



"I Raised

My Daughter to Be a Star"

by Mrs. Maria Gurdin



The much-publicized "romance" between Natalie Wood and James Dean began in film, "Rebel Without a Cause."



Natalie's biggest role is as "Marjorie Morningstar" opposite Gene Kelly. Many actresses wanted the part.



Young Natalie is used to performing with stars like Frank Sinatra and Tony Curtis in "Kings Go Forth."



As Marjorie, the star achieves another goal in career she and her mother have sacrificed much for.



And now a role in which she has little training—that of a wife. Groom Bob Wagner isn't worried.

The mother of Natalie Wood talks frankly of the years she devoted to grooming her daughter for movie fame and fortune.



RAISED MY DAUGHTER, Natalie Wood, from early childhood to be a movie star.

To do it, I lied to my husband, neglected my other children, and subordinated every desire to her success.

Looking back, I now wonder whether I've done the right thing for her!

As I stood in the Scottsdale (Ariz.) Methodist Church recently and watched my daughter marry actor Robert Wagner, I was haunted by the thought that I may have neglected to instill in her the values that make a good wife and mother.

Yet I'm not what you might consider "a typical movie mother." Until Natalie was 18, I went to the studio and on location only because the law required an adult to be with her when she worked. I never interfered, advised, or even criticized her professional life. My influence was more indirect—though just as effective, I feel.

It started on a sleepy Summer day in Santa Rosa, Calif., when Natalie was four. I had heard that director Irving Pichel would shoot crowd scenes for a movie and was asking local people to act as extras.

I went to the location solely because I was curious about film-making. While I was watching, Natalie suddenly disappeared. I searched for 20 minutes before I happened to glance at director Pichel—and saw her sitting on his lap, talking animatedly. Mr. Pichel was fascinated by my little girl, whom he had tabbed "Brown Eyes."

He wanted to know if she could act, and without further encouragement Natalie went into a song

and dance routine. The director promptly wrote in a bit part for her. I couldn't have been more delighted, and later Mr. Pichel even asked if he could adopt Natalie.

"Sure," I grinned. "Just come to the house tomorrow morning with \$10,000."

To my surprise—and shock—he took me seriously! The next day he appeared at our house with two witnesses and a written contract initiating the adoption procedure. I told him I had been joking, but he failed to appreciate my humor. However, he agreed to send for Natalie as soon as he found a suitable part for her in Hollywood.

A YEAR AND A HALF later, the call finally came—and with it trouble from my husband.

"I will not let her get into motion pictures!" he burst out when I brought up the subject. "It's bad for children. It will spoil her. And she'll associate with the wrong kind of people!"

Even Natalie's tears—which usually melted her father—were unsuccessful. She refused to eat for two days. My husband still wouldn't budge.

That's when I stepped in. I asked a friend of mine in Los Angeles to wire me that she was desperately ill and needed me right away. An hour after the telegram was delivered, Natalie and I (with bags packed the evening before) took off for Los Angeles and Natalie's screen test. When my husband learned the truth, he was furious. He has since grown accustomed to the idea, though in all honesty I'm not sure he has ever forgiven me.

When we arrived at Paramount, Mr. Pichel

warned us that Natalie was one of 40 girls testing for the part of a little German refugee. The night before the test I carefully evaluated her chances. She had practically no screen experience while many of the other girls were veterans. Her best clothes would look shabby in comparison to the expensive wardrobes of the other contestants. To be noticed, she had to be different. I made sure she was.

While all the other youngsters were dolled up in their prettiest organdy dresses and painted with lipstick and rouge, I had Natalie put on a plain cotton dress, braid her hair, and scrub her face until it shone. As a result, she not only looked different but was so like a refugee girl that she was the first to read for the part.

When she did—slowly, accurately, mechanically—she almost lost her chance! Mr. Pichel's face mirrored a growing disappointment with each line. "I guess she doesn't have it after all," he admitted.

Natalie stared at him in disbelief. "Didn't I read well, Mr. Pichel?"

He explained about the emotions and tears he wanted to see during certain passages.

"I didn't know I was supposed to act," she cried out. "I thought you only wanted to find out if I could read!"

When she went through the scene a second time, she wasn't the only one crying. All of us watching had tears in our eyes.

She got the part and a seven-year contract.

Once Natalie was signed, I stayed out of the

limelight altogether. I never told her how to play a part, nor criticized her performance, nor in any way influenced her acting. That was the director's responsibility, I felt.

Yet I had other ways to be helpful.

I cued her, encouraged her, and performed dozens of tasks that might have cost her valuable time and effort—like answering fan letters, shopping, and taking over every household chore.

Maybe I spoiled her too much in this last respect. Natalie has never learned to keep house, fix a meal, or balance a budget. Still, this may not be important. After all, she can afford a maid, cook, and secretary—and I made certain she had an excellent housekeeper when she got married.

PERHAPS NATALIE already has solved her greatest problem—growing up normally while her mother groomed her for stardom.

To help her keep a level head, I always insisted she attend public schools and make friends with neighbors' children and schoolmates. I was only partly successful at this because, during the last years of school, her new interests and movie environment drew her into a different world.

Concentrating on Natalie's career meant cutting 15 years out of my own social life. If I was invited to a party, I went only if I could take Natalie along. I did my own housework long after we could afford a maid because I felt the money could be invested in a more impressive house which would help Natalie's career.

And all the time I had to appease my husband and make certain that my youngest daughter, Lana Lisa, would not experience the same jealousies my oldest, Teddy, had felt because of my complete devotion to Natalie.

Teddy's problem solved itself when she married and began raising her own family. With Lana Lisa, I made certain she didn't feel slighted by giving her something new whenever I bought anything for Natalie. My biggest help, however, was Lana's own devotion to her sister. Lana became as engrossed in Natalie's career as I did and willingly played second fiddle when Natalie's needs took precedence over hers.

From now on, I will concentrate on Lana to make up for some of the neglect she suffered in recent years. I hope it isn't too late.

As for Natalie, I have accomplished my dream of seeing her develop into a successful star, as she proves with her performance in "Marjorie Morningstar." Only the future will tell whether she can be equally successful as a person, a wife, and a mother. If she isn't, it will be my fault.