



MARILYN ROSS STRAUSS

March 1, 1927 - September 15, 2018

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With the same strength, style and grace with which she lived, Marilyn Ross Strauss, noted Broadway producer, Tony Award-winner, and founder of the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, passed away on Saturday evening, September 15th, surrounded by her loving family and friends. Services will be held on Tuesday morning, September 18th, at 10:00 a.m., at The Louis Memorial Chapel, 6830 Troost Avenue, Kansas City, MO, with burial in Rose Hill Cemetery. Immediately following, there will be a celebration of Marilyn's life well-lived, one enriched by family, community, and tremendous accomplishments, at the Kansas City Young Audiences building, 3732 Main Street, the home of the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival. The family requests that flowers be omitted and contributions in Marilyn's honor be made to the Marilyn Strauss Legacy Fund at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival or to Jewish Family Services.

"Mar" was born to Harold Ross and Louise Phillips Ross in Detroit, Michigan, on March 1, 1927, and spent her childhood years in Dallas, Texas. Dedication, determination and perseverance are key words which have guided Marilyn through life's journey. Through her positive attitude and tenacity, she overcame adversities like a life-threatening childhood illness, and many family moves. It was her grandparents who instilled her strong sense of Jewish identity. She developed an extraordinary sense of independence and a can-do attitude that would shape her life and her legacy.

Strauss came to Kansas City as a teenager and made it her home. After a year in Florida for college, Mar returned to Kansas City to care for her ailing mother. She married Dale McCall and had three children: her much-loved daughter, Monte, and sons Jon and Kevin. She was a devoted mother who cared deeply for her children but was also fiercely self-reliant with endless energy and the determination to make a name for herself and make an impact on her community.

Mar managed to find time to volunteer for the Junior Chamber of Commerce where she served as president. She became involved with the Jewish Community Center's Resident Theatre, where she made lifelong friends like Dennis Hennessy and Richard Carrothers, who would go on to found Tiffany's Attic and Waldo Astoria Dinner Theatres, now the New Theatre Restaurant. It was there that she got her first taste of the stage, which would ultimately reshape Kansas City's theatre community forever.

When she and McCall divorced, practicality necessitated that she find employment, so she started producing fashion shows and began a styling and marketing company. She enjoyed financial independence and entrepreneurial success in her businesses. She married Kansas City businessman, Leonard Strauss, from whom she was later divorced.

Marilyn continued her civic involvement by working with Shirley Helzberg to establish a volunteer program at Menorah Hospital. Her continued interest in the theatre prompted her to produce the spectacular Leonard Bernstein Festival, in collaboration with Kansas City Philharmonic Music Director, Maurice Peress, in 1979.

World-famous maestro, Bernstein, conducted a three-day festival of performances, which were filmed for PBS. Ms. Strauss commissioned and titled an original solo ballet for Judith Jamison to perform. The highly-acclaimed festival featured appearances by notable film and Broadway stars, and was recorded for 60 Minutes. The much-publicized event drew rave reviews and Strauss was lauded for her remarkable capabilities as a producer.

After the enormous success of the Bernstein festival, Marilyn purchased a pied-à-terre in New York City, where she worked closely with famed producer, Lester Osterman. She would always say that she was a quick-study and she acquired the skills and chutzpah necessary to triumph on Broadway.

In her 12-year New York career, Marilyn co-produced five plays on Broadway and received a Tony Award for Best Producer/Best Play for the Irish drama, *Da*. She received an Obie Award for *Getting Out* and a Tony nomination for *Pump Boys and Dinettes*. Mar also traveled extensively throughout Europe, attending theatrical performances and was an acclaimed speaker with a focus on American theatre.

Joseph Papp, legendary producer and founder of the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park, urged Marilyn to return to her hometown to fill a void in Kansas City's arts community. Papp encouraged Marilyn to establish a professional, outdoor Shakespeare Festival, and above all, to keep it free! Marilyn followed Papp's insightful direction and

brought noted actor, Kevin Kline, to Kansas City to perform an evening of Shakespeare's best-loved monologues at her first fundraising event in 1990.

Kline's performance was so well-received that Marilyn gathered a group of Shakespeare enthusiasts to encourage community interest and support. She formed a board of directors and was excited and encouraged to install noted Shakespearean scholar, R. Crosby Kemper, III, as the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival's first president. In 1992, she was able to present the Festival's inaugural production, *The Tempest*, in Southmoreland Park. She served as both Artistic and Executive Director for the next three years in order to bring to our vast community, what is historically considered the work of the world's greatest playwright.

Under the Board's leadership and fundraising efforts, the Festival was able to hire a talented staff, which included professional directors, designers and actors. In 2001, after experiencing the deep satisfaction of the public's embrace of the Festival, Marilyn and the Board named accomplished director, Sidonie Garrett, as Executive Artistic Director. The mutual respect, dynamic friendship and love for the Bard's work, shared by Marilyn and Sidonie, continues to make the Festival an extraordinary success story in Kansas City's theatrical community. Throughout the Festival's 27-year history, Marilyn never drew a salary; her "payment" was seeing the joy on the faces of the audience, as they were enraptured by the professional performances of the nation's finest Shakespearean actors.

Marilyn's ambitious dream of a FREE festival has been fulfilled and grown beyond all expectations. Since the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival's inaugural production, over 750,000 people have attended the much-loved summer performances, still held in Southmoreland Park. Marilyn was most proud that thousands of children have participated in the Festival's educational programs.

In 2017, Mayor Sly James issued a proclamation in honor of Marilyn's tremendous gift to our city. The Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department, under the leadership of Mark McHenry, renamed Oak Street, between the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and Southmoreland Park, Marilyn Strauss Way, to honor her lasting legacy.

Kansas City has expressed its gratitude to Marilyn with many other honors, as well. During Jackson County's 175th Anniversary, Marilyn was included in the list of the top 175 people who have shaped our community. As Kansas City celebrated its 150th birthday, Marilyn was listed by *The Kansas City Star* as one of the "150 Trailblazers among us, who have wielded legendary influence and will make a big difference beyond the year, 2000." In

2008, she received the Dr. Phyliss and Robert A. Bernstein Humanitarian Award from Jewish Family Services and in 2011, she was honored with the Gillis Kansas City Spirit Award. In February of 2016, Marilyn received the ArtsKC Virtuoso Award, which honors an exceptional individual for his/her dedicated volunteerism in the arts.

Marilyn was predeceased by her beloved daughter, Monte Dunning and her parents, Harold Ross and Louise Phillips Ross. She is survived by her two loving sons, Jon McCall of Ashland, Oregon, and Kevin McCall and his partner, Elaine Werner of Reno, Nevada. She also leaves behind her daughter-in-law, Beth Brooks McCall and son-in-law, Robert Dunning; Grandchildren: Cassie Sochocki, Spencer (Jenny) McCall, Brent Stemmermann, Brooke (Nick) Szczurko, Douglas McCall and his girlfriend Alissa Marshall, Kahley McCall and her fiance Tate Knudsen, Wyatt McCall, Summer McCall, and Jackie (AJ Canillas) McCall; and Great-grandchildren: Janosch and Eli Stemmermann, Josie and Ivy Sochocki, June Nelms and Noah Szczurko, and so many friends spread all over the world.

Since Marilyn's family lived outside of Kansas City, she developed a unique talent for assembling a wonderful team of friends who supported her throughout her life. A very special thanks to Gloria Ward, who cared for Marilyn with tremendous love, admiration and compassion for over 40 years. Thanks also to Carla Hein, her friend and business manager and Gayle Price Krigel, her trusted BFF! Marilyn's family is deeply grateful to the caring staff at Claridge Court, especially Trish Fluit and Christina Reed for their many kindnesses over this past year. Special appreciation to the knowledgeable team at Midwest Neurofeedback for sharing their extraordinary life-improving skills.

Pallbearers

Sidonie Garrett, Dennis Hennessy, R. Crosby Kemper III, Bruce Krigel, Douglas McCall, Dr. Charles Porter, John Rensenhouse

Honorary Pallbearers

Bob Bond, Dodie Brown, Shea Gordon Festoff, Bob Gershon, John Kornitzer, Mark McHenry, Myra Siegel and Jackie White

“And though she be but little she is FIERCE!”

William Shakespeare

Events

SEP **Funeral** 10:00AM
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The Louis Memorial Chapel
6830 Troost Ave, Kansas City, MO, US, 64131