

On cementing a future in an uncertain industry



Broadway actor Lorna Courtney discusses the ups-and-downs of auditioning, being a lifelong learner, and embracing every creative interest.

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As told to Sammy Maine, 1606 words.

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When did you first feel successful?

As an actor, success can be measured through different ways. It can be measured by how many notes you get at the end of your performance, or on the audience reactions or sometimes awards and recognition. But for me, I feel the most successful when I give the most or when I have the most impact. At first, I didn't know how big & Juliet would get, but when we were doing our out of town tryout in Toronto, people would just keep coming back and coming back. Moms would bring their young daughters to see me, and they would tell me that they feel so inspired and that they look up to me. It's those moments where I feel I'm doing the most good, therefore I feel the most success.

I'm interested to know what led you to this show.

I was in two Broadway shows before the shutdown happened. I was an understudy in both: one offstage cover in *Dear Evan Hansen* and in *West Side Story*, I was in the ensemble as an understudy for Maria. When the shutdown happened, a lot of creatives ended up moving out of New York because of financial reasons, and we started second guessing our career choices and our paths. Should we go back to school? Should we make a career pivot? When auditions did come back, the theater wasn't open, but there were some TV and film auditions happening, and I probably auditioned for about a hundred things before landing the pilot episode of *The Equalizer* with Queen Latifah. After that, it was back to the drawing board. I was auditioning for this one musical that I really, really wanted to get. I put in so much time and effort working on the material, and I didn't end up getting the part at the end of the day, it was given to another actress. But a couple weeks later, the same producer had another musical called & Juliet, and it was actually the same casting director casting for both shows. I was given the material and when I read the script, I was laughing, I was crying, it brought me so much joy. I read it with my best friend and her mom, and her mom goes, "Lorna, you have to get this part." It was so empowering and uplifting.

How do you deal with the uncertainty of the industry that you're in?

It's hard, because no matter how much time, energy, effort we put into things, it's not up to us. It's up to the people with money, the people in charge, the producer. Even when auditioning for college musical theater programs, if they have someone that looks like you in the program, you may not get it just because of that. They're looking to build a cohort, a group. So it has nothing to do with your talent at the end of the day, it's a specific look. The way I deal with uncertainty is when I am working, I make sure that I have an emergency savings fund that I'm building, and that I am investing into my retirement fund, my Roth IRA and also a regular brokerage account. Then creatively, I'm always in class. I'm always learning and I think that's really the only way that we can grow and feel as if we're continuing to get better. Even the greats, the people that made it at

the top, will say, "Oh, you never stop learning." So I take on-camera classes, I'm in voice lessons.

What resources have you found most helpful?

I've had to learn a lot about my body. A lot of people don't realize this, but when you're dancing on Broadway eight times a week, it's a lot of stress on your body and on your mind, too. We're acting and it's a lot of emotional stress. So after the show, I take an Epsom salt bath and I eat. I've also been doing craniosacral therapy with an alignment specialist. She's been doing myofascial release on me too, and teaching me how to do that on myself just to release any tension in the body that's held. That is all helpful. For me, eating healthily to fuel your body means eating a lot of carbs, eating more carbs than you think, because you burn it. I've learned a lot about bodily and vocal health and awareness.

Do you have a pre-show routine?

I do and I think it's important. For me, I do a physical warmup and a vocal warmup. The physical warmup involves Pilates and what's called a shush breath; many people think it's a breathing exercise, but it's actually being able to engage your core, because when you're singing and dancing, you need something stable in order for the rest of your body to move freely. Altogether, I would say it probably takes about 20 to 25 minutes to be in my body and in my voice ready for the show.

When you're not performing, how do you fuel your creativity?

This goes back to the pandemic where some people were thinking about different career options. As human beings we're interested in multiple things, and as an actor or as someone who's creative, if you can find a way to combine all of your interests, isn't that the goal? Wouldn't that be amazing to be able to do everything that you love or want to do? For me, I'm taking a songwriting course through Berkeley, and I want to start taking piano again to help with songwriting. I'm also taking a finance course for non-finance professionals. Even though some of us have business managers, we should be able to understand what our accountant or our business manager is telling us. We should be able to know how to budget and keep track and set goals for our money, especially since we're in a field where it comes and goes.

When you're not actively in a show, do you have a day job that you go back to? Or do you live on the savings you were talking about.

Prior to *Juliet*, I was working at a gym because I loved working out, and I could work out for free. Now I do freelance work, and that comes in the form of voice lessons and cameo videos, any little concerts or workshops. Honestly, a goal for me is to try and build something as another source of income and revenue when this job, which is temporary, goes away.

Is there something you wish you could have told yourself when you first started out on this creative journey?

Yes. I would say slow down and take in, observe, and learn. I think that when you want something and you really, really want it, you want to do it as soon as possible, which also means growing up sooner. And when you're young, why not be young? I graduated college early because I didn't want to have to take out any loans in my final year. If I could go back, I would want to continue to learn, maybe even do a study abroad program, something that I didn't get the opportunity to do. So I think that's also why now I'm in so many different classes because I want to try and make up for the things I didn't get the chance to do.

How has the meaning of success changed for you as you've become more successful in your career? Does the goalpost keep moving?

Honestly, I want to say no because for me, a lot of that stuff doesn't matter. What's important is you have to listen to your director, and if they're giving notes, that doesn't mean that you're wrong, that's not a bad thing. Don't take those things personally. It has nothing to do with how talented you are. But there are many people who

are very talented who never get recognized in that way, or to the highest degree as far as awards and things like that; that doesn't make them any less successful than me. For me, success is measured by impact.

Especially in an industry with so much rejection and uncertainty, it could be so easy to get swallowed up by imposter syndrome.

Who's to say the artist who has their own nonprofit and is making kids' lives better every day, but financially making a lot less than a multimillionaire, who's to say that they are any less successful than the multimillionaire? I mean, hopefully both are happy too, but maybe success is also measured by happiness. It feels so great to be able to do something that I love that makes me happy, and I'm able to bring so many other people joy as well. That to me, that's success. So many people are stuck in a position where they're unhappy. Some of them make a lot of money doing what makes them very unhappy. Does that mean they're successful? I'm a person that likes risks and challenges.

Lorna Courtney recommends:

Favorite food spots: Peacefood Cafe, Up Thai, and Modern Bread and Bagel.

Journaling and writing your thoughts down.

Going to museums and taking a walk on rainy days. I like Fort Tryon Park and The Cloisters.

Go to theater, concerts, comedy shows, or improv performances. Today tix app is great for tickets.

The New York Public Library for Performing Arts is a great resource.

Name

Lorna Courtney

Vocation

Broadway actor

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