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**William S. Gooch Talks to  
Lavinia Dowdell**

**Photo Credit: Ernie Green**





### **A New Kind of *That Girl*: Lavinia Dowdell**

I can't think of enough adjectives to describe Lavinia Dowdell; effervescent, free-spirited, and industrious immediately come to mind, but she is so much more than that. With her unique beauty, bubbly personality, and skilled craftsmanship, this sepia-toned *That Girl* is making her mark on both coasts. Never one to rest on laurels or past successes, Lavinia is always creating new opportunities and projecting toward the future. Unlike Marlo Thomas of the 1960s sitcom *That Girl*, who was always getting involved in zany situations that prevented her from performing her best on stage or screen, Lavinia is always prepared for each new challenge. I expect that this new and improved *That Girl* will soon be the 'It Girl' everyone is buzzing about. And to think I knew her when!

#### **William Gooch: Where did you grow up and what was childhood like?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** I am an only child and growing up I had a great family life. I grew up in Prince Georges County on the Maryland Washington, DC border, but I went to parochial school in DC for twelve years. I grew up around very progressive people that expected me to do well, so I had lots of nurturing and support. I had the typical middle-class childhood.

**William Gooch: Where did you attend college?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** I attended the University of Maryland, College Park. It is a big campus, 40,000 undergraduates; however, I never felt lost there. I really enjoyed college life because the campus was so diverse. I majored in English with a minor in Government Politics. When I graduated from the University of Maryland I did graduate work at the University of Miami. I attended only for one semester realizing that graduate school was not for me. A girlfriend of mine in Miami told me about a Miami Dolphins cheerleader audition. I had studied ballet since I was a young child and figured I could at least pick up the combinations. Out of 600 girls at the audition, I was one of the ones chosen to be a Miami Dolphin cheerleader. After two years as a cheerleader I realized it was time to move on. Two to three years is usually the maximum amount of time spent as a professional cheerleader. Plus, our choreographer, June Taylor, whom I adored, moved on to other projects.

**William Gooch: How did you become involved in theatre?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** After the Miami Dolphin cheerleaders I came back home to Washington, DC, and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I found a job and decided to take an acting class at Prince Georges Community College for fun. I knew immediately that acting was my calling. From that one course, I started auditioning for commercials and community theatre in the DC area. Because of two great management teams, Taylor Royal and Linda Townsend Management, I became SAG eligible within eight months. I saturated the market in the DC area very quickly and set my goal on coming to New York City. I have to add that my parents were so supportive with my career decision because they were seeing me on billboards all over the DC metro area.

**William Gooch: So how did you first come to NYC?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** I first started out commuting on Amtrak to New York City taking acting classes while I was doing community theatre, commercials, and print work in DC. What I've found that is so important about taking acting classes, other than working on your technique, is that you get to meet other acting professionals that tell you where the jobs are. From the connections I made in my acting classes, I was sending out my headshots and resume. I was getting same-day calls to audition in New York City and was not able to go to auditions because of my commute from DC. Casting agents didn't know I didn't live in New York City because I had a 212 answering service. So moving to New York City was a natural and necessary progression.

**William Gooch: What was it like at first auditioning in New York City?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** After auditioning regularly in New York City, I noticed that I

was seeing the same girls at auditions. We all had the same look; you know hairstyle, height, complexion, etc. I have heard the same story from girls of other ethnicities. I don't know why that is, but when I first started I experienced that a lot, but not as much now. I noticed more typecasting at staged reading auditions than auditions for commercials. Contrary to popular belief, I have experienced very little jealousy or cattiness from other women; in my experience most folks have been extremely supportive.

**William Gooch: I read in your bio that you studied the Stanislavski technique, could you talk about that?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** After being in New York City for a while, I felt I needed more training. At auditions I was going up against graduates from Yale School of Drama, the Actor's Studio and other elite theatre programs, and I felt like I was out of my league; so I knew I needed to step up my game. I heard that the Russian Arts Theatre was to be at Columbia University for a summer session. I auditioned and was accepted into the program. It was a very intensive ten-week immersion into the Stanislavski technique. I studied the works of Meyerhold, Moliere, and Chekov, as well as improvisation techniques, biomechanics, and of course Stanislavski technique. I was the only African American in the program. In that program ethnicity was not a concern; it was all about your talent. I even ended up getting the female lead in Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Moliere's *George Dandin*.

**William Gooch: How did studying the Stanislavski technique help your acting?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** Stanislavski technique gave me a foundation that I didn't have before. I am now able to explore a character from the inside out and the outside in. Because of this solid training, I have more confidence and project more confidence at auditions.

**William Gooch: Do you continue to study?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** Yes, I do. Your true class is what you learn on stage or on a set, but your foundation comes from good training.

**William Gooch: What theatre have you done in New York City?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** I have done a lot of staged readings. After I got my Equity card I got a part in an original Off-Broadway production called *The Hat Left Behind*. The play was about people in a nursing home and consisted of a tiny cast of four people. My character was a young lady who volunteered at the nursing home. I had to be on point in the production because the stage was so small and the audience was practically in your lap. Also, Off-Broadway audiences are so

savvy; they go to the theatre a lot and know when you are authentic or performing for effect.

**William Gooch: Has race been an impediment for you when it comes to casting?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** It has not been impediment; it's been a consideration. Race is an ingredient to the larger vision of the director or casting agent. And like anything else, you have to make it work for you.

**William Gooch: Are you cast as a certain type?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** I usually get cast as the best friend, the well-heeled professional woman, or earthy types. I stay away from sexy roles.

**William Gooch: Why do you shy away from sexy characters?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** Well, it not the way I want to go in my career. I know that it's a moneymaker and as an actress you have to be open to all experiences and opportunities, but I don't actively seek out those types of roles.

**William Gooch: What has your experience in LA been like?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** My LA experience has been great. I am now officially bicoastal. When I am in LA I do the rounds, and I have gotten such good response from casting agents. My objective in LA right now is not to necessarily get cast, but to get my name out there and meet producers, directors, and casting agents. I have gotten most of my LA film work from people who know my work or by word of mouth.

**William Gooch: You are in the independent film, *P.J.* What was that experience like?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** In the movie, *P.J.*, a man witnesses a horrific accident that leaves him almost catatonic. He is admitted to the hospital where the staff tries to get his sensory skills back. At the same time, this particular patient causes members of the staff to examine their own lives and personal demons. *P.J.* stars John Heard (*The Sopranos*), Vincent Pastori (*The Sopranos*), Hallie Kate Eisenberg (*Beautiful*), Patricia Rae (*Maria Full of Grace*) and Glynnis O'Connor (*Law & Order*). I play a nurse on the late shift and my part took about two weeks to film. The cast was great and so encouraging. It was also wonderful to be working with actors who have had stage and screen success and have had longevity in the industry. I learned so much from watching them work.

**William Gooch: When does *P.J.* come out?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** I believe it comes out on DVD domestically sometime in February 2009.

**William Gooch: What keeps you motivated?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** What keeps me motivated is celebrating the small victories. I try to remain in a state of gratitude for all the blessings in my life. When you first start out as actor you are so anxious for that one big break, but over time you realize that it's really a journey. Each opportunity is a chance to learn something new about yourself and develop your craft.

**William Gooch: What are you working on now and what do you have lined up?**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** Well I am going to be in LA in January shooting another film and I am waiting to hear about casting for two more films.

**William Gooch: As always, it was great seeing you again and much success on your upcoming projects.**

**Lavinia Dowdell:** Thanks, this was a delight.

Lavinia Dowdell is an actress living and working in New York City and Los Angeles. This is the first installation in a six-part series on Ms. Dowdell's life as a working actress. For information about Lavinia Dowdell, go to:

<http://www.laviniadowdell.com>





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