

# WHEELS OF STEEL

**Nothing stops Natasha Wood, television production supremo and actress, now keeping audiences in stitches with her comedy act. Just don't call her a stand-up**

Interview **Elaine Lipworth** Photographs **Patrik Giardino**

**L**ike hundreds of aspiring British actresses in pursuit of the Hollywood dream, Natasha Wood headed for California hoping for stardom. She is blond, attractive and charismatic, with a sharp wit and a natural gift of the gab. But the 36-year-old writer/performer from Nottingham was well aware that she faced tougher competition than most when she arrived in Los Angeles 18 months ago, because she has been in a wheelchair all her life.

Natasha was born with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), an incurable genetic muscle-wasting disease. Despite painful operations as a teenager to straighten her back, she will never walk, and her life expectancy is shortened (her elder brother Julian, also a sufferer, died at 37). She relies on professional carers to help with every aspect of life, from going to the loo to getting in and out of bed (which involves a hoist). She can pick up a fork to feed herself, but can't lift a pint of milk.

Yet this is a woman with a fiercely independent spirit – and remarkable optimism. 'If I drop dead tomorrow it doesn't bother me, honestly, because I've already done more in my life than you can imagine.' This is the girl who made the decision at the age of 18 to move into a Nottingham old-people's home, where she could get the daily care she needed but

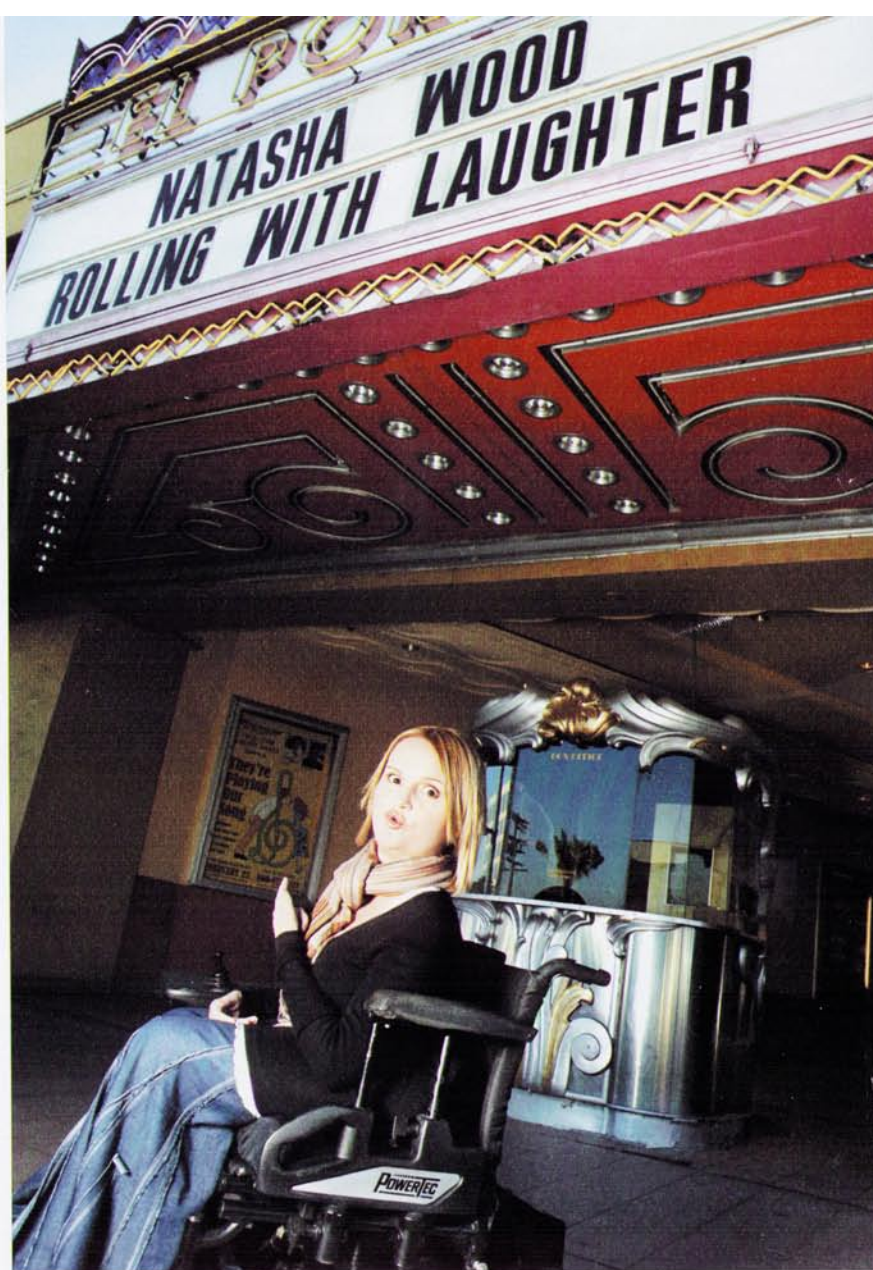
also enjoy her independence. Her remarkable family supported her choice, and she loved it there. 'I could have a bath every day, I had my own "penthouse" with a TV and phone, and I was friends with the young staff. Half the old people didn't even realise I was there – I lived my own life.'

Now she has written a hilarious 90-minute, one-woman show, *Rolling With Laughter*, which was booked out for months ahead in Los Angeles. This summer she hits London and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

'My show is the story of my life,' says Natasha. 'It's, "How did the girl from the middle of England, who sat in a wheelchair all day, get to Hollywood?"' We're talking over tea at her temporary home, a spartan hotel suite in Burbank, outside Los Angeles. The suite costs £900 a month but it's worth the expense, she says, because of the great facilities for wheelchair-users. Her specially adapted car, a Dodge Caravan, is in the hotel garage, and in it she drives herself to classes and meetings with agents and directors.

Natasha looks after her body; she swims and eats carefully to keep her weight down, and includes jokes in her routine about the £5,000 breasts that she bought herself 'as an investment'.

Of her childhood she tells me, 'I was always a determined little girl. I



had a happy childhood. My brother was nearly two and my mum was already pregnant with me when she found out we both had SMA.' (In the UK one person in 40 carries the SMA gene, but because Natasha's parents were both carriers, their risk of conceiving a child with the condition was one in four.) 'But she didn't think about an abortion, all she wanted was a little girl. She wasn't distraught – my parents accepted it and they were extremely loving. They weren't overprotective and I didn't feel different. I've always had a lot of fun and never felt insecure.'

Natasha, who describes herself as 'a bit of a one', combines a brash attitude with an endearing vulnerability. 'My brother went to a special school, but my parents

managed to get me into local state schools, where I acted in plays like *Educating Rita*, smoked cigarettes and kissed boys behind the bike shed. I got caught by the vicar three times snogging behind the church. I was always part of the gang and the village community. A few kids called me names but I didn't care because I gave as good as I got and I had a lot of good friends. I wore body braces from my groin to above my chest, to keep my back straight: the school bully punched me once and broke his fist on them. From then on, no one bothered me,' she laughs.

Leaving school at 16 with five O-levels, and remembering the school plays she'd loved, Natasha auditioned with the Graeae in London (a disabled-led theatre company) ▶





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◀ and got a part in a play called *Why*, about a girl who has an affair with a care worker in a home. This meant touring the country for six months, but Natasha managed this by driving herself in an adapted car.

On her return to Nottingham, she studied drama A-level at a local college, where she met and fell in love with Duncan Wood. They lived together for nine years and married when she was 29. 'Apart from being in love, he was my best friend,' she remembers. 'We had loads of fun together – and, of course, it was great having a strapping young lad by my side. He could throw me into bed in ten minutes, instead of the hour it takes with a carer.'

Natasha's theatre work had earned her an Equity card but, wanting financial security, she applied to the BBC for a place as a trainee production assistant. She was taken on, and by 2004 she had worked her way up to the position of production manager, based in Birmingham, for big-budget productions including *Top of the Pops* and *EastEnders*, as well as news and documentaries.

But that same year she split from Duncan after 14 years: 'It was the happiest marriage, and I have to say,

it was the happiest divorce. We just realised we had grown apart. I wanted to do new things and travel, and he wanted to relax at home. He's engaged to someone else now.'

Months later, she lost her brother Julian to pneumonia. 'He hadn't been well, but it was still a shock. I thought he'd make it to his 40th birthday. We had become closer as we got older, and I miss him a lot.'

Reassessing her life, she decided it was time to try something different, and when she spotted a job opening for a nine-month position as a production manager with the BBC in New York, she realised it was just what she needed. Which is how she

found herself, in the spring of 2005, in a luxury apartment in the heart of Manhattan – not the easiest place to manoeuvre a wheelchair.

Undaunted, with the help and companionship of her black labrador Zoë (who would open doors, fetch and carry for her), she settled into the hectic world of New York television: booking film crews, hiring staff and organising schedules for such shows as the US version of *What Not To Wear*. 'Being in New York was exciting, but it wasn't enough,' she says. 'I still wanted to perform, and I wanted an adventure.' So at the end of her contract, to the amazement of her colleagues, she enrolled at the New York Film Academy at Universal Studios in Los Angeles to take acting classes, and set off, with Zoë and a carer, on a road trip across America.

The idea for a show based on her own life had been percolating for months, since Natasha started sending a regular e-mail diary home to friends and family, who found the daily bulletins so entertaining that they forwarded them on to other friends. 'I began writing to deal with some of the emotional pain I felt about my divorce and Julian's death, and I would get e-mails back from people who didn't even know me,

saying they thought I was hilarious.' Inspired by the positive feedback, Natasha took writing classes too when she arrived in LA.

Later, I go to watch Natasha perform at a small beachside theatre, where her show has sold out. The packed audience howls with laughter as she embarks on her comedy routine, during which she tells of how she would heckle customers on the Midlands market stalls where she worked alongside her parents, Hazel (a former beauty queen) and Tony, selling underwear. 'We had standard, strapless, seamless, underwired... I developed a talent for spotting a cup size from 50 paces and

persuaded women that wearing a sexy piece of kit was like pouring a tasty sauce over a plain chicken breast. I sold a lot of bras.'

As she sits centre-stage, dressed in a long, green Jigsaw skirt and brown top, she keeps her audience riveted by her personality and her delivery (she alternates between her own strong Midlands accent and a California drawl). 'My biggest regret about leaving New York and coming to LA was saying goodbye to the firemen,' she jokes. 'I've always dreamt about marrying one. It's the uniform, the danger, the fitness. I used to fantasise about being stranded in my 11th-floor apartment and hearing the words: "Ma'am, don't worry, I've got eight men coming to get you, we'll have you out of there in no time." I kept deodorant and Tic Tacs by the bed especially for the occasion.'

They love her LA dating stories, too. In real life, she admits to me later, she'd love a relationship. 'I don't have a desperate desire to get married or have children because I'm focused on my career,' she says. She did try to conceive while married to Duncan, and there's no medical reason why she shouldn't have children.

Natasha still considers

Nottingham her home: her parents are now divorced but still live there, as do her older brother, Martin (not an SMA sufferer), and her 19-year-old adopted sister, Tammy. She doesn't intend to stay in the States for good, but for now she's happy there.

In addition to her stage shows, a documentary about Natasha's extraordinary journey will air later this year in the US. She has also been offered several TV acting opportunities in the States – including a pilot for a sitcom starring Natasha as 'the pillar of the community, who runs a B&B but also happens to run a sex phone line. It's a cross between *Sex and the City* and *The Vicar of Dibley*,' she says.

She has attended plenty of A-list parties and premieres, meeting Clint Eastwood, Dustin Hoffman, Forest Whitaker, her 'dream man' Leonardo DiCaprio, Emma Thompson and her 'hero' Stephen Fry. 'I'm not starstruck – I've worked with hundreds of celebrities in the UK, doing the TV production of the Royal Variety Performance and Comic Relief. But it's fun to meet big stars here in Hollywood. When you're in a wheelchair you play on it – you use it,' she tells me with raised eyebrows and a grin. 'If you see a celebrity you want to talk to, you catch their eye and you can see the thought bubble out of their head: "Ooh, must talk to the girl in the wheelchair." You hook 'em in and once you've got 'em, then you can be yourself.'

Yet for all the Hollywood glitz, Natasha has her heart set on a TV career back home. 'I would love to get a regular part on *Coronation Street*. I've watched it since I was a child, and that is my real dream. You never know...' she says. And, given her achievements so far, it may not be long before the *Corrie* casting directors are on the phone. **Y** Natasha Wood – Rolling With Laughter ([rollingwithlaughter.com](http://rollingwithlaughter.com)) will be at the Jerwood Vanbrugh Theatre, Malet Street, London WC1 on 28 July, tel: 020 7908 4800, and at the Pleasance Joker Dome in Edinburgh from 1 to 27 August, tel: 0131 226 0026 ([edfringe.com](http://edfringe.com))