

Alberto Urroz

A Touch of T

It was quite early that day. Maybe not so early, around 11 a.m., but certainly too early for someone who lived in International House, the large residence located in Morningside Heights, N.Y., to be ringing my apartment's bell at the North wing of the building. As I was sure I was alone in the apartment, I ran to the door to see who was there. I can recall that moment as it had just happened yesterday, as it is always with the most meaningful moments in my life: I never expected that morning to open the door to my new flat-mate, Thea St.Omer, who would become one of my best friends ever. I remember her wonderful figure, her beautiful and cheerful face, and how she was standing in front of the door with the bearing and elegance of a goddess. She introduced herself with her velvety voice. I welcomed her and asked her to let me take the suitcase to her room. She thanked me for being such a gentleman. And so, that morning in 1997, the story of a true friendship began.



Thea was then a film student at New York University, while I was a piano student at Manhattan School of Music. We soon realized we had much to talk about. She had lived in Spain for a while and her Spanish was still fluent (she named her lovely dog Javi and often closed her letters with “besos y abrazos”). We both loved cooking at home and enjoyed sharing the food with our flat mates and other common friends. I visited the public film sessions at NYU as much as she came to graduate recitals at the Manhattan School. We loved to walk along Broadway, all the way down to Chinatown, drink delicious cold coconut water in the extremely hot New York summer weather, and then walk all the way back to Upper Manhattan where we lived. We liked to sit around the dinner table for hours, eating watermelon while talking and making fun of stupid stereotypes. Since we lived so close to it, Harlem was always on our agendas, either to buy food or to visit some Hispanic or Afroamerican restaurants.



Life seemed to be wonderful in New York City those days. However, Thea made it much more so, for she was the most intelligent, generous, liveliest companion one could hope for. There was depth: she had the glorious gift of making one aware of one’s own prejudices and weaknesses, so that one could become a stronger, better person. Besides, she was such a compas-

sionate woman that anyone felt comfortable around her. She looked beyond one’s surface to bring out the best assets and qualities in whomever she was with. Thea’s films were often a projection of the best features of her personality. As if by magic, in her films, Thea would make beauty blossom where one would never expect it. Her films urge the viewer to be aware of the hidden beauty surrounding us.

While being kindness personified, always displaying the sweetest disposition, Thea nonetheless never waived in the pursuit of her beliefs and her ideals. She was strong and enthusiastic in seeking to realize the type of films that conformed to her vision. She did not need to mask the firmness of her vision behind imperiousness. She allowed the message she wanted to convey and the strength of her artistic convictions dictate the technical vocabulary her film would deploy. She would spend hours, maybe days, deciding how much film footage developing an idea should take. I remember her asking for my opinion of sequences of *A Touch of Tutelage* as she was searching for the perfect timing of long mute scenes. Her

ability to derive joy from whatever she was doing was the key to Thea’s rhythm, not only in her films, but in her life.

In June 1999, my New York adventure came to an end as I decided to move back to Spain. From then on, I got Thea’s postcards and letters from different places: New York, California, Florida or Montreal. One of the first letters contained a little score of a tender and lovely piece by Edward MacDowell titled “To a Wild Rose,” which I was asked to play for her touching documentary *Love in an Elevator*.

Thea’s late decision to let go of filming was, in her own words, the “death of a dream.” In spite of that, we had promised each other to collaborate together soon. I dreamed of her shooting a documentary about the Mendigorria International Music Festival in Spain. *“It would be a DREAM to be able to visit with you in Spain this summer—such a dream. (I haven’t spoken Spanish really since I lived with you)!!! I’ll have to practice. But, let’s try to make it happen! I’ve given up film for now, but would be honored and would make an exception to film you!!! Until then, be well, my dear, precious friend, Alberto!”*

You’ll be my precious friend forever, dear Thea!



Alberto Urroz is a pianist and is founder and director of the Mendigorria Internacional Music Festival in Spain. Learn more at albertourroz.com and festivalmendigorria.com. **To see Alberto’s tribute to Thea, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m55uC5b1fLg>**

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Photographs courtesy of Alberto Urroz.

Second photo, 1998: Alberto, Thea, and Cinta Medine, in Sakura Park, New York City.