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# Weston

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THE BEAUTY OF LOVE BY JORGE AND LAURA POSADA  
DOWN AND OUT ON WALL STREET TEA PARTY BREWHAHA  
SPECIAL SECTION: GUIDE TO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

## GREEN ROOM



GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT

# IN APPRECIATION JUNE HAVOC

**WHEN** June Havoc, one of Connecticut's longest running acts, died last March, it threw me back to a time 25 years ago when, as Fairfield County residents, our paths crossed—twice, and unforgettably so.

Many people knew her from the Broadway hit, *Gypsy*, the 1959 Stephen Sondheim-Jule Styne-Arthur Laurents “musical fable” in which she was forever immortalized. Based on the life of the striptease artist and burlesque queen, Gypsy Rose Lee—her more famous sister (née Rose Louise)—it was a fictionalized distortion of Havoc’s life that served to diminish her considerable vaudeville achievements, create and fuel rumors of estrangement from her sister and, despite her own successes,

BY HOWARD V. SANN

affix upon her the label, “Gypsy Rose Lee’s little sister.”

June Hovick—her given and stage name—began her career in 1914 at the age of two (before she could talk) as “Dainty Baby June” with bits in silent shorts and then in Hal Roach comedies starring Harold Lloyd. By five—already a trouper—she was a vaudeville star, a headliner billed as “Baby June, the Pocket-sized Pavlova,” earning \$1,500 a week and “killing the audience” on the Orpheum-Keith Circuit, four shows a day, five on weekends and never missing a show. She knew exactly “how to get

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE JUNE HAVOC LIVING TRUST (TANA SIBILIO, TRUSTEE)

laughs and applause" the first time she appeared before a live audience.

Kids knew her as Miss Hannigan from the early 1980s hit Broadway show *Annie*, which she played in the final years of the original production. Their grandparents knew her for her 1940 breakthrough role in the Rodgers and Hart musical comedy *Pal Joey*, the first of her major work in the theatre: over a dozen shows on Broadway, 22 in all, including *Marathon '33* (1963), starring Julie Harris, which she adapted from her autobiography *Early Havoc* (1959) and directed. Fans of daytime soaps knew her as Madeline Markham, the character she portrayed on several episodes of *General Hospital* (1990), her swan song that capped four decades of work in television. Film buffs knew her as Gregory Peck's self-hating Jewish secretary in *Gentleman's Agreement* (the best picture of 1947) also starring John Garfield—the first of her 26 Hollywood films—and younger moviegoers knew her as Steve Guttenberg's wacky Jewish mother in *Can't Stop the Music* (1980).

However, before she began her career on the Broadway stage and in film and television, June Havoc was a highly successful marathon dancer. West Palm Beach, Florida. 1934. That's when a 17-year-old Havoc, dancing as "Jean Reed," stayed on her feet 3,600 hours (almost five months), establishing the all-time marathon dance endurance mark—for "a whopping forty dollars." In his 1967 book, *Fads, Follies and Delusions of the American People: A Pictorial History of Madnesses, Crazes and Crowd Phenomena*, my father, Paul Sann, devoted a number of pages to "The Marathons" or "Endurance Follies"—the craze that swept the nation between 1924 and 1934 before it was widely outlawed—called both "a pageant of fatigue" and "a macabre modern equivalent of a homicidal Roman gladiatorial spectacle." In the chapter, "June Havoc, Winner and Still Champion," Sann chronicles her successes on the marathon circuit, which happened, "quite by accident" when she was "slowly starving as a single in vaudeville." She'd gone to do some tap dancing during a rest period in a San Francisco marathon because she needed the money (five dollars) and, as Sann tells it:

"She happened to look the way any marathon promoter wanted his contestants to look—you know, anemic, like you're about to drop dead; it was good box office" [Havoc said]—and so she was talked into putting her taps away and going after the big prize money..."

As a "marathoner," Sann writes, "June Havoc was a star," not a "horse." Havoc thought of herself as "a sort of an athlete, too." "For a girl as fragile as she was in those days," Sann writes, she was "deceptively sturdy." When she needed to carry a partner who needed to rest, "she developed a simple trick, somewhat unappetizing, to keep him from col-

lapsing. She kept a pinky in one of his nostrils."

When I moved to Wilton in the fall of 1982, June Havoc was living in an old farmhouse in Cannondale, just north of Wilton Center, the town's downtown area, and just above the pre-Civil War farming village of Cannon Crossing, a complex of 19th century buildings across the tracks from the Cannondale train station. In the years after 1978, when Havoc sold her jewelry, furniture, furs and five decades of showbiz memorabil-



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ia, craft and gift shops sprang up, making the area just off of Route 7, then called "June Havoc's Cannon Crossing," a popular tourist destination. She had traded her treasures to buy the eight-acre site for \$230,000 and then restored it, boutique-style.

Well known for her love of animals of which she had many, including a burro named Bottom, and for adopting many "furry people," she also hosted an annual holiday event, the Blessing of the Animals, a ceremony to which people traveled from far and wide, bringing every imaginable creature—from house pets to farm animals. It was always listed in the Connecticut section of *The New York Times*, with the additional language,

"All animals welcome (on leads). Carol singing," and then, at the event, she would distribute song sheets to everyone.

I lived over on the far eastern side of Wilton on the Weston town line on Cobbs Mill Road, which, separated by the Saugatuck River, ran parallel to Newtown Turnpike in Weston. Strangely, the road between Cedar Road and Route 57 was unpaved, and Cobbs Mill became the cut-through speedway of choice to Routes 57 and 53 north. One day, I asked the mailman why Newtown Turnpike had never been paved. "June Havoc," he said. "She wanted her privacy."

It was on a Saturday in a crowded food market in Wilton Center that I first came face to face with June Havoc. My wife, who was associated with her professionally, introduced us. When I mentioned that my father had written the *Fads* book, at the sound of the word "fads," Havoc, her head shielded by

DAINTY BABY JUNE



a sprawling hat, turned suddenly and locked her blue-eyed gaze upon me. "It's not right in the book," she said. "What do you mean?" I asked, stunned. "He got it wrong," she said, "I wrote him a letter and never heard back." "I'll tell him," I said, figuring that was the end of it, but she said, "He should fix it," and then, unfinished business completed, turned and engaged my wife as if I no longer existed.

Later that day, I found my father, the former newspaperman, who, as executive editor, had run *The New York Post* for the last 27 years of his 44-year career. He was on his IBM typewriter at home in Rhinebeck, New York, busy working on a novel. "I was just assaulted by June Havoc," I said. "I thought she was dead," he replied. "Hardly," I said. "She's very much alive. A powerhouse." I voiced her complaint about his not answering her

letter. "Tell her it's fixed," he said gruffly. I could tell that his head was someplace else. "I fixed it in *Panorama*," he explained, his intonation making it clear the discussion was over. The last of his seven nonfiction books, *American Panorama* was a revised edition of *Fads*, published in 1980, the same year as June Havoc's second autobiography, *More Havoc*, the story of her "overnight stardom," which took 22 years, and the relationship between her, her sister and their fiery mother, "Momma Rose"—the mother of mothers of all stage mothers—the ruthless prime-mover of it all who often pitted the girls against each other.

Then, a year and a half after my father had died, in 1988, going through his papers, I came across June Havoc's letter. Typed single-spaced, in italics, three paragraphs unevenly indented, ellipses between sentences and—at the top—in my father's printed handwriting in big, red, block letters the word, "F-i-x." It began: "Dear Paul Sann: First of all...." There was no animosity, it was cordial and, under Havoc's signature, my father had printed her return address in New Orleans. Knowing my father to be a consummate newsman—doing the research and separating fact from fiction—I had my answer for June Havoc.

The moment of delivering his response would come nearly two years after I'd first met her, again running into her in Wilton Center. This time she was wearing a light yellow silk shirt and loose-fitting black pants, a large hat over a black scarf wrapped around her head, protecting her from the sun. After she said hello to my wife, she removed her sunglasses and looked at me, surveying my face, studying it until making positive ID. Acknowledged, I said: "I found the letter you wrote my father. As far as I know, he fixed it." "It's not fixed," she shot back, surprising me. I thought, she mustn't know about the other book. "I talked to him right after we met," I said, spelling it out. "There was a second book, a revision, *American Panorama*. That's where he fixed it." "It's not right," she insisted again, leaving me nonplussed; then, bringing her sunglasses up to her face, she flashed me one more look of certainty and walked past me. And

CANNON CROSSING



that was that. Or-so I thought.

Last March 29, when I read that June Havoc had passed away, her undated letter to my father happened to be sitting on my desk. I re-read the letter, looking for clues in my father's prose to what might have upset her. In it, she speaks of "playing Mrs. Malaprop here with a wonderful Rep." This puts her in Sheridan's *The Rivals* in 1970, the season she was serving as artistic director of Repertory Theatre New Orleans. Home was still Weston, where she'd been living at least ten years and where she suggested my father, "send things [because] they will be safe there." She was referring to two of the four original photographs from her collection that she'd given him for the book: one of her as a curly-haired young blonde, arms draped over her partner's shoulders, resting on her feet during a marathon; the other, on her back, head in arms, on a cot onstage in the girl's rest quarters during a break—they'd dance 45-minutes straight, then rest 11 minutes, taking two minutes to get to the cot and two to get back on the dance floor. As a champion, Havoc was an authority on the

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subject, which is why my father sought her out:

Miss Havoc recalls that the eleven-minute breaks actually were surprisingly refreshing for most of the dancers because they had trained themselves—"it was a kind of self-hypnosis," she says—to fall asleep as fast as they hit the cot and then roll off it refreshed when the wake-up sirens went off. "I've always believed that you can train yourself to do anything," says the pretty stage star. "To stay alive in those marathons, you had to get the most out of those eleven minutes or run the risk of going 'squirrelly'—out of your head, cuckoo—on the floor."

Rereading her chapters in both books, I was surprised to learn that there was no revision, no "fix." She was right. My father only added one sentence on the 1969 film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* for its brilliant recreation of "that time of madness." According to Sann, Havoc's first marathon was in 1933, but, in fact, she had "established" herself four years earlier at 13—after she'd eloped (she was a mother at 16)—when she went 1,500 hours in her first marathon and, although unimpressed with her own performance, realized that there was money to be made. In her letter, she seemed to be saying, "I was more than a marathon dancer... it was a means to an end... not who I was." That, and modeling, performing in the Catskills and in summer stock were her bridge between vaudeville and theatre, between eating and starving, between a career and a life and becoming her own person.

There was also this line in both books:

Dancing under the name of Jean Reed and making futile stabs at Broadway chorus lines between marathons...

Nothing was "futile." It was all part of her plan: "legit" theatre was where she always wanted to be. That's why, in-between marathons—a way to support herself while honing her dancing (she was a charismatic high kicker) and singing talents (fans threw money when she sang)—she used all her marathon winnings to travel by train or bus back and forth to New York to audition for the stage. Sann doesn't finish her story. This was the destiny she'd forged. She never doubted it. It was partly her fierce and driven nature and partly in spite of her mother's monumental lack of confidence in her: having reminded her that her sister was "the most beautiful girl on Broadway" and telling her she'd never get noticed "looking as plain as a piece of homemade soap." It was Havoc's preparation, perseverance and industry—she was always rehearsing and taking lessons, what she called, "the endless effort"—that led directly to the audition for John O'Hara's *Pal Joey*, which launched her stage and film careers and from which she achieved stardom. My father had understated the breadth of Havoc's creative force and not properly "framed" the arc of her life as a performer—Paul Sann, the latest to underestimate the indomitable June Havoc. About marathon dancing, in 1966, she'd told him:

"Of course, you were always on the verge of falling down, the way you do when you're untrue to your system, but you kept going somehow...."

June Havoc had a very, very long run—97 years; 39 years and 11 months of them without her sister Gypsy, who died in 1970. The story of their "estrangement" was pure media fiction, and couldn't have been further from the truth. Havoc knew Gypsy's place in the American musical comedy pantheon and, more importantly, she knew what Gypsy the musical meant to Gypsy the woman, and she was never going to allow anything to come between her and her only sibling. It was beneath her; part of her graceful and generous loving spirit. June and Gypsy were friends to the very end, with June at her bedside during her dying days—and then mourning and missing Gypsy every day of her life.

In the late Eighties, I occasionally stopped at the renovated, old station-house at Cannondale, which had become a coffee and donut place within an art gallery and antique shop. Once, while paying for postcards and talking to the guy at the register, the mailman came in and handed the mail to him, momentarily interrupting the flow of our conversation. The mailman turned and said, "Excuse me." I nodded and said, "June Havoc lives around here, right?" "Up the hill," he said, paused then added: "She got a mailbox moved; the pickup box in front of her property. She didn't want traffic there. It's down the hill now. Not many people can get a mailbox moved. Do you know the kind of clout it takes to get a mailbox moved?" When the expression on my face conveyed that I did, he said, "Did you know she was Gypsy Rose Lee's little sister?" \*

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*Howard V Sann is the principal of Victory Ink, a Bridgeport-based communications company. This fall, Dover Publications of New York will reprint Paul Sann's 1957 picture book on the Roaring Twenties, The Lawless Decade: Bullets, Broads and Bathtub Gin, with a new introduction by the author's son.*

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