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My story will leave them rolling in the aisles

A rare muscular disease is causing comedienne Natasha Wood to lose the use of her limbs. But her barwdy mouth has vaulted her onto the West End stage, says Neil Tweedie

Natasha Wood was given her new wheelchair by Owen Glenn, a New Zealand shipping tycoon. "He saw my show in London and told me that if I had to spend my life in a wheelchair then it should be the Rolls-Royce of wheelchairs," she says. "I've found everything except the button for the vibrator."

Bawdiness is Wood's stock in trade. A small woman she may be, but her personality easily fills the Soho restaurant.

Deprived of the use of her legs, and increasingly her arms, she relies on her mouth to get her through life: amusing, persuading, cajoling people into action.

Sheer willpower propelled her on to the stage when an intolerably obscure life in the East Midlands beckoned. Her one-woman play, *Rolling with Laughter*, was a hit last year at the Edinburgh Fringe and has been staged in London and Los Angeles.

Wood plays some 30 characters in the autobiographical work, which focuses on her family and her lifelong companion, the genetically inherited disease Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA).

SMA is a neuromuscular disease which inhibits signals from the brain to the muscles. The impulses should pass down the spinal cord through anterior horn cells, which form part of the spine's motor unit. In SMA, the anterior horn cell is abnormal and not all nerve impulses get through. As a result, the muscles become weak and wasted.

A child can be affected only if both parents carry the defective gene responsible for SMA. Each child born to such a couple stands a one in four chance of developing the condition. Wood's brother Martin is clear of SMA; she and her brother Johnny drew the short straws. There is no cure, but the disease can be managed to some extent.

But a sob story it isn't. There are plenty of laughs, some observational, some vulgar. Only occasionally does it take on a darker hue, when death and divorce make their entrances.

Describing her condition, she explains: "It's about the movers and shakers in my spine, they ain't moving and shaking."

Wood was four when she approached her father about her

malfunctioning body, and was met with deadpan Nottinghamshire humour.

"We bought you in a store, toy department, top shelf."

"How much did you pay, Dad?"

"Oh, very cheap on account that you were broken."

"Why didn't you try and fix me?"

"Your mother tried. She went out and bought sticky tape and glue."

"Why didn't you try and take me back? You always told us that if something's broken, you should take it back."

"Ah, well, you were sold as seen."

Type 1 SMA is the most severe form. Within a few weeks of birth, babies become limp and unable to lift their heads. Vulnerable to respiratory infection, some 80 per cent die in the first year of life.

Wood suffers from Type 2. Again there is muscle weakness – she cannot stand and finds it difficult to pick up a full glass – and susceptibility to respiratory illness, but the severity of the condition varies, depending on the muscles affected. Curvature of the spine may develop. At the age of 13, Wood underwent a major operation to correct hers.

"You are stretched as far as they can, and then they insert metal rods on either side of the spinal column so it's rigid. I spent nine hours on the table."

Type 3 is the mildest form of "child onset" SMA – the disease can occur in adulthood with varying degrees of muscle weakness. The prognosis for Type 3 is good: balance may be a problem and walking difficult, but lifespan is normal.

So what about the Natasha Wood version, Type 2? The prognosis supplied by the Jennifer Trust, an SMA support group, is hardly comforting: "survival into adulthood is possible", says its website. She takes such things on the chin, as when describing her divorce from Duncan, her partner of 10 years and husband for four.

"Duncan and I were very happy but I exhausted him – I would exhaust anybody. Not physically, I mean. Well, actually, yes, I could exhaust someone physically – what I lack in movement I make up for vocally – but anyway, I exhausted him."

They broke up suddenly, but



This wheel's on fire: Natasha Wood's one-woman play was a hit at the Edinburgh Fringe last year

amicably, four years ago. Wood, who worked as a production manager for the BBC, was offered an attachment in the corporation's New York office.

Just as she was about to take up her new appointment, her brother Johnny died.

"It was six weeks to go before I flew to New York," she says. "We were always worried about him, about winter colds turning into pneumonia, and it was pneumonia that got Johnny. He was tired and couldn't take it any more." Johnny was 37 – her age now.

Natasha Wood's life expectancy is uncertain. She says she will be fortunate to survive middle age. However, the prospect of a life curtailed seems not to move her. She delivers her guestimate with her father's matter-of-factness, which is strangely moving.

"SMA is not progressive as such, but the muscles get weaker as you grow older. It feels like I've got this really heavy blanket weighing me down. When I wake up in the morning, my arms feel like lead."

When the BBC told Wood her time in the Big Apple was up, she remortgaged the house and took off

for film school on the West Coast, driving across America in a modified car. She has never been afraid to spend her own money in pursuit of her dreams, using it to stage shows. But critical acclaim doesn't pay the bills, and by her own admission she is skint. She'll always have her new boobs though – saline ones implanted by one Doctor Perks and sources of obvious pride. The implants, provided by Mentor Medical Systems, corrected her asymmetry of the chest, and left her feeling much happier about her appearance.

On March 30, Wood will appear in *Rolling with Laughter* at Her Majesty's Theatre in the West End, for one night only. The proceeds will go to the Jennifer Trust. It was set up in 1985 by the mother of Jennifer Macaulay, who died of SMA when seven months old.

Tickets are still available.

"I've never been the depressed kind," muses Wood, preparing to take her leave. "I think I've been dead lucky. I had 14 great years with Duncan, lived in New York and LA, met Leonardo DiCaprio and Will Smith."

Her "day" dream is to be a successful actress and author – she is looking for a book deal. When asleep, she dreams of other things, like having a good night out – dancing with her friends on her own two feet.

"I've never had a dream in which I'm in a wheelchair," she says. "It's weird."

She shows no self pity.

"I've always been like this and I've never known anything different," she says. "I met a girl recently, a dancer. She was larking about with her boyfriend and fell out of a tree and broke her back. Her life changed forever. That must be terrible – when dancing was your life, and it's taken away." The table is cleared and you wonder how you would have coped if you were dealt Natasha Wood's hand. Nowhere near so well, being the obvious answer. Indomitable is the word made for her.

Then, she is off, speeding out of the door towards her next appointment. It's lunchtime and busy, but the restaurant seems suddenly empty.

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