North Haven Island’s novelist and screenwriter Susan Minot debuts a new play this August that hits very close to home.

INTERVIEW BY OLIVIA GUNN KOTSISHEVSKAYA

In her third novel, *Evening* (made into the 2007 film starring Vanessa Redgrave, Meryl Streep, and Claire Danes), Susan Minot tells the story of a dying woman whose memories whisk her back to a weekend spent on an island off the coast of Maine in her twenties. It’s a world familiar to Minot, who grew up summering with her family on North Haven, eventually living there full-time as a new mother. The island has been a constant in her life and today, at 61, she’s written a play for it. *On Island* will run from August 2-5 at Waterman’s Community Center.

How did the story of *On Island* come to you?
I’m on the drama committee at Waterman’s [Community Center on North Haven], and David Hopkins, a committee member, had the idea of doing something oriented toward the island much like *Islands: The Musical* that was done. It’s very much rooted in the experience of the people on the island. The idea was to take some of the history of North Haven, some of the myths on the island, and put them into a dramatic collage-like story. I’ve always wanted to write a play. In fact, I did write a one-woman show based on a memoir called *The Little Locksmith* by Katharine Butler Hathaway starring Linda Hunt [*The Year of Living Dangerously, Solo: A Star Wars Story, NCIS: Los Angeles*]. [Putting *The Little Locksmith* on stage] had been suggested to me by the famous John Wulp, who was the force behind North Haven theater for a long time. He was a Broadway producer who came to North Haven in the 1980s and put on the shows there. So, this isn’t technically my first play, but it’s the first one that’s more of a proper play. I found that for me to really get behind it, my orientation is more to the personal and the present. Since I’ve lived both on the island as a year-rounder and a summer person, I know a lot of aspects of the island. I decided to do a story that takes place on the island today in the summer. The day is August 3rd. It focuses on two island families; one is a year-round family and the other is a summer family.

Is there a conflict between the two families?
It’s not between the two families at all. It’s more about seeing the different versions of family conflict. They both have different versions of the same thing going on.

“I’ve been visiting the island since I was born.”
Life on North Haven may seem a little mysterious to everyone who isn’t on North Haven. How do you connect a story that takes place on an island to the rest of Maine? I think you’ll find it will connect with people in Sri Lanka. It’s not about the strangeness of people who live on an island. It’s about people who happen to live on an island. There are some aspects that are encouraged. Isolation may be something people who live on the island deal with more. One of the through lines of the play is a stranger on the island. He gets on the wrong ferry. He was to go to Vinalhaven, which to North Haven seems like the other side of the world. He acts as a kind of catalyst. Also, North Haven has a very active theater community because of John Wulp. The children act in school, the Christmas shows—they’re used to performing. One of the things I love is seeing the musicals there. People are happy to hear songs, so I’ve inserted existing songs in the play. Two of the artists are from the island: Courtney Naliboff and the band the Toughcats.

Both are local? They are. Courtney lives on-island and the Toughcats have lived on-island; some are off-island at the moment. If you live on an island, and I go into this in the play, there is a very refined sense of who’s an islander, who’s a year-rounder, who’s a transplant. That could be very divisive language. It can be, yes. Part of my assignment was to celebrate the island. It would be probably easier and more dramatic to do a piercing expose of the underbelly, but this is a PG effort. Children are in it; anyone can see it.

Were you tempted to go to the underbelly? I couldn’t. That was never going to be. That’s usually where I am tempted to go, but this was an interesting challenge for me. I wanted to do something moving, celebratory, and entertaining.

On that note, how do you keep a story like this relevant to everything that is happening in our headlines? Family and life is always relevant. That’s the bottom line. Being able to exist in a family, on a small island, that couldn’t be more relevant.

What has your experience on North Haven been from childhood through today? I’ve been visiting the island since I was born. Every summer of my life. Maybe I missed a few in my twenties, but certainly growing up we’d go for the month of August. My six brothers, sisters, and I would go with my parents. We’d stay in part of a house my father’s parents lived in. Cousins would be there. It was the fun place to go. The beauty of the island, picnics, boats, the smells, nature. When you’re young, you don’t notice that so much. What you notice is that you can walk barefoot everywhere you go starting at age ten… I grew up in Massachusetts and have always felt that North Haven was more of a hometown. When I was in my forties, I fell in love with a man, Charlie Pingree, who lived on the island, and married him. We had a child, and lived there for nine years year-round.

Going from visiting to living there full-time, did you ever feel a little crazy or stuck? I always feel a little crazy wherever I am, so hard to tell. I went from living in New York City and traveling a lot to living on a small island with three ferries a day. It has another kind of adventure to it. You’re faced with the challenges of living with the same people and the acceptance of peo-

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People… People are the same wherever you go. An island just accentuates behaviors in people more than a city. The city accentuates different ones, too. You’re just experiencing yourself slightly differently. I was also a mother for the first time. There were a lot of new things going on when I lived there, but the rhythm of the day was the big difference. The rhythm of the day and the slowness. It was fantastic.

You’re going to be directing a film adaptation of your first book, Monkeys. What has been the most difficult part of that process?

Well, it’s the fourth script I’ve written. Two of the movies have been made [Stealing Beauty, Evening], and I’ve adapted another one of my books and am developing that as a movie. Difficulty? It’s just the logistics. Instead of it being all up to you to finish the last page at your desk, you need a hundred things to be lined up before the making of the movie happens.

My husband was a film student and is a big fan of Bertolucci (The Last Emperor, Last Tango in Paris), so I have to ask, what was it like co-writing Stealing Beauty with him?

It was fantastic. It was a wonderful time. I wrote the movie based on an idea of his, and then I would write some ideas and we’d meet again and confer. He’d say, “Oh, I want to have three generations in the story,” so I’d go back and write something else. He’d say, “This should happen here,” and I’d say, “No, I don’t think a girl would do that.” It was that kind of conversation. Then I was on set all summer. That was my master class.

How did you get the assignment to write with him?

Bertolucci was looking for an American or English woman writer to give credence to the main character point-of-view; a mutual writer friend mentioned me as a cinephile. My books had recently come out in Italy, and he read Lust & Other Stories.

Was Bertolucci aware of the Maine connection that you and Liv Tyler share? Has Tyler ever visited North Haven with you?

No awareness at all. Liv’s childhood was in Portland. She has rented houses a couple of summers on North Haven and loves it.

Did you write any of the Stealing Beauty script in North Haven?

I wrote the script in New York, Rome, and Sabaudia, a seaside town south of Rome.

You come from a family of writers, so do you play off of one another’s work?

My sister Eliza—who lives in New Jersey with her four children—she is working on her next book. She writes beautiful essays and short stories she shares with me. I’m continually inspired by her. I aspire to be as good a writer as she is.
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