

Arts

Dietrich's heartfelt letters to her greatest love – her grandson

An exhibition shows the screen icon and 'femme fatale' in an unlikely role – as the doting grandma. By *Olivia Cole*

After stepping back from the gruelling demands of Hollywood and her cabaret career, Marlene Dietrich was thought to have spent her final decade as an almost total recluse in her Paris apartment at 12 Avenue Montaigne, until she passed away aged 90 in May, 1992.

Yet this month, a new Paris exhibition by British artist Nina Mae Fowler is inspired by the extraordinary relationship she had with her first grandson Michael Riva, born to Marlene's daughter and actress Maria, and her then-husband and set decorator, William Riva. Following in his family's footsteps, Michael went on to become one of the film industry's most admired production designers, and kept up regular, intimate correspondence with his grandmother up until her death.

Michael's stash of letters, poems and prose was discovered when his wife Wendy cleared out her late husband's office in 2020 to make room for their eldest son during the pandemic. While everyone knows about Marlene the sex symbol, this archive – currently being gathered into a book, alongside drawings by Fowler – is an introduction to "Mass", or "Massy", as she was known to her family.

Through Michael's writing, she is revealed as a brilliant cook who put on "beautiful" breakfast spreads on her Paris balcony, and who was so generous at Christmas that merely unwrapping the gifts she brought would take days. She had a sense of humour too, with one of Michael's letters detailing how Dietrich loved a bizarre French Sunday afternoon quiz show, in which the children of pushy parents would compete against each other. When a child guessed a correct answer, Marlene would emit "screams of pleasure" that would leave the rest of the family in stitches.

Dietrich and Michael were close from the moment he was born in 1948, with his arrival providing the actress with another chance at motherhood.

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COURTESY OF SAMUEL COLE/WENDY RIVA

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As she wrote in her memoir, “the studio executives were of the opinion that motherhood didn’t suit the ‘femme fatale’ role I was supposed to play”. And so time with her daughter Maria – born in 1924 – was limited.

Despite *Life* magazine crowning the Balenciaga-suited Dietrich “the world’s most glamorous grandmother”, the star would often go out for walks disguised as Riva’s nanny in Central Park, enjoying the anonymity she gained from pushing a pram among all the other women.

But eventually, Dietrich moved to Paris and retreated from public view altogether. As Fowler puts it, “at a certain point, she decided the



Unconsummated love: Ernest Hemingway and Dietrich in 1938

‘Dietrich decided the world had had enough photographs of her and there’d be no more’

world had had enough photographs of her and there’d be no more.” Considering the vicious judgment that ageing female stars continue to face, Dietrich’s answer – to simply not be seen at all – gave her the autonomy she’d craved for her entire career.

By the time Michael entered his thirties, his career had taken off, and Dietrich, who at his childhood request had gifted him his first video camera, took huge pride in his achievements, keeping a list of his credits by the phone. She even had her secretary make copies of his letters, to ensure she didn’t lose any of them.

Marlene was always thinking about her grandson, so much so that Michael’s various assistants would often find themselves

bombarded by packages of household essentials sent by his fretting grandmother splurging through TV shopping channels. In 1980, he was hired as art director for the film *Ordinary People*, starring Robert Redford.

Nina Mae Fowler’s plaster sculpture of Dietrich and her grandson Michael



While Dietrich had no time for American directors – believing they had no technical skill – she made an exception for Redford, firing off a missive in her distinctively vast scrawl: “Tell Mr Redford from me to treat you well, because I adore him! Isn’t that a good reason?”

Michael also thought about his grandmother constantly, finding memories of her Paris home a comfort while he was working on location during the 1980s. “Writing to you is wonderful for me” he wrote in one letter from the archive. “As if I have talked to you on the edge of your bed... Are you still staying up all night reading and writing endless notes?” With his vivid design eye the descriptions of her little world in her apartment are incredibly evocative. “Send me your poems. I often come across them, sometimes at work they fall out of some art book and I am reminded of you and the pianos, and the way the sheer curtains blow across your bed when the sliding doors are open, and the geraniums peek inside.”

She influenced his home too, with Michael often buying tuberose – Marlene’s favourite flower – in her memory. The flowers were the subject of one of her poems that she had sent him and that he had kept with her letters. “He brought me/Tuberose/Like a lover would... He did not know then/He would bring me/Tuberose/When my end/Was nearly in sight.”

Other papers in the archive reveal snippets from Marlene’s own romantic life, such as correspondence with Ernest Hemingway, with whom she fell in love and wrote to until his death in 1961. Although the relationship was never consummated, Hemingway would include his used cigar papers in these letters, which Marlene would save and send on to her bookish grandson who no doubt treasured them like religious relics. As Marlene wrote, she and Michael – who became so fascinated with Marlene’s wartime affair with French actor Jean Gabin he even wrote a script inspired by it – were both “incurable romantics.”

In October 1991, one of the last letters Marlene addressed to Michael, who died in 2012, read: “Your soul has been cuffed to my brain and heart more than even described by poets and writers”.

Fowler titled her exhibition – which includes 30 drawings and sculptures – after a line she found in a letter from Michael to Marlene, describing the love she

provided him as “an end to a kind of loneliness”. For his grandmother too, their friendship brought immense happiness to her twilight years. In one of her final letters, she wrote: “you light up my lonely life”.

‘An end to a kind of loneliness’ is on show as part of Nina Mae Fowler’s solo show running at the Galerie Suzanne Tarasieve in Paris until May 6: suzanne-tarasieve.com



Marlene Dietrich's heartfelt letters to the love of her life – her grandson

An exhibition, based on a recently unearthed archive, shows the screen siren and 'femme fatale' playing a different role: doting grandmother

By Olivia Cole

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When J. Michael Riva was born in 1948, Life magazine called [Marlene Dietrich](#) “the world’s most glamorous grandmother”. But in Central Park, close to the family apartment, one of Hollywood’s first sex symbols – and certainly [one of the world’s most famous faces](#) – could still pass by unrecognised.

Instead of her Balenciaga suits, she would go out for their walks disguised as an old-fashioned nurse (or nanny) blending in with all the other anonymous women pushing prams.

Riva’s arrival seemed to give Dietrich a second chance to be a maternal figure – in marked contrast to when her daughter Maria, Michael’s mother, was born in 1924. As she wrote in her memoir: “The studio executives were of the opinion that motherhood didn’t suit the ‘femme fatale’ role I was supposed to play.” Years of Maria’s childhood passed by before Paramount allowed her to leave Berlin and join her mother in California. Nobody wanted Lola Lola (the siren of The Blue Angel) to be thought of as a mother.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Dietrich stepped back from Hollywood and toured the world as a cabaret performer. It was badly paid and physically gruelling – she broke every bone in her toes wearing her heels – but it gave her her freedom back. “I didn’t have to do what anyone told me,” she said of that time.

But her glamorous grandmother years seem to have brought Dietrich the most joy – a previously unknown part of her story revealed in a recently unearthed collection of letters between her and her grandson.

Riva, who died in 2012, followed her into the film industry with a career as one of Hollywood's most admired production designers. But as their letters show, he was also a soulmate to whom she felt connected irrespective of where they were in the world.

This month, an exhibition by British artist Nina Mae Fowler goes on show in Paris at the Galerie Suzanne Tarasieve, inspired by their extraordinary relationship. Fowler, who explores the darkest aspects of [the so-called Golden Age of Hollywood](#), started the series in 2019, responding to a collection of family photographs shared with her by Riva's wife Wendy.

In 2020, while clearing out her husband's office, Wendy discovered another cache of materials: telegrams, letters and poems from Dietrich that Riva had always kept, as well as his own writing to his grandmother, and prose about 'Mass' or 'Massy' – as she was known to her family. This treasure trove of new material – currently being gathered into a book, alongside drawings by Fowler – shows an unexpectedly nurturing and domestic side of the passionate screen goddess.

In February 1982, Dietrich wrote to Riva about looking back on those days of helping with him as a baby: “You must know by now that I don't love you because I am supposed to love my grandsons. I love you as if I had picked you up on one of those awful streets of New York without a name-tag.”

“You know you can call me anytime collect – Paris 7239749,” she went on. “Don't shut yourself in like I did all my life!”

In her final decade, spent as an almost total recluse in her apartment in Paris, at the 12 avenue Montaigne, news of Riva's life seemed to sustain her. “Michael, you know what your letter did! I'm still up there – higher than the seventh!” she wrote to him.

In October 1991, just months before she died, she wrote to her cherished correspondent: “Your soul has been cuffed to my Brain, and heart more than even described by poets and writers.”

While the world may know Marlene, the archive is an introduction to Mass. She was a brilliant cook, and Riva references memories of his grandmother's artichoke recipe and beautiful breakfasts on her balcony over the years. At Christmas, the only time the whole family would gather, she brought so many presents the unwrapping would take days.

Her later years, in which she confined herself to her Paris apartment, communicating with the world over the phone and by writing, may seem ghoulish. But as Fowler puts it: “At a certain point, she decided the world had had enough photographs of her and there'd be no more.” Even today, when you consider the vicious public judgement of either aging or surgery to look young, Dietrich's answer – to simply not be seen at all – gave her the autonomy she'd craved her entire career.

As Dietrich moved out of view, Riva's own career was taking flight. By his thirties he was working very successfully, and Dietrich, who had given him his first video camera as a child, took huge pride in his achievements. In 1980, he was hired as art director for the film *Ordinary People* and, bringing his beautifully moody aesthetic, helped Robert Redford win the Academy Award for Best Picture.

Dietrich usually had no time for American directors as she didn't believe they had any technical mastery, but she made an exception for Redford. She fired off a missive in her distinctive handwriting: “Tell Mr Redford from me to treat you well, because I adore him! Isn't that a good reason?”

To stay on top of his latest achievements, she kept a list of Michael's credits by the phone. There was more acclaim when he worked as Steven Spielberg's production designer for *The Color Purple*. This time it was Spielberg who wrote a fan letter to Marlene, praising her grandson as “the best production designer I have ever worked with.”



A drawing of Marlene and Michael by the artist Nina Mae Fowler | CREDIT: Nina Mae Fowler

As a young man making his way in the film industry, Riva acknowledged that he and his grandmother had an ability to make themselves at home on film sets – “always these strange places”, as he termed them. But when he became a father himself, he rejected the peripatetic aspect of his own childhood. “He grew up not knowing where he was going to be the next year. Having the family in one spot was really important to him, and being close to them,” remembers Wendy. Tragically, when Riva died of a stroke in 2012 – on the New Orleans set of Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* – it was one of the rare times he had taken a job away from home.

When he worked on location in the 1980s, letters from Mass anchored him. “Writing to you is wonderful for me,” he told her. “As if I have talked to you on the edge of your bed... Are you still staying up all night reading and writing endless notes?”

But the letters are funny, too. Dietrich loved a bizarre French Sunday afternoon quiz show where pushy parents brought their children onto the show and watched them compete. Michael remembered how the “screams of pleasure” for each correct answer would crack his grandmother up. Dietrich had another light-hearted lifeline to the outside world with the TV shopping channels. Riva’s assistants would find his office inundated with “must-have” household items for him: from Kleenex holders to endless kitchen utensils – definitely the shopping of the practical nurturing Mass rather than the impossibly glamorous Marlene.

In terms of her own writing, she often included poems with her letters. Wendy Riva remembers how Michael would often buy tuberose to have around at home, because they were his grandmother's favourite. A poem she sent him in 1985 movingly shows that it was a habit of a lifetime: "He brought me/Tuberose/Like a lover would... He did not know then/He would bring me/Tuberose/When my end/Was nearly in sight."

In other poems there's an unnamed "you" that, given her romantic history, is tantalising to wonder about. Ernest Hemingway and Dietrich fell in love and corresponded until his death in 1961 – although the relationship was never consummated. For years, in these letters he would also enclose his used cigar papers which she saved, and then sent on to her bookish grandson.

Erich Maria Remarque, Dietrich's former lover and author of [All Quiet On the Western Front](#), is a possible inspiration for another beautiful lyric set in the tormented afterlife of a love affair. "You left your/Wristwatch/On my bedside table... Will you return/To claim both it and me?" she asks. But her grandson was clearly her greatest love, something powerfully reflected in Fowler's sculptures.



A sculpture of Marlene and Michael, by Nina Mae Fowler | CREDIT: Nina Mae Fowler

Fowler titled her works inspired by their relationship "an end to a kind of loneliness", quoting from Riva's line to Dietrich about how their love for each other made him feel, and his belief that they "would always be inseparable." But the title also speaks to just what her role as a grandmother gave her too. As she wrote to him in her final years: "You light up my lonely life."

In a 1975 interview, still working, but not long before she started to sequester herself away, Dietrich told an interviewer: "I think that as long as one can use one's hands and one can hear... it's wonderful. If you cannot see, if that's your fate, then there are other things that you have in life. You have a touch that nobody has. You can hear. You can have music and you can have a family and you can have love." That family life, and that love, even in a self-imposed exile from the world, seems richer now than anyone could have imagined.

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