



They're calling: Since her film debut in *Meatballs*, Norma Dell'Agnese has been busy. Directors have called her often. She's done four films in 90 weeks.

There's life after *Meatballs*

By Kate Daller Toronto Star special

"A year ago," Norma Dell'Agnese was saying, "you were on your hands and knees for auditions and then, all of a sudden, people are asking for you and calling you 'star.'"

Norma Dell'Agnese (pronounced del-an-yeh-ze) is one Torontoniano who ended up in the eye of the cinematic hurricane that blew into this city over a year ago. It changed her life, and the lives of other locals — people who were involved in the action on both ends of the camera.

Norma has definitely been on the front end of the "black box" as she calls it.

The petite redhead landed her "first professional role ever" as Brenda in *Meatballs* last year. A graduate of the School of Dramatic Arts at the University of Windsor, with aspirations to work in theatre, Norma was supporting herself as a fitness instructor when she answered a newspaper cattlecall ad for *Meatballs*.

Back court action

For her celluloid initiation she had to land flat on her back on a tennis court.

There followed a brief lull in Norma's blossoming film career while she played both Columbia and Usherette in a Toronto stage production of the *Rocky Horror Show*, but it wasn't long before the black box beckoned again.

By now, the Toronto film industry was accelerating. Norma was cast in four films in a space of 10 weeks. In *Middle Age Crazy*, starring Bruce Dern and Ann-Margret, Norma twanged and drawled away as a Texan, a high school valedictorian. In *Head On*, she had a less illustrious role, as a "forgotten lab subject," abandoned with her head still attached to electrodes.

She got a more prestigious break when she met Louis Malle in Toronto. Malle

the part of an "off-the-wall oyster bar waitress." Norma bubbled away in her excitement and that was enough, apparently. In a week or so, she'll fly to Atlantic City, New Jersey, to be a waitress along with her film "buddy," Susan Sarandon.

But so far, Norma's most memorable experience has been in making *Circle of Two* which wrapped a week ago.

Norma met the legendary director Jules Dassin in the course of his search for "a beautiful, ethereal Italian girl of 16" who could sing. The girl would be one of Tatum O'Neal's best friends. Italian parents, singing ability and a knack for looking younger than she is, qualified Norma for an audition. It turned out to be something of a baptism of fire.

Norma was required to sing Handel's *Lascia Ch'io Pianga* emotionally, meaning partially in tears. To make matters worse, Dassin called his wife, Melina Mercouri into the room.

"I could have died on the spot," Norma says. But when it was over, Mercouri announced, in her throaty Greek accent, "My dear, you have a looovely voice." Norma floated home, promising to come back again with dark hair. Dassin couldn't quite adjust to a red-headed Italian.

Norma's attempt to become a brunette via a brown rinse and black spray didn't make the grade. Dassin finally asked her to show up for her screen test as "very sweet, but let the woman show through."

Norma arrived at the screen test in "a very girlish tight dress" but couldn't resist one last attempt at brunnetedom by topping it all off with a Gino Vannelli wig. Dassin was aghast.

Off came the wig. Norma sang Handel as a redhead, tears and all. With the last note, she began apologizing madly for her performance. Musically, she felt, it hadn't happened.

ignored her apologies, "he just walked up and gave me a hug, didn't say a word. Just hugged me."

Several nerve-racking days later, Norma was told that the part was hers.

Filming *Circle of Two*, Norma says, was even crazier than doing *Meatballs*. And since she is inclined to store up tension, she has had to come to terms with the film business for what it is.

"I realized that it wasn't going to change, I was going to have to change."

After her Louis Malle film, Norma will head back to Toronto and hopefully get some time to get back in touch with herself. Her burgeoning career and Toron-

to's emergence as Hollywood North have not gone to her head.

"I've been toying with the idea of working at a Joe job this Christmas because you really gain a terrific perspective about money, people, everything."

And in the meantime, Norma continues to smile at those involved with movie making in Toronto.

Norma's agent, for one, has enjoyed success in the "business" end of Toronto's youngest showbusiness entrepreneurs. When she and partner George Bell formed Noble and Bell Talent Associates in July, 1979, Penny recalls that "it was a fluke that I joined an agency."

Shot in the arm

And for Penny, as well as for Norma, *Meatballs* turned out to be a shot in the arm.

"Fortunately for me," Penny says, "the film had just been made and they used an awful lot of people who had never done film before."

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Two years ago, people like Noble and Dell'Agnese had little inkling of how the tax break for movie investors in Toronto would affect their lives. But they were ready when opportunity knocked. There's nothing like being in the right place at the right time, especially when the right place turns out to be your own.



Noble venture: Norma Dell'Agnese's agent is Penny Noble, whose own career has risen with the boom of the film