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THE FIRST TIME

Linda Lavin: The First Time I Sang in New York. (It Was a Bar Mitzvah.)



The actress Linda Lavin. Photographs by Elizabeth Weinberg for The New York Times

By Linda Lavin Sept. 26, 2017

So here's the story. My mother, Lucille Potter Lavin, was a singer, an opera singer, with a very beautiful lyric coloratura and a brief but dazzling career in New York. She sang on the radio and early TV with George Gershwin, Risë Stevens (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/22/arts/music/rise-stevens-opera-singer-dies-at-99.html>) and Paul Whiteman, until she and my father moved back to Portland, Me., to give birth to me.

That was the good news for me; not sure about my mother. I think not so much. She gave up her dream. She was very musical, petite, pretty, beguiling, very funny, a spirited adorable woman. You would have loved her.

My mother wanted me to be a concert pianist. I didn't care for practicing one damn bit but it was her dream for me, so, to be a good girl, I worked very hard at it. But I hated every minute. What I really loved was playing by ear, for myself or for my mother or for anyone who wanted to sing.

I sang from the time I was a baby. The story about me is that I stood up in my crib before I spoke and sang "God Bless America." This may be apocryphal but my mother dined out on it plenty. "Come," she'd say to the company, "she's singing."

That's pretty much who I have always been — a light goes on and I'll sing. I sang on beaches in Maine for my mother's friends, while they were sitting and knitting, and for their husbands, who would come on Sundays to play cards. My theme song was the Buddy Clark hit "Linda,"

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmeoEIpHmOY>) with the lines, “When I go to sleep, I never count sheep, I count all the charms about Linda.”

I thought that song was written for me. It was not.

As a kid I sang in school productions, talent shows and pageants, and tried out for everything in town. My favorite song at one point was “Secret Love.” I was singing in front of an entire junior high school student body, “Once I had a secret love that lived within the heart of me,” and I thought I was Judy Garland. I was trying to sing like her because I didn’t know who I was yet. A lot of booing and hissing ensued — a lot — and I was horrified. So now I was singing and crying.

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The kids simply didn’t care for my singing. Afterward I went out to the grass in front of the school and my mother was standing there with her hands on her hips. “Well now you know,” she said. Maybe you’ve heard that expression from your mother?

My mother was, you see, an all-knowing musician. “You don’t sing romantic ballads for teenagers,” she told me right then and there. Good thing Frank Sinatra’s mother didn’t enforce that rule! I loved romantic ballads and I loved sad songs because I was a very sad kid, so sad songs came easy.

My mother, Luci Lavin — critical, vigilant, observant — always knew the answers to questions I didn’t even dare ask. I now realize that I have spent so much time focusing on her critical nature that I’ve forgotten to remember some of the supportive and gracious things she did for me.

There was the time, for example, she drove me to New York to attend a bar mitzvah at the Pierre Hotel. I was still 12, not yet 13, a little Jewish girl from Portland, Maine, her first time in New York City. Pink lipstick, a party dress appropriate for my age, but when we entered the Pierre ballroom and saw the New York City girls — wow! They were stunning, sophisticated, with fully developed breasts, strapless dresses, high heels. And *red* lipstick.

I remember feeling like an alien in a very strange land. I’m sure there was dinner and dancing, probably speeches and maybe some entertainment, but I have no memory of any of it until suddenly I was on stage in front of 500 people.

This was my first large audience. I mean I was singing on beaches for my mother’s friends with the knitting and with the husbands with the card playing, and now I was in the Pierre ballroom singing with an orchestra: “Strange dear but true dear. ...” Lyrics from “So In Love,” from “Kiss Me, Kate,” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeiOFZy1dx4>) — a 12-year-old singing, “So taunt me and hurt me, deceive me, desert me.”

No boos, no hisses. I finished the song and as I descended the stage on the way back to my table, a small woman came toward me on the dance floor with her arms open wide: my mother. She wrapped her arms around me in such pride, such pleasure, such joy. I was overwhelmed. I was embarrassed. I was 12. But today, I am so grateful and full of love for her.

My mother gave up her career. My mother gave up her dream. I don't know why; I can only assume. But I do know that what happened to her as a result was a deep unhappiness and longing.

And so when I started to do the very same thing that she had done, when I started to express myself through music, when I started to sing, when I stood up and performed, there must have been a tremendous conflict in her, mixed feelings, as there would be for me if I had given up my dream.

Yet my mother gave me her full approval that night. No criticism, just sheer loving acceptance. In that memory, I now know the depth of her generosity.

Linda Lavin

The actor and singer's new series, "9JKL," has its premiere on Monday on CBS.

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