

Screen

**FEISTY, FUNNY ANN SOTHERN
RIDES IN FROM HER SNOWY MOUNTAIN HOME
TO SCORE A WHALE OF A FILM COMEBACK**

by John Stark

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In her comeback film, *The Whales of August*, she makes her cheery entrance through a bramble of blueberry bushes, wearing a red wig and walking precariously with a cane. At first, she's almost unrecognizable. Then comes that voice, as sweet and tart as lemonade. "Hello! Hello! Hellooo," she calls out, causing film audiences to smile and applaud, as if reunited with an old friend. Call her Maisie from the movies. Or Suzie or Katy from TV. Ann Sothorn is back, practically stealing *Whales* from her redoubtable co-stars Lillian Gish and Bette Davis.

"There are four re words to describe me," says Sothorn, who hadn't faced a movie camera for 13 years and, frankly, can't understand why. "Resurgence, reappearance, rediscovery and reemergence."

The words fit. Four years ago Sothorn sold her town house in West Los Angeles, packed up 18,000 pounds of belongings and moved to remote Ketchum, Idaho, next door to the Sun Valley ski resort, where she had spent her winters since 1948. "I could no longer stand the dirty air and traffic of Los Angeles," she says. But there's another reason for the move that she avoids talking about.

"She's sad and bewildered by an industry that didn't give back what she felt she gave to it," says her longtime friend and former Beverly Hills neighbor Sarah Mitchel. "She didn't go around saying it's terrible how she was treated. She moved, which was a brave and courageous thing to do. She didn't sit around feeling sorry for herself."

Sothorn may have escaped Hollywood, but not her admirers. They still revere her—"because I always played the underdog," she says. In the laundry room of her two-bedroom house is a barrel filled with fan letters, many prompted by the current revival of her old TV shows, *Private Secretary* and *The Ann Sothorn Show*, on the Nickelodeon cable channel. "They've found me," she says. "The letters arrive here simply addressed to Ann Sothorn, Ketchum or Sun Valley, Idaho."

Now that Ernest and Mary Hemingway are dead, Sothorn is Ketchum's

(pop. 2,200) most famous year-round resident. Old photos of the wry blond on skis line the walls of the Sun Valley Lodge, alongside candid shots of such famous skiing buddies as Gary Cooper, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. "Who wouldn't want to live here? It's a fairyland," Sothorn says, gazing out her living room window at

TV's *Topper*—she lives alone with four cats. Her only child, actress Tisha (Norwood) Sterling, 40, who plays Sothorn as a young woman in *Whales*, lives down the road and keeps a constant lookout on her famous mom. "I'm very much alone up here, I really am," says Sothorn. "That's the only thing I don't like too much." She doubts she'd marry again, although . . . "I see a lot of guys that turn me on," she says. "I get turned on easily, really."

Sothorn claims her problem with men is that she's too strong for them to handle. Even so, she's had her share of serious romances. Tales circulate through the Sun Valley Lodge about her past affairs with handsome ski instructors. "She's been admired by some of the most well-known, talented men around," says Sarah Mitchel. "One multimillionaire from a prominent family—like really big—still sends her gifts."

Despite these flirtations, Sothorn has never been associated with scandal. "I've never heard a heinous rumor," says Mitchel. A practicing Catholic since 1954 (she worships at Ketchum's Our Lady of the Snow), Sothorn has always had a fine sense of moral outrage. After hearing that Grace Kelly was having an affair in 1953 with Ray Milland, who was married to

her best friend, Ann wrote the Princess-to-be a scolding letter. "She received it," says Sothorn icily. "I sent it certified mail."

Sothorn saw *The Whales of August* for the first time last summer at the quaint Sun Valley Opera House, where she hosted a screening for 300 invited guests. "I was so astonished at how I looked," she says. "I used to be Miss Glamour Puss. When I saw myself with my bosom and tummy sticking out, I said, 'Oh, my God, what's happening here?'"

Though she snacks throughout the interview on cheese toast and cookies, Sothorn says the movie prompted her to start dieting. "I've lost 36 pounds. Can you tell?" she asks. For the record, she insists she's never had a facelift. "You have to be damned careful," she says. "I know friends who've had them who look like they



PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY COSTA

"I never looked in mirrors. I never thought I was beautiful," says Ann (above, in 1942 and, left, sleighing near her Sun Valley home).

the falling snow. Although she owned a house in Sun Valley for 17 years, she sold it in 1969, "in a pique of madness," she says. She rents now, but come spring she will have a new house built for her.

These days Sothorn seldom gives into mad whims. As the interview begins, she turns on a tape recorder to make sure she isn't misquoted. Earning her trust takes time. She says exactly what she thinks, often softening the blow with a perfectly timed "honey." When this visitor asked what it was like being a movie star, Sothorn shot back, "I still am a movie star."

She also has the requisite bad marriages that go with the title. Twice divorced—first in 1942 after six years, from bandleader Roger Pryor, who died in 1974, and then, in 1949 after six years, from actor Robert Sterling of

have hammocks in their faces."

Sitting in an armchair, cane in hand, her platinum hair askew, Sothorn holds court for hours. Walking exhausts her. **In 1974 she was nearly crippled in Jacksonville, Fla., where she was playing a bag lady in the play *Everybody Loves Opal*. As she lay on her stomach, an 18-foot fake tree fell on her, fracturing a lumbar vertebra and damaging nerves to her legs. Since then, she's had years of hospitals and neurologists. "It's the utter pits. I've had to make pain my friend," she says. Some friend. Sothorn is at constant war with her body. "I think growing old is terrible," she says, her voice rising. "You have to fight it to the maximum. In America, to be old is a stigma, like why did you stick around so long?"**

Refusing to sit still, Sothorn paints and writes music. She plays a tape of a song she composed called *Children All Are We*, recorded by her granddaughter, Heidi Bates, 24, a kindergarten teacher who lives in L.A. "That voice. She kills me," says Sothorn, tears streaming down her face. "I think I

have a big hit. Lots of money to give away," she adds brightly.

When Sothorn talks about giving away money, she isn't kidding. "She's generous to a fault," says longtime pal Lucille Ball. "When I first came to Hollywood, I rented a little house. Ann dropped by to see it and told me to get



In *Private Secretary* (1954) Sothorn took dictation from Don Porter. "TV was a challenge that soon bored me," she says.

rid of my curtains and to put up new ones with ruffles. When she found out I couldn't afford them, she said, 'I'll get them up for you.' She saw to it that I had them." Former porn star Jack Wrangler remembers working with Ann at a Chicago theater in 1968 in a comedy called *Glad Tidings*. "One night there was a blizzard and only 25 people showed up," he says. "Rather than perform, Ann took the audience and cast to dinner and picked up the tab."

Sothorn is not so generous when people go poking around into her past looking for dates, ages and the like. Although **most film biographies give Sothorn's date of birth as 1909, she says they're wrong. "I was born in 1919. Do I look like a 78-year-old woman?"** she asks. Even if she doesn't, she played her first movie role in 1929's *The Show of Shows*. Of Danish stock, Sothorn also disputes an old studio bio that lists North Dakota as her place of birth. "I'm from Minnesota, a Vikings fan," she says. She does admit to having been born Harriette Lake, a name Columbia studio boss Harry Cohn made her change in 1933. At first she denies doing films under her own name before going to Broadway and becoming a musical star in *America's Sweetheart* in 1931. "No," she says, then, "Yes," then, dismissing the subject, "I hate that period. My life started when I went to New York."

Other verboten topics include her late father, Walter Lake, who was in the import-export business. When Ann was 6, he deserted the family, leaving her mother, Annette-Yde Lake, an opera singer, to raise Ann and her two sisters, Marian and Bonnie. "I promised [half-sister] Sally I won't discuss Daddy, because I won't say anything nice about him," Ann says. That also goes for her ex, Robert Sterling. "He was no father," she says, in reference to Tisha.

Claiming that she rarely gets depressed ("and I've got plenty to get depressed about"), Sothorn refused to partake in the ego wars that raged between Davis and Gish during the *Whales* filming. "Bette wanted me to do her fighting for her," says Sothorn, who plays a nosey neighbor. "I told her, 'You do your own damn fighting.'" Recalls Lindsay Anderson, the film's director: "When Ann appeared on the

In *The Whales of August*, Sothorn shares acting honors with star peers Lillian Gish, 91, Bette Davis, 79, and Vincent Price, 76.

PHOTOGRAPH



set, the whole atmosphere lightened up. She brought her own poker chips and played cards with the crew." Sothorn says the chips were a gift she received in the late 1950s. "I got those monogrammed chips from my Mafia friends in Las Vegas when I did my nightclub act there," she says. "They were darling to me. Gave me mink coats and God knows what else." And stop those naughty thoughts: "They were darling because I did such business for them with my act. They called me No Seat Sothorn."

Sothorn also had another name in Hollywood at the time: Queen of the Bs. She detests the title. "I don't know where that got started. The pictures I made earned a lot of money," she says adamantly. Let the titles of those unmemorable films (*You May Be Next*, *Hell-ship Morgan*, *Don't Gamble With Love*) stand as a more accurate testament. The truth is that, until 1939, Sothorn's career could best be described as prolific but undistinguished. In 1939, however, she landed the title role in *Maisie*, playing a scatterbrained blond show girl always getting into scrapes. So popular was the film that nine sequels followed over eight years. "After my sixth *Maisie* film, I told [MGM chief] Louis B. Mayer I wanted out," recalls Sothorn. "He said, 'Too bad, honey, your pictures pay for our mistakes, so you just stay in 'em.'"

Throughout her film career, Sothorn says, "I've always resented being called a pert and sassy comedienne because I am essentially and basically an actress." In 1949 she proved it in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's Oscar-winning *A Letter to Three Wives*, walking off with the best reviews of her life. Her next few films failed to live up to expectations. After a near-fatal three-year bout with hepatitis, which started in 1949, she chucked movies for stage and TV; *Private Secretary* and *The Ann Sothorn Show* ran back-to-back from 1953 to 1961. Four years later she was the reincarnated voice of Jerry Van Dyke's deceased mom in *My Mother the Car*. During the '60s she finally got her wish to play some movie character roles, including a "vicious old bitch" in 1964's *Lady in a Cage*. Her last film, before 1975's *Crazy Mama* for offbeat director Jonathan (Something Wild) Demme. "I loved the part, but we didn't get along so well," says Sothorn, adding, "Strange little man."

Waving her hands over her head,



Sothorn draws the number 88 in the air. "It's going to be a great year. The letters are smooth and flowing, unlike 87, which was the worst year of my life," she says (she filmed *Whales* in 1986). In 1987, Sothorn had stomach surgery for a blocked intestine, lost three friends to AIDS and got the news that her granddaughter's husband of 18 months, Mark Bates, 23, had been killed in a motorcycle accident in L.A. "I did the eulogy at the funeral," says Sothorn. "It was the hardest thing I ever did."

There's strong talk that Sothorn will win a Supporting Actress Oscar nomination for *Whales*, but she's not hold-

"We're a family of strong women," says Sothorn (at home with Tisha and a mother-daughter oil portrait by Paul Clemens).

ing her breath. "The business has never been very kind to me," she says. Whatever happens, Sothorn has no plans to move back to L.A.—now or ever. After her death she wants her body entombed in her mountain surroundings. As for an epitaph, "I kind of like Dauntless Lady," she says. So who needs Oscars and Emmys? "What I'd really like is a street named after me in Sun Valley. Ann Sothorn Drive," she says, savoring the sound. "Now, that would make me very happy." □