

MY PARENTS, MAGIC MAKERS

A memoir by Stephanie Waxman

When I was young, my brother and I were trained to enter our house through the back door because, in all probability on a Wednesday afternoon, a rehearsal was taking place in the large living room of our Burbank house. ¶ The den, which was equally large, had a round maple table that sat six, a beige couch, an enormous hutch, an upright secretary, an easy chair and bookshelves overflowing with books on Judaism, philosophy, theater, and art. ¶ The living room had nothing. Not even a chair. My parents could not afford to furnish two rooms. (The den furniture was mostly castoffs from my grandparents.) But the main reason the living room was empty is that my parents were actors and needed a place to rehearse.

I remember once peeking through the crack in the sliding door that separated the living room from the hallway and seeing my mother and father sitting cross-legged on the floor drinking imaginary tea out of imaginary tea cups and thinking, “How can I ever explain to my friends what it is that my parents do?”

It was embarrassing; my parents weren’t real actors; they didn’t perform in plays or on television or in film. They stood behind two black stands that held their scripts and they pretended to be different characters. Their regular venues included Hadassah, B’nai B’rith, National Council of Jewish Women, ORT, The Jewish Federation, United Jewish Appeal, the Jewish Community Centers and Hillels. The fact that they worked steadily didn’t impress me. That they had a loyal following and received fan letters didn’t count. Real actors memorized their lines, wore costumes and played only one character, either on stage or in front of a camera.

My father, Stanley, looked like Tyrone Power. With his matinee idol good looks and a

solid background in theater and radio, he had moved to Los Angeles with my mother, Rena, after the war to pursue work in film. While mom put her career aspirations on hold to raise my brother and me, Dad's career took off. He co-starred in several movies and was on his way to becoming a movie star when his career was abruptly cut off by the Hollywood blacklist which swept the industry in the mid-50's taking with it the livelihood of hundreds of actors, directors and writers.

When the dust cleared, my father was selling furniture in a store on Western Avenue. Mom, scrambling to help make ends meet, developed a unique form of play-reading: she took contemporary Broadway hits, cut them down to 45 minutes and presented them in a one-woman show, playing all the parts. She was hired by Jewish women's organizations. This earned her a solid reputation in the Jewish community and, before long, she had more work than she knew what to do with. It was then that Dad quit his sales job and became part of her act, taking over the male roles. Since they were working outside the film industry, they weren't vulnerable to the blacklist.

After a time, they stopped performing Broadway plays and performed material that they wrote themselves, building a program around a common theme using poetry and dramatic excerpts from plays. They wrote "Behold the Beautiful," "For Better or For Worse," "Behind Every Man," and "How Do I Love Thee." Then they stopped using the work of other writers entirely and created their own plays. "Miracle At Midnight" is about the conflict between a Danish couple when the husband wants to hide a family of Jews from the Gestapo. "Please Call Me Sol" is about a widow committing to a new relationship. "The Affair" is about the temptation of a shipboard romance and a renewed commitment to marriage. "A Table for Two" takes place in the airport restaurant after Hal and Bella put their last child on a plane to college. "Welcome Home" is about a terrible argument between Lil and Jerry after they return from a wonderful vacation. "Boxes" is about a husband and wife discovering their past as they clean out the attic. "Yellow Daffodils" is about what happens when a man's mother comes to live with him and his wife.

I now realize what I couldn't appreciate as a girl: my parents used their art to hold up a mirror; their stories reflected what they—and their audience—were experiencing, each play a depiction of what they were going through in their own lives. Furthermore, they were working actors—not in front of a camera; not with props and costumes on a stage. Rather, turning the curse of bad luck into gold, they carved out a unique career where they actually logged more hours acting than I daresay many a movie actor.

Three of their plays were published. "Miracle At Midnight" became a television movie

starring Sam Waterston and Mia Farrow. But my parents never achieved the kind of glory reserved for “real” actors. Instead, they reveled in the very real appreciation of the thousands and thousands of people who, over thirty years, had the good fortune to experience the magic that Rena and Stanley Waxman created on stage. ■