



TAMILISA WOOD

interviewed by Ashley Pacini

Tamilisa Wood is an actress and a musician who recently played the part of Marjorie Hinckley in Gordon B. Hinckley: A Giant Among Men. Website: i-am-tam.blogspot.com

How did you get started in LDS arts?

My family has been pretty involved in the LDS artist world. We did plays together growing up, and it was actually my mom who got me started in acting. I was six when she got us into an agency, and that was the start of being serious about acting.

I've always loved making films as well—not just being in them, but being on the other side of the camera and being involved with the production. I remember when my interest in film developed. I've always observed the director on set, and when I would come home at night after being on set for a movie, for example, I would want to play director, so I'd get my friends and we'd make movies and I'd dress my animals up and make them do stuff. As I got older, my friends and I would incorporate a plot. We'd make up a little script in our minds and have a lot of fun with it. When we had sleepovers as girls,



we'd stay up all night doing music videos. We'd do a little backdrop and put in fades and choreograph it to the music. Everyone had their part. We made some good little productions

You went to college at BYU. Why did you decide on BYU and how did you choose your focus?

I was making church videos when I was nine and ten and I'd make them about Mormon ads. I'd make them with pictures of Christ, and I would use this old camera and go from picture to picture with the camera. I would have music playing in the background and topics would range from Book of Mormon to Jesus Christ to families can be forever—you know, those semi-sappy Church topics. But that's what I wanted to do and those spiritual things are what I went to BYU for.

When I got to BYU, I started my generals and then realized I had to pick a major pretty soon. I had a hard time choosing because I wanted to do so many things. One day freshman year, one of my

roommates came home and said to the other six of us, "Guess what, everyone! I declared my major!" I didn't know what that was. "I went to the Family, Home, and Social Sciences Department," she said, "and told them that I wanted to do family sciences for my major." I said, "That's all you do? You just go and declare your major?" And she said, "Yup."

I thought and thought and thought, and I decided that because I was already well-networked in the film world, and since it was one of my passions, that it would be silly not to pursue film as a major. So I went into the film program up in the D-wing of the Harris Fine Arts Center. I walked up to the front desk and said, "Hi, I'm here to declare my major." The secretary there looked at me and said, "What?" And I said, "I'm here to declare my major. I'd like to do film." And she said, "Oh, no, sister. Go downstairs to the advisement center in D-445. There you'll find packets of all of the things you need to do to apply to get into our program. You'll find the various sheets that have the schedules and lists of which classes you need as prerequisites." I

was shocked. I went home and told my roommates that my major was going to take a lot more work to get into. I had to do a three-minute silent film that couldn't be edited digitally—it had to be on the linear system that they had back then at BYU. I had to watch and critique eleven films and write papers on each. I had to submit résumés, letters of recommendation, and a plan of what schedule I was going to follow as far as classes I was going to take to finish. It was a huge process. I think about forty-seven people applied and only thirteen got in. I worked really hard on that application. And I got in.

Is film acting different from stage acting?

Film acting is very different from stage acting. Not very many people can do both, which is why I haven't done stage for quite some time. I remember going to a film audition when I was in high school, and after I had delivered the lines at the audition, the casting director asked, "Are you in a play right now?" and I said, "Yeah." She said, "I can tell. You just can't do this stuff at the same time." I guess I was over-projecting and over-dramatizing it, because with stage you have to do that. The motions are big and sometimes you're loud and sometimes you're not, but you're a lot more so with stage than with film, so she could tell immediately that I was in a play.

Stage is probably more time-consuming than film or video acting. If you're just doing a small commercial, you'll go to an audition that maybe takes an hour or half hour and then film the commercial for a morning and it's done. You submit your invoice, you get paid, you're done with the whole process. But stage is a huge commitment because you're rehearsing for weeks and weeks every night. You're memorizing lines that you have to deliver on the spot.

Tell us about your full-time job with the Church.

As a film student, I had an end goal to work for the Church, because I've always felt that you should put your passion into helping others and helping people understand the gospel.

After I graduated with my film degree, I luckily came upon a job within a week. I worked for the Education in Zion exhibit, which is now up and running in the Joseph F. Smith Building at BYU. It's directed by Dr. Terry Warner. There was only one other person working for Dr. Warner at the time,

Ben Unguren, and I knew that they were looking for some other media support to help make the videos that would go in the exhibit. So I pursued it, and I remember calling them over and over trying to make sure to get that job, and sure enough, they hired me on and it became the three of us.

We worked in a little room in B-44 on campus, kind of in the middle of nowhere, and it was just the three of us for a good six months. We had the mandate from the president of the university to build an exhibit and we had some direction, but we didn't know exactly what it was going to be about, and the space that we needed to fill was two-thirds of a football field—it was huge as far as square footage goes.

So, we had a lot to do, and that was a really good, challenging time for me, and I grew a lot. Ben Unguren taught me a lot about editing. I hadn't had editing classes—I basically knew how to edit going through film—but he taught me more specifically what to do. It isn't necessarily school that makes you who you are. School sets a foundation, but then





you've got to pursue it and become who you want to become. That's how I got behind the camera: by helping make those pieces for the exhibit.

I worked there for almost four years and then I was starting to feel like I needed to move on. I'd been thinking about getting another job where I could also work more heavily in filmmaking. One week I had an audition over at the motion picture studio. I ran into Ron Munns, and I'd only known him because he had come to consult with us on this exhibit project. He stopped me in the hallway and said, "Tamilisa, are you still working for the exhibit project?" I said yes, and he said, "Well, when you're done working there, I've got some things for you to do. You've been on my mind." I hardly knew him, but he told me that the few times that he'd come over to our little workplace, that somehow I'd impressed him because I had gotten documents ready fast, I knew where everything was stored, and every

time during a meeting when they needed to refer back to a quote or something, I knew right where it was. That impressed him and he said he felt like I needed to be working more in film and needed to come over to the Church and help with that cause. I needed to let another company know the next day whether or not I was going to take a job from them. They had offered me a position, but my ultimate goal had always been to work for the Church, so I decided not to take the job. The next week the audiovisual department of the Church called me.

What's your job position?

I am a producer in the audiovisual department. I help clients in other departments conceptualize, develop, and produce media products that will then be distributed by various means throughout the world. I think I'm fortunate to be able to work in the audiovisual department of the Church, because there are people around me who understand the business so as far as acting is concerned. I have a boss who, if I tell him that I need to go to an audition for an hour, will let me make up that hour at work. In fact, when I was being hired, I worried that I would no longer be able to audition for Church films because that might be a conflict of interest. I asked up front before I was hired if that was going to be a problem, and my boss surprised me by saying, "No, we see that as something that you bring to the table." I felt very relieved and blessed because I can still participate in those things.

Tell us about your band.

We are called Miles to Go, which comes from one of the famous poems by Robert Frost. All the members of the band played separately at first, and almost all of us took classes at BYU and went through the folk ensemble program. Hilary Barlow, who plays fiddle and mandolin, got a couple people together and they started a group and then it grew from there. The core group has been playing together for about six years, minus a couple bassists who have come and gone. There are five of us now. Hilary, Trent McCausland, Cassie Singly, me, and Geoff Groberg. I play the mandolin and the fiddle, I'm learning the banjo currently, and I sing as well. We all sing. Cassie Singly is the lead singer. The band is known for its harmonies—we do a lot of three-part women harmonies.

Does it get hard sometimes to balance everything you have going on?

It works out really nice to have an environment where I can do what I love and not have it conflict but rather go hand in hand with what I do daily. At night I'm either at band practice, or sometimes I'm prepping résumés, updating them, prepping production reels. Right now I'm working on an acting reel that will go onto a website of the acting agency where I belong. So, in any spare time I'm trying to push things forward, and when I don't have things to prepare like that, I love to pursue making my own movies. Often in the evenings I'm capturing video, editing video, trying to put it up on YouTube, and getting little accounts started in various places where I can post them.

Auditions come up pretty last minute. Usually you'll have about a day's notice to memorize a script that the agency sends you, to get your clothes ready that you need for that audition. So sometimes

at night I'm ironing, making sure I've got my shoes and socks and whatever else I need, and then I've got to bring that all to work with me in the morning. I go over to the conference center and change clothes in the bathroom there, get in my car, go to an audition, come back as fast as possible, go back to the conference center, change my clothes, come back to my normal job at the Church Office Building, and then maybe I'll leave for a gig—and I've got to go pick up my instruments and then get there on time. Some days can be really, really crazy.

Do you have anything to say about networking?

Anybody who's serious about acting should get an agent. An agent will not only help you know about the audition and send you all the information, but they'll also secure the job for you by figuring out the location, parking, how much you need to charge, who your contact person is, how long you're going to be there, etc. They set it all up, but even





further than that, if you're not being represented appropriately in some way—maybe they're not paying you enough—your agent will try to negotiate that.

I'm also on BYU's acting database. That's a good way to know about a lot of student films. Many universities around here are always doing student films, and you can keep in touch with those by checking their bulletin boards and their websites. There have been a couple jobs that I've known about because I already knew the director or I already knew the casting director and they asked me to make sure to come to the auditions.

Facebook is a big networking tool for me, and a lot of the actors and actresses from my agency are on Facebook, so I've been able to talk with them and keep updated on what projects they're involved in. Then when I have things that come up at work as a producer, I know these people and I can know who may best fit a certain role. Sometimes I'll recommend them to other producers, too. I continue to stay in

touch with a lot of my film friends and buddies from college. Also, any time you are on a new film, it's good to network with the people—not just for networking's sake, but because you become friends. There's something about the film industry and the stage that binds you together as friends really fast, because they're such time-consuming pursuits.

As far as music and performing with the band, most of the gigs have come to us. We play at the Timpanogos Storytelling Festival each year and play a benefit concert for Habitat for Humanity each year. Once you play for someone, if you're good, and if your band is still together the next year, you're always an option to play for them again. We just played for the Intermountain Acoustic Music Association this weekend, and I'm hoping that they'll invite us back.

We got the opportunity to play for the Concert in the Park Series that is put on downtown in Salt Lake City at Brigham Young Park, and the in-

vation was extended, I think, because somebody saw us play in Brigham Young Park for the Deseret First Lunch. And all five of us are networking with friends and family.

Tell us about playing Sister Hinckley in *Gordon B. Hinckley: A Giant Among Men*.

It was such a privilege to portray Sister Hinckley. To prepare, I looked at lots of pictures about her, checked out books about her and President Hinckley, and tried to learn about their life together. I didn't know she was so witty.

I also got to know her a little better by portraying her, and I got to know lots of things I didn't know about President Hinckley, too. It's such a neat opportunity to play somebody who is so well known and so well respected within and out of the LDS world and the Church. It was awesome.

How has the gospel influenced you as an artist, and how do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

The gospel influences everything I do and everything I am and everything I've become. My motivation is to help the gospel go forth through media products of any sort. I try to pick my personal projects on the basis of doing service for someone else—lots of people need help doing media, and I try to help them with what they need done. I also try to pick my projects based on whether or not they'll be influential in some way, because the gospel is spiritually influential. I hope that all my artistic endeavors will someday put me in a more influential position so I can share the gospel more readily.

Everyone can share the gospel in lots of creative ways—not just by knocking on doors. In the book *David O. McKay and the Rise in Modern Mormonism* by Gregory A. Prince, President McKay says, "Today it is a simple matter for us to teach all nations. The Lord has given us the means of whispering through space, of annihilating distance. We have the means at our hands of reaching millions in the world."

I also think a lot of prayer has helped me be where I am. Besides praying for parts, I always keep in my prayers that I can be successful and keep everything going and that I can always use these talents for good. I want to be the kind of person that whenever Heavenly Father needs me to be some-

thing for him, I can be it. I want to be an instrument in His hands.

Who do you see as your audience?

My audience is everyone—both members and non-members. And my justification for that is that truth is truth. Truth is good. If truth is going to be your message, it's a message for non-members and for members. You don't have to specify a certain age group or gender for your target audience. Everybody can be touched by the message of the gospel.

The teachers I had at BYU were incredible and really opened my eyes to religious filmmaking and what it means to teach a spiritual message without being manipulative. There's a fine line in sharing the gospel through film. It's hard not to be preachy.

Where do you see yourself in the future?

I plan on continuing pursuits in acting, filmmaking, and music, and in all other ways that I can be creative and make things, even if it needs to be on a smaller scale. I will always, always be making something, creating something, doing something to spread the gospel and get good media out there. I remember a teacher at BYU—I was in his office once, debating whether or not to do the film program anymore, and he just looked at me and said, "Please don't leave. We need good people in this business. We need good people who will make good media." He talked to me about how it's a war out there and how we need more soldiers. So, I kind of consider myself a soldier in the media war of life, and there need to be more of us. ■

