

NORRIS CHURCH MAILER AND THE PROVINCETOWN THEATER

B R I A N O ' M A L L E Y , M D

AFTER A FIRE DESTROYED THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYHOUSE on the beach, in 1977, the dramatic community that has been finding its voice in this town since the original Players on the wharf premiered O'Neill's *Bound East For Cardiff* in 1916, was again without a home. It found shelter at the Art Association, Town Hall, the Monument Museum, the Provincetown Inn, town churches, and a number of other venues. . . .

It would be more than three decades before we would again find that home.

Late 1990s . . . two active producing companies in town. The Provincetown Theater Company (PTC), a community-based and membership-driven producing and teaching organization, built on a pool of local talent in the early 1960s, doing mostly off-season work. And the Equity-based Provincetown Repertory Theater (PRT, or more commonly, the Rep) founded in 1995, and producing more elaborate and expensive productions in the summer season. I joined the Rep Board a few years later, and soon volunteered for the role of President, at a difficult time when ambitious and beautiful productions were losing tens of thousands of dollars, and our debt was staggering.

Knowing the Mailers' involvement with the Actors Studio in NYC, I encouraged Norris to join our Board. She became an engaged and active participant.

After the painful departure of our founding Artistic director Ken Hoyt in 2002, Norris stepped into that role. It was a time of deep divisions, complicated by the dispersal of the talented repertory company members that had been its core over the first five years.

Norris assembled new talents, and found new venues. Son John Buffalo brought young actors, and explored new works in simple settings. A most memorable production was *Master Class* by Terrence McNally, in the stunning *trompe l'oeil* Universalist Meeting House, on Commercial Street.

While the quality of the company's productions sustained belief, it was the Mailer family as a whole that Norris recruited in support of the major fundraising needed to rebuild and find a home. Taking advantage of the size of Provincetown Town Hall, in order to maximize the audience potential, we were gifted with a trio of fundraising theatrical events that indeed turned our fiscal ebb tide. She said, of the series they devised and carried off, "Norman was certainly a supporter and loved the theatre but it was too difficult for him to sit through performances so he didn't go often. But he wanted to contribute the best way he could, so we did the three benefits."

She was committed to the Rep, and Norman was devoted to her.

2001 saw the first production, *Zelda, Scott and Ernest*, a dramatic dialogue that Terry Quinn and George Plimpton had adapted for the stage from letters and other writings by F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, and Hemingway. They persuaded George Plimpton to play Fitzgerald, while Norris was his wife Zelda, and Norman, of course, was Ernest Hemingway.

Norris later recalled, "George, Norman and I went on to do Zelda Scott and Ernest in seven cities in Europe, the Fitzgerald festival in St Paul and several venues in NY. It was one of the best times of our lives."

They outdid themselves the next year, as the reluctant-voyager Gore Vidal accepted the invitation from his old verbal (and on at least two occasions, physical) sparring partner Norman, to come visit Provincetown, to play His Wickedness in *The Devil and Don Juan*, adapted from GB Shaw. He traveled, uncomfortably, from Italy to do the single performance. Norris describes a "... wild and wooly week ... rehearsing all day ... ending with a late night of drinking and verbal sparring between Norman and Gore in our bar. ..."

To the best of my knowledge, the week was fundamentally amicable. No injuries were recorded.

Norman could be charming, and he was specially liberated in the role Don Juan. Norris was lovely as Dona (with a tilde) Ana, the victim of his seductions. Mike Lennon was the Duke, her enraged father. The show was a sell-out; the largest theater audience in Provincetown history enjoyed a fantastic performance. We were rescued from the brink.

And in 2002 the family performed scenes from O'Neill's *A Long Day's*

Journey into Night, again in Town Hall. Norris observed, “The odd thing was that (sons) Stephen, John, and Norris were all the right age for the roles, NM was a bit older but that was okay. Daughter Kate was also in it. It was a great experience for us all.”

In that year, an emerging dialogue intensified between the Rep, and the Provincetown Theater Company, with a focus on our need for a Theater home, as a shared space for our companies. With the collaborative energy, and fundraising support that we collectively developed and then gathered, we found an old car dealership and garage, and turned it into a first-class intimate performance space, The Provincetown Theater, which opened its doors as in June 2004.

In our second year, we saw John Buffalo Mailer’s *Crazy Eyes* at the Theater, having premiered in Athens months before. As I responded to the very positive reviewer for the Provincetown Banner, “. . . the title suggests the consequences of conviction-driven imperatives, twisted by interpretations of real events experienced at close hand.”

In June 2004, Norris Church Mailer was recognized and honored by the Provincetown Theater with a ceremony and a plaque bearing a sweet photograph of her at home, for her “. . . Outstanding Contribution to the Performing Arts.”

And in June 10, 2010, in her last appearance in the Theater, she read a particularly personal reflection on her first intimacy with Norman, from her just-published memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*, to an adoring audience.

Now in its eighth season, The Provincetown Theater is committed to promoting the talents in our performing arts community, and to providing a workshop to hone skills. Our Playwright’s Lab meets every two weeks. We have three annual playwriting competitions, which each generating a Playwrights’ Festival running for two to three weeks. We also encourage new performance companies to try out new works in our space, in front of our smart theatre audiences.

I believe it no exaggeration to say that we owe the very existence of the Provincetown Theater to the Mailer family, to their devotion to the craft of theatre art and, indeed, to the community of theatre here.

And for Norris Church Mailer, a most particular appreciation. It was her commitment to this theater company that enabled the community, in this birthplace of modern American drama, to build and sustain the crucible that continues to nourish the vitality of the dramatic arts here.