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Irene Ziegler at home in Richmond.

PROFILE

“YOUR DOOR IS AJAR”

The many voices of actor, playwright, and author Irene Ziegler.

By Sherrie Page Guyer | Photo by Adam Ewing

Whether using her home's tiny coat closet as a recording studio, penning plays with her neighbor, or hanging out with zombies, it's just another day at the office for the multitalented Irene Ziegler. A creative to her core, Ziegler—who has called Virginia home since 1987—divides her talents between voiceovers, writing, and acting. She proudly calls herself “a messy artistic hybrid” with a mind that never rests.

“I have a few irons in the fire most of the time,” she tells me. “When one of them heats up, that’s how I identify. Right now, I’m a playwright and am rolling that boulder up a hill. Next week, I’m in a staged reading of a new play, so I’ll don the actor hat. I do several voiceovers a week, so they are my sustenance—more bread and butter than steak and potatoes—but hey ... I’m still at the table.”

INDEED, ZIEGLER BOASTS THE CV OF an impressively well-rounded artist. She is the author of two novels, *Rules of the Lake* and *Ashes to Water*, as well as multiple plays. Her acting resume spans stage, film, and TV. A regional theatre icon, Ziegler has performed throughout the Commonwealth in roles ranging from a nun in *Doubt: A Parable* to a teenager with a rapid aging condition in *Kimberly Akimbo*. In films, she has worked alongside notable celebrities like Sandra Bullock in *Premonition* and, most recently, Daphne Maxwell Reid in *The Cashier*, a yet-to-be released independent feature film shot in Richmond. Among her many TV credits, she played Broadcasting Woman on *The Walking Dead*, a cannibal who lures humans to a zombie-free sanctuary in hopes of eating them for dinner. Not your average employment history!

While you may have intentionally sought out Ziegler's work with your library card, theater tickets, or a Netflix binge, you've most certainly unintentionally appreciated her voiceover talents. Throughout the years, she's voiced numerous commercials, video game characters, and—as the original voice of your cell phone's techno-navigation—it was Ziegler who gave us all directions before Siri was born. "I recorded every street name, exit, and highway in the United States with three different cadences," she tells me of this fascinating but tedious job. "At 11 cents a word, I was able to complete a beautiful kitchen renovation," she quips.

Despite the far reach of her GPS cues, Ziegler tells me her favorite voiceover was for a talking Mercedes-Benz, "your door is ajar," recorded in a perfect, soothing tone. In Central Virginia, she's the voice you'll hear inside the bus when using the Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC): "Next stop, Chamberlayne Avenue ... Don't forget your belongings."



Various headshots, performance photos, and brochures from Ziegler's illustrious acting career.



Ziegler performs in an adaptation of her book *Rules of the Lake* at Theater IV in Richmond in 1994.

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Ziegler's voice literally and figuratively impacts the Commonwealth. Joining forces with composer John Winn—who conveniently lives on her street—Ziegler's current artistic focus is *Safety*, a play she wrote that explores themes of PTSD and gun control. "Theatre, more than any other art form, reflects our society," she explains. "In *Safety*, I wrote comedic characters and situations to explore heavier topics related to the human experience of trauma. I have no point to preach; I simply want the audience to leave thinking about what they just saw on stage."

As a playwright, Ziegler tells me she is grateful to live in Richmond for the "creative energy and opportunities for new voices." A two-time fellow in Cadence Theatre's Pipeline New Works Program, she credits the fruition of two of her plays, including the aforementioned *Safety*, to this initiative and the mentorship of its co-creator, the Tony Award-winning playwright, David Lindsay-Abaire. "A well-crafted play is a structural miracle," Ziegler says. "I've been so lucky to have David as a mentor and friend. I've never been happier than when sitting at his knee. I have Cadence Theatre to thank for those learning opportunities."

Laine Satterfield, Cadence's director of education, holds Ziegler in high regard as both a fellow actor and successful Pipeliner. "Irene is a very brave playwright who takes chances with her

work," Satterfield tells me. "Clever and wickedly funny, she has a depth and pathos to her writing that is thrilling."

Satterfield played a lead in *Safety*'s first table read, which occurred over Zoom during the pandemic. "I was blown away by Irene's ability to make the specific universal through her characters' points of view." After many rewrites and the addition of the songbook by John Winn, *Safety* evolved into a dramedy musical, produced by and scheduled to run at Richmond's Firehouse Theatre, July 8–26. As you plan ahead for the new year, be sure to mark your calendar for *Safety*'s world premiere, enjoy the show, and remember ... don't forget your belongings! 

Sherrie Page Guyer is a Richmond-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to Virginia Living. Her work has appeared in Newsweek, HuffPost, Time Magazine, and more. SherriePageGuyer.com



A selection of books by Ziegler, including *Rules of the Lake*, one of her most well-known novels.