

OUR LADY OF PROVINCETOWN

D E N I S E D O H E R T Y P A P P A S

“People will forget what you said.
They will forget what you did.
But they will NEVER forget how you made them feel.”

—From an anonymous
church bulletin, Elyria, Ohio

“Norris will be joining us today,” a board member whispered to me as we sat in the deconsecrated auto body shop on Bradford St. This comment was made before my first meeting of the Board of the Provincetown Repertory Theatre the summer of 2002. I had no idea who Norris was, except, of course, that she was THE WIFE of literary lion Norman Mailer. Arriving late, Norris slipped quietly into a folding chair, making greeting gestures to a few.

Instantly, I recognized how everyone in the group—myself included—was excited to see her, to be granted her blessing, her expertise. I saw everyone purposely avoided looking at her for too long, lest we embarrass her and ourselves. She was so elegant and yet so real, a soothing voice coupled with “can do” answers.

That year, the Repertory board’s mission was to raise funds to establish a permanent theater in Provincetown. Transforming a car shop into a state of the art theater required many resources. Ever generous with their time and talents, Norris and Norman and Mike Lennon and Gore Vidal entertained us with their town hall performance fundraiser of *Don Juan in Hell* on Oct. 12, 2002. Post play, there was a large party at the Mailer’s East End home. Pinching ourselves, we invitees walked taller, stood straighter, and were at our party best entering their Commercial Street celebration. Norris greeted every single guest as the front door. She had the charm and grace to make each of us feel A-listed: treasured, important, entertained.

With her longtime friend Lynda Sturner, the Artistic Director of the new venue, Norris engineered an inaugural performance for the Bradford Street building's opening night. *The Direct Line Play*, premiering on June 26, 2004, was an innovative piece, whose concept had been imported from England. At Norris's urging, this chain play was started by playwright number one—who wrote a three-minute scene and then passed it to playwright number two, who added three minutes etc., etc., until the twentieth-fifth writer completed the script. Wendy Wasserstein and Michael Cunningham were two contributors to this amazing evening. Standing on the shores of Provincetown, the audience was told, we have a direct line to the ancient Greeks who invented the drama we love.

Legacy notwithstanding, what theater isn't in need of more income? So again, the Mailers stepped up to the fundraising plate. In August, Norris and Norman trekked back to the town hall to perform *Long Day's Journey Into Night*—with Mailer daring—*en famille*! Norman played the father, Norris the mother, Michael and Stephen the sons and Kate the daughter in O'Neill's drama. Post show, I complimented Norris for acting with her children. She said they often read plays together. I copy from the best and subsequently tried *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with my own kids. A novel family memory, thanks to Norris.

This summer (2011), I spent time at the Mailer Center, the extraordinary writing colony that Larry Schiller created with Norris. The paintings she created, mostly of family, have pride of place on the second floor. As one's home is one's autobiography, I noted the tender smiles she traced around her relatives' portraits. I realized she expressed the same circle of appreciation back to her many Provincetown admirers. My mother wisely told me: "Beauty is as beauty does." Thank you, dear Norris, for consistently showering us with your beauty, inside and out.