



Natasha Lee Martin, top, stands in front of a tenement complex on Healy Street where her grandfather used to live many years ago before he moved to Tiverton. Photos by RICHARD COSTA/ Fall River Spirit SouthCoastToday.com

"Actress with Fall River Ties Makes a Run at the Silver Screen"

by Richard Costa, Fall River Spirit Correspondent January 24, 2007

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Natasha Lee Martin has it all working for her: a diversified life, a well-traveled history, an excellent education, remarkable acting ability and disposition. The photogenic 33-year old lives in Philadelphia where she teaches acting at a community college. She also performs in many theater events. But the Providence-born and -raised Natasha also has roots in Tiverton and Fall River, where her grandparents are from. In many ways, it's where her journey started.

I asked her about that journey over a cup of coffee at King Philip Lunch when she visited her father in Tiverton over the holidays.

"It began when I was 5," Natasha remembers. "My uncle, David Tully, worked for WSAR in Somerset. In the evening he was a radio persona. He commissioned and produced 'The Man in the Snow,' a radio play. He needed the character of a little girl."

The little girl was the character who finds a lost Santa Claus freezing in the snow. She leads Santa to her parents and brother. Natasha rehearsed and performed the show on microphone for a broadcast audience in the late 1970s.

She would continue her stage work in high school and move on to travel the world, including undergraduate work in acting at the University of New Mexico and graduate studies at the Actor's Studio Program in Manhattan.

But her roots always tug at her heart wherever she goes. Her paternal grandfather, John Martin Sr., grew up in the Flint while her grandmother, Evelyn Martin, was from the Globe district. Evelyn lived on Heatley Place off Sprague Street along with her parents until she married John Sr. and moved to Tiverton.

Natasha remembers the area well.

"I've been to various parks in Fall River and I used to sail in Fall River and Tiverton. My grandpa had a 25-foot sailboat. We'd sail to Newport and back to Fogland and the Tiverton Bay.

"I also knew all the local Portuguese bakeries and I was introduced to Polish food here at places like the Ukrainian Home. My dad would take us to the factory outlets and flea markets in Fall River. We used to go the China Royal and Burlington Coat Factory."

The memories never leave.

"The ethnic food here is a tradition within my family, like the Portuguese food. When I'm here I realize how much I miss it. I miss the smells, the sandwiches and the way people speak. It becomes a part of you."

She's also seen the city change dramatically over the years from the end of the textile era until now.

"It's now an artistic hub. The factory/warehouse on the waterfront is where the Narrows Center for the Arts is. It's good to see."

Natasha's Uncle David was so involved with the arts it sparked a creative flame within her. As a teenager, she used to go to Newgate Theatre in Providence. Her Uncle David performed there

while other relatives, like cousin Patricia Tully, ran much of it. Natasha watched him work and hung around the Trinity Repertory Conservatory backstage, where she eventually acted in a Christmas Production at Rhode Island College.

"I saw so many performances, I became completely enamored with acting while I observed it."

Her family was equally inspirational. David Tully was very arts savvy, as was her cousin Patricia Tully, who is presently the chairwoman of the Salve Regina University Theatre Department. But it was Natasha's family, friends and professors who proved to be her greatest source of inspiration.

"I owe a tremendous thank you to the late Marvin Simms, my acting teacher, and Dr. Noreen Barnes-McLain, who's been an incredible mentor. She gave me many opportunities to direct and teach and develop my work as an actress. I also couldn't have done this without the support of family members who stuck by me, especially my mother, Judith Dimaio, and my father, John Martin."

Judith passed away in 2004. Natasha's father John owns a Fall River based business called TCIC, The Competitiveness Improvement Co. It provides grant-funded training to strengthen a company's ability to compete.

In her late teens, Natasha was accepted at Salve Regina but elected to go to the University of New Mexico instead.

"I studied under some unbelievable people and ended up fully enrolled in production. I had many leading roles there."

While she was enrolled for her MFA in acting at the Actors Studio in Manhattan, she had the opportunity to ask Jennifer Jason Leigh a question on James Lipton's now famous A&E show, "Inside the Actor's Studio."

"I stood up and I was nervous. I asked her what she does when her 'gut' fails her as an actress. She described her 'tool box,' her life experiences, the methods and techniques which she draws on. That's what I do now, draw on my growing experience."

She also witnessed the beginning of the artistic renaissance of Providence, which has culminated recently with the growth of 'Hollywood East' and numerous Providence- and Rhode Island-based productions. It's an effect that has rippled to Connecticut and Massachusetts as well. The 2002 film "Passionada" was produced in New Bedford and Disney is presently producing "Dan in Real Life" in Jamestown.

Natasha recently did an episode for Japan's Nippon TV on a program called "Astonishing News" in which contestants try to solve famous American crimes. In short, the audience is shown dramatized parts of the case and has to solve them. Natasha played Betty Gow, the nanny for the Lindberg baby and chief suspect in the case.

Between sips of hot coffee, she mentions another recent project which was very special to her, a short film called "The Audition." It's about a struggling actor who has an endless array of things go wrong for him in a single day.

"I play one of the horrible things that happen to him. It was a role that was dark, maniacal and mysterious."

She embellished what she thought about playing these "nefarious" parts.

"I enjoy playing the antithesis of what I believe. I enjoy acting opposite my nature to get to know myself. You stretch your limits and realize your potential. I also like historical re-enactments for the same reason. In some films, history is speaking to you in a way you wouldn't otherwise realize. You get to know a culture or environment and how people function in it. You come to understand how much humanity we keep alive — it's a universal feeling to see a character struggle."

Natasha's done numerous short films and continues to do a lot of stage work as a writer, director, and actress. She was an extra in films like the "Summer of Sam" and more recently in "Annapolis" starring James Franco. She co-starred in the 2005 independent feature film "St. Cecilia." The film was shot in the Northeast and distributed to numerous film festivals. Natasha plays Gloria, a bar owner in the middle of a love triangle with the main character. Her character has a tough, world-wise demeanor on the outside but a softer sensibility on the inside.

Natasha was also in an episode of the third season of the "Simple Life" with Nicole Richie and Paris Hilton and in 2005 and played in the short comedy film "Posse," which won best acting at the Philadelphia Film Festival.

"I played an office worker who kept falling asleep at the meetings."

This year, she plans to work on a ghost story that's slated to be shot this summer. "1,000 Words" is a combination of film noir, detective story and psychological thriller. It will be filmed in rural Pennsylvania and parts of the Northeast.

But Natasha never forgets where she's from.

"Every actor experiences some shock when they come from a small city or town, such as when I went to New York City and now Philadelphia. You realize you're just one of many people trying to have your voice heard in this industry and still stay true to yourself. When I go home, I look at the faces of the people here, and it reminds me of what's important in life. But this is where I'm from, who I am and I can always go back. It's a comforting feeling to know — it makes you comfortable in your identity. This area is so much about family. At heart I'm a small town girl."

Let's hope Natasha keeps coming back to visit and when more films get cast and developed here she'll have the opportunity to lend her experienced touch to the project. That may include a project in Fall River or the surrounding area.

"I would be honored to film in my hometown if the opportunity arose. I would love to work on a project in this area. I can't imagine what a thrill it would be. I always felt that this area would be good for a project. It has such a rich cultural history that people don't know about it."

She'll keep us posted. Meantime take a look at www.natashaleemartin.com if you want to find out more about Natasha and her work.