

POINT REYES LIGHT



‘After I’m Dead’: A tribute to a remarkable woman

by Ike Allen
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This fall, Vivien Straus will perform a one-woman play she wrote about her mother, MALT co-founder Ellen Straus, in the family’s historic barn. The last time the barn hosted a performance was in 1971, when the 14-year-old Vivien directed a 4-H skit titled “The Scooby Dooby Washtub Band.” (Photos: Denise Rocco-Zilber)

She fled Amsterdam as the Nazis invaded, followed a fellow Jewish refugee to his idyllic coastal ranch and went on to shape West Marin's agricultural landscape by co-founding the Marin Agricultural Land Trust. Ellen Straus, who died in 2002, had a life as idiosyncratic and influential as she was gregarious and goofy.

This fall, Ellen's daughter Vivien Straus, an actress, playwright and manager of the Straus Home Ranch, will pay tribute to her mother's life, work and wit in a one-woman show. Vivien will perform her play, "After I'm Dead, You'll Have to Feed Everyone," in the 1850s barn on the ranch where she grew up and where her parents lived for more than 50 years.

"I just want it to be an adventure," Vivien said. "An experience, not just a show."

Though the play is personal, Vivien hopes it will capture a deeper truth about her mother's public life as a champion of farmland preservation. "I'm trying to show how a person becomes an activist," Vivien said. "My mother said, 'I was kicked out of one place I loved. I'm not going to be kicked out again.' That was her mantra, to protect this at all costs."

Vivien grew up on the Straus Home Ranch before leaving for New York and then Los Angeles to pursue a career in acting. She had roles in movies like "Peggy Sue Got Married" and commercials, including a "Got Milk?" ad for the dairy industry, but eventually she was pulled back to Tomales Bay. After her parents died in the early 2000s, she became the manager of the home ranch, which hosts events and farmstays, and founded the California Cheese Trail.

Vivien's previous one-woman play, "E-i-E-i-OY! In Bed with the Farmer's Daughter," a comedic coming-of-age story she performed at a theater in San Francisco, was "85 or 90 percent true," she said. "This one is 100 percent true." In "After I'm Dead, You'll Have to Feed Everyone," Vivien plays 10 different people, and one cow. Bovine anecdotes abound, and the farm itself plays an important role. The performance will be the first in the barn since she directed a 4-H skit there at age 14.

Ellen was celebrated for founding MALT along with her friend Phyllis Faber, and for her family's dairy, which her son Albert transformed into a major purveyor of organic dairy products. But her life could have gone quite differently.

Born Ellen Prins to a wealthy Jewish family in Amsterdam before World War II, she fled the Netherlands at 13 on the eve of the German invasion in 1940, moved to New York City and went on to study at Bard College. While preparing to practice medicine, she was introduced to Bill Straus, who himself fled Germany in the 1930s and eventually purchased a ranch on the shores of Tomales Bay. Ellen fell in love with him and the photographs of his farm that he showed her, and she joined him in 1950.

Though the Strauses made a living as farmers and Ellen later became the leader of a kind of agricultural movement, for years they were outsiders, Vivien said. "We were Democrats, we were Jews, we didn't go to church," she said. "Nobody wanted to listen to us. My parents had accents. We were just different."

Ellen, whom Vivien described as an early environmentalist and admirer of Rachel Carson, faced an uphill battle in rallying support for zoning reforms and easements that would bar development on West Marin's family ranches. The tricky political issues Ellen navigated are the subject of the final third of Vivien's play, which she's rewriting to imbue with more of Ellen's lightheartedness. She described the play as a "dramedy or tragicomedy."

Vivien's play comes soon after her mother's creation, MALT, had to fight for continued taxpayer support through Measure A, lost multiple members of its leadership team and faced down allegations that its agricultural easements unfairly benefited its directors. Vivien, who joined the MALT board last year, said the trust has sometimes failed to publicize the human stories that give its work meaning. Though her own play is just a personal perspective on Ellen's life, it is also a history of the activism that launched the preservation of farmland in Marin.

"She brought people on board," Vivien said of her mother. "In a way I'm disappointed she's not around, because MALT's had all these struggles, and I know my mother would have fixed it."

"After I'm Dead, You'll Have to Feed Everyone" is directed by Elly Lichenstein and co-produced by Denise Rocco-Zilber and Vivien's brother Michael Straus. Vivien will perform the play four weekends in a row, from Oct. 21 to Nov. 13, at the Straus Home Ranch in Marshall. The performances will begin at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays and at 2 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, with food truck dinner options beforehand. Tickets are \$45, with a limited pay-what-you-can option, and are available at www.VivienStraus.com.