

BY ALJEAN MELTSIR

The taming of the shrewd

Movie-struck at 6, moon-struck at 16, Natalie Wood is a top cinema star at 21. Since becoming Mrs. Robert Wagner she is learning to be a woman, too

WHEN SHE IS NOT WORKING, Natalie Wood rarely leaves her massive Viking oak bed before mid-afternoon. Propped up on three pillows with a string of black glass beads around her neck, the tiny—5'2", 93 pounds—actress is only half as big as the carved horses that gallop across the headboard. The bed, which belonged to her husband before their marriage, is her office, salon, dining room and hospital. In it she eats breakfast and lunch; swallows pills, vitamins, aspirin and Alka-Seltzer; writes letters; splashes make-up on a face as precise as a Swiss watch (except for wild, liquid brown eyes); orders dinner from her

butler; and fills endless memo pads with items to discuss with her husband, actor Robert Wagner.

From it she makes frantic phone calls to the shops where she has everything monogrammed with NWW, initials now over two years old; to Frank Sinatra or Dean Martin to discuss poker, a game at which she has won as much as \$400 in a night; to Miami to bargain for a 52-foot boat to replace the 42-footer the Wagners recently sold; and to her doctor to report the new ache that needs some new prescription.

To it come delivery boys, friends, her agent, business manager, dry cleaner, plumber and the man to repair the TV set she keeps on constantly, but soundlessly.

Her closet is filled with negligees that she "buys by the gross" according to her business manager, "and never wears." On the floor are 65 pairs of shoes dyed to match the newest French fashions. In the drawer is a diamond stickpin for her hair. But all this is merely the frilly surface. At the core, Natalie Wood is as sharp as steel.

At age 21, Miss Wood has the poise of a woman of 31 and the acumen acquired from handling at least some of her own affairs since the age of six. She gets star billing with the best, and commands one of the highest fees in Hollywood—estimated at \$100,000 a picture for work outside her own studio—and possesses one of the few long-term movie contracts at Warner Bros. Yet, adolescents think of this svelte, successful sophisticate as one of their own, along with Sal Mineo, Bobby Darin, Fabian,

Pat Boone and a few favored others. She is, notably, the only girl.

She has been a professional actress since she was six. Last year, before she attained her majority, she fought her studio—Warner Bros.—for the right to do outside pictures. She was suspended for nearly 15 months. During the preceding year she had co-starred in high-budget films with two stars over twice her age: Gene Kelly in *Marjorie Morningstar* and Frank Sinatra in *Kings Go Forth*. She gambled with her future—and won nearly everything she had asked for. One result: she is co-starring in *Cash McCall* with James ("Maverick") Garner.

Even as a child, she never drifted. By the time she was five years old, she had chosen her destiny and was to a degree controlling it.

She was born Natasha Gurdin on July 20, 1938, in San Francisco. Natalie was Nicholas Gurdin's first child—her mother had had a daughter by a previous marriage—and he adored her. At three, Natalie could sit through a movie without moving. Her mother, fascinated by films, did not like to leave her baby at home. When the child got restless, nobody in the dark theater noticed if her mother breast-fed her and rocked her to sleep.

When the newsreel ended and the camera on the screen turned toward the audience, her mother would tell her to pose. Natalie believed they were taking her picture. At four—when the family moved to Santa Rosa—she could identify the 94 actors in her half-sister's scrapbook.

Six months later, a Hollywood

movie company came to Santa Rosa. With it came Director Irving Pichel who, one day, noticed a tiny child with enormous eyes, standing behind the ropes that held the onlookers back. He beckoned to Natalie. She went to him.

"Those eyes . . ." he said later, "she looks at you and you can read her thoughts." She sat in his lap and sang *In My Arms* in a thin, sweet voice. Pichel gave her a small scene in his film, *Happy Land*. When it was over, he asked Mrs. Gurdin if he could adopt the child for \$10,000. "Of course," Maria Gurdin said and smiled, although she did not think it was funny. The next day the courtly, middle-aged Pichel arrived with legal adoption papers. She explained she had been joking.

"All right," he said. "But when I find the right part, I'll send for her."

The letter came a year-and-a-half later. Because Maria Gurdin knew her husband would not allow Natalie to act, she pretended a friend had invited them to Los Angeles for a visit. Natalie—who knew the truth—said nothing to her father.

The first day Pichel asked her, playfully, "Do you like actors?"

"Yes," she replied, not at all playfully, "I am going to be a star."

At first, in *Tomorrow Is Forever*, Natalie was an amateur among professionals. After two weeks of shooting, however, Universal-International signed her to a contract under the studio-manufactured name of Natalie Wood. Maria Gurdin telephoned her husband: "Come down here. We are going to stay."

Miss Wood's pigtails have been

replaced by a chic Empire Cut, but her eyes are still those of the eight-year-old who didn't believe in Santa Claus in *Miracle on 34th Street*. George Seaton, director of that film, said: "She had an instinctive sense of timing and emotion that I have found in only one other child. She was so businesslike she amazed me."

Before she could read, scripts were read to her and she memorized them entirely. If an adult actor forgot his lines, she cued him. She can still remember every word of every part.

At the end of a year Natalie moved to Twentieth Century-Fox for *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, *Chicken Every Sunday*, *Father Was a Fullback*. She was already accustomed to older people but had few friends her own age. When she was nine, she met an 18-year-old boy the studio had just signed to a contract. That night she asked her mother, "Do you think I'll ever marry anyone as handsome as Robert Wagner?"

At 16, Natalie co-starred with the late James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and the resulting Dean hysteria swept her forward with him. Perhaps no other child actress except Elizabeth Taylor has made the transition from child to young adult on the screen so successfully.

OFF THE SCREEN the transition has not been easy. At 16, she ate snails for lunch; wore black fur blouses; covered her face with make-up; wobbled after older men on spiked heels; and—to celebrate her graduation from high school—sent a box of cigarette butts to the Board of Education. At 18, she jumped fully

clothed into a swimming pool to impress Marlon Brando. She rode behind Elvis Presley on his motorcycle; walked through Greenwich Village barefoot, playing a flute.

The world was her ash tray. When she was told jewelry made a person look older, she drowned herself in pins, necklaces, bracelets and shoulder-length earrings. When Michael Wayne, son of actor John Wayne, called her an "infant behind the wheel of a car," she went in a rage to the Cadillac agency and ordered a \$12,000 automobile. At a party, she lifted her glass with the remark, "Just think. In four years I'll be old enough to drink."

On the set she was professional. Off the set she was uncontrollable. Her parents no longer knew her.

The men she went out with were usually older than she. Nick Ray, director of *Rebel Without a Cause*, was 27 years older. Actor Raymond Burr (TV's "Perry Mason") was 20 years older. Ray taught her to read Freud and Schopenhauer. Burr taught her how to order wines and address headwaiters. At their first dinner, he asked her if she would like *escargots*. Only when she was served did she realize that *escargots* were snails. Unwilling to back down, she ate them. After that, snails were her favorite lunch.

But Natalie was more and more dissatisfied; her escapades got wilder and wilder. "She reminded me of an F. Scott Fitzgerald heroine," says a woman who knew her well. "She was burning herself up. I was frightened and I waited for something to happen."

Something happened. At 21, Natalie is tamed.

"For the first time in her life," says one friend, "Natalie has found a man who can dominate her. Even with men 20 years older she was the boss. She played the masculine role. With Wagner, Natalie is a woman."

Twenty-nine-year-old Robert John Wagner, Jr. is considerate, kind and has a strong sense of etiquette. On the surface his chief attribute seems to be charm. Yet he has succeeded in what one actor has called "The Taming of the Shrewd."

After a little more than two years of marriage, the girl who predicted her life would be "jewels, travel, lovers and no marriage until I'm 37" spends her spare time crocheting an afghan. On her honeymoon she wrote thank-you notes for nearly 1,000 wedding gifts. When she ran out of note paper, she telephoned four or five times to assure people that she would thank them properly as soon as new paper arrived.

Regarding these changes, Natalie says—in her pseudo-tough tone of voice that contrasts with her fragile body—"The Board of Education had ceased to disturb me."

She never looks in a mirror when she passes one. She is rarely self-conscious. She says, "If I'm not dressed right for the occasion, I just shrug."

When a friend had no money to pay for extensive dental work, she paid the bill. Yet she is liable to quibble over nickels. The cleaning woman did an excellent job on the boat, and left a bill for \$7.50. Wagner put \$10 in the envelope for her. Natalie didn't calm down until he

had promised not to leave over \$9.50.

When Natalie first stepped aboard Wagner's power boat, her experience on the water had been limited to a trip to Honolulu. Now friends consider her a better sailor than her husband. She steers a straight course, keeps the log, works both radio and radio direction finder, sluices down the deck, baits her own hooks and cleans the bait tank.

In a marriage between two actors there is usually an undercurrent of competition, a professional—if not a personal—jealousy. The Wagner alliance seems the opposite. The pair vowed that their careers would never separate them—because they knew the dangers inherent in separations and because Natalie can't bear to be away from her husband.

She turned down the chance to star with three of the biggest male stars—Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster, Laurence Olivier—in George Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*, simply because the picture was to be made in Europe and would separate her from Wagner for four months. Also, Wagner had been offered an important role in *In Love and War* which was to be made in the U.S. So, she put her marriage and his success first.

Now she and Wagner are co-starring for the first time in MGM's *All The Fine Young Cannibals*.

Only once since their marriage has Natalie been away from home—for a ten-day tour promoting *Marjorie Morningstar*. As soon as the train left the station, she became ill and remained so during the trip.


Natalie has never been seriously

ill but has often imagined she was. When she was eight and heard her parents whisper about a polio epidemic, she woke up paralyzed. For years she was sure her heart was bad. She is always concerned about her health, yet she eats almost nothing. In a restaurant she orders the most expensive dish, takes three bites then pushes the plate away.

She cannot bear to be alone. She is full of reasonless fears. Of airplanes. Of snakes. Of swimming in the ocean.

Yet she stands her ground against the things from which most people run. She does what she feels she must do, no matter who disapproves.

The weight of the studio was thrown against her when she refused *The Devil's Disciple* and *The Young Philadelphians*. She was bribed, cajoled and threatened. But she stood her ground. "There'll always be another picture," she said. "And I've discovered there are more important things. . . ."

Natalie has always suffered from the lack of identity that afflicts those who spend their lives pretending to be other people. And Natalie has been pretending to be the daughter of Bette Davis or Fred MacMurray or Claire Trevor or somebody since she was six. As Mrs. Robert Wagner she has at last found a firm identity. It is this that she calls "more important" and she is not about to lose easily what she was so long in winning. Marriage has tamed her to some extent, but not so much that she will avoid a good fight to keep the "togetherness" she needs so desperately. 

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