

# THE WENDY CHRONICLES: A PERSONAL MEMOIR

BY CAROLINE AARON

FIRST DISCOVERED WENDY WASSERSTEIN at the 92nd St. Y when I went to see Paul Rudnick, the brilliant satirist, read a chapter from his new novel. On the bill with him that evening was Wendy, the Off-Broadway playwright of *Uncommon Women and Others* and *Isn't It Romantic?* She was reading a monologue but did not introduce the piece. She simply came up to the lectern and began, "Women, where are we going?" I was smitten. Was this fact or fiction? Was she talking about herself or giving voice to some new character? As the monologue went on I felt like she had plagiarized my inner life. In the last paragraph the character says, "It's just that I feel stranded and I thought the whole point was that we wouldn't feel stranded. I thought the whole point was that we were all in this together." That monologue became *The Heidi Chronicles*, which earned Wendy a Pulitzer and the distinction of becoming the first female playwright to win the Tony Award for best play.

But long before the Pulitzer or the Tony was the workshop production of *Heidi* at the Seattle Rep under the direction of Dan Sullivan. Being in that cast was my first personal Wendy experience. It was so exciting to be on the frontlines as new pages were coming out of her typewriter. But Wendy and I were new to each other and the spontaneous and instantaneous camaraderie of show folk did not come easily to her. The workshop was a success and *Heidi* was on its way to New York.

The full-scale production was to be mounted at Playwrights Horizons. All four of the principal actors in the Seattle workshop were to be replaced. It was not unusual to be the guinea pig actor who is replaced in New York with the pedigreed one. But what was unusual was I got a handwritten letter from Wendy thanking me for my contribution. She wrote me she had already worked on the play in New York with an ensemble of actors and felt they should have the first crack at the New York production. She then went on to say that she fully hoped someday I would be on the other side of that loyalty. And indeed I was. That letter was the beginning of one of the most rewarding and complicated friendships of my life, that letter was the beginning of "The Wendy Chronicles" for me.

It would be another five years before I would once again be the actress to her playwright but in the interim, our relationship grew from colleagues to friends to family.

Our most fun was going to temple together for the High Holy Days. Every year we went to a different temple. The Super Bowl is probably the only ticket harder to get than one for high holy days at a temple in Manhattan. But Wendy was always a coveted guest at all the best temples in New York so I was in. Was she temple shopping or temple hopping? Hopping was the answer. Wendy never wanted to belong to a congregation. She did not want to be identified by any institution.

I told Wendy first that I was pregnant with my now 16-year-old son. I was her date for the Outer Critics Award ceremony and I was bursting with my news, but it was still a secret. *The Heidi Chronicles* won that night. Over drinks celebrating Heidi's first of many prizes Wendy told me a secret of her own. She was trying to have a baby too.

Wendy had a way of being so personal and so guarded all at the same time that I instinctively did not press for details. I just got on the ride of her unique journey. There were allusions to possible mates, donors or adoptions but the how seemed insignificant. It was the chance to be somebody's mother that was important to Wendy. It would be 10 years later that this dream would finally come true with the birth of her Lucy Jane.

Fast-forward five years and it is time to enroll my son in preschool. The playground advice given new mothers was, when it comes to school admissions you must pull every string, call in every favor, so, "Hello, Wendy?" Can you write Ben a recommendation to preschool?" That hilarious letter is still in his box of treasures that I keep for him. Wendy highly recommended my four year old son be included in the preschool class of these exclusive private schools because she was so impressed with "...Ben's opinions about movies and books" and because she "supported his political views."

And then in 1993 once again I became her actress when I played Dr. Gorgeous in the national tour of *The Sisters Rosensweig*. The tour ended in Los Angeles and I ended up staying in LA. My life spread out and I added cats, dogs, fish and a baby girl to my family. Wendy came out to meet the new baby and as we peered over the crib to gaze at Sydney sleeping I said, "I don't know whether to raise her to be Madeline Albright or Kate Moss." Without hesitating Wendy said, "Kate Moss. She will be much happier." I believe Wendy wanted a happy life but she was not a slave to securing that outcome. An interesting life, that was her brass ring with as much happiness as possible in its midst.

Perhaps our most profound bond was we were little sisters. Our big sisters were accomplished, imperious, judgmental and brilliant. They were the women we both feared and relied on. And then, Sandy, Wendy's big sister, was struck with breast cancer. During this time she wrote *The Sisters Rosensweig* and Sandy was the inspiration for the eldest sister Sara in that play.

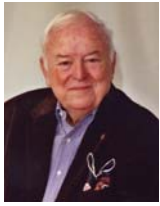
I was amazed at Wendy's fortitude and wisdom. She was learning on her feet but a quick study. Sandy, once the *shtarker* in the family, was now the fragile one. Sandy couldn't be the manager, the boss.

These were now Wendy's roles but, in her infinite kindness, Wendy made it still appear that she relied on Sandy. When Sandy died I felt so sorry for my friend, still strong, but profoundly diminished by the loss.

Ironically very shortly after Sandy died, my sister was diagnosed with breast cancer and Wendy was my first call. I was living in Los Angeles by this time and Wendy flew all the way

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## DINING OUT

WITH THE HOLLYWOOD CHEF VERN LANEGRASSE

ONLY DINNER ENTREES ARE DESCRIBED IN DINING OUT. PRICES ARE DESIGNATED BY DOLLAR SIGNS: \$ MOSTLY UNDER \$15; \$\$ FOR \$16-\$25; \$\$\$, OVER \$25.

**MIKADO** is my favorite restaurant in the Valley with the best sushi bar in one of the Southland's prettiest dining rooms. Popular with celebrities and civic leaders throughout the years, owner Jerry Flick often changes the interior; each time it becomes more stunning. I have been a fan for over 20 years. Besides sushi, I suggest tempura soft shell crab with garlic in a Chinese mustard sauce, bay scallops or lobster with mushrooms in creamy masago sauce, Asian-style Caesar salad with parmesan won ton strips, bay dried anchovies, Korean bbq boneless ribs with global Pommes Frites in Dijon cream fraiche. The seafood platter and the teriyaki combo dinner are outstanding; both are bargains. Gracious dining at tables or booths in the dining room or in the bar lounge. For more informal dining there is a sushi counter with a friendly Asian staff to assist you with your selections. Full bar with a great glass wine cellar in the center of the dining room. Dinner Mon.–Fri., 5–10 pm; Sat., 5–10:30 pm; Sun., 5–9:30 pm. Plenty of free parking \$\$\$

**MIKADO JAPANESE RESTAURANT, 12600 RIVERSIDE DR., NORTH HOLLYWOOD; 818.763.1963. NEARBY THEATRES: CELTIC ARTS CENTER, ECLECTIC COMPANY, WHITEFIRE**

**CA' DEL SOLE**, that temple of Northern Italian cuisine from the team that gave us Locanda Veneta and Ca' Brea, came next door to Universal Studios and made the Valley happy. It is always crowded

so make reservations for dinner. With a two-sided fireplace and huge patio there is a feel of an old hacienda. Noted for their pastas, seafood and the best capriccio in the city, it is a good venue for romantic dining and Roman banquets. I can graze on the appetizers and never get to the delicious entrees. The 16-ounce rib-eye is a killer. Have the chocolate chip cake for desert, a la mode makes it even better. This is the place to see and be seen in the Valley. Full bar, great wine list, top service. Dinner Mon.–Fri., 5–10 pm; Sat., 5–10:30 pm; Sun., 5–9:30 pm. Valet Parking. \$\$\$

**CA' DEL SOLE, 4100 CAHUENGA BLVD., NORTH HOLLYWOOD; 818.985.4669. NEARBY THEATRES: NEWPLACE, THEATRE WEST**

**PALERMO RISTORANTE ITALIANO** has an unusual menu, one I applaud. It has large, medium and small size dishes of many of their menu items. It is the typical mom and pop neighborhood operation I grew up with by serving red or white sauces and old familiar dishes at reasonable prices. The only problem here is they don't take reservations and there is usually a wait. Some recommended dishes: fried calamari, antipasto "sicilia," scampi All Becky, tender imported shrimp sautéed in garlic and butter served over fettuccini in cream sauce and peas, chicken picata, tender floured boneless breast of chicken al funghi, large noodles stuffed with ricotta cheese, and spinach with fresh mushrooms in a tomato sauce or veal Milanese, tender veal pan fried. There are many pastas and sandwiches and the best spumone Siciliano in the city. This is a real value restaurant. Full bar and wine list. Same menu all day six days, 11 am–10:30 pm. Closed Tuesday. Valet Parking in rear. \$

**PALERMO RISTORANTE ITALIANO, 1858 N. VERMONT AVE., LOS ANGELES; 323.663.1178. NEARBY THEATRES: FOUNTAIN, KNIGHTSBRIDGE, SKYLIGHT**

### WENDY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

across the country to be with me. She stayed only for the day and said, "I just came to tell you two things. One: this is not a TV movie and Two: Show up." For the next six years as Josie, my big sister, battled this hideous disease I called Wendy my cancer coach. When my sister died I thought now I only have one big sister left. I have Wendy.

In the following year, I got a call from Wendy who said, "I want you to come to Washington and do a two week workshop of a new play I wrote." She started giggling and said, "Whenever there is a two-figure deal in a swamp, your name immediately pops into my mind. But I totally understand if you can't do it." I needed to spend time with Wendy so I asked my husband if I could ditch the family for two weeks and go to be with her. I didn't even read the play. I just headed to Washington D.C. in the August heat.

The play was *Rash*, a two-character play about a doctor and his patient. I knew then why Wendy had wanted me. It was a play about a woman trying to cheat death in chemo rooms being poked and prodded, winning and losing the battle on a daily basis. But, because it was Wendy's writing, it was a romance, a kind of love affair between this Indian doctor and his frightened female patient and it was damn funny.

One night back at the hotel, after Wendy had put Lucy to sleep, we were hanging out in her bed watching TV and I ventured forth into the choppy waters of Wendy's privacy. "Who

is this play about?" I wanted to know. "It's not about Josie or Sandy is it?" "No, it's not," she finally replied. "It's about me. I have leukemia and I went through a lot in the last year and I met this great doctor and I am okay now." I needed to believe her. She ducked my worry and said, "I wrote another play on my way to D.C. Maybe we should read that one too."

I was in. "I don't know if it is any good," she demurred, "but why not put it out there and find out?" So the next day, at rehearsal, the company sat around and read the one-act version of *Third*. We mounted both for the festival at The Kennedy Center and both were a triumph. I thought *Third* was her best writing ever and she was energized and hopeful, with her muse at full throttle.

Wendy spent her formative years as a student at The Calhoun School on the Upper West Side of Manhattan where she says, "I began writing to get out of gym class." Wendy's early resistance to physical fitness gave us Heidi and Holly and Rita and Dr. Gorgeous and *An American Daughter* and all kinds of *Uncommon Women*. But when asked about her work as a female playwright, she would always bristle. "I am a playwright," she would respond, "it is not relevant that I am a female. My plays stand for me, not my gender."

Wendy did not want to represent. She wanted to reveal. But now that she is gone who will speak for us? Who will remind us not to leave each other stranded, that we are all in this together no matter what our individual choices? And who will be my big sister?