

# The Doyenne of Classical Publicists Takes on a Final Client: Herself

Mary Lou Falcone is stepping out of the background to raise awareness of Lewy body dementia, the neurodegenerative disease that claimed her husband.



Mary Lou Falcone in front of a painting by her late husband, Nicholas Zann, called "The Day Schubert Died." Evelyn Freja for The New York Times.



By [Alexis Soloski](#)

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Mary Lou Falcone has lived most of her life away from the spotlight. “I made a conscious decision that I wanted to be behind the scenes,” she said over a recent lunch at Café Luxembourg, a few blocks from Lincoln Center on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Fifty years ago, after brief careers as a performer and a teacher, Falcone changed course and became a leading publicist in the world of classical music. She worked in the background with leading organizations and artists including the soprano Renée Fleming, the pianist Van Cliburn, the flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal and maestros including Gustavo Dudamel, Georg Solti and Jaap van Zweden, helping him raise his profile in the years before he was named music director of the New York Philharmonic.

Now, for the first time since she was 28, Falcone has put herself center stage to promote a new, personal cause. In early 2019, her husband, the artist [Nicholas Zann](#), was diagnosed [with Lewy body dementia](#), a neurodegenerative disease. He died in 2020. To raise awareness of the disease and shed light on becoming a caregiver, she wrote [“I Didn’t See It Coming: Scenes of Love, Loss and Lewy Body Dementia,”](#) a memoir of her life, their relationship and Zann’s diagnosis and decline. Falcone, 78, has now embarked on a publicity tour for the book, giving readings, talks, interviews. In many ways, she is doing what she has always done: crafting a narrative, then sharing it.



A table in Falcone’s room is adorned with photographs of her and Zann and of the pianist Van Cliburn,

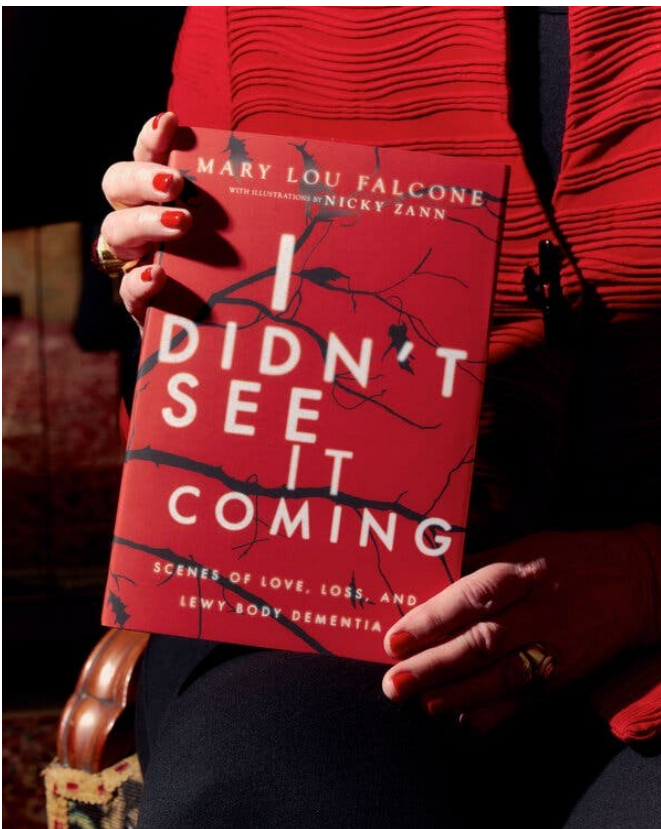
an early client, as well as with an artwork by Zann. Evelyn Freja for The New York Times.

“I just happen to be telling my own story,” Falcone said.

Falcone grew up the eldest of three children in an Italian American family in New Jersey. When she was 10, her father was disabled by a stroke, and music became her emotional outlet. As a teenager she earned a scholarship to the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music. She refers to herself as a “chicken soprano” — a soprano afraid of the high notes. Many of her colleagues were extraordinary singers; Falcone felt that her own gifts were slighter. She soon discovered that performance was something she could take or leave.

“I didn’t need it,” she said. “I needed to communicate. That was different.”

After graduation, she took a teaching job and embarked on a brief performance career that took her for several summers to Saint Paul Opera. During her third season, she was asked to oversee a photo shoot. That kindled something in her. The next year, in addition to performing, she asked to intern in the publicity department. The general manager refused that request. Instead, he asked her to become the company’s publicist.



To raise awareness of the disease and shed light on becoming a caregiver, Falcone wrote “I Didn’t See It Coming: Scenes of Love, Loss and Lewy Body Dementia.” Evelyn Freja for The New York Times

“He just looked at me and said, ‘I’ve watched you. You like challenges. Say yes and go figure it out.’” Falcone recalled. “And I did.”

Word got around. Soon more clients came calling. Falcone turned some away, even though she couldn’t afford to. She accepted only the ones that she believed in and felt that she could help. Though she is not an agent or a



manager, she has advised her clients on matters of repertory, performance and even wardrobe, helping many of them to craft memorable public personas.

“I’m a publicist, but I’m also a strategist,” she said.

[Fleming](#), the distinguished American soprano, met with her three times before Falcone agreed to take her on. Falcone’s first job was to make sure Fleming, giving her first recital at Carnegie Hall, sold out the auditorium. Which she did. She went on to help establish Fleming as “the diva next door.”

“People respect her tremendously,” Fleming said in a recent phone interview. To be taken on by Falcone was to receive an instant imprimatur.

[Deborah Borda](#), who stepped down earlier this year as president and chief executive of the New York Philharmonic and led the Los Angeles Philharmonic before that, has worked with Falcone in various capacities since 1988. Borda described Falcone as “a maestra of the art. It’s a combination of mystique, an incredible nose for recognizing talent and remarkable generosity of spirit.”

Falcone had never intended to puncture that mystique. Even when she knew that she had to write about Lewy body dementia, which the pitcher [Tom Seaver](#) and the actor and comedian [Robin Williams](#) also suffered from, she was initially determined to leave herself out of the narrative. Her first draft of the book read more like a disease awareness pamphlet. Friends and early editors told her that no one would care about Lewy body dementia unless they first cared about her. So she rewrote it, beginning with her childhood and continuing, in exacting detail, even including a log of what it was like to care for Zann at the end.



A photo of Falcone in her performing days, as a Valkyrie in Wagner’s “Die Walküre” in 1973 in St. Paul, Minn. Evelyn Freja for The New York Times.

“I opened my heart,” Falcone said. “And I allowed in everything that I had suppressed.”

But after so many years of waiting in the wings, she remained disinclined to center herself. As Falcone notes in the introduction, “For decades I have shied away from the words I, me and my, preferring to focus on the lives

and careers of others, often writing in their voices through my work in public relations.” That shyness may inform one of the book’s literary devices: many short chapters begin in Falcone’s own voice, then channel the voice of a family member or colleague or artist. (Fleming confirmed that the section written in her voice was entirely accurate.)

Asked about her literary ventriloquism, Falcone said, “I get bored with I, me and my, this is the truth,” she said. “It has nothing to do with humility. It has to do with boredom and I don’t want to be boring.”

Falcone is nearing retirement. She retains only two clients, Carnegie Hall and the New York Philharmonic. And though she has now taken on herself as a client, she hasn’t done so alone. One of her first acts when she found a publisher was to hire a publicity firm that specializes in books. Some of her friends have joked that she is likely the client from hell.

She hopes not. “I think I’m the client who realizes how hard this is,” she said.

At Café Luxembourg, which she has adopted as a supplementary office, she made it look fairly easy. Hosts and servers visited her corner booth to tell her that they had already ordered the book and ask her to sign it. In a forest green tunic and faintly bohemian gold jewelry, Falcone accepted their congratulations with modesty and self-possession.

The first act of her career, she believes, was performing. The second was teaching. The third and longest was publicity. And this is her fourth, as a spokeswoman raising awareness about a devastating disease.

“I thought it would be hard,” she said. “But I’m just telling my story.”

*A correction was made on Oct. 23, 2023: An earlier version of this article misstated which opera company Mary Lou Falcone performed with for several summers. It is Saint Paul Opera, not Minnesota Opera.*

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