

Robert Wagner surviving celeb fame and taking it to writers fest

Bruce Fessier The Desert Sun

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Google Robert Wagner and some of the first things to come up are stories touting conspiracy theories about the 1981 death of his wife, Natalie Wood.

Wood drowned on a boating trip to Catalina with Wagner and Christopher Walken, Wood's co-star in an upcoming movie titled "Brainstorm." Wagner and Wood were on their second marriage and had adapted, as well as two people could, to their status as a golden Hollywood couple. Wood had earned three Academy Awards nominations before the age of 25. Wagner was groomed as one of the last great leading men of the studio system, starring as Prince Valliant in the 1954 film of that name. Yet their relationship solidified as they raised a blended family through the '70s.

Wagner now lives in the snowy enclave of Aspen, Colorado, with his wife of 26 years, Jill St. John. At 86, Wagner says he has less privacy now than when he was a film and then television heartthrob. He wrote in his 2014 book, "You Must Remember This: Life and Style in Hollywood's Golden Age," if he were a young man today, he might eschew film and go into business, like his father.

"I might have," he said. "I think that what has happened in regard to celebrities, you can't move. You can go to dinner and know how it tasted the next morning by the Internet. It's just amazing what goes on. Everybody's got a camera. Whatever you do is down and exploited the next day. It's pretty intense now."

Wagner will make two appearances this weekend at the sold-out Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. Its founding director, Jamie Kabler, said Wagner is the missing element to transform this year's festival into one of the best book events in the country.

"What was missing was a celebrity and I got Robert Wagner," Kabler said. "He's an icon. He's going to talk about Natalie Wood on a panel with his daughter? That's pretty amazing. And he's bringing Jill St. John."

Wagner has written three books in the past eight years, all with co-author Scott Eyman, and contributed a foreword to a fourth – a coffee table book about Wood, written by Manoah Bowman with contributions by his step-daughter, Natasha Gregson Wagner, titled "Natalie Wood: Reflections on a Legendary Life."

Wagner will climax the festival with a discussion of his latest book, "I Loved Her in the Movies: Memories of Hollywood's Legendary Actresses," with George Schlatter, his friend and creator of "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In," Sunday evening at the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel. That book talks about actresses Wagner has known from Norma Shearer, who became a star in the silent era, to Glenn Close and beyond. It makes the point that actresses have always had it harder than men, although, in the studio era, they at least had an apparatus to nurture their careers.

On Sunday afternoon, Wagner, his step-daughter and Bowman will discuss Natalie Wood in a discussion pegged to Bowman's book. It will be a sympathetic panel. Natasha, who grew up with her step-father even after her mother's, death, has said she believes Wood's death was accidental and that conspiracy theories implicating Robert Wagner are "preposterous."

Wagner still finds it difficult to talk about the tragedy. His voice drops in volume, his tone reflecting a deep sadness, as he explains how he can deal with Wood's death in such a public way.

"It's very difficult for our family," he said plaintively. "We've had some very, very difficult moments."

In another part of "You Must Remember This," Wagner talks about his late friend, the British actor David Niven, who also lost his wife in a tragic accident. He imagines how that incident would be handled today and said, "Proper grieving would be impossible. A terrible tragedy would be made even more traumatic. And it would never go away." When reminded that it sounded like he was speaking about his own experience, he said, "Well, of course it will never go away. Of course it will never go away."

Wagner hasn't shied away from public appearances. He has done extensive promotion of his books. It's just that those stories are overwhelmed online by rehashes of Natalie Wood's death.

"I've been out there doing everything," he said. "I was in New York when we launched ("I Loved Her in the Movies) on the 14th of November. I was on every show in New York with satellite radio and television and Tavis Smiley, Kelly Ripa, all of those shows. I haven't shied away from anything. You've got to catch lightning in a bottle. There's a tremendous amount of competition these days. Look at all those writers that are going to be (in Rancho Mirage). It's nice that I'm going to be down there."

Writing has not become a greater passion for him than acting these days. He still makes regular appearances as Anthony DiNozzo Sr. in the hit TV police show, "NCIS," which he calls "a wonderful, wonderful experience for me." Wagner was friends with so many movie stars that were older than him that he's become a repository of Hollywood history.

He had an long romantic relationship as a young man with Barbara Stanwyck, who was 13 years older than him. He was close friends with Sinatra, Spencer Tracy, Cary Grant and Fred Astaire, a 1920s Broadway star who co-starred with him on TV in "It Takes A Thief." His rise to stardom in the early 1950s, before method actors such as Marlon Brando and James Dean changed the craft, has made him somewhat of a spokesman for the studio era.

"Well, I get asked that a lot," he said. "Younger people say, 'What was it like? It must have been great at that time,' and I find myself telling them about some of the experiences I've had. My career has just been so fantastic. My God, I'm so blessed."

"You Must Remember This" is a virtual textbook for old Hollywood, with chapters on the architecture, fashions, nightlife and even the way the studios controlled the show biz press before the late 1960s.

Wagner began having what he called "wonderful" conversations with Eyman, a premier movie historian, while working on his autobiography "Pieces of My Heart." They researched much of Hollywood's history, but their next two books were borne out of Wagner's memories of the town he encountered after moving to Bel Air from Detroit with his family in 1937.



Jill St. John, Robert Wagner and Barbara Sinatra attend a past Frank Sinatra Celebrity Invitational golf gala. Marc Glassman/Special To The Desert Sun

"We started talking about different places and, having a remembrance of Hollywood and these places, and that's how we put together 'You Must Remember This,'" Wagner said. "Then we started talking about the women I had known and the people that were so influential in my life and he said, 'You know, maybe that could be an interesting book.' With his knowledge and background, and my personal involvement with some of them, it became a reality."

Wagner and Wood bought a house in South Palm Springs in the late 1950s partly to escape the Hollywood spotlight, but also for the sense of community in the village.

"The desert had a particular draw to people who built houses down there – Harold Lloyd, Cary Grant," he said. "They came there because of the weather and it was wonderful and romantic and they could relax. Nobody was bothering them. There was great privacy."

Today, he said, there's not much of a film community left, even in Hollywood.

"Everybody now, they do a film and get out," he said, "or the film may not be made in Hollywood."

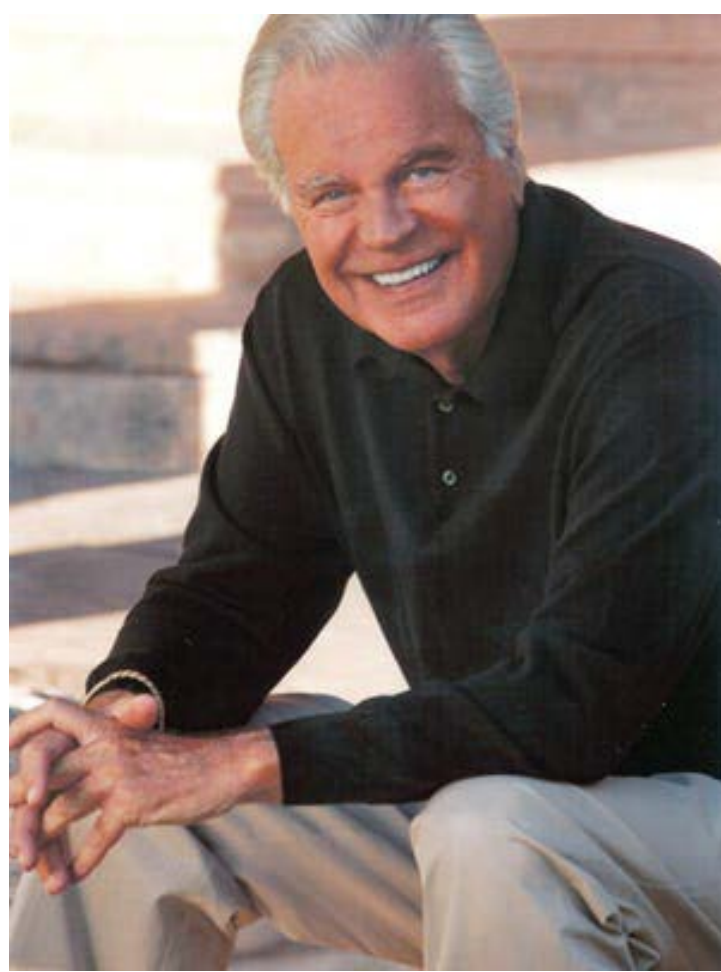
If you go:

"Natalie Wood: Reflections on a Legendary Life" with Manoah Bowman, Natasha Gregson Wagner and Robert Wagner, moderated by Bruce Fessier. John Steinbeck Room, Rancho Mirage Public Library, Sunday at 2:40 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

"Robert Wagner in Conversation with George Schlatter." Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel, Sunday at 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Tickets for the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival are sold out, but there is a waiting list and the entire festival, Saturday and Sunday at the Rancho Mirage Library and the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel, will be broadcast on C-SPAN Feb. 3-5

For more information on other festival events, go to <http://www.rmwritersfest.org/schedule/>.



Robert Wagner will give two talks this weekend at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival Courtesy Of Robert Wagner



Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood in 1972 in London. AP Photo



Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood in 1957. Bill Anderson Photo, Courtesy Palm Springs Art Museum