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ISN'T THAT...

Loving Linda Lavin

New year, new hit show for the Portland star.

BY STEVE HREHOVCIK

ALICE MAY NOT LIVE on 96 Clinton Street anymore, but the Deering High graduate is doing a starry turn in her new sitcom *9JKL* on CBS, where she plays opposite Elliott Gould. **Linda Lavin** plays Judy, a lovable, interfering mom to recently divorced son Josh (Mark Feuerstein). An out-of-work actor, Josh is forced to move into apartment 9K, crammed between his mother and father in



ISN'T THAT...

The cast of *9JKL*, from left to right: Elliot Gould, Linda Lavin, Liz Lapira, David Walton, and Mark Feuerstein. **Right:** Linda Lavin graces the cover of *People Magazine* in 1978.

9J and brother and sister-in-law in 9L. It touches a nerve, and it's devilishly fun. "We're getting wonderful feedback about *9JKL*," says Lavin. "The writing is funny and true to life. The character and actors are wonderful."

Lavin gets to the set early and never lets up. "It starts at 5 p.m. and can go as late as 11. It's exactly the same process established all those years ago by Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. We film to a live audience at CBS in Studio City, California, on Stage Two," where *Roseanne* used to be shot. "A warm-up comic entertains the audience between our scenes and keeping things mov-

ing. We also pre-shoot some scenes the day before and then project them on monitors for the audience, mixed in with the live performance. We shoot each scene at least twice;

"We get new lines from the writers and put them in right on the spot. It's lively and exciting and high-energy."

more often than not, we get new lines from the writers and put them in right on the spot. It's lively and exciting and high-energy."

Earlier this year, Lavin starred in the saucy Hollywood rom-com *How to Be a Latin Lover*. She plays Millicent, a mature millionaire in a romantic relationship with Rob Lowe's character, Rick. "The movie was a lark. It was a lot of fun to create my character, Millicent, with my director, the brilliant Ken Merino. I fashioned Millicent after the upper-class New York socialites of the 1960s. Working with Rob Lowe was delightful. He's charming and easy to be with."

The cast of *How to Be a Latin Lover* (Lionsgate) includes Mexican actor Eugenio



Derbez, who plays Maximo, a man thrown out of his 25-year marriage to a wealthy older woman. "Eugenio Derbez is the Cary Grant of Mexico, a huge star. He's so generous and kind," Lavin says. "In one of our scenes, I had to speak to him in Spanish, which is not my second language. He was extremely patient and helpful."

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Spicing the spice, Salma Hayek, Kristen Bell, and Raquel Welch helped make this ensemble cast *una verdadera celebración*.

THE ALICE YEARS

In 1976, Lavin grabbed the lead role in the sitcom *Alice*. The show was a decade-long hit (Lavin was on the cover of *People Magazine* on April 24, 1978), warm-hearted and feisty, in which Lavin plays a single mom hustling hash-browns in Mel's Diner, nursing dreams of stardom. Her portrayal of the strong-willed Alice earned Lavin two Golden Globe Awards. *Alice* ran from 1976-1985. Her character became a powerful inspiration for working women and single moms across the country. "When I was Alice, I came to realize I represented 80 percent of blue- and pink-collar working women. Alice politicized me. She taught me to be aware of the issues facing working women and single mothers today."

Inspired by her success with *Alice*, Lavin formed her own production company, Red

Barn Studio Theatre 2007. "People came to me with scripts about women in real-life working situations. They were stories about women who walked through fire and came out standing. Stories about underpaid women working in factories and nurses who dealt with people in crisis. This was during

"When I was Alice, I came to realize I represented 80 percent of blue- and pink-collar working women. Alice politicized me."



the 1970s and 1980s, which I consider the Golden Age of television. These shows were the forerunner of the realistic feature films about women we see today.

"Like *Alice*, *9JKL* deals with family relationships—except it's a more sophisticated and edgier show. The people are more privileged and on a higher economic level than *Alice*. I love to go to work every day. I feel very grateful and fortunate for this role, the quality of work and good people at this stage of my life. Fun and creative are the operative words for me. I'm very committed to participating in projects where I can bring and exchange those qualities with like-minded people."

MADE IN MAINE

Lavin was born in Portland, Maine, on October 15, 1937, to a musical family at 96 Clinton Street. Her mother, Lucille, an opera singer, gave up a promising career as a *coloratura soprano* to raise her





Alice is ruling the airwaves on Antenna TV, with multiple shows on different days across the week in 2018.

family. "I remember singing a three-part harmony with my mother and older sister, Jocelyn, while washing dishes," Lavin says. Her home state is still close to her heart. "I still have connections in Maine, including my sister and her family, plus several high school classmates," she says. "I like to visit when the weather is better."

During her formative years in Maine, Lavin studied at Waynflete and Deering High School, polishing her acting chops in local performances and in Deering's Glee Club. "I attended the Dorothy Mason School of Dance for many years and performed at Waynflete in pageants and plays." Her talent wasn't always given center stage. "While I hoped to portray Alice in Waynflete's *Alice in Wonderland*, I played the white rabbit." Lavin's connection to the local performing arts continued to build. "I studied piano with the great Florence Libby. And from the sound booth at radio station WCSH, I watched my mother perform



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her radio program every Wednesday night. I also did a number of plays and musical performances at Deering High School."

Lavin went on to study drama at The College of William and Mary and began performing summer stock in New Jersey. Full of drive, she went to Manhattan in the early 1960s in search of theater gigs. There she met famed producer/director Hal Prince while rehearsing her first Broadway show, *A Family Affair*. Prince spotted Lavin in the chorus and, impressed with her singing and acting, gave her five more parts in that production. Prince would continue to land roles for Lavin in a number of shows, including *Superman* and the revival of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* at the New York City Opera in 2017. "We've had a long and lasting affectionate relationship," Lavin says. "He was my earliest and greatest mentor. As a director, Prince always brought out the best in me."

ROLL THE CREDITS

Her talents have won her a Tony for *Broad-*



Fun fact: At age one, Linda Lavin astonished her parents by standing up in her crib and belting out "God Bless America." According to her mom, Linda was singing before she could talk. A refrain of Lavin's 1966 Broadway musical hit "You've Got Possibilities!" echoes across time and space. From the first, her career was written in the stars.

Fun fact: "Production of *9JKL* takes place in the former sound stage home of *Roseanne* (1988), (Stage Two at CBS Studio Center), which, due to its wide and expansive New York-themed sets, utilizes one of the largest sound stages on the lot. When *Roseanne* (2018) was announced as a revival in 2017, it was not able to return to its original stage and instead was moved to Stage 15."—imdb.com

Ever heard
"Kiss my grits?"
It earned stardom
in *Alice*.



way *Bound*, Drama Desk, Outer Critic, and Helen Hayes Awards, plus numerous nominations. She's starred in over 50 films (including *The Intern*, with Robert DeNiro and Anne Hathaway, 2015), TV shows, and plays, leaving her indelible shine on everything from *The Sopranos*, *How To Be a Latin Lover*, *Gypsy*, *The Intern*, *Follies*, and *The Good Wife*, to *The Muppets Take Manhat-*

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The childhood home of Linda Lavin at No. 96 Clinton Street is just blocks from Deering High School. To get there, simply stroll up Stevens Avenue and take a right after The Quality Shop. **Right:** Linda Lavin's Deering High yearbook photo. She graduated in 1955.



tan. Lavin also directed several episodes of *Alice* and produced soundtracks for the sitcom, as well as for *Damn Yankees!* and *The Muppet Show*.

"I went to Wilmington, North Carolina, to make a movie and fell in love with it." She also fell in love with her third husband, artist and director Steve Bakunas, and married him in 2005. While they shuttled for roles and performances in New York

and Los Angeles, they made their home in Wilmington for 17 years. "We found a garage in a neglected part of town and converted it into a theater," Lavin says. "We put on three shows a year for five years. We had great support from the town." Lavin had previously been married to Tony-award-winner Rob Leibman (known for his performance with Sally Field in *Norma Rae*) from 1969-1981.

Lavin continues to reinvent herself. When she's not on set, she produces and directs, teaches acting (including a master class at William and Mary), and oversees The Linda Lavin Arts Foundation, dedicated to empowering young women through the performative arts. On top of everything else, Lavin is currently launching a bed and breakfast with her husband in Chatham, New York. ■



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