

The Mystery of the Death of Natalie Wood

by Michael Curtis



I had else been perfect but now I am confined to saucy doubts and fears.

We know now from publication of photos, or purport to know because they may be doctored, that Kim Jong un, Supreme Leader of North Korea, is alive and perhaps well, at least not dead. The mystery of his absence from public life for over two weeks has not yet been explained. Nor is it clear why his first reappearance should have been staged in an improbable place, a fertilizer factory. His appearance on May 2 coincided with a brief exchange of gunfire between North and South Korea, but there were no known casualties and no further escalation, and the noise was not a symbol of welcome for the enigmatic leader.

Mysteries remain, even mount, concerning pandemic Covid-19. Medical personnel are in the dark on whether the anti-viral drug Remdesivir will have any significant positive effect as a cure for the virus or is not a magic bullet. Specious explanations grapple with the mystery of why the coronavirus

has had a considerably greater deadly impact in some countries and large cities, New York, London, Paris, than in others, New Delhi, Moscow, or Bangkok. More simply but equally mysterious are the wide disparities of the models and projections by private and official medical organizations of the expected number of infections and the daily death rate due to the virus.

In view of these present uncertainties it is not surprising that mysteries linger. This is particularly the case when outcome of the medical, social, or legal system does not correspond to expectations of available evidence or the use of procedure of due process. In legal issues, mistakes and miscarriages of justice are not unknown, especially if the prosecution has not turned over all the evidence that might exonerate the accused person, as was held in the 1963 case of *Brady v. Maryland*. In a similar issue, *Giglio v. U.S.*, 1972, the Supreme Court held that it was a violation of due process that the prosecution had failed to inform the jury of all relevant evidence.

It is a cardinal principle in the U.S., and in democratic countries, that everyone has a right to a fair trial, and that the accused have a presumption of innocence until proven guilty. This was at the core of the controversial and compelling case in which O. J. Simpson was accused of murdering his ex-wife and her friend on June 12, 1994. The case differs from most others because it, and the not guilty decision of the majority black jury, may have been more based on racial issues than on the specifics of the murders. The evidence presented in court seemed to overcome reasonable doubt about the innocence of Simpson, but it was disconcerting there was such a wide difference of opinion between U.S. white and black citizens over Simpson's guilt, though the gap has narrowed in recent years. Yet the mystery of the two deaths remains, and O.J. Simpson has been determined to solve it and find the real murderer, in spite of his imprisonment for armed

robbery in 2007.

The Simpson case had sex, race, and Hollywood, the epitome of glamor. Two of the three are pertinent in an old mystery that has now resurfaced by the presentation on May 4, 2020 of the life and death of the actress Natalie Wood in a documentary produced by her daughter.

Some of the facts of her end are known and undisputed. On the night of her death November 28-29, 1981 the body of Natalie was found floating in the shallow surf, dressed in flannel nightgown, jacket and wool socks, with superficial bruises on her body. She was found about a mile away from where she had spent the evening in her yacht, *The Splendor*, off Catalina Island outside Los Angeles, together with three others. One was her husband, actor Robert Wagner, then 51 years old, to whom she was married twice, 1957- 62, and 1972-81. The others were actor Christopher Walken, a younger man born in 1943, with whom she was co-starring in a film, *Brainstorm*, completed after her death with a stand-in playing her role, and the young captain of the yacht, a man named Dennis Davern. The ongoing mystery is whether her death was an accident, or due to murder.

Natalie had a short but vibrant life, successful professionally but personally disordered with allegations of affairs including with Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra. If that life was not as messy as that of Judy Garland who died at roughly the same age in her 40s, it included apparent suicide attempts, heavy drinking, and her eventual relegation to B movies. Beside her glamorous life style, Wood was also admired off-screen, and regarded as being ahead of her time, fighting for equal pay for women, and rights for the LGBT community. She supported and helped finance the play *The Boys in the Band* by Mart Crowley, the groundbreaking portrayal of gay life, and helped Robert Redford start his film career.

Natalie was born in 1938 to Russian immigrant parents. She

began acting when she was five, and in a short time became a studio child film star. She filmed with Orson Welles at age 8, and then, with her aura of sexuality and magnetic personality, rapidly made a transition to mature roles and became an adult star. She was to be for a time the second highest paid actress, after Elizabeth Taylor. Among her best known films are: *Miracle on 34th Street* at age eight; *Rebel without a Cause* (with James Dean) and directed by Nicholas Ray with whom she had a sexual relationship at age 16; *Splendor in the Grass* (with Warren Beatty, another lover); *West Side Story*