

# RENAISSANCE ACTRESS

by Mark Hall Amitin

**T**he co-founder of The Living Theatre, (along with the late Julian Beck), is keeping the torch burning as the company is about to celebrate its 40th anniversary season. The Living Theatre is known for its daring productions dating back to *The Connection* (1959) and its shattering and revolutionary *Paradise Now* (1968). They were equally known as pacifist/anarchists and for their adventures in New York's bohemia and Europe's avant garde which has earned them permanent inclusion in the hall of fame. As more books discussing the beat era and the 60's cultural influences appear, one constantly comes across their doings, whether it's in the Pulitzer prize-winning Jackson Pollack biography, John Densmore's (of The Doors) *Riders on the Storm*, or the *Diaries of Judith Malina 1947-57*. Ms. Malina is also experiencing a renaissance as an actress. In the last year and a half she has starred or co-starred in three major films including the just completed *The Addams Family*.

**MHA:** What was it like working with Anjelica Huston?

**JM:** Marvelous; she's very complex, has a lovely simplicity and a terrifying sophistication and a terrific directorial knowledge of where she should go and what she should do and how a scene should form; eventually I think she will be a very fine director. Whenever Anjelica made a suggestion I was always amazed at her acuteness of perspective.

**MHA:** What did you two do to create your special relationship as mother and daughter?

**JM:** We'd converse in character sitting around the set or in our dressing rooms. I would remind her of the high position of our family. In this game, she was the more active in improvising. In Charles Addams' work Granny was known as "Grandma Frump". This is an insult by our enemies! We are Schroffensteins going back to Romania and Transylvania where we lost everything and now our circumstances have been greatly reduced despite our castle and our servants. Granny is gregarious and sociable and wants to poison everybody, lovingly.

**MHA:** Was your *Addams Family* experience very different from working with Penny Marshall, Robin Williams and Robert De Niro on *Awakenings*?

**JM:** Certainly it's different in making a comedy than a tragedy; though Penny, Robert and Robin really made a picture about hope, it is nonetheless a story of gruesome realism.

**MHA:** In *Awakenings* you and Robin Williams have a wonderful scene where you dance at Roseland and you sing, "You made me love you" to him.

**JM:** I'm not really a singer or a dancer, but Robin Williams plays a rather shy doctor who gives in to his impulses and gets up and dances. I was doing a jazz dance and Robin danced rings around me and I puffed along with him. I'm this much older woman foolishly infatuated and flirting with him. We worked until 4am and I danced until I passed out. They wheeled over the oxygen as I lay on the floor and I took a few deep breaths and they said, "do you think you can do it some more?" and I said, "oh, sure."

Robin is witty and charming. He draws the best out of everyone. We found that we had in common a kind of theological morality. We talked a lot about what is goodness. The film itself is about goodness; De Niro kept

to himself a lot. He was wrestling with his character. But Robin, the good doctor, felt he had to cheer everybody up. We had fourteen weeks filming in a psychiatric hospital in Brooklyn, and I cannot tell you how depressing that was. Every time Penny said "cut" Robin would do a take on the scene, which was even funnier, and at the same time, always an insight into the scene itself.

**MHA:** What was the inscription that Robin Williams made in the front of your script when you finished making the film?

**JM:** "The soul of Mother Theresa, the heart of Ghandi, and the mind of Groucho." Ah, that it were true...ah, that I could be as funny as Groucho.

**MHA:** Last year you also starred in Paul Mazursky's *Enemies, a Love Story* as Lena Olin's mother. The video is now out and it's also showing this summer on HBO.

**JM:** Mazursky made us study a lot about Judaism and its culture. I had a language coach who taught me to speak exactly like my grandmother. Paul was very concerned about the way the actors related to each other. In *Enemies, a Love Story* all the relationships are very real though sometimes deadly, thus the title, even if there's unbearable anger and hatred and rage there really is, finally, a love story.

**MHA:** You played this incredibly suffering woman who came out of the concentration camps. What did you draw on to play this enormous pathos so profoundly?

**JM:** I'm a German Jew. And, I escaped the holocaust because my father, who was a Rabbi, observed that we had to leave Germany early. Here he established a synagogue for the emigre Jews and he dedicated his life to trying to wake up America to what was happening. He did help bring many people out. These people came to our house when I was a little child and as I listened to these stories it was very clear to me what was happening to our people and our families. I didn't have to go very far to know what the character of Shifra felt.

There is a great saying from Terrance, my actor's motto, "there is no facet of human nature alien to myself." That means copping to one's own weakness and wickedness. It means we recognize that we have goodness and evil and sometimes we have the extraordinary possibility to play the cannibal matriarch who says, "don't eat those feet, those are for company." These quasi-humorous allegories have their messages.

**MHA:** You also played Al Pacino's mom in *Dog Day Afternoon*, directed by Sidney Lumet; that's quite a list of extraordinary film children you've had.

**JM:** Lumet directs film as if it were a play. He allowed the actors to create the dialogue. Al and I would read with the scriptwriter and then Lumet would take it away and say "now improvise it." We'd go through the same thing with our own words, and the script writer would take notes. The final version was ultimately all our own words. Lumet filmed the entire screenplay sequentially, first scene to last. This allowed the actors to take the whole trip of desperation day by day.

**MHA:** Didn't Pacino work with The Living Theatre in the early 1960's and weren't he and Martin Sheen roommates who also worked with your company for several years?

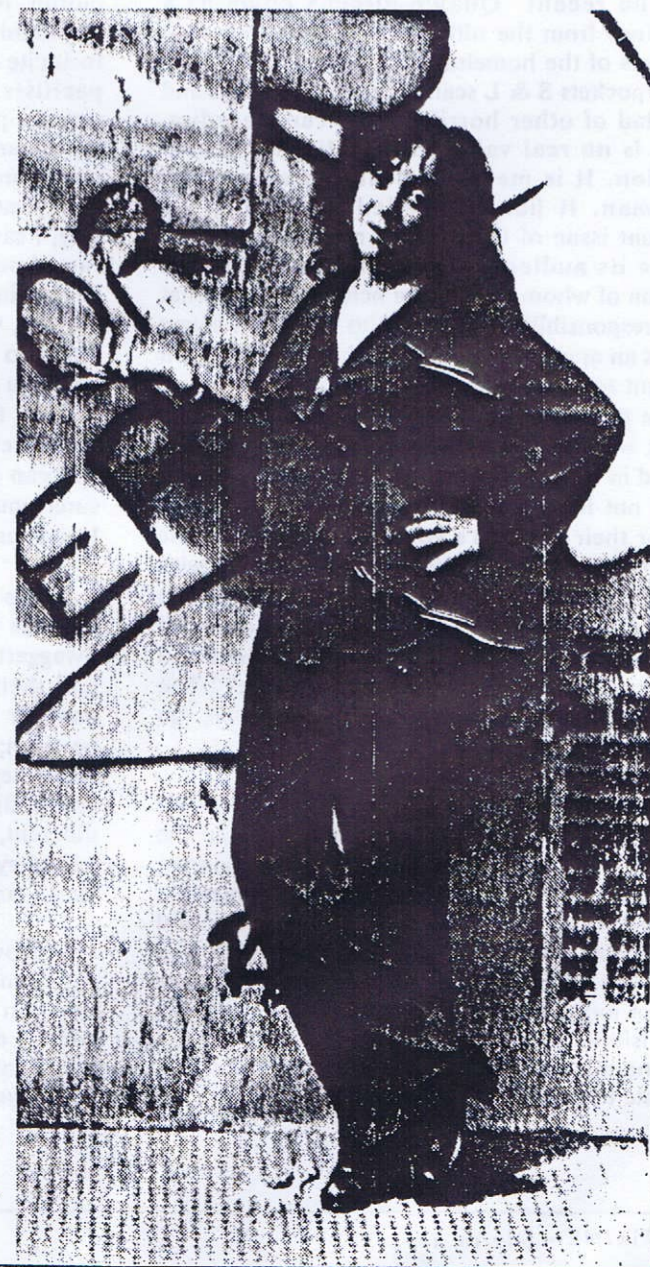
**JM:** We first cast Martin in our production of Gelber's *The Connection* and Al later. Martin is on our board of

directors, but our deepest contact now is the work of our social obligations. We are dedicated to the causes of peace, social justice, and stopping pollution. For Martin these are an important part of his work. We were arrested on 42nd Street for opposing the nuclear risk. Charlie Sheen came to the station to show solidarity with his dad. When we came to trial the judge made a speech in praise of our work instead of condemning the prisoners. That was exceptional. More recently we were at an 'artists speak out for peace' event in California where he read a passage of his journal from his visit with Mother Theresa asking her to intervene with the Pope for peace in the Middle East. And it is this kind of contact that I treasure.

**MHA:** The Living Theatre is about to have its 40th anniversary this fall. What are the plans?

**JM:** Hanon Reznikov, my husband and the co-director of the Living Theatre, and I are working on a play, *Waste*, about the environment and pollution. It is a street play to be performed around the city through the summer including on the Lower East Side where we have our theatre. We're utilizing many forms of theatrical style winding them together into a panoramic event. Nonetheless, we try to get out of the city to visit with our friends in Montauk and the Hamptons, who we like to go to the beach with, and engage in discussions in the artistic havens from where so much inspiration has come. ◀

Mark Hall Amitin is presently working on books on The Living Theatre and the biography of Geraldine Page.



The spirited Judith Malina