

**Change Magazine proudly salutes  
NATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH AND ARLENE ALDA**



*Arlene and Alan Alda celebrating  
50 years of marriage this month*

# ARLENE ALDA: A Rhythm all her Own

As a Fulbright scholar who studied at the Music Conservatory in Cologne, Germany, she credits traveling as the one thing that broadened her knowledge and social skills, but says without hesitation that it was her mother and teachers who molded her personality and added to the strengths that she carried into adulthood.

About to celebrate fifty years of wedded bliss to her actor husband, Arlene has not only carved a niche for herself in the world of music, photography and writing (books number fifteen and sixteen due out next year), she has successfully kept her show-biz marriage intact while raising three daughters and juggling helter-skelter schedules. Being married to a well-known television and movie personality took work, but it was mutual work. Arlene and Alan are as devoted to each other today as they were fifty years ago.

Arlene was gracious enough to grant us this interview, and we are so very pleased to introduce you to someone who is much more than just Mrs. Alan Alda. Saying she has “gone against the tide” most of her life, she credits music as being a strong influence and leading to a career as a writer and photographer. She is youthful, petite, charming, and wears her warm smile well. Here’s her story:

**By Sue Mayfield-Geiger**

What are the odds that Alan and Arlene Alda might have wound up living in Houston, Texas? Someone else would have played Hawkeye on M\*A\*S\*H, Arlene may have never picked up a camera, and this story would have a much less interesting twist.

Before Arlene and Alan were married, she played assistant first clarinet with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Alan was in the Army, but anxious to resume acting after military duty. The year was 1957 – a time when most women wanted their fiancé to have a “real” job. But that never entered Arlene’s mind. When the concert season ended, Alan came to Houston (even toyed with the idea of performing with the Alley Theatre). They married, packed up and soon headed back east. With faith in her husband and faith in herself, New York was the ticket. Besides, being from the Big Apple and having already traveled extensively in Europe, Arlene felt it was just one more link to where life would lead her.

Growing up, Arlene fortunately had a mother who instilled in her the notion that she could do anything she wanted to do and be anything she wanted to be. At a time when the career norm for women was nursing, secretarial work or teaching, Arlene refused to adhere to those limitations.

**What was life like for you as a young girl?**

I was born Arlene Weiss, in the Northeast Bronx, the youngest of three children. My parents were immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe, my father was a lithographer, my mother a seamstress and housewife. We weren’t poor by the standards of those days, although looking back; I do wonder how my parents managed with three kids, a dog and themselves in a three-room apartment. Everyone in our neighborhood had about the same standard of living – middle class/working class. Food was always on the table, because of my mother’s ingenuity in putting it there, even with my father’s periods of unemployment. Rent was affordable, we all went to public schools, and the streets were safe, allowing all of us to play “outside.” I think all kids growing up during WW2, in our neighborhood and probably all of New York City, played outside in the streets where everyone congregated. Growing up, I never knew of a kid who didn’t know all the other kids in the neighborhood

*A captive audience of children and adults as Arlene reads at Magic Tree Bookstore in Oak Park, Illinois.*



by name. It was more like a village within a larger city. I learned to ride a bike, roller skate, run and play ball all within a few blocks of our building. It was a kid's paradise, until I reached high school; when I hungered to get out; to be free – to get into the real world – Manhattan.

#### **What were your aspirations growing up?**

From the time I was a little girl, even before starting school, I loved music. I took piano lessons for a while, but if I'd had a crystal ball back then and could have looked into the future, I would have never believed what I saw. I always knew that I wanted to do something, but who knew what? Although I love photography and writing children's books now, they were as far from my conscious thoughts in those days as one could imagine. In high school, I began to zero in on being a musician, but didn't like playing the piano. I wanted to play the clarinet. I got that chance in high school and loved it.

#### **Who or what inspired you?**

My mother instilled in me the notion that I could do anything I wanted to do when I grew up. She truly believed in me. I also got strong messages from my teachers in school, which was good to hear at a time when most neighborhood women were asking, "What does a girl need with college?" I think I was a rebel at heart. Since I was doing sort of an off thing for a girl then (playing the clarinet), I accepted the fact that I was going against the tide.

#### **What was your concept of the role of women?**

I had vaguely defined concepts. I knew that other mothers discouraged their daughters from careers. My mother, however, encouraged me to pursue my own. I also saw how hard her actual life was, and I didn't want to end up washing, cleaning, shopping, cooking, with little recompense but exhaustion at the end of the day. I had learned what was expected of girls in terms of skills (sewing, for instance), but I refused to limit my love of learning.

#### **How old were you when you met Alan? Describe those early years of marriage.**

We met when he was 20 and I was 23. I was a performing clarinetist just back from a Fulbright Scholarship. I was also a licensed music teacher, and Alan was a senior in college. When we married (one year later), I had been playing with the Houston Symphony and he was just starting his acting career. I'm grateful to this day that I never said to Alan, "Become a businessman if you can't make it as an actor." I think that because of my parents' encouragement and Alan's faith in himself, we had the hope that we would and could get work to make ends meet. Starting out, we had little money, but we were optimistic, educated, talented and willing, so we knew we could always make a living.

#### **Was it difficult dealing with Alan's stardom as his popularity grew?**

One of the negatives I felt was the intrusion of strangers in our lives. I was aware of being watched, observed, listened to, in public places. Another was the difficulty of the actual work schedule, since it involved travel, separations, coping with loneliness, doing family things without our complete family. The up side was that it gave me the financial freedom to pursue another career (photography). I had put my music career on the back burner when our daughters were small, although I played in a chamber group and gave clarinet lessons. When Alan first started out, my teaching was our main source of income. When our daughters (Eve, Elizabeth and Beatrice) were in elementary school, I took a photography course and loved it instantly. My passion for music just automatically transferred to another art form.

#### **What are the things you instilled in your daughters while they were** **CONTINUED ON P. 34...**

# BOOKS BY ARLENE ALDA:

Did you Say Pears?

Book of ZZZs

Morning Glory Monday

Hurry Granny Annie

Arlene Alda's 123

Arlene Alda's ABC

97 Orchard Street

Hold the Bus!

Pig, Horse, or Cow, Don't  
Wake Me Now

Sheep, Sheep, Sheep, Help  
Me Fall Asleep

Matthew and His Dad

Sonya's Mommy Works  
The Last Days of MASH

On Set

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### growing up?

The beauty and value of family and traditions, kindness, service to the community, and a sense of social justice. We always told them that when they got a good college education, they could be anything they wanted to be afterwards. That meant learning how to set goals and achieve them, how to live independently, on a budget, how to be the best that they could be, how to pick and choose friends, and how to be true to one's self. They didn't disappoint us. They all went on to get graduate degrees in various and different fields (teaching deaf children, social work and film making). Someone once said: "Find work that you love and you will never work a day in your life." That's not totally true; since even loving one's work doesn't mean that it won't be just plain work some of the time. But most importantly, our children have instilled in their own offspring the values that they grew up with and have put those values into practice.

**You have your own strengths: music, photography, writing. These talents obviously have made you your own person. Was it hard finding your own identity as Alan's career took off, or is that something you've always had a grip on?**

I think that finding one's identity can be a life long search. Work gives you identity, but I guess identity is what you're most invested in, that you identify yourself as. With me, it's a combination of woman, wife, mother, grandmother, my professions, my ethnic background and even my nationality as American. At 73, I can honestly say, this is who I am. I'm still learning and growing, but what you see is what you get. I also think "flexibility" and "forgiveness" are two wonderful words. "Humor" and "compassion" aren't bad either.

**Let's talk about the time you studied clarinet in Germany on a Fulbright grant. That must have been exciting.**

Yes, those years were unique in so many ways. I recently came across a scrapbook that I kept

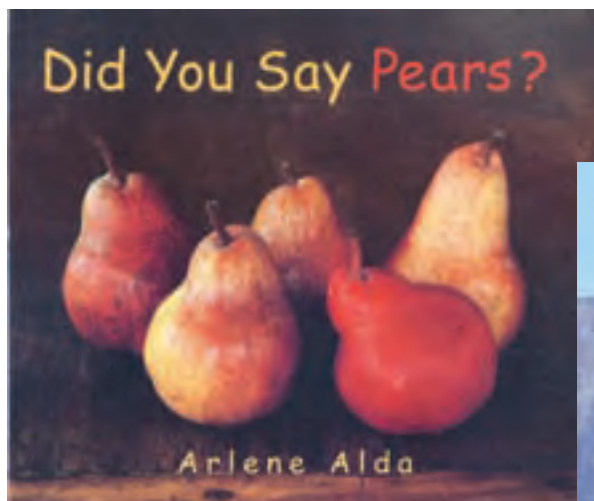
during that year abroad. Everything was different – from the language to the buildings to the people to the geography to the school. Prior to that year, I had never traveled anywhere outside of New York except for Connecticut and Toronto to visit family. I had been in college in New York (Hunter College), but going abroad that year was a life-changing experience. I gave concerts all over Germany and traveled to other countries when time allowed. That year on my Fulbright convinced me that performing and playing the clarinet were an inseparable part of who I was. When I met Alan a half year later back in New York, it was as if we had been friends forever (even though he wasn't a musician). I guess you could say that Senator Fulbright, along with the German and U.S. Governments, changed my life forever.

### **How did you happen to end up in Houston with the Symphony Orchestra?**

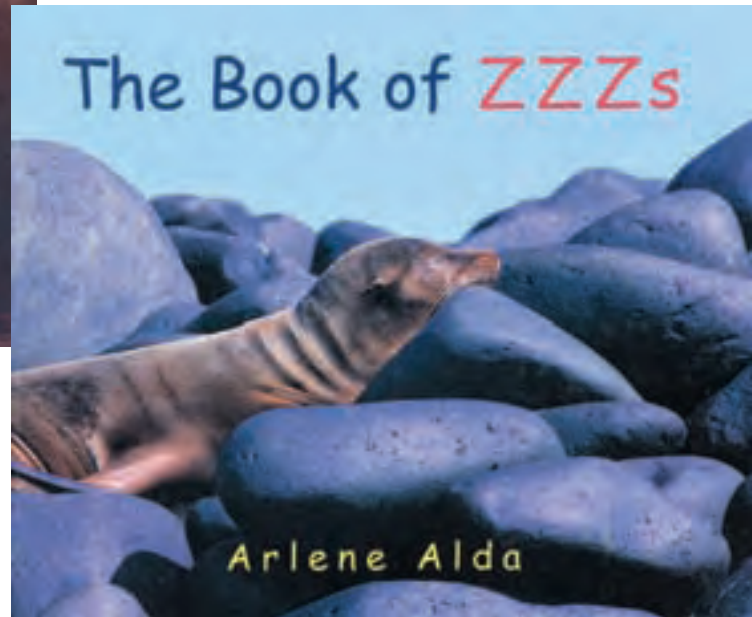
After the Fulbright, I played in a training orchestra in New York (National Orchestra Association) while taking lessons with the legendary clarinet teacher, Leon Russianoff. The orchestra was for aspiring young professionals who had to audition to get in, and I was glad to make the cut. From there, I auditioned for Leopold Stokowski (conductor of the Houston Symphony at the time). There was an opening for assistant first clarinet and bass clarinet, so I set up an audition date. I practiced like I never had before, while still living in that three-room apartment in the Bronx. The following fall, I was on my way to Houston. Alan and I got married at the end of the concert season and went back to New York where we found an affordable apartment and looked for jobs. That's how we started out – with much optimism, little money, and some good skills.

**Most people who study music early in life become quite disciplined in their personal lives. It sounds like this applies to you.**

I guess that music did instill a discipline in my life that I might not have had otherwise, but my early



Two popular children's books by Arlene Alda.



years of studying music weren't that disciplined. I hated practicing the piano, and was a moody and

temperamental child. Studying the clarinet was a better match for me, but real internal discipline didn't happen until later. I was lucky in that I was a fast learner, but that can also be a detriment. I was good at looking for the easy way out (and succeeding) instead of developing good work habits. I'm very goal oriented, and I know that I can deliver, with or without a deadline, but a deadline helps. I've also found out that my energy level is either high or nothing. So I have to gear what I do to those natural rhythms. I get a lot done and then – nothing. I'm a talented sleeper, as my husband says.

#### When did you get interested in photography?

Photography came along when our kids were all in elementary school and I had some time to contemplate how to spend that time. I spent weeks working in the darkroom, which turned into years. I loved it! During those years, I shot black and white exclusively, and just learned as I took and developed pictures. It's a wonderful art form. I studied numerous books of photographs by well-known photographers, shot thousands of pictures, and realized that I loved photojournalism. Ironically, that's not at all what I do now. Now I use photos as illustrations for my children's books, but then I was interested in the unfolding of human-interest stories.

#### What are some of your favorite photography moments?

One of the most exciting jobs I had came as an assignment from *Life* magazine in 1983. They wanted pictures of the last days of M\*A\*S\*H, behind the scenes. It was exhausting and wonderful. I found myself observing and running around all over the set; after the day's work, I'd run to the photo lab that was open all night. In the morning I'd pick up the slides, do a rough edit, and go to the set again. This lasted five days. On the last day, I went to the lab, waited a few hours, picked up the slides, made edits, and grabbed a red eye plane out of LA for NY. I arrived in the morning, exhausted from work and no sleep, and handed over the slides to *Life* magazine. The upshot of it all was a six-page color spread. I was thrilled. But the career decision I had to make then was whether or not I wanted to use my access to photograph celebrities. I decided against it. I ultimately got into more writing and taking photos for children's books, which I am still doing to this day.

#### Tell us about the children's books.

Prior to the *Life* shoot, I did two children's books (*Arlene Alda's ABC* and *Sonya's Mommy Works*). Then I did a book for adults called *On Set*,

a behind-the-scenes book documenting the shooting of the movie, *The Four Seasons*, which Alan was filming at the time. But books for young children was something that I really had a sustaining desire to do in my own way – with the lilting verbal rhythms of music, the savvy of a teacher and mother, the skills of a pro, and the humor of my own personality. I love being with children. I also feel that what interests them can intersect with what interests me, if told in the right way.

#### What new books are on the horizon?

Two will probably be coming out next year (Tundra Press in Toronto). They are called, respectively, *Iris Has a Virus* and *There's a Face in My Sink* (temporary title). Sometimes I just write the story, which is then illustrated by an artist, or I write the story and illustrate it with my own photographs. Sometimes the photos come first, and I work back and forth.

#### Do you have a favorite book you've written? Which one and why?

I can't say that I like any one book of mine more than any others. The cliché is that they are all my babies. But perhaps the last one that came out this year is a bit different, and one that I can single out. It's called *Did You Say Pears?* I have always loved seeing kids learn the nuance of language and words. And I have a sense of humor. What better way to combine those interests than in a book that shows what words sound alike but have different meanings, and actually can look alike in a series of opposing photographs. In other words, a book of photographed homonyms and homophones. It's been selected by the Independent Booksellers Fall 2006 List. Another book of mine that has also been singled out is, *Arlene Alda's 123*. A story I wrote that is illustrated with drawings by Maryann Kovalski is *Morning Glory Monday*, which is based on a true story about an immigrant family in New York in the 1930s. It really resonates with my soul. I go to various bookstores, schools and libraries to read my stories to children. The exhilaration I feel at

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Arlene at work in her Manhattan apartment.

having my own grandkids, I am so thrilled to be the visiting author, especially in my grandkids' classrooms. The feeling of pride that exists between us is palpable.

**Who are some of the women you admire and why?**

The woman who introduced Alan and I to one another was both a violist and a conductor. She was full of spirit, energy, generosity, love and loyalty to her friends and work. Her name was Beatrice Brown, and we loved her. We named our youngest daughter, Beatrice, in her honor. How lucky for me that both Alan and I met Bea and that we came together. Because of Bea's dinner party, Alan and I were the only two guests who ended up eating a rum cake off the kitchen floor, where it had fallen. Alan and I were made for one another!

...CONTINUED FROM P. 35

seeing the reactions of the kids while I read is totally indescribable. I love hearing them laugh and watching them while the stories unfold. Although I started writing some of the children's books prior to my

**If I ruled the world, I would...**

I would abdicate to someone who knew what to do with billions of people of different economic levels, standards of living, religions and levels of aggression. It's so far beyond my comprehension, that only wise people of good will and governing expertise would have any chance at all at saving our planet from either ecological disaster or plain political and religious disaster from wars. Not comforting thoughts to have in the autumn of one's life (or is it the winter?).

**Women can be anything they want to be because...**

We live in a country where economically, it is possible. Artistically it is possible, and personally it is possible. However, it is most distressing to see that mindless consumerism has overtaken our country and with it, the image of female as a sex object. It has not only returned, but returned with a vengeance. The attitudes and dress have filtered down to middle school kids, who in my opinion are losing not only the innocence of childhood, but also what the Women's Movement in the '70s and '80s fought so hard to achieve for all of us. That is, the value of being the special YOU who you are...not an object...or a toy...but a human being who has the basic right to fairness and opportunity in the workplace and at home. ☐

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