your job as company manager at Steppenwolf is very, very different than company managers elsewhere because we have a resident ensemble. How is your job as company manager at Steppenwolf with a resident company different than at other regional or Broadway theaters?

**Erin Cook:**

Well, that's an interesting thing because I've never been company manager anywhere else, so I only have my experience at Steppenwolf, so for me doing it, part of me is like, “Well, yeah, this is just, this is how it's done, this is how we do it,” but then of course, you know, I work with other company managers at other companies in Chicago. We have a little, a little friend group keeping each other posted and stuff, and I've had the opportunity, wonderfully, to work with other company managers as Steppenwolf moves shows to Broadway or elsewhere, so that's been really great. So, having the resident ensemble definitely does add another layer of what I like to call “care and feeding” to the job, right? So we have these 50 or so people, the number changes every now and again when we add someone, but I have the opportunity— and I'm going to use the word opportunity here— to, to form relationships with those folks and make sure that all of those artists kind of know what's going on. They feel like, again, they have somebody they can reach out to at Steppenwolf whenever they need to. They get taken care of while they're working with us, but they can also reach out to me when they're not working with us and just kind of want to know what's going on, or “Hey Erin, I'm going to be in Chicago for the weekend to see my family. I want to make sure that I see the plays that are happening, what's happening, what can I do while I'm there? I need to see the new building, can I set up a tour?”. I went on a tour of the new building this morning with Mr. Frank Galati and Mr. Bob Breuler, and what a darn delight that was. But it's a, I will say it is rewarding, incredibly rewarding, the work that I get to do with the ensemble and the relationships I've gotten to form. And also challenging.

**Caroline Neff:**

So when you started at Steppenwolf— can you remind me what year that was?

**Erin Cook:**

I started in the fall of 2008 right after Labor Day with the show *Kafka on the Shore*, written and directed by Mr. Frank Galati.

**Caroline Neff:**

But you didn't start as company manager, right?

**Erin Cook:**

I did not. I started— you read up on me. I started as, at that time the position was called “Staff Dresser”, and it was our resident wardrobe position, and we still have that position and Mel Motz, I love you, but I can't remember what your title is now, but I know it's different, but it's the same function. I came on and I dressed the shows, did wardrobe backstage, and I started with *Kafka on the Shore*. And that was what I went to— I didn't go to school specifically for wardrobe, but I was in the costuming world in school and that was what I really enjoyed, and I was lucky enough to professionally start working at Steppenwolf in that capacity and I just knew that I loved the company, and after a couple of years of the job I was ready for something, just something different. I always say you know, no shade in, in— there's— at all. People who are backstage folks are some of the most important people that we have, we're all doing it and getting it done. I just knew that for my longevity, I wasn't going to be able to survive that eight shows a week, weekends and evenings lifestyle, so I was looking for a shift there.

**Caroline Neff:**

And so how did you end up as company manager? Was it something that was offered to you? Is it something that you sought out or something that was recommended?

**Erin Cook:**

So, Steppenwolf has a history of keeping company managers on for a long time, so I'm very grateful. Our, the company manager before me was the wonderful Ms. Cat Tries and she had been in the job about 10 years I want to say, and was ready to leave to seek out other opportunities, and she did the classiest thing someone can ever do and gave like, six months' notice or something crazy. So that— yeah. So the company, Steppenwolf, had the opportunity to really take their time hiring someone and get them trained. So I applied, I just thought “On paper, I do not qualify for this job. [Laughter] But I have all this experience.” At that point I had done shows with, I had dressed more than half of the ensemble. I had dressed Martha Lavey, who was the artistic director at the time, multiple times. I'd worked with Amy and Tracy and other artists, Cliff Chamberlain who wasn't an ensemble member yet at that time but I'd worked with him, and those relationships are super important to Steppenwolf and I think really integral to the company management job. And the other things people, the people who hired me, David Hawkinson and David Schmitz and Martha Lavey, had confidence that I could, you can, I could learn the desk stuff, I can learn the paperwork, I can learn all of the processes. I had, you know, I think I got hired on my attitude and my history already built with our artists, and I'm forever grateful for that. I did have to interview like, a whole day with a bunch of people including Amy Morton, and even though I had just dressed her I was very intimidated. Love her so much.

**Caroline Neff:**

“I've helped you put pants on.”

**Erin Cook:**

Yeah. *[Laughter]*

**Caroline Neff:**

You were born in Wisconsin.

**Erin Cook:**

Mm hmm.

**Caroline Neff:**

Grew up in Wisconsin, went to school in Wisconsin, right?

**Erin Cook:**

I went to college at UW Green Bay— University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, and loved, loved my experience there. Cannot say, say that enough.

**Caroline Neff:**

And then from graduation, did you go straight to Steppenwolf or was there an interim?

**Erin Cook:**

Starting the summer after my sophomore year of college I was lucky enough to work wardrobe and be a stitcher in the costume shop at Utah Shakespeare Festival in Cedar City, Utah, so I did that every summer throughout college and then continued that after I finished school. And then got a job at the Milwaukee Repertory theatre, and I'm from Milwaukee, and I worked there for two seasons also as a dresser and then worked in Utah in the summer because they are just a nine-month company, they're not a year-round thing, so I was able to kind of keep the Utah thing going. And then I just realized I was ready to try something else. I didn't want to settle right away after school where I grew up. I just wanted to experience something else and New York scared the shit out of me. Um—

**Caroline Neff:**

Still does.

**Erin Cook:**

Yeah. *[Laughter]* And Chicago seemed accessible, still close to my family, but also an incredible, incredible theater scene. And the timing—I have been one of the luckiest, most blessed people in this industry and I will just hopefully keep passing out the blessings to others that I have felt because I had made up my mind to move to Chicago, very scared about going without a job, but thought “you just, you gotta do it. You gotta bite the bullet and go.” And a friend of mine, Jessica Stratton, reached out to me, I had worked with her at Utah Shakes four or five years prior, said, “Hey, we're hiring for my assistant, you should apply.” And I applied, and my resume spoke for itself. *[Laughter]* But it was just perfect, and so I moved to Chicago and started at Steppenwolf right away. And I'm so thankful for, I know, I feel like in this industry you hear all the time it's “networking, networking, networking” and “never, never burn a bridge”, and that has been true for me. I don't actively network, but I, you meet so many people and, and maintaining those relationships, first of all, is easy because most of the people you meet in this industry are frickin delightful. And, and second, you just never know when you can help somebody else or they can help you and, and it can just work out well for both of you. You just, you just never know.

**Caroline Neff:**

When you say that you don't network, I would agree with you. And I think that one of your incredible gifts as a human being which translates to being the most incredible company manager is that you actually have a genuine desire to form relationships with people. I don't know that there's a person on the Steppenwolf campus who is as known and as loved as you are. And I'm wondering if that like— because you have one part of your job which is to do like, the logistical, practical parts of it, and then you also have either the great opportunity or the great burden of a bunch of people who also want to be your friend. And is that—is straddling that difficult for you ever?

**Erin Cook:**

I would say, it's, it's a little bit of everything, right? And you're right, there is a huge logistical part of my job that is, that is just about staying organized to the best of my ability. And then the part that, I think for me, the relationships and, and the ability to care for people is what makes the job for me. And, yeah, can it be really hard? Yes. You know, if the theater is having a tough moment or, you know, just an example, when, when our beloved Mariann Mayberry passed away, she was one of my dear friends by that point and I felt like I couldn't grieve right away because I was helping other people grieve and, and also, well, we have to plan a memorial and, and we have to start thinking about how we're going to handle, handle these things and get the news out in a compassionate way and, and I'm forever thankful that I can be a part of conversations like that because I do, I'm a very empathetic and compassionate person and other people's feelings and how they see things is always at sort of the top of my mind, and on the other hand, yeah, it can weigh on you as, as me, it can weigh on me as a person to have to put my feelings aside for a little bit sometimes to help other people through, right? But I also think I get it back in spades. I get it back in spades. And when I, when I need people, you're all there for me too, you know? And so, it is, it is a back and forth. Yes, I also book your airfare. *[Laughter]* But, but I get this wonderful, just beautiful relationship with these creative minds that, that also fulfill some sort of creative desire in me too, you know? Being around that energy is, is so wonderful and just uplifting.

**Stage Manager:**

This is your 15-minute call. 15 minutes til top of show. Thank you.

**Caroline Neff:**

I'll only speak for myself but I'm sure that others would agree with me as like, having you visit us at half hour in our dressing room is like, it's one of the highlights of our day. And it's kind of like, we're like, "Alright, Erin came, we're gonna have a great show tonight."

**Erin Cook:**

Well thank you, I love that because sometimes I get down on myself a little bit because I think, "You got— you have to be around more, you have to be more present, you have to do that stuff more often and show that—" and it, and it can be hard to balance the getting stuff done and also just taking the time to say hi. But that stuff is, it's important. It's important to say hi, and if I had to like, pinpoint the one thing during this pandemic that I missed the absolute most, it is just that. It is coming to the theater at half hour of the show or stopping in the rehearsal hall as you're gearing up to go into tech week and just being a fly on the wall saying hi, offering support, "Hey, what do you need? What can I do for you?". I— that's, that's the thing that's been really hard to recreate over zoom.

**Caroline Neff:**

The way that I see you is somebody who is honestly, and I'm not being hyperbolic when I say this, you're just always giving of yourself and of your time and of your compassion. And so I'm curious, how do you, how do you recharge? Like, how do you refuel that?

**Erin Cook:**

Hmm. That— I have had to— it's interesting that you bring that up because I feel like over the last year and a half I have really worked on myself and trying to figure that out for myself and figure out a better balance. I won't say you're same as me, Caroline, but I feel like you know what it means to just give a little too much of yourself occasionally, right? And you don't know that you've done it until it's too late, right? Until you're, you're feeling that, that little bit of drain on yourself. And I have been able to really use this time to better myself personally in a way that I just felt too overwhelmed before to do. And I think that's just going to make me better at my job when we're, when we're back in, in real life, quote, unquote. And part of that is starting to recognize when I'm giving a little bit too much of myself and being able to say, "Is this really necessary, is it?" because if I, if I'm hurting myself in an attempt to support someone else, then actually that's not helping them either, because then I'm not ready for the next round, or I'm not ready for the long game, you know.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, so— one of the things that I find most fascinating about you always is your like, desire to stick close to your family, close to your home, like your geographical home, but also always being willing to sort of, you're a lifelong learner and you're a lifelong adventurer. Now, we went to Bulgaria.

**Erin Cook:**

We did.

**Caroline Neff:**

We did. So I was going to a wedding in Turkey and one of our ensemble members at Steppenwolf, Yasen Peyankov, is from Bulgaria. He's from a small town on the east side of Bulgaria called Varna. And I remember you and I just saw, I was like, "I think I'm gonna go to Bulgaria." You're like, "I'll meet you there." And I was like "No!"

**Erin Cook:**

It was it was a dressing room conversation. This happened in your dressing room. So this is the magic that can happen when the company manager stops by during the show.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, can you talk a bit, we can go into the Bulgaria part, but what else did you do on that trip?

**Erin Cook:**

Oh, man, it was, it was crazy. I went to Amsterdam for a couple of days by myself, rented a bike from my hotel and returned it an hour later because my butt hurt so bad. I was like—*[Laughter]* I was like, "I'm gonna be, I'm gonna just be one of these Amsterdam folks just tooling around on my bike going down to the canals!" And then, no, I will be a walker. I will be a walker, and that's okay. And that was phenomenal and just, witnessed beautiful things on my own which I'd never really done before. And then I went to— I met you at the airport in Turkey, and we flew together from Turkey to, to Bulgaria, to

Sofia, we stayed for a few days and that was wonderful, and then we drove across the length of Bulgaria, which was beautiful. I did—like, sunflowers everywhere. Gorgeous.

**Caroline Neff:**

Their biggest export.

**Erin Cook:**

Yeah, unreal.

**Caroline Neff:**

In the way that we see soy plants, they're all sunflowers.

**Erin Cook:**

I mean it was just unreal. And then we met Yasin and his wife Bisa and their beautiful daughter Anya and they, it was wonderful to see them in their home. And, and they got to show off their, where they grew up and their country and their, their lives that, that I don't know if many people from their lives in Chicago have seen you know and that, what a great way to see a new country.

**Caroline Neff:**

Totally.

**Erin Cook:**

Unbelievable. We had a great time. We swam in the Black Sea, Caroline!

**Caroline Neff:**

We did. I got sunburned on the Black Sea.

**Erin Cook:**

[*Laughter*] Yes! So, and then I went to Istanbul after for a couple of days. And then I went to London for a few days and Tarell Alvin McCraney is a wonderful human being and he has a great relationship with the National Theatre, and he hooked me up with, helped me get tickets for the full cycle of *Angels in America* so I spent a whole day at the National watching *Angels in America*. I went and saw another show on the West End and then I just tooled around London for a couple of days by myself and then I came home. And it was amazing.

**Caroline Neff:**

One of my favorite things about that story is it was like, okay, so this trip was planned because of a conversation in a dressing room which led to a journey to another country to like, the homeland of our friend and his wife. And then you went to London by yourself, but you still had the Steppenwolf connection with Tarell and just, how sort of like, it's amazing to me always how far-reaching Steppenwolf is. But that's not true for everybody, you know, like, and it is true for you, and I think that there's, there is something about you that just sort of invites opportunity in really cool ways, and I think that's because you have this genuine interest in people. Like, I don't think I've ever seen you have, like a, like a surface conversation with anybody. Would you say that that's something that you've always had, or is that something that you learned later?

**Erin Cook:**

Who knows where that came from. My mother is an open person and, and can be vulnerable and is also very genuine. But like, I took it somewhere starting at about age nine, I just— feeling everything.

**Caroline Neff:**

As a person who has been under two different artistic directors, I feel like you also, like, carry both of their best elements. You know, Martha was, you know, would walk into your dressing room be like, “What happened to you when you're five?” and you're like, “Whoa, why am I crying right now? Why did you ask me that question?” but like, was incapable of having a surface conversation. [Laughter] You know?

**Erin Cook:**

Oh, God. Oh, they, they— I mean exactly. The question from Martha for me was “So your dad was an alcoholic, right?”

**Caroline Neff:**

[Laughter] Oh my god!

**Erin Cook:**

Yeah, Marth. Let's get into it. Let's get into it.

**Caroline Neff:**

Weeping. But then now also as like, the assistant to Anna who, who just is a very different leader. She's like, she's very goal oriented and I love to see like, I don't want to say like, your ambition, but your, your drive, right? And I think you sort of like, I love watching like, the two artistic directors that I have had the fortune of working under feel very embodied sort of in duality with you, and I think that's really cool, and I don't know if you're doing that on purpose, but it's very cool to me.

**Erin Cook:**

Why are you so smart? [Laughter] That is so like, way to just encapsulate a thing that I've never even thought about, but it is 100% correct. Um, holy cow, I— first of all, I'm going to have to have a conversation with Martha tonight when I go to bed because I've got to thank her for some things. And Anna D. Shapiro, I'll call you later because wow, that is, that's spot on. I do feel, I do feel like Martha, Martha and I vibed immediately. Martha is the reason I got the company management job. I believe that, I think she was a champion for me. She saw the relationships that I have formed and felt that I could do this, and she opened doors for me at Steppenwolf. I got to go to artistic meetings, I got to sit in on, on producers' meetings and, and just learn and absorb and watch her work and watch Erica work and, Erica Daniels, when she was our casting director and associate artistic director, and that was, that opened just whole new worlds and possibilities for me. And then having Anna come in, again, she afforded me that same privilege and even brought me in closer, I would say, and gave me more responsibility with the ensemble and tried to set goals—

**Caroline Neff:**

Which was so smart.

**Erin Cook:**

Yeah! And I, and I have, wow, I just, I have grown more confident in the last couple of years, and— wow, Caroline, just so smart. My mind is blown right now! *[Laughter]* Who knew I was gonna come on here and learn something. This is better than therapy.

**Caroline Neff:**

And it's free.

**Erin Cook:**

Yeah! *[Laughter]* Holy cow!

**Stage Manager:**

Five minutes everyone. This is your five-minute call, five minutes till top of show. This is your five-minute call. Five minutes please, five minutes.

**Caroline Neff:**

Alright, now as the first person I think, I think this is true, but you're the first person on the podcast who knows what the lightning round questions are. Have you memorized them?

**Erin Cook:**

Not at all. That would have required me paying attention.

**Caroline Neff:**

You got it, so, are you ready?

**Erin Cook:**

We'll see.

**Caroline Neff:**

E. Colleen C., for the lightning round.

**Erin Cook:**

Hit me.

**Caroline Neff:**

Okay, great. What was your welcome to Steppenwolf moment?

**Erin Cook:**

Meeting Jon Hill. He was, he was an actor in the first show that I did and I had worked with a bunch of his friends from college, and they said, "Be friends with Jon", and I said "I will", and that just feels like a seminal, "Here we are, this is what you're doing" thing, and another moment of kismet.

**Caroline Neff:**

Cool. Cool. What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Erin Cook:**

I applied to be a GM at another theater and that was tough. I was feeling like maybe I was ready to move on, but I will say this was shortly pre-pandemic and in the end— in the moment it hurt, and in the end I, I truly think it worked out for the best. I cannot imagine myself being anywhere else during this time.

**Caroline Neff:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**Erin Cook:**

[*Laughter*] Oh, man, you know, this— don't take this the, don't take this for what you think it's the obvious thing anybody but an elephant, and not because of its size, or anything like that. I just, there's something about a delightfully dopey lumbering elephant just making their way through it. There's, they can, they're so easily happy. I just, I, it's like I both want that and think I have that.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**Erin Cook:**

Oh, I was in the Laramie project in college, so I do actually have like, an actor piece of memorabilia, and I kept a blouse from one of the characters that I played. Can't even remember the name of the character at this point, but, and it wasn't even like, it wasn't like I stole it or anything. They were like, "Yeah, this is clothes, they were just like, bought from Goodwill for you, go ahead and have them," I was like, "Oh, I will, thank you!" And I still have it.

**Caroline Neff:**

Who are some artists that are giving you inspiration right now?

**Erin Cook:**

Well first of all, I just finished *Mare of Easttown* and Kate Winslet is an artist, like, chef's kiss. So that's giving me life. I'm also obsessed with this musician Dermot Kennedy from Ireland who just writes like, really sad love songs but like, sings them so powerfully. Love him, can't get, can't get over him. And music is where my— music is where my heart lives when it's not in theater so also, the City Girls recently dropped a new album and it's so trashy and I love it, and I love them.

**Caroline Neff:**

Awesome. What do you daydream about?

**Erin Cook:**

Oh man, I do, I daydream about travel right now, and I think part of that is, is because it's been so, so limited because— and, but I guess in daydreaming about travel, it's more daydreaming about seeing people who live other places. You know, I was used to being able to go to New York or go to LA pretty much once or twice a year, two or three times a year to see this to see the folks that I know and love there and I haven't been able to do that. So I'm ready for that, for that moment.

**Caroline Neff:**

If you are super power, what would it be?

**Erin Cook:**

Hmm. You know, I think I just have to go just classic flying. Like, wouldn't that just feel so cool? Like, I don't know what I do with it. I mean, I'd get places pretty quickly, I think. But I just, that, that freedom would feel so cool.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is one thing you do every day?

**Erin Cook:**

I make breakfast every day, which is— some people meditate. Some people exercise every day. I make breakfast and listen to, and I say, “Alexa play 90s alternative”. Oh, she's probably going to turn on. Alexa, no! And I listen to a 90's alternative playlist and I make breakfast and I prepare for my day. And that is a new thing over the last, over the pandemic that I'm going to keep because it helps just kickstart my day and center me.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Erin Cook:**

Oh, you know, I live very close to Horner Park and over the last 18 months I have met many friends there for walks and love that, and also just go there and walk around by myself or throw out a piCaroline Neff blanket, play some cards, lay down have some snacks, whatever. I think just the, the simplicity of the Chicago Park System. Beautiful. Simple, everywhere, lovely.

**Caroline Neff:**

If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Erin Cook:**

Unhinged. No. *[Laughter]* Um, oh, wow. How could I have forgotten about this question? I should have been prepared for this one. Let's say, I'm gonna say, we're gonna put genuine in there because we've talked a bit about that. She's a, she is a genuine, forthcoming, compassionate human being who also sometimes can get a little bit worked up and just a little, a little, a little out of whack and needs to have, you know, needs to have her shoulders rubbed down so she's not wearing them as earrings anymore. You know?

**Caroline Neff:**

Our new resident playwright ladies and gentleman, Erin Cook.

**Erin Cook:**

*[Laughter]* Watch your back, Tracy Letts.

**Stage Manager:**

Places everyone, this is your places call. Places please for the top of the show. This is your places call. Places, please. Thank you.

**Audrey Francis:**

Ugh! I'm obsessed.

**Caroline Neff:**

You know, one of the things that I hadn't quite thought about is one of the things I really like about this podcast is getting to like, feel like you're sitting in a room with your friends, and especially with Erin, who's a person that I miss really, really dearly, to be able to sit down and listen to that over and over again is a real, it's a balm for my soul.

**James Vincent Meredith:**

I love the self-care aspect that she was talking about. I mean, look, you got 50 something odd ensemble members, and I was looking through my emails in advance of us talking and I was like, "Erin, Erin Cook." and I was looking at all these emails and they were all like, "What can I do for you here? This is ready for you here. You did great on this voiceover that I just heard on the TV, you did such and such." And it was just like, it was a constant like, like, serving up love to me, like filling my basket, which I thought was awesome. And she has to do that for like 50 people, and yet she still finds a way to have that self-awareness to say, look, I gotta take care of myself.

**Audrey Francis:**

Every company should be so lucky as to have someone like Erin Cook care for them. Erin, we love you.

**James Vincent Meredith:**

Yes.

**Audrey Francis:**

And we're sorry. [Laughter] For the past, for the present, and for what will undoubtedly be the future. And with that we are out of time, so thanks for listening to this episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

**Caroline Neff:**

And big thanks again to our guest this week, Erin Cook.

**James Vincent Meredith:**

*Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem, mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman.

**Audrey Francis:**

The theme music for *Half Hour* is by Michael Bodeen and Rob Milbourn.

**Caroline Neff:**

The voice of this episode's stage manager was Christine D. Freeburg.

**James Vincent Meredith:**

Special thanks to Joel Moorman, Madeline Long, Christopher Huizar, Kerstin Adams, Anna DeNoia—

**Audrey Francis:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

**Caroline Neff:**

Follow us on Twitter @Steppenwolfthtr or on Facebook and Instagram. And you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org).

**Audrey Francis:**

In two weeks, we'll be back with a conversation with ensemble member Tina Landau.

**James Vincent Meredith:**

Till next time, this is James Vincent Meredith—

**Audrey Francis:**

Audrey Francis—

**Caroline Neff:**

And Caroline Neff. A lifetime to engage, half hour to places.