

VANITY FAIR



APRIL 1986

\$2.00

MAILER'S NEW MARILYN

IT'S HIS
DAUGHTER!

CAVIAR GENERALS

Palm Beach

Women

by Dominick Dunne

HARVEY KEITEL

Acting Up a Storm

by Pete Hamill

Kate Mailer
Photographed by
Bert Stern

PLUS:

Samuel Beckett

Erica Jong

Michael Kinsley

Tom McGuane



THE

Bracelets by M&J Savitt.
Faux pearls by
Kenneth Jay Lane.
Wig by Theresa's Wigs.
Details, page 123.



Mailer's new Marilyn is his daughter: Kate, born in 1962, two weeks after Monroe died. He cast her in his Actors Studio production of *Strawhead*, which dramatizes his continuing obsession with the sex goddess. Kate was so extraordinary we set up a photo session with BERT STERN, the photographer who captured the real Marilyn in that haunting pictorial document *The Last Sitting*. Stern's verdict: "No one has played Marilyn better, except Marilyn." On subsequent pages, NORMAN MAILER offers an exclusive extract from his play

The only advance publicity for *Strawhead* was a paragraph in the *New York Times*, but if you're Norman Mailer you generate your own. By the end of its two-week run the play had become a celebrity event. Seated on folding chairs in the legendary Actors Studio on West Forty-fourth Street, a select audience that included—all on the same night!—Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, and Elia Kazan witnessed Mailer's latest rumination on the former wife of Arthur Miller.

Onstage, decked out in a tight pink sweater, a platinum wig, and a lot of eye makeup, young Kate Mailer, a twenty-three-year-old Brown University graduate who had acted in college and had a minor part in an amateur repertory production of *Hair*, amazingly *became* Marilyn. She whimpered and flirted, was seductive and coy; she babbled to herself in a nervous, breathy voice; she emanated sex. "Libido seemed to ooze through her, and ooze out of her like a dew through the cracks in a vase," Mailer wrote in *Marilyn*, his 1973 coffee-table biography. Never mind the prose. What he meant to say was that Monroe was sexy—and so was Kate in her father's dramatic version of some ancient evenings.

Kate is the sole offspring of Mailer's brief marriage to Lady Jeanne Campbell, daughter of the Duke of Argyll and granddaughter of Lord Beaverbrook. Mailer's current wife, Norris Church, also had a major part in the play, and his son Stephen was the stage manager. "When you have this big a family," Mailer reasoned, "you might as well put them to work." But wasn't it a little... odd to cast one's own daughter in a role that required her to bed down with a decadent goon and simulate sex on a motorcycle? "I try to have the detachment of the artist," Mailer stressed, "and Kate had a natural affinity for the role."

Around his daughter, Mailer was scarcely recognizable as the swaggering bully who dominated the PEN Congress in New York the same week *Strawhead* played. His manner was gently, touchingly paternal. "She was the best prep-school actress I'd ever seen," he recalled of her performance as Joan of Arc in Jean Anouilh's *The Lark* when she was a senior at St. George's School. "Dad said, 'Forget about college. Just come to New York and act.'" Kate remembered. "But I didn't feel I was ready yet." There was nothing disingenuous about her modesty, and it was hard to believe that the shy girl bantering with "Dad" backstage was the slatternly sex bomb from the play. Milky-skinned and auburn-haired, she could have been a coed home from college for the holidays. "Did you get a haircut?" she asked her father. "You look so cute."

The play was a family affair, but the playwright was utterly in earnest. Sitting intently in the audience night after night with a few of his numerous progeny by his side, Mailer could have been a high-school drama teacher directing his twentieth *Taming of the Shrew*. Pencil in hand, he made notes on a yellow pad, leaned forward, grinned at a good line. *Strawhead* had been kicking around for years, and he was determined to make it work. Begun as a possible Broadway play adapted from Mailer's second Marilyn book, *Of Women and Their Elegance*, it gradually metamorphosed into a more experimental work. Now it's a candidate for Off Broadway. "If the play doesn't go this time, it's not going to go," says Mailer. "I can't afford to write for the theater."

The opening night was pretty ragged, a "read-through" so bewildering that when a woman in the audience disrupted the play

Styled by ANDRÉ LEON TALLEY

FIRST SITTING

those who hadn't noticed the "Espontaneo" listed in the program thought she was for real. There was a lot of play-within-a-play business: the "director" and "producer" yelling, the "playwright" yelling. Kate protesting, "How do you know Marilyn did things like this?" There was a bad moment when the actor playing the director asked how many wanted the play to go on, and was answered with silence. ("A poor idea," Mailer conceded afterward.)

It was Kate who really made the show. For three hours, with never a moment offstage, she rehearsed Marilyn's doomed marriages and disastrous affairs, her cinematic triumphs and private failures of nerve. Her evocation of impending tragedy was magnificent. Seated at her vanity table, she brooded and whined, vacillating between a wistful elegiac voice ("I'm so rosy I want to dance") and a brutal estimate of her vulnerability: "It's the fellows with the nicest faces who always drill that tiny little hole in your heart." This is late Marilyn, the Marilyn addicted to pills and champagne, the world-famous icon on the downslide to an early death.

Strawhead is a "memory play," Mailer explained—memories that happened, and memories that never did. Biography isn't Mailer's intention. His research, he confessed in *Marilyn*, would "suray toward the borders of magic"—that is, pure invention. Reverting to his weird cabalistic ways, he dwelled on the anagrammatic significance of the fact that the letters in Marilyn's name, "(if the 'a' were used twice and the 'o' but once)," would spell his own name, "leaving only the 'y' for excess." The play is less mystical, more grounded in actual events; but it has its own share of poetic license. "I'm trying to comprehend Marilyn," says Mailer's imaginary playwright, "and I think we have to assume there were buried horrors in her life. Something kinky."

Are these assumptions justified? It hardly matters. *Strawhead* is less about Marilyn than about Mailer's quest for Marilyn. And what better way to approach this mysterious *shiksa* than through Arthur Miller, another guy from the wrong side of the Brooklyn Bridge who happened to become a famous writer. Mailer's portrait of Miller in *Marilyn* is both pitiless and sympathetic. Puritanical, parsimonious ("find

Kate: "Dad said, forget about college. Just come to New York and act."

Mailer: "She was the best prep-school actress I'd ever seen."

Cotton T-shirt and skirt by Perry Ellis America. Details, page 123.



Cotton ribbed sweater, matching skirt, and chiffon scarf, all by Zoran. Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses by Bausch & Lomb. Wig by Jacques Darel. Details, page 123.

the witness to testify that Miller had ever picked up a check"), a "tall and timid hero of middle-class life, as guarded in his synapses as a banker," the playwright is in every way the volatile novelist's opposite. "He was sufficiently pontifical to become the first Jewish Pope, he puffed upon his pipe as if it were the bowl of the Beyond, and regaled sophisticated New York

dinner parties with tedious accounts of his gardening and his well-digging, he was a Hamsun and Rolvaag of the soil, a great man!"

In *Strawhead* Miller is again the complacent country squire, boring people with his accounts of clearing fields, gardening, the joys of plumbing. ("Nothing like taking a bath in water that comes through pipes you threaded your-

self.") Worse, Miller is a prude. The night they met, Marilyn recalls, "we didn't do a thing. We just sat in a garden and talked. He held my big toe." A nerd in white socks who doesn't know how to cope with America's blonde sex goddess.

Who could? Well, if you dropped an "l" from Miller's name and substituted an "a"...

—James Atlas

An extract from Act One

STRAWHEAD

by Norman Mailer

We see an open stage. Only a few pieces of furniture are present. Downstage center left is a simple white vanity table with drawers. Midstage left is a café table with two chairs. Midstage right is a motorcycle. (A heavy, brightly painted bench may be used to signify the motorcycle.) Midstage extreme right, a window frame suspended by wires. Upstage center on a dais is placed a high heavy chair with arms, a "throne." A dim red light is on it always. It illumines the throne even through bright lights, spots in other areas, and occasional blackouts on the stage. . . .

DIRECTOR: I'd like to introduce the leading lady. (*Calls to wings*) Marilyn!

(*A male actor yells offstage, "She's getting ready."*)

DIRECTOR: (*Tries to smile*) She's just the way Marilyn used to be.

Let me say a little about the theatrical piece you will see tonight.

Strawhead begins late in Marilyn Monroe's life. We find her alone with her memories on two successive nights. This is a play about recollection. In memory, no one ever has to answer the door; people merely walk into one's mind.

So, our piece is composed of short scenes that cut into one another like a film. Memory, you see, is not unequal to a movie. Cinema, after all, is that delicate membrane between memory and the dream. So Marilyn's life comes to her each night like a film.

Two acts—two nights.
Is Marilyn ready?

(*Offstage voice: "Yes."*)

DIRECTOR: Bring the houselights down! . . .

[Editor's note: The following scene occurs later on in the first act. The characters are MARILYN, MILTON and AMY GREENE (the fashion photographer and his wife who became Marilyn's mentors), and NORMAN NORELL (the famous American dress designer of the fifties).]

(*Low light on Marilyn—she is alone.*)

MARILYN: There's something about ermine. It's awesome.

(*Marilyn caresses her invisible fur.*) I love every animal that's gone into it. And I never think of the hunter. That's fair. After all, I make movies, and people will look at them after I'm dead.

(*Marilyn gets up, doubles over in pain, gives a long, slow groan. Amy hurries in.*)

AMY: My God, what's the matter?

MARILYN: I'm sorry. It's my period. I have periods that are like catastrophes.

AMY: We're going to the hospital right now!

MARILYN: No, it's all right. I have some pills. I'll be O.K.

AMY: Are you sure?

MARILYN: Oh, yes. Don't you ever get cramps like this?

AMY: It may get better after you have a baby.

MARILYN: Amy, the last doctor said he found a lot of scar tissue in there. He wanted to hear how many abortions I had. I told him I didn't know.

AMY: You don't know?

MARILYN: Twelve.

AMY: You must be shreds inside.

MARILYN: (*Pause*) Tatters.

AMY: What did you do, get pregnant every month?

MARILYN: Don't talk. The pain is getting worse. You know, every time I wouldn't have the child, I'd go into one of those depressions where you wonder if you are going to pull out. How I would have spoiled that baby. (*On the edge of tears, she and Amy embrace.*)

(*Lights up softly on Marilyn. She is alone.*)

MARILYN: Yet all the while that I was feeling sorry for myself, I was also thinking that there is nothing like hot scalding emotion for relaxing your face. Isn't it nice and crazy to have two personalities?

Amy takes a lot of baths. So, I do too. I lie in a tub and read. I rest in the water until Hollywood goes right out of my pores. [*Play continues on page 66*]

"Reading in the
bathtub is like drinking champagne.
It gets me truly excited."

Marilyn, in "Strawhead"

All diamond-and-platinum
jewelry by Tiffany & Co.
Chiffon stole trimmed
with shadow fox
by Alixandre. Silk-taffeta
dress by Vicky Tiel.
Wig by Jacques Darcel.
Details, page 123.



[Continued from page 63]

Then I put a lot of cream on my face. I figure it takes a ton of cream to forestall one wrinkle.

Reading in the bathtub is like drinking champagne. It gets me truly excited. Amy gave me a book about Lady Hamilton. Lady Emma Hamilton. Only Emma didn't begin as a lady. Emma became a lady by marrying Lord Hamilton. But she started out as a waitress. She would see fellows after work. That is a humble beginning. I was impressed.

There are a lot of her letters in the book, and in the beginning Emma couldn't write as good a letter as myself. I noticed that!

(Marilyn opens the book and reads in a cockney accent.)

"What shall I dow?" She spells it d-o-w. D-o-w! I don't believe it. "Good God, what shall I dow? I can't go to town. I have not a farthing to bless myself with."

(Marilyn leafs through the book.)

Then Lord Hamilton came along. He swooped down and made a real lady of Emma.

(Marilyn reads again.)

Now, here's a letter written ten years later: "The Queen has been very friendly to me of late. This morning she was cordial to a point!"

(Marilyn closes the book.)

That's a lot of improvement. "Cordial to a point." A girl can learn.

(Marilyn picks up a rather large but plain notebook from her dressing table and hugs it.)

Ergo—which is a new word I've learned—I've begun my own book. I take quotes from authors I like and jot them down. The kind where my thoughts and my heart come close to touching...

(Sighs.)

But to tell the truth, I'm edgy. I'm too alone. I feel like I'm wearing an evening gown on the moon. I want a new man.

Ergo, when they made me an offer to become a princess, I was ready to sign up.

(Lights up on Norell on his throne.)

NORELL: What do you know about Aristotle Onassis?

MARILYN: Aristotle Onassis? Doesn't he own a yacht?

NORELL: My dear, he owns Monte Carlo. But, right now—would you believe it—Monte Carlo is in the red. So he has sent us their reigning prince. Prince Rainier is in America to meet a movie star. If it takes, His Highness will marry her and thereby refurbish old Monte Carlo. Right at this minute, the Prince is looking the ladies over.

MARILYN: He is?

NORELL: He is. I happen to know the boy. I've been told in absolute confidence that you are being considered most seriously. Rainier, it seems, has a yen for Marilyn Monroe. You might be the prime candidate, darling.

MARILYN: Oh, I am. Dear Norman Norell, I am the only one.

NORELL: Marilyn, curb your pride. You must not be so certain.

MARILYN: Honey, give me two days with him and the Prince will be just as certain.

(Amy appears at front of stage. She speaks as lights go out on Norell.)

AMY: I can't believe it. Norman Norell says you're going to be a princess!

MARILYN: You may kiss my hand.

AMY: (Singing) A kiss on the hand may be quite Continental...

MARILYN: Amy, you're not bad. I didn't know you could sing.

AMY: Oh, yes, a little. I saw *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* four times. Milton says I do a good imitation of Jane.

MARILYN: You do? Show me. I don't believe you.

(Amy starts to sing and dance, and Marilyn, after a bar or two, joins her in "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." At the conclusion, they hug like roommates. Suddenly, Marilyn looks morose.)

MARILYN: Amy, was Marie Antoinette a real blonde?

AMY: Doubtless. Why?

MARILYN: It doesn't matter. Reindeer won't care.

AMY: ... "Reindeer"? ... No, Prince Reindeer won't care if you're not a real blonde. (Amy laughs.) Reindeer!

MARILYN: (Ignoring interruption) I love it when you laugh. Your eyes look just like stars.

AMY: My eyes. Girl, you are totally out of your mind. Your eyes are like stars.

(Marilyn looks in a mirror. Milton enters.)

MILTON: Edward R. Murrow wants to interview you, me, and Amy, on *Person to Person*. Marilyn, he said everybody is asking why you ran away from Hollywood. Fifty million people watch that show.

MARILYN: Fifty million people. Staring down my throat. Milton, I thought you said television wasn't for me.

MILTON: This is the best show-show-showcase anyone could get.

AMY: Edward R. Murrow. What a fabulous man!

MARILYN: He is?

AMY: He ought to be president.

MARILYN: (Examining herself again in the mirror) The public sees me as a scheming sex bitch. Sort of Lana Turner with an evil streak. And here I am looking like a kid in a high-school graduation picture. My eyes are like stars.

I said yes. If you're going to be a lady, think of being First Lady. Even if you miss, you're still up there with the ladies. □

"The public sees me as a scheming sex bitch. Sort of Lana Turner with an evil streak."

Marilyn, in "Strawhead"

Cashmere tunic by Zoran. Chiffon scarf by Jackie Rogers. Wig by Theresa's Wigs. Details, page 123.