

## “Ruthy”



Ruth Astor directing in New York City during the 1960's.

by Carol Johnstone

RUTH ASTOR REMEMBERS her birth: “I didn’t like the whole thing. My parents were disappointed that I wasn’t a boy, that I was ugly and covered with hair.” Her sister was born when she was 5—pretty, blond, sweet, the family pet. Ruthy, on the other hand, had her own gang at age 6.

Her early youth was spent moving from place to place through the Great Depression, ending up in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. She was 16 when World War II broke out and all the boys went away. She says, “I was desolate, very horny and had no one to play with. So I married the first guy who came back from the army.” It lasted a year. When more guys started coming back, she hitched up with a drummer and got a job as a “camera girl” for night clubs.

Thus began her career in film as a New York “broad,” a career girl. The only way for Ruthy to break into film as a woman was to take on a diverse array of jobs in documentaries, industrial films and commercials—production manager, producer, director, researcher, and editor.

The highlight of her career was producing a series of 26 half-hour television

films on the presidency of Harry Truman in 1964. When asked for access to his presidential files, Truman said, “I wouldn’t let Margaret [his daughter] see those files.” Ruth countered with “I’m not Margaret, I’m producing these films.” They gradually became friends, such that when her parents came to meet him, he was very generous in his praise for their daughter. She says, “the only nice thing I did for my parents, I fear.” Of Truman, she says, “Harry was very down to earth, drank a quart of bourbon a day, and always harangued anyone around with stories of why he HAD to drop the bomb to save American boys’ lives.”

In her personal life, Ruth felt that she “could do better if I got the right guy, but each time it turned out a little worse (except for a very sweet affair with Burt Reynolds—whose letters I still keep).” Gradually she came to see that “all the things that were supposed to bring you happiness or even some gratification: money, career, love, marriage, sex, fame—were empty and bringing no lasting happiness.”

While on a visit to London, her friend Fran Lewis told her about this “Tibetan lama living in a monastery in Scotland.” Ruthy says, “he sounded so exotic, so cool.” Later when Fran, who was living at Tail of the Tiger in Vermont (later to become Karme Choling), came to stay with her in New York, Ruthy says, “I discovered that she was a much more pleasant person to be with and that no matter how much I tried to be a good hostess, she was always doing things for me before I could begin to be helpful to her—I was definitely intrigued.”

The first time Ruthy went up to “Tail,” she was struck by “the haunting feeling that I was meeting myself for the first time.” Her first meditation instruction from Fran was, “If you fall asleep, don’t snore.” That was her instruction until she

went to Seminary in 1973. She remembers, “We only pretended to do [meditation], because we fell in love with Rinpoche and it was something he wanted us to do.”

Rinpoche kept asking her to move, saying “Come to Boulder and you will become Ruth.” But she wouldn’t even consider leaving her “groovy apartment, friends, lover, career and a summer cottage on Fire Island.” Rinpoche sweetened the offer, inviting her to come live with him, his wife Diana and his son Tagi, and work as his secretary.

She says when she finally got to Boulder, “It felt as though my skin was being ripped off my body. It was so painful to drop my whole life. In Boulder, everyone was 18 years old, blond, blue-eyed and leggy. I was in my forties with an Eastern European physique. The sangha was very small and it seemed hard to connect with anyone. I remember crying for most of the first year.” She celebrated her 45th birthday with Rinpoche, telling him how old she felt. He said, “fine, we’ll grow old together.”

Ruth staffed three more seminaries at Lake Louise. She also made a connection with Judy Lief and The Naropa Institute. When Judy moved to Halifax, Ruthy immigrated as well to create a branch of Naropa Institute in Halifax.

By the time the first 3-year retreat at Gampo Abbey was announced, Ruthy was ready for it, seeing it as a way to connect with her “true nature.” She recalls, “mostly the experience was one of intensification of *kleshas*, or neurotic patterns, arising from the claustrophobia and having to relate to others in such a closed environment.” The week after she finished the retreat, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. Surgery and chemotherapy followed and eventually, recovery.

When she was almost healed, Suzann Duquette offered her a position at Karme Choling as head of Practice and Study. She’s been there for two years now and says, “it’s been good for me, quite intense, very hard work,” with the reward of at least trying to “give it back.”\*