

Written by Kiley Warren

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Dawnn Lewis is no stranger to the entertainment industry. After making her television debut in the third grade, Lewis has garnered a reputation for being one of Hollywood's most versatile talents – with a resume comprised of acting, singing and songwriting, and theatrical credits that have spanned decades. Though Lewis's first big break was on "The Cosby Show" spinoff, "A Different World" – where she starred alongside Lisa Bonet – she's managed to continue to stun audiences with gripping performances alongside Hollywood's finest. From starring alongside Beyoncé and Jennifer Hudson in the 2006 hit, "Dreamgirls," to being one of the newest voices alongside Kristen Bell on the Hulu-favorite, "Veronica Mars," Lewis is an unstoppable force, capable of finding her footing and delivering in almost every realm of the industry.

Now, she's adding another credential to her list of accomplishments, as she'll star in the Scottsdale Theater Company's upcoming production of "Thoroughly Modern Millie." We had the chance to chat with Lewis about her new role with the local production company, the influence that her mentor Gladys Knight has had on her career, and how the entertainment industry still has more work to do in becoming truly inclusive.



AFM: What attracts or draws you to working on certain projects rather than others?

DL: I would say that the quality of the project and the people I would be working with are the two things that really sell me on a project or opportunity.

AFM: Dawnn, I also want to talk to you a little bit about how you think the industry has changed. You're obviously very familiar with the entertainment world because you've worked in it for such a long time – but right now in particular, there's a lot more of a push for the entertainment industry to become more inclusive and to produce projects that speak to all audiences rather than just to a certain demographic. Because you've had such a successful and long career, I'm curious as to how you feel the industry has changed. Have you seen a visible progression of more inclusivity since you started? And where do you think the industry still needs to improve in that sense?

DL: Well, I think it's both edges of a double-edged sword. On one hand, it's gotten better and more people of color and more women are getting opportunities behind the camera. So, you don't necessarily see them. But even that seems to have its limits and its glass ceiling – it always has. But I do believe the numbers have gotten better over each decade. What I have found is that with this industry, for as creative as the creators are, it's always been and will always continue to be rooted in finance. It's all about how can we make money. And it's not necessarily that I like you, it's not necessarily that I like the fact that I have to hire you, but if I can figure out how to make money by working with you, then it's a win for me. So, some of the gains that I've seen that have been made, have continued to be political ones with strings attached sometimes. It's the same thing in front of the camera. We may start to see more diversity, but when you look at the context of whose being paid what, you kind of have to take a double take.

AFM: Throughout your career you've collaborated with dozens of different creative talents, for you though, what artists have you been the most struck to meet or work with?

DL: Wow – that's really a hard question to be honest with you. OK, in different genres: on stage, it had to be when I did "Tap Dance Kid," and Harold Nicholas was in it. Watching his movies when I was a kid – and even then, say they were re-runs, watching Harold and his brother dance, that was like watching angels with taps on their wings. Their performances were just absolutely mind-boggling, amazing and phenomenal. So, to do a Broadway show with a living legend at the time – he's since passed away – to do a show like that with a living legend,

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that was a real inspiration for me as a dancer. To be able to listen to his stories and learn about what the journey was back in those days, that was incredibly inspiring for me. In the recording industry and as a composer, I would say Grover Washington Jr. – the saxophonist. I had a co-written a record for his next exit album, and Nancy Wilson sang it on his album. Being in the studio with Grover and Nancy was mind-boggling for me. Until the day they passed, both of them became like family to me. So, those people not only inspired me, they actually helped change my life. They taught me more about this industry, and they made me think differently about how to not only honor myself, but also my talent – and to never take it for granted and to always strive for excellence. And you're talking about three people who were absolutely excellent within their own right. In film and television, Gladys Knight was another one for me. Gladys played herself in the series, "A Different World," and I got to play one of her pips. That was surreal for me [laughs]. She's one of those people who taught me how to do what I'm doing with class and elegance. And she's got what, six decades of experience within this industry? So, if someone's going to be a mentor to you, it's hard to think of somebody better.

AFM: For your latest project, you're working with the Scottsdale Musical Theater Company in presenting "Thoroughly Modern Millie." How did this opportunity come about for you?

DL: The artistic director of the theater, he approached myself and my team. He had heard me sing or watched footage online as well, and when they were putting their season together, he really thought about me in this role as Muzzy. Playing kind of the big sister person to the Millie character, and we put a lot of time into working it out so that I could do it in my schedule. We just finished shooting the series "Veronica Mars," which we've been filming since October. So, we just wrapped that and they're doing a reboot of the series with the original cast and Kristen Bell – all of them are coming back. And they added me to the cast. In accordance with what my schedule was already, we were able to work out the logistics of having me come down to Arizona and that was how I ended up there. David was and is convinced that I'm the perfect person for this cast and for this role, and put a lot of energy into making it possible for me to be there. And for me as a performer, you love to be loved. You love to be wanted and we spent a lot of time jumping through this job, for other jobs, for an audition, an interview, whatever it is – but when someone comes and gives you what they call a 'straight offer,' where you don't have to jump through hoops or do any of that stuff because they already know what you bring to the table and they want to work with you – that was basically how David approached me for this project. Which has since given me the opportunity to learn more about the musical and the community – that kind of opportunity and environment speak to my sensibilities as a performer. I mean this company is really a top-notch crew of performers and crew. So, I love it, and I'm really looking forward to it.

Scottsdale Musical Theater Company presents "Thoroughly Modern Millie" from April 25 to May 5. Get tickets [here](#).