

## Christina Koch

**Daniel Schindler** [00:00:07] So this is an interview with Christina Koch. Welcome.

**Christina Koch** [00:00:14] Thank you.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:00:14] Thanks for being part of this interview process, this oral history process. So could you tell me a little bit about how you came to be part of the review city players and what brought you here.

**Christina Koch** [00:00:29] Sure. Well, my life story is kind of rambling. I actually started out in early childhood education and taught pre-kindergarten for about eight years. And while I was doing that, I started taking some classes at the local community college just in music, did voice lessons and piano music history just because it was fun and I was interested in it. And that ended up turning into an Associate's degree in classical vocal performance. And the man who was the head of that department encouraged me to continue and get my bachelor's degree in musical theater performance. So I auditioned for some schools and I got a full ride scholarship to Metropolitan State University of Denver. So I decided to leave my teaching job and do that because it was an intense program. So I did that for two years, and my senior year I was selected along with eight other students to represent our school at the our RMTA Festival, the Rocky Mountain Theater. Yeah.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:01:50] I think I auditioned for that and ages ago.

**Christina Koch** [00:01:51] Yes. So they would have it in a different city every year. And that year it happened to be in Helena, Montana. So the school paid for eight of us to go to Helena and attend workshops and compete in the acting competition and all of that. And I was first going into the last round and then I came in second. But I got a lot of job offers and I'd never been to Montana before. So this was in 2010, and, and I was offered a position at Phillipsburg and at Virginia City and at Grandstreet and then a few theaters in Colorado. So I looked into all of them, and there was just something about Virginia City that was pulling me toward it. It was just seemed very interesting. There really wasn't a lot I could find online at the time. But what I could find and the people that I talked to that had worked here before, it just seemed like the right fit. So I accepted the job here. And then I left Denver, got up at 5:00 in the morning with my car packed full of stuff and drove the 12 hours to get here. And yeah, and I had so I'd never been here. I was going from Ennis up the hill and I saw the sign for Virginia City ranches. And I was like, Was I supposed to turn there? What am I doing? So I just kept going and I thought, well, if I get to Alder, then I'll turn around. But then when I pulled into Virginia City, it was obvious that I was here. And when I was moving up here, I asked the business manager what the address was. They said, I don't know at the addresses, but, you know, it's the last building on the highway on the left. You can't miss it. So of course, I was nervous because I was coming from a city and used in all of this. So, but I got here and it was easy to find. And they told me, if we're not here when you get here, if there's nobody in the theater, we're probably next door in the saloon. So I got here.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:04:08] A lot of people get that... I think I got that, "if we're not here we're next door in the bar."

**Christina Koch** [00:04:11] Yeah, right, Probably. Yeah. So the theater was closed. I couldn't find anybody. So I went in the saloon and asked in there, and the guy that was working in there, the bartender said, "Yeah, the cabins you guys are staying in or down

below the Opera House. I'll show you." So he went outside with me and showed me where to drive and he said, "I think somebody down there now, if you go down there, you can catch him." So I drove down and this adorable dog came running toward me. It was this little white, fluffy cocker spaniel. And I opened the door and got out, was playing with the dog. And then its owner came up behind it. And that was Bill Koch and I. That was my first time ever seeing him. I'd never met him before. And he just said, you must be Christina. This is your cabin over here. And so I backed up and he, you know, showed me where I was staying and everything. And he was working here that summer as the technical director and a performer. And his son was working here as a performer also. So I met both Bill and Errol the same summer. And yeah, so it was, it was exciting to get here. There's something interesting about Virginia City and when I pulled into town. I felt like I was coming home in a way. Like it felt like I felt like I had been here before. It was very strange. And I had quite a few, like déjà vu type moments through the summer where I knew I had been here before. And I. But I can't explain it. I have no idea. It was just really, really weird. I'd never experienced anything like that before, but I loved it here and I loved the people. And so working for the Opera House was very exciting. It's really hard work. You really don't know until you're here and you're in it. And but I loved every second of it. And.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:06:16] Do you remember the shows from that first season?

**Christina Koch** [00:06:19] Yeah, I do. Moving on. No, no. The first one was. It was, The Fire Within. Fire From Within? I can't remember the exact title. But it was about the Butte mining disaster. And then the next one was The Desperation. No way. The next one was The Miser. That was fun. And then The Desperation of Kathleen was the last one that we did that summer. So. And then the vaudeville. I loved the vaudeville. The vaudeville was great.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:06:59] Had you ever done melodrama or vaudeville or any of that style before?

**Christina Koch** [00:07:02] I had not. No. I learned a little bit about it in school, but I had never really been. Exposed to that before. So it was really exciting. You know, I really hadn't done anything like that. And up to that point. Like before I went to Metro, I had done some acting for film classes and for commercials where everything you do is very small and subtle. And so that's what I was used to. And then getting into musical theater, it was always like, be bigger, be bigger, be bigger. And then when I got the job up here, my acting coach was like, "You got to be the biggest characters you can possibly imagine. So you feel completely ridiculous", you know? And so it took me awhile to get out of the mindset of where I was before and into what this theater requires. But it was so much fun and you just learn so much and you learn so fast to be able to put on and take off characters that fast, you know, just because sometimes you'll have a vaudeville number right next to each other and you have to go off and just, you know, as quickly as you change your costume, you change your character and you come back on to somebody else. And and that's interesting. It's hard for some people who haven't done it before. And, you know, as people who like to sit and get in the mindset of the character and, you know, lean more towards method acting. And, you know, we've had some actors like that who have had a really hard time with the speed. Of changing characters. But yeah, but I think people learn a lot from being able to do that and. Yeah, I remember my train of thought was going, but.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:08:59] That was back in 2010.

**Christina Koch** [00:09:01] 2010 was my first summer here. Yeah. And I loved it a lot and then that's when I got to know Bill and his son both. And we started dating that summer. You know, as a lot of people do in

**Christina Koch** [00:09:15] Summer theater. But I really loved it up here. And he had run the theater before and he was just back as the technical director that summer. And he really loved it. And the person who had the contract at the time, they had one more year on it and then they weren't going to renew it. It was Gerry Roe with Rocky Mountain College.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:09:39] He was a professor of mine as well.

**Christina Koch** [00:09:40] Yeah. So he had one more he had one more season in his contract. And then after that, they weren't going to renew it. So the theater is going to be available. So Bill said, "I think I need to stick around here and plant my roots again, get to know everybody and put in a bid to run the theater the next season". And, I said, okay, let's do it. So so I went back home and...

**Daniel Schindler** [00:10:16] This is in 2012.

**Christina Koch** [00:10:18] This was in 2010 still. But after after the summer, after the summer season, we were trying to decide what to do with our lives, you know. So he decided he was going to stay. And so he got a job at the gas station in Ennis and got a place to rent here and just got to know people. And I went back home and packed my stuff up and finished school, settled everything I needed to settle in Denver and then moved back that Fall. And and then in 2011, I worked at the Ennis Community Children's School in Ennis teaching kids again, did that for a year, and then and we put in the bid for the theater and we took it over in 2012.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:11:12] So can you explain "putting in a bid" so that people understand. Because everything in town used to be owned by the Bovey's

**Christina Koch** [00:11:18] Right, Right.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:11:20] And it was changed over to the state in '98.

**Christina Koch** [00:11:25] I believe, something like that. Yeah.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:11:26] And now there's individual contracts.

**Christina Koch** [00:11:28] Right, Right. So it's the Montana Heritage Commission is the name of the group that owns it now that runs it for the state. And you have to lease the buildings from the state. So different concessionaires will put in bids to run the business. And then the Heritage Commission accepts a bid. And you could set up a contract with the whoever the concessionaire is going to be. So we are Koch Productions doing business as the Virginia City Players. So that's how those businesses in town work. So that's what we did. And it was it was really fun the first summer to, you know, so quickly be on the other side of the audition table.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:12:20] That's pretty quick to go from actor

**Christina Koch** [00:12:21] It was very quick.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:12:22] To "in charge."

**Christina Koch** [00:12:24] Yeah, it was very fast. But, but Bill had done it so many times, you know, So I was just, you know, like his right hand helper person and kind of learning along the way. And, you know, I was older and I had, you know, I'd been married before and I'd had other jobs. And I was, I worked as the I was basically an assistant principal at a private school in Colorado. So, you know, I had been in business a lot, so. Yeah, Yeah, right. Yeah. So I had a pretty strong business background already, but it was just interesting. Going from, you know, always being the person auditioning to then watching people audition. And you learn a lot watching people audition, too. So it was really fun and it was fun to I just I still feel so lucky to be here and be part of it because I love I love performing, but I also love designing. I love screenwriting. I love. And, you know, so getting to write scripts for the show and getting to design costumes and design the set and like be part of all of it is amazing.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:13:50] So you have your hands in all of it?

**Christina Koch** [00:13:52] Yeah. So we help with everything. The only thing I really hadn't done was managing the tills and the banking and the inventory and stuff like that until Bill had his heart attack. And then he. Yeah, and then he had his quadruple bypass surgery. And so then I had to step in and Errol came down in between the two of us, we got everything figured out. But you know, I was trying to talk to Bill about. How? Okay. So how did the tills run and how do you do this? And what do you do? you know, and he was like rather incoherent at the time. So it's like, okay, the theater opens in a week. You got to figure this stuff out. So that was a little daunting. You know, we'd been doing it for the 13th season. Yeah, this is our 13th season this summer, but there was still a lot of stuff that I hadn't personally done, and he just always took care of it, you know? So. I'm so glad he's back, 'cause it was a lot.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:14:51] So what makes this place special for you? You've been here now... 14 years.

**Christina Koch** [00:15:01] Yeah, I've been here 14 years. And for me, with Virginia City, it's really. It's the community that makes it so special. Actually, living here year round, you get to be a big part of the community and work here at the library. I started out just part time and then that worked into a full time job as an Assistant Librarian, which then worked into Deputy Director, which now as of a couple weeks ago, I'm the Library Director.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:15:31] Because, Jack retired.

**Christina Koch** [00:15:32] Jack retired, and I got my master's degree in library science. So yeah, so, so that's been great. But what I love about the library is that it is the community center, especially in the winter when everything closes down, you know, everybody needs something to do. So, you know, I'll go crazy. So, so it's get to put together lots of programs and parties and things for people and get to see everybody. And the community is just very supportive and, you know, like like was evident a few months ago. And he had his heart attack that the whole town just stepped up to help with everything that we needed help with. And that was wonderful. So for me, that's why I love Virginia City so much. The theater itself is so unique, and with it being part of such a great community, it's wonderful to have people come to the shows over and over again and

people who come in and say, "I've been coming to this since I was a little kid." And, you know, it's like it's their theater. We just get to be part of it for a while, you know? That's how Bill and I both feel. We don't feel like this is ours and we're doing this. This is, you know, whatever this is like, you know, it has a tradition. And we try to stay with the tradition of what it was originally when the Bovey's started it and when Larry Barsness and Ben Tone started it. And what did they want it to be? And we try to, you know, keep it in that vein and keep people happy. The people who've been coming here since they were little kids. And, you know, we just want it to always be nostalgic and traditional for everybody. So, I really like that about this theater that it has such a deep history. And um, and also I love the with the vaudeville style that there's not a fourth wall and you get to interact with the audience. So it's always different even though you're doing the same thing over and over. It's always different when you get to interact with the audience and it's just it's a lot of fun. And there aren't many places that you could get to do things like that as a performer.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:17:53] That's true. Yeah. The town is full of characters. Right. And it's interesting that there are, you know, 20 actors in town between the two companies, right. Along with all of the normal characters in town. Do you have memories of people in specific? People or things that happened over the years. That you'd be willing to share?

**Christina Koch** [00:18:24] oh, Man. I think as far as other actors go or just other people?

**Daniel Schindler** [00:18:30] or other characters in town.

**Christina Koch** [00:18:31] There are always interesting people. I'd say Dave Walker Mr. Davy Pooh is one of our most interesting characters.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:18:42] Why's that?

**Christina Koch** [00:18:42] Well, I don't know if you've met him or not?

**Daniel Schindler** [00:18:47] I haven't, or I didn't realize it.

**Christina Koch** [00:18:47] Well he's from England and he used to play with he played with Savoy Brown was his main band. He played with Black Sabbath and Fleetwood Mac and a bunch of other groups like that. He got fired from all the best groups, he says. But he's one of my favorites ever. And he comes in the library and sits in the corner and drinks coffee and talks all the time. So he's one of the greatest characters in town for sure. I really love him. Yeah. I mean, there are so many, so many interesting people in this town and. Yeah, I don't know.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:19:30] One of the questions I've been asking. You've sort of already answered. This is. So this year's the 76th anniversary of the company. It's been here the longest running company west of the Mississippi. No one has disputed that when I put it in any documents. So I think we're good. But, you know, you've answered this as a community. But it was like, what? What do you think has driven it for that long where other companies like show up and run for a while and they fold, You know, and people have said, it's the tourism thing. I don't actually buy. It's the tourists coming through all the time. You know, you talked a lot about community. Is that do you think that. Yeah.

**Christina Koch** [00:20:10] I think that is a big part of it. This community here is very dedicated to the history of Virginia City itself. And it's.. I mean try to build something new in this town and you'll see what I mean. Yeah, there's the City Council, there is the Historic

Preservation Advisory Committee that you have to go through first to even get to the City Council. So there's a lot of a lot of rules in place that the people who live here take very seriously. And it's a good thing that they do because, you know, the. One of the main draws and the main charms of this town is its history. And if you lose sight of that, then, you know, you'd lose sight of the heart of the town and it could grow into Bozangelus. And, you know, so, you know, as far as as the historic district goes, it's nice to have those rules in place to try to keep the town historic and try to keep keep its charm and keep its draw. And then on the flip side of that, just finding the line between change and progress, because the buildings do need to be taken care of and changed. I mean, everything does grow and we do need to grow to appeal to new generations. And, you know, so it's really finding the balance between all of that history and progress. But. Just the fact that this town is so proud of its history. And. The business owners, you know, are here for that reason. And like the Chamber of Commerce and everybody works really hard to bring in tourism and to promote our history and to keep Virginia City on the map. And that. You know, it's a lot of work because right now I'm also the Executive Director for the Chamber this year, and it's a lot of work. I'm very busy, but it's a lot of work that goes into it that people just, you know, voluntarily pour their hearts into this to get the word out, to get people to come to Virginia City to keep coming to Virginia City. And if Virginia City didn't have people doing that throughout history, then it probably would have closed down at some point. You know, the theater wouldn't be able to keep going. It is a lot of overhead with the theater paying everybody's salaries to come here, paying for all of the buildings for them to live in and paying, you know, pay all their utilities. We pay their WiFi. We have a little laundry facility down there. We even give them money for food. We go, you know, it's and then, of course, the, you know, the heating bill, the air conditioning bill, the, you know, just all of it. It's a lot of overhead. So you have to sell a lot of tickets to be able to keep the door open.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:23:35] So this is a good segway to the next question. So how have you seen the theater change from the time you've started to now? And what do you think happens in the future?

**Christina Koch** [00:23:52] You know, we've we've worked really hard to keep it. Like I was saying, keep it traditional, keep it in the same vein of, you know, doing the hour long melodramas and then 15 minute intermission, 45 minute vaudeville show on the weekends. We did change. It was, there were seven shows a week. That was melodrama, vaudeville, every single show. And we found that a lot of families that come during the week. Didn't want to stay that long. And people are really interested in the vaudeville shows. So we just started offering just the vaudeville show during the week and then doing the melodrama and vaudeville on the weekends. And it's worked really well for us. Our numbers, you know, they went up a little bit, not a lot, but that's a lot less work for all of the actors, you know. And to still see an increase in our numbers doing that, much less work, that was good. So that that was a change that we saw. Daytime shows tend to do better than nighttime shows during the week because I think it's a lot more families. I know Bill can talk about when he was here before the late 80s, early 90s. It was kind of a party town. So it was, you know, late night shows were great and people party all night and it was, you know, and now it's a lot more family oriented. And daytime shows is when you get the most numbers and evenings it just kind of drops off. Excuse me, my cold. So that has changed and I've I've noticed change in the the audience myself, just in the, you know, 14 years that I've been here. Audiences can be. They're actually a lot more accepting now than they used to be of, like, different sexualities. Doing doing vaudeville and hiring someone who, like a gay man, would. Didn't feel. Like it didn't seem like it would be as well accepted for them to be themselves, you know what I mean? In the vaudeville show.

Whereas now it's not even a question. You know, and they and it's just well-received. You know, everybody. And I just. I feel like. In a strange way, because the world is so divided right now politically, you know, and just like everything, but just from what I've seen with the audiences at the theater, I feel like in general, everybody's more accepting now than they were 15 years ago. Which is wonderful. Yeah. You know, it's just wonderful.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:27:24] What happens next?

**Christina Koch** [00:27:25] Next. Well, I hope that it I hope the theater will continue doing melodramas and vaudeville and, you know walking the line between tradition and appealing to new generations and, you know, just keeping the tradition alive, but also keeping it exciting and exciting and new for new audiences and I just hope it keeps going. You know? I really do. We've worked really hard to keep it going. And in 2020, when Covid hit. That was hard. You know, we were lucky in this area. We were so remote that it hit us later than it hit everybody else. So we were able to open that season. We were open for three and a half weeks with Rumpelstiltskin before it hit the town. And then somebody in The Bale had it and they had to close the bathrooms. And that's our access to bathrooms is the Bale bathrooms. So once those were closed, we were like, Well, I guess we'll have to close down. So we were only open for three and a half weeks, but at least we kept the continually running summer stock theater company. So that was good.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:28:52] Is there anything else you'd want to share with whoever watches this. With someone who've never been to Virginia City, what would you tell them about it?

**Christina Koch** [00:29:04] It's a very unique place. If you get a chance to come, I definitely would. You get to go to the creamery and get old fashioned ice cream. You can go down to Nevada City and pan for gold. You can ride the stagecoach and walk around and see the old buildings and old artifacts. And it's really a fascinating place. All the old music machines are really cool, but the Opera House is just special. It's very unique and I haven't ever seen anything else like it in the country. But so, yeah, I would definitely suggest coming visiting.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:29:50] Well, thank you, Christina, so much for your time and thank you for fighting through a cold to do this little recording.

**Christina Koch** [00:29:54] Your welcome.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:29:56] I appreciate that very much.