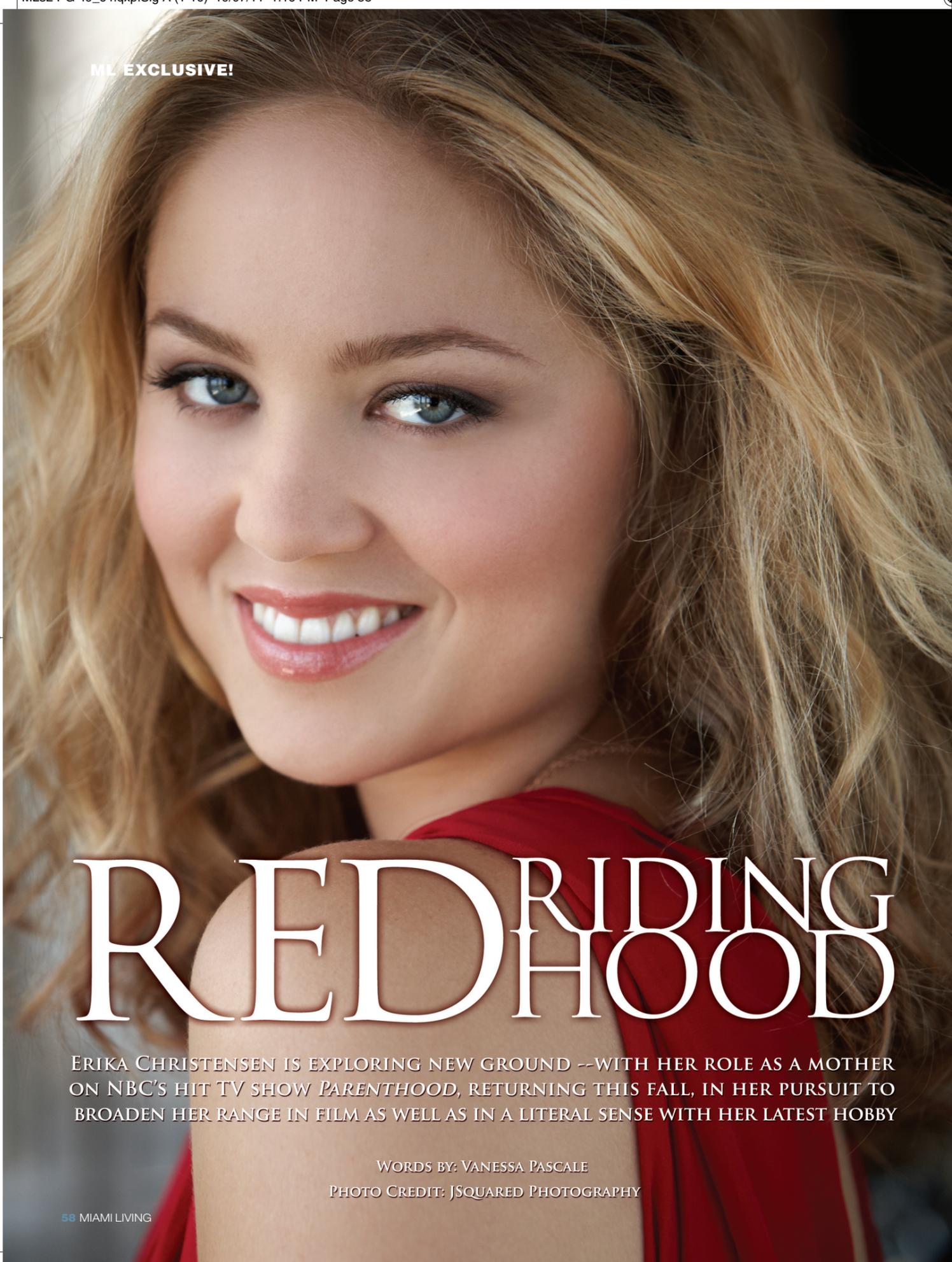


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RED RIDING HOOD

ERIKA CHRISTENSEN IS EXPLORING NEW GROUND --WITH HER ROLE AS A MOTHER ON NBC'S HIT TV SHOW *PARENTHOOD*, RETURNING THIS FALL, IN HER PURSUIT TO BROADEN HER RANGE IN FILM AS WELL AS IN A LITERAL SENSE WITH HER LATEST HOBBY

WORDS BY: VANESSA PASCALE

PHOTO CREDIT: JSQUARED PHOTOGRAPHY

ERIKA CHRISTENSEN arrives at the Intelligentsia Coffee Bar, in the neighborhood of Silver Lake in Los Angeles, on her bicycle. Fresh faced, her tousled blond hair is pulled up and she is styled in a light blue button-down with its sleeves rolled up, white shorts and chic toffee-hued Tory Burch sandals. Looking very All-American and as if she just stepped out of a Ralph Lauren ad, the look is quite fitting as it is 4th of July weekend. She grabs a cool beverage and a to-go treat and we settle onto one of the blue wood benches out front.

This fall, Erika reprises her role as Julia Braverman-Graham on NBC's hit comedy-drama *Parenthood* —in its third season. "At the end of the second season, I was thinking, *If this is what it feels like to do two seasons, then sign me up for the duration. I'm in.* It still feels like we're just getting started... It's a really good show, so yay!" Erika says enthusiastically.

The role of Julia (wife-mother-lawyer) is a more mature role than Erika has taken in the past and one that she's adapted nicely to. For those who are not familiar with the character, Erika explains, "What you're seeing of Julia is her coming to the realization that she's not as good at the home life as she is at her job. She's not necessarily the greatest mother —and then her trying to resolve that..." Erika mentions that her girlfriends, who are mothers, have given their seal of approval on her getting the mom role right, which she is elated about. Playing Julia seems to have also given Erica some insight and appreciation for parenthood. "Sam Jaeger, who plays my husband (Joel) on the show, is a father. He's a really good, patient father, and he plays a really, good patient father on the show as well. I intend to have children too," she adds.

Audiences have watched Erika develop into a beautiful woman over the span of her career onscreen, so it's only natural for her tastes in characters she's interested in portraying to grow as she does. In addition to her seeking more "grown-up roles," she hopes to explore different genres: comedy, action, and period-piece-type movie roles in the future.

In entertainment since she was 12-years-old, Erika's career gathered force at whirlwind speed. Erika tells me that she went to her mother and told her that she needed an agent. Some parents might dismiss such a request, but her mother took it seriously and secured one for her. Within a few weeks Erika was getting a taste of stardom. "I found out much later, that my parents had discussed it and decided they would give me a trial period, I guess it was six weeks, to see how I did. In six weeks, I got three national commercials and was making more money than they were..." She makes sure to note that all of this was made possible with her mother's dedication to driving her to auditions and handling the logistics of it all.

From national commercials, to appearing in the late Michael Jackson's music video "Childhood" ("I never got to meet him, but he sent me an autographed picture, so that was cool," she says), to her breakthrough performance as Michael Douglas' onscreen heroin-addicted daughter Caroline Wakefield in *Traffic*, Erika steadily established herself as a serious actress and was in the works of building an impressive resumé. Several film roles, with major heavy hitters, followed: *The Upside of Anger* (Kevin

Costner), *Flightplan* (Jodie Foster), *The Banger Sisters* (Susan Sarandon and Goldie Hawn) — making it even more apparent that Erika could hold her own among the most revered thespians in the business.

For Erika, film and TV present her with two very different and enticing worlds. The thoughtful actress explains, "Movies, they're kind of a sprint. If I was working on a job out of town, I'd just turn off my phone ignore everybody and disappear for those months. Whereas on a show, it's part of your daily life, you have to still engage with the rest of your life. You can't sit out forever, so that's a really interesting difference there. I like that's it's really integrated into your overall life. It's a long-term commitment, I like that."

Erika temporarily stepped away from films while shooting the first couple of seasons of *Parenthood*, now she's ready to get back into them. "I just got hungry again. I actually really like auditioning, so I've been auditioning, meeting people, reading scripts. It's all really good fun. Because we're going back to work soon on the show, I have a feeling I'm going to end up having to juggle two at a time, doing TV and a movie." Acting is in her blood. It's never long before she's looking for the right role.

Her attraction to acting rests in her inquisitive nature. Portraying another person allows the opportunity to experience a multitude of

lives through acting. "It's really kind of a wild and fascinating thing. It's kind of profound. You have to allow yourself to live somebody else's life for a period of time. You learn a lot from these characters or you can. I have three brothers in real life, but in *The Upside of Anger*, I had three sisters and it's a totally different dynamic. I got to explore that a bit. I just did one episode of *SVU*, where I played an FBI agent and it's such a strange kind of shift in the way you're perceived to walk around with a gun on your hip —little insights into things like that," she passionately explains.

Erika has been able to dabble in the minds of unique characters over the course of her career, is there a favorite thus far? "There are a number of them I

really liked... Oh, boy, ya know what? I have a good reason for this, I'm not being lazy. I like Julia, because her energy is so different from anyone I've ever played and so different from me. Most of the other the characters I've played have some hint of me sneaking through. I'm very live-and-let-live..." she says, gesturing with her hands animatedly, "I'm pretty mellow and she is not. She is really controlling and very uptight. She makes me laugh when I read the script and I think that's really cool to experience someone so different from myself..."

Erika's high-energy is endearing and infectious. Describing herself as a "barefoot-in-the-park-kind-of-a-person," Erika tells me about a hobby she has wholeheartedly embraced within the last year —cycling. "It's like a whole new identity how I'm a cyclist. That's big now!" says the wide-eyed actress. Cycling since September of last year, she has gotten involved with a group of "knowledgeable and dedicated" riders, who ride everyday. "The first ride I did was 43 miles. It was just like, 'Ok, here we go!' I didn't really know that it was possible to do what we do. You just have to forget that and go with the flow —anything is possible!" she emotes positively. Covering miles upon miles at a time, Erika is reveling in her "new found freedom." The effervescent cyclist says that she

FALL TV

"I'm looking forward to watching Elijah Wood's new show, *Wilfred*. That looks super unique and cool. There are some great NBC shows I'm looking forward to... *Smash*, it's about Broadway. It's a musical --Anjelica Huston is in it. I saw her and was like, 'You're on my network!' That's all I said. I was so proud. Yes! Those are two I'm really looking forward to seeing."

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rides everywhere. "Before I would complain to drive my car to West Hollywood from my house, it would take 20 minutes or so. It's 20 minutes by bike as well. And a lot of places you get to faster by bike. After this I'm going to ride downtown and then I'm going to go up to my fella's house in east L.A. and then I'll ride back to Hollywood tomorrow. It's like when you first get a car as a teenager or you first get a bike," she explains, her face all lit up. An added benefit, Erika mentions, is that she can eat whatever she wants because of cycling, which is evident as she is quite fit and slender.

Clearly, passion is not something Erika has a lack of. All of her interests she speaks of enthusiastically and expressively, especially her love of music and singing. If she wasn't an actress, Erika would most likely pursue music. "What I've said before is that I haven't figured out what my own style is..." says the chanteuse in regard to cutting her own music album. "I don't want to be led into doing something and have it not be really me." Last year she tested the waters and recorded a song she was inspired to write. But don't count on that song, with its "Billie Holiday-ish, swingy-jazzy-flirty-feel," to be heard by an audience —she was just experimenting. "The lyrics are a little risqué, probably not risqué compared to what's on the radio, but for me to put out there, it's a little much."

For the time being, Erika is focusing her creative energy on her current craft. The deep-seated need to pursue music on a professional level is not tugging at her the way acting does, she's just happy to have music be a part of her life artistically. "My dad plays piano, so when I'm at my parent's house, they live in L.A. too, I'm like 'Dad, lets do a sing-a-long!' Play and sing. And I'm telling all my musician friends, 'Jam session. Come on!'" She

animatedly gets into how her friend Travis Warner has a music project called "Cover Nights," which is sort of a "game" that involves a group of people writing down the names of songs, pulling one out of a hat and recording the impromptu performance of it. "Nobody really rehearses, we just record it. Like, 'Ok, you play guitar. You play bass. And they are musicians, so they can do that. So I sang on a recording that I think will be on iTunes soon. It's a mash-up of that Prince song, "Controversy" and the Spoon song, "Turn My Camera On." *I turn my camera on, I cut my fingers on the way....*" she sings.

Erika is in her element when among friends —easily presumed by her exuberant delivery when speaking of them— and a gathering of them is certainly in order with her 29th birthday coming up August 19th. Last year's festivities included a dinner party at *Top Chef* winner Ilan Hall's restaurant, The Gorbals, in downtown L.A, where there was a whole roasted pig, live music, and dancing. To further celebrate, she hosted a brunch at her house with about 30 people in attendance. "It was really cool. I cooked, made fish tacos, carnitas made from the leftover pork, tons of fruits and vegetables that my mom juiced... It's really fun just to have people kind of experience the exact fun that I wanted," says Erika. As for her upcoming fête, she's thinking of doing something along the same lines and is entertaining the idea of weaving her newfound hobby into it. "Maybe choose somewhere and have all my riding buddies ride with me to go there and all my non-riding buddies drive and meet us there," she says with a laugh. And hopefully, at the birthday girl's request, a game of running charades will ensue. What's a party without games? As lively and fun-loving as Erika is, there's sure to be much merriment. **ML**



60 MIAMI LIVING

Photo credit: Art Streiber

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Fans would be surprised to find out...

"Nothing anymore, now that I'm on Twitter all the time," Erika says with a laugh. "Hip-hop is a big part of my life. It has been for a long time. And skateboarding is a big part of my life --not as an activity I perform, but as a culture. It's something that I've always admired. I admire how much of an individual viewpoint somebody has to have to do that. You have to almost disagree with physics. It's like, *Gravity? Who cares!?* It's kind of crazy. I think it's really cool to be able to disconnect yourself from what society thinks you're supposed to do and supposed to think."

Photo credit: Mitchell Haaseth / NBC