

THE UNKNOWN AND THE GENERAL

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My black T-shirt feels painted onto me with sweat and my fingers are slippery inside the black leather motorcycle gloves as my chest heaves from the exertion, desperate for oxygen. I am going eighty mph on my Harley—and giving it to Marilyn at the same time. Her back is arched to get as much of me as she can and as she hits a peak, belts out, “Gee Rod, it’s like fireworks on the Fourth of July.” This is how it goes in my mind. Except this is no dream. I’m in a church. No. It’s not a church anymore. It’s been converted into a theater: The Actors Studio. And I have just finished performing in a scene from Norman Mailer’s play Strawhead about Marilyn Monroe.

There is a pause before the next scene begins, as if everyone, audience included, has to take a breather after what just unraveled before them. And into this gap rises a husky matron who, with a piercing voice, suddenly launches into a loud harangue: “You don’t know she did that. How dare you? What right have you to take such liberties? I was her first roommate in Hollywood. I was her best friend. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

It is Shelley Winters. She seems ready to ream Norman at full blast for quite a while, but before she can completely bring the performance to an untimely halt, an older, bull-necked man with a pronounced nose in a long, deeply lined face, also stands up, turns to her full face, and says “Shelley. Shut up. Sit down.”

And, instantly, she does. It is Elia Kazan, the moderator of the Playwrights and Directors Unit. So we continued that afternoon and finished the fragment of the play we had prepared. But the next

time we presented it, at just about the same moment, another heckler stood up and started a harangue repeating Shelley's rant almost verbatim and the play again broke down.

Except this time it was Norman who had written it—he had planted her in the audience and was now investigating that uneasy but fascinating theatrical territory of where make-believe ends and reality begins. Talk about turning a disaster into a victory. Whew.

I'M SUPERSTITIOUS, I ADMIT IT. Or I'm at least given to paying attention to signs—when I see them. So I shouldn't have been surprised when about a week before Norman was supposed to show up in L.A. for a book tour, I was traveling around back of the group house I live in with other, mostly thwarted souls obsessed with filmmaking of an independent sort, to pick a lemon off of our tree, when something orange caught my eye nestled among its roots. Lo and behold, it was a copy of Norman's *Ancient Evenings* that in some bizarre way had found a resting place there. A thousand pages of Egyptian arcana, embalming procedures, and cavorting of various Egyptian gods and demons. I confess, I had read some but not all of it, yet out of some weird sense of loyalty, I couldn't leave it there and picked it up, brushed away the less crusted dirt and dropped it off at my workbench area where it would receive its own embalming at some later date. So there it was. And exactly the next day I got the call from Judith, Norman's most loyal assistant whom I had gotten to know over the last decade, and who was now inviting me to attend a talk Norman was giving and afterward join him and his party for dinner.

At that time, there had been quite a splash in the press about his long and illustrious career as a writer spanning fifty years, and his anthology of his work, *The Time of Our Time*, had been respectfully received, but almost nowhere was there more than a scant line or two mentioning his writing and *directing* in theater and film. This was dismaying to me, both because that was, in fact, how I had come to know and work with him, but also because—through my experiences with him as a performer—I knew firsthand that as a writer and, more particularly as a director for the stage *and* screen, he was first-rate. Yet for some reason, he never seemed to receive his just due in these endeavors. His theatrical and film projects, though admired by some, were criticized mercilessly and scoffed at by others. Sometimes I wondered if there weren't some secret cabal that had decided the

gods had dropped enough manna on him already in the form of his talent for prose, and to ask for more was offending to them, so he paid accordingly. If some praised his work for the stage and screen, others slaughtered it. But to me, as an actor who was working cheek by jowl with him as a director and interpreting the lines he would give me—I was always flying. When I would hear someone excoriate something we just had finished performing, for example, at the Studio, I would wonder if they had seen the same piece I had been in. To me, the dialogue was always rich, and the scenes were powerful—outrageous maybe, and certainly male in their impulse, but juicy to perform in, they were a hell of a dance, and never, ever, boring. Norman was always pushing the envelope of conventional behavior. He was always *interesting*.

Of him as a *director*—they knew nothing at all. I suppose, in these days when the worth of a director is gauged by how many commercial hits he's had, Norman didn't loom large on the landscape of Godzillas, but I think that this may be a reflection of the times we live in, rather than a reflection of his merit as a director. Because if it's true that being a good director is related to some psychological zone of leadership, as it happened, Norman had it in spades. In his presence there was an amazing aura of commitment—one had the feeling of participating in something of great import, ground-breaking, historic even, and you gave one hundred and ten percent of your stuff as an actor. I can't speak for others of course, but I never heard too much of the common griping or bitching during our stage-run of *Strawhead* at the Actors Studio, or during the shoot of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Norman often used the metaphor of a general marshalling his troops to describe the work of the director, but I always thought he was more benevolent and inspirational than any military man I had ever heard of. Rather, he seemed to have something more like the inspirational power of a preacher or rabbi, maybe.

I think it would be a great disservice to his work to have this sound like just some sort of epistle of adoration, so I'd like to go back to the beginning of our work together, our first encounter, and then chronicle some episodes from the projects we did together that might be illuminating. Apparently I've been privy to some moments that not too many others have, and if I can re-create some of them, maybe I can give my opinions some basis.

There's nothing better to stir up the creative juices than a damp, cloud-hooded day in the Apple. The fruity colors of the garbage spilling out of the cans stand out a little stronger against the gray cement in an especially attractive funk, the smells are mostly just wetness—the gods are about to make their move in the arena above—one's nerve-endings start trilling with expectation, and it makes me, for one, feel alive and especially capable. And I needed an extra dose of spunk, because on a day like that, I would cross paths with Norman Mailer.

The floors of the Actors Studio were being shellacked, and so the theater was unavailable, but rather than canceling the session it was relocated. Nobody seemed to know exactly where, as if it were a secret place, so the entire entourage of maybe three dozen wandered up Tenth Avenue from Forty Fourth Street, as if guided by an invisible hand. Maybe they were afraid that if people knew, they wouldn't show. Anyway, on we went, and it was still Hell's Kitchen then (not "Heaven's Gate," which is what I call it now) and the slums and dark alleys we passed were good enough for me—they fed me, "preparing," as I was, to play a young Scottish gang leader in Dundee, who was trying to get out of the endless rounds of "bovvers" (gang brawls where kicking was the main jab) and go straight. As I stalked up the avenue, I found myself hunching over, like a boxer, protective of my psyche, not very chatty, irritated by everything—from the steady honking and screaming sirens approaching and then fading, to the kid who somehow managed to trip right in front of my feet (I admit I was tempted). But these fumes wafting around my brain gave rise to the unmistakable feeling that a claw was slowly tightening around my skull—and the deeper it gouged, the more I wanted to bust out—perfect for the part I was about to play. In short, Stephan, the actor, was having a good day. We ended up on the eighth floor of what was nothing less than an empty warehouse building. Yes indeed, no lie. A few scoop lights at one end over what was apparently the playing area, and a few dozen folding chairs facing it, made up what would be our theater for this event.

To say that this dusty industrial space had the surreal quality of a Fellini movie would not be an exaggeration. Not just because of the barrenness amidst the scattered pools of light, but because sitting in those few wooden chairs was a roster which included the likes of: Arthur Penn, Joseph Mankiewicz, Ellen Burstyn, Elia Kazan, Joseph Heller, Pete Masterson, A. R. Gurney, Harold Brodkey, Jonathan Reynolds, and Norman Mailer.

Though I had worked hard on my character, I didn't expect to find that playing a character with an accent, or this particular accent was, in some mysterious way, terrifically liberating. Perhaps the distance it created from my own personal reality gave me a mask, behind which I could leave my particular self behind, and be free. Though not a Scot by blood, I felt as if some atavistic tribal chord of Scotland was throbbing inside of me—unless it was the terror I felt in front of such an audience of heavyweights—that put an extra zing into my performance. Suffice it to say, if there *had* been any scenery to chew I would have had a feast. A spirit of heroic proportions flew into my chest like a madman on wings and lodged there with steel talons. I couldn't have shaken it even if I had wanted to—it was bigger than I was. And when it was over, with people milling around the way they do after a main-event bout, I knew in my bones, that it was one of those times in my life where it had, indeed, been my night. Now it was fortunate that I felt this because I happened to catch sight of a large flock of white hair next to me. It was Norman inviting another cast member to play Arthur Miller in a play of his about Marilyn. Since that actor, though capable enough, was a soap opera actor, an occupation held in rather low esteem by some young stage actors, I naturally felt that I might also be worthy of such an invitation. The adrenalin pumping through me that night, had given me a little more bravado than I might otherwise have had.

So I planted myself in Norman's path and, be damned, sure enough he turned and as if it was all in the plan, said "And you. There's a role for you. Not the lead, but a role I think *you* might find interesting. He's a stuntman, and one thing he does is take Marilyn for a ride." You've already heard what that scene was like, and that was just the beginning, but what's really significant here is that he offered me a role in his play only because of the merit he saw in the work—he didn't know me from Adam. A gesture of that kind of fairness is almost unheard of in the Byzantine casting channels of theater and film. To give a young actor a break, without asking for credentials, or who he knew, or was connected to, with the only consideration being the *work itself*, seems like it is almost looked upon as heretical by the powers that be. So that was my first sense of Norman, that he was a stand-up guy—a *fair man*. Rare indeed.

One of the most satisfying things for an actor is to have a director who receives and fully absorbs what the actor is doing in his performance. The director is the actor's objective eye and his mirror reflection. At the same

time, a gifted director is one who creates a safe space, say, a sandbox of the mind, where the actor can cavort, search, get naked—psychologically or otherwise—and yes, fall on his ass, if it comes to that, without fear of retribution. In short, where he can be free to take risks and, if his instincts are ripe, land on his feet. Norman didn't miss a trick and, it was understood, if the actor felt the urge to try something that might embellish a scene, he could, and if it worked Norman was likely to keep it in. Not to be misconstrued as license to rewrite the author's lines, no, this was more in the vein of breathing life into the lines by extending their physical life. The first time this happened for me was a rather small moment, but one that opened up a door that ushered in an abundance of future opportunity. My character, Rod, had picked up Marilyn in a bar where one of her first lines was a challenge. "Gee, Rod, why are all those boys staring at you?" The line called for a simple answer of "I don't know." Instead something sparked and, taking my cue from her, I looked off in the direction she had suggested and then sashayed over a few steps to where this imaginary bevy of queenly young men might be, and with a gesture of defiance, a Sicilian "fungoo," grabbed my crotch at them, so to speak. The gesture spoke volumes, and opened up the scene—the audience guffawed as if they could see this imaginary little group. This happened during a performance and none of it had been planned. Now it should be noted that, in addition to Norman's openness, this was, after all, The Actors Studio and there, when you were *on*, you went all the way with what you were doing—if an impulse hit you, you were free to dive after it. I didn't know from what cesspool of the subconscious this impulse sprang from, but it felt right and Norman loved it. Afterwards he told me to keep it in—it was right for the character. To me this was the real thing, theater on the edge: genuine collaboration between author and actor.

Recently I read about a young, raging, female playwright that had lit up the London stage with a play that included a character getting anally assaulted with a broomstick, another character shooting junk through his eyeball. She was touted as terrifically brave, and her writing groundbreaking. What's peculiar to me about this is that when Norman put things up, at least as dark as this, fully a decade before in our production of *Strawhead: A Portrait of Marilyn*, the audiences almost yawned, barely raising an eyebrow, defiantly unimpressed. And nothing he wrote was ever gratuitous—it never felt as if anything we did was exploitive or pornographic. He simply had a curiosity for those who walked on the wild side, and was committed to push-

ing out to the edges of what was considered acceptable behavior on stage. Which leads me to a scene that takes place between Marilyn and Rod, right after their motorcycle ride. Norman was not yet through running with the demons of the night. After she and I dismounted, I was supposed to pull her down to her knees by the hair; apparently, how I did this was a little too gentle for Norman's taste. He wanted something, frankly, more brutal.

He: "Well, look. This is not Stephan, Boy Scout. This is Rod, Stuntman and stud *extraordinaire*. Can I show you?" Feeling a little foolish, I nodded. Grabbing a fistful of air he brought his arm down twisting it with a vicious grunt. Did I mention that the actress playing Marilyn was his daughter? Well, so she was, but before we go off speculating about various and delicious Oedipal delights, suffice it to say, after I was given the license I needed—indeed, a father's permission—WHAM, down she went.

The scene didn't stop there. In the next instant, I found myself within a zipper-jerk away from being the first actor in the history of The Actors Studio to be felled during a performance. At that moment, Marilyn flings off her platinum wig and the actress, Kate, refuses to go on with this "tabloid bullshit." Of course, the whole thing was a set-up, and this is, in fact, the moment when the play stops mid-stream, with the heckler, previously mentioned, standing up and haranguing the playwright.

One night, shortly before a performance, Norman approached me in some consternation. "Look, about that cassette with the Doberman sounds. It turned out badly. I don't want to use it, unless I have to. I want to try and keep it more in the vein of live theater." He peered at me closely, his sharp blue eyes driving in on me. "I have this idea. What about if you tried it? Could you do something?" My mouth opened and closed as I caught myself from saying "Like what?" I was blank—it took a long moment for what he was suggesting to sink in. Then, "Sure. Where uhh ... do you want me to do it?" I was trying to be a sport about the thing, but I could only imagine myself out there in the center of the stage, maybe even off a little to one side, writhing and growling, for all I was worth, like some rabid psychotic, less like Rod and more like Renfield's soul brother. A whole performance going down the toilet in one unfortunate flush. I must have been transparent in my despair. So he said, "Well, I mean for you to do it in the wings upstage. You go offstage and make the sounds from there."

Small comfort. This was the story. To wit: Rod, who was determined to get back a diamond necklace from his ex-girlfriend would have to retrieve it

from the neck of her Doberman, and thereby kill it in the process. So I was going to be making the sounds of Rod grunting in his efforts, simultaneously with those of the dog snarling with rage, then whining in pain and finally gurgling in his death throes. Never mind that I had never taken a sound effects lesson in my life, as if there were such a thing. Or that I could only vaguely conceive of what a Doberman might sound like in such circumstances, alive or dead. Well, sometimes you can't plan and you have to just jump and pray. And sometimes, just because of this, when there's nothing preconceived, instinct takes over—there's no thought involved—and though there may be very little recollection of what exactly happens, something extraordinary may occur. Maybe Norman didn't realize how much of the dog I had in me—or maybe he did and knew better than I. But I doubt that he was expecting the *symphony*; nay, hurricane might be more accurate, of sounds that issued forth from that little corner in the wings. I have only a hazy recollection, like some werewolf, of that first time we did the scene. I am convinced, though, that if there had been any fur it would have been flying. The audience must have thought so because, as I recall, there was a spontaneous ovation for it.

They say that the hardest thing in art is to know when to stop. Sure enough, small moment of triumph that I had snatched, perhaps from the dark jaws of disaster. Still, the way the Doberman scene opened, left me unsatisfied. Why would any dog, especially a trained attack animal, just wait to be slaughtered? Didn't make sense. Clearly something was missing for the scene to have some street credibility. Then I got *the idea*. And yet, because it was a fragile one, or perhaps because I didn't have the strength of my convictions, I found myself eagerly waiting for the night I had found out there was a good chance Norman would arrive very late or not at all. I would try it. It would either work or it wouldn't, and if it didn't nobody would be the wiser except me, and maybe the more astute souls in the audience. I had a strong feeling that this idea was valid, yet I wouldn't know for sure until it was up in front of an audience. And if I brought it up casually to Norman, and I happened to chance it at the wrong moment, say, in the dressing room when he might be having an irritating moment with another actor or, worse yet, with his lovely though provocative wife, Norris (who was also in the cast). Or if I just presented it clumsily, it might easily get shot down, and we would never know if it could have worked or not, which, in my heart of hearts, I believed would have been very unfortunate. So that night, as I slith-

ered across the stage, giving a low whistle for the dog, Bowie knife slipping quietly up out of my engineer boot—I slowly drew out the large, soft, bloody steak Rod had especially brought for the occasion. The mushy, red flesh swaying back and forth from my black-gloved hand, spread something nauseating into the air as if bloody vapors were slowly drifting out into the house. It wasn't so much that you could hear a pin drop—you couldn't, because there was a storm of little gasps rolling around out there. Maybe because it was not imaginary, but a small dose of something real, palpable, in this minimalist production—it stood out and it resonated, that pulpy piece of meat, so that I knew in my bones I had made a small but stunning contribution to the piece. I was thrilled, to say the least, and then I did a double take. There was a flock of familiar-looking white hair in the last row. Impossible. Norman was presiding at the PEN meeting at the UN and not here tonight, or at least not until much later. After the show, sure enough, there was Norman in a formal three-piece, pin-striped blue suit looking for all the world like a banker. He caught my eye and, solemn-faced, stormed straight up to me. As he approached I heard a strange hymn-like phrase thunder past me. "Here comes the Judge. Halleluhah." Ho. Ho. Joke's on me. When he reached my elbow he immediately broached the subject of the steak. "What kind of meat was that?" (I was a vegetarian at the time, and wouldn't have known a sirloin from a shoe sole.) I shrugged. "Steak?" Then he moved in on me. "Do you know what Dobermans love to eat?" he demanded. I saw a large black hole opening at my feet into which my cherished spirit of collaboration was diving headfirst. Busted. I hadn't even done my homework. Who knew what Doberman's ate? Meat. Red. What other mysterious substance could they possibly crave? Who knew? Maybe someone, but not me. Suddenly his face lit up with a look as if he had suddenly remembered something. A smile creased his mouth and, as his eyes started to twinkle ferociously, he was whisked away by an old crony, arm around his shoulder, who more direly needed his attention. So he had been yanking my chain. I had paid the price for my boldness. Later he gave his formal approval and for the rest of the run he even paid for the steak.

The run was not without some moments of tension and ruffled feathers. We had a few interns helping us out backstage and one of them got into a dispute with the young stalwart running the lights. It seems that the lighting kid had a pretty full plate up in the booth and had asked the intern to help him out and sweep the stage. The intern, not too diplomatically, had

answered the request with “I’m not here to be a friggin’ janitor.” Things had escalated and gotten out of hand with the two young bucks squaring off and in the end the intern had stalked off. The Actors Studio tends to be somewhat on the egalitarian side, so if anyone had been just pulling rank, that would have been given short shrift, but it was not hard to see that there was a lot to be done up in the booth. Moreover, as it happened, the lighting booth techie had been somewhat generous in his praise about what I was managing to pull off in the play and, since it’s true that generosity is not especially abundant in the theater, he was in a position to see every night’s efforts and his comments were especially valued. But more than the flattery, I really appreciated the warmth of spirit he brought to the production. He was one of those buoyant personalities that can bring some levity to an otherwise grim moment. To further complicate things, it turns out I had also developed an acquaintance with the intern and, prideful though he might be, he was a good sort in the end. And since there are never enough volunteers for a show, even at the Actors Studio, I thought it would be worthwhile to approach him and said so to Norman. “Lemme talk to him, I think I can get him back.” Norman answered “No. We don’t want him if he’s not interested.” I persisted. “Look, we had a small crew before, now we have almost no one backstage. I’m telling you. I know him a little. I think I can bring him back.” Norman repeated himself even more sharply the second time. “It’s only good if he’s interested.”

Well, his drift was clear. He wasn’t about to beg anyone for help and no cajoling would be acceptable. If a person didn’t have his own inner drive and desire to participate in something, than in Norman’s opinion it was better not having them around. For no particular reason, that dictum branded itself on my brain. I guess I liked its brass. *Only if he’s interested* became one of those mantras that surfaced in my mind whenever similar situations cropped up later in my life. A little addendum: The intern did walk, and I didn’t say much to him about his decision, even though I thought it was a foolish one. Although most of the time I can see no rhyme or reason why one person gets a career and another does not, years later I bumped into the intern in L.A. He was trying to pull down commercials and exercising his comedic talents as a driver for the Star-Graveyard Tours. It might also be noted that up in the booth had been the young Ben Stiller.

If *Strawhead* is beginning to sound like the story of Marilyn and Rod, I have misrepresented it. Since most of my experience of the play was through

my character, it may only be natural that my point of view is rather one-sided, and that may be one of the shortcomings of an actor writing about a production he is in. In fact, a major portion of the play focused on her relationship with Milton Greene the photographer, and his wife, and the haven they created for her. For a brief spate, Rip Torn, one of the brighter, if wilder lights of the American Stage stepped in to play him. I must admit that as a young actor I felt some awe at playing in the same production with this legend of the theater who was trailed by a long line of apocrypha about his work, inspired as it was, perhaps to the point of craziness. He carried a mantle of reputation for doing anything to be real. *Being* the character was brought to new heights. Brawls with actors in the middle of a performance on stage if he thought they were inauthentic. Brawls with directors off stage right after. Even he and Norman had a famous story between them, when at the end of *Maidstone*, the experimental film Norman had made, things got carried away, or did they?

That was the point, what was real and what was manufactured? You could never be sure and that was the preferred state. So in the last scene, perhaps out of a frustration that had been building between the two erstwhile friends, or out of some truth of the moment, Rip had whacked Norman with a hammer and Norman, in turn, had bitten him on the ear. All this by way of introduction to describing an amazing scene I had the uneasy privilege of witnessing that occurred between them one day in rehearsal. I had arrived early and was watching the end of a scene that Rip had been working in. He was wandering around far upstage in a dark corner, doing what you would have to call private work, in the sense that he was mostly repeating the lines to himself and occasionally including the other actor in his investigations. Well, it was clear that he wasn't obligating himself to the text and was free of it, presumably until he was ready and understood it in a felt way. It's a way of working—what the hell. It is certainly true that because you had no idea what he might do at any given moment, he drew your eye to his haunted being, like a magnet. How this served the playwright might not be altogether clear and, since the session had been going on for some time, there might have been a worm of tension beginning to turn between the two old chums, actor and writer. When the end of the scene was finally reached, Rip ended up about fifteen feet upstage facing Norman, who was standing by the first row of seats. Rip asked, "Can I split for the next half hour? I want to get some lunch." Legit enough, nobody is served by a hungry actor. I'm sure that if

Norman had heard him he would have agreed. Unfortunately, all he did hear was, “Do you need me?” Proud man that we know he is, he answered gruffly, “Need you? No, I don’t need you.” And what Rip heard was “No,” which *he* couldn’t figure and lightning-quick also got huffy. “Well, I need some food. I’m leaving,” he flipped over his shoulder and, adding from the doorway, that he’d be back in thirty minutes. Norman missed that last bit altogether. I need to reveal something here: Norman had a cauliflower ear on his right side (maybe from his boxing efforts) that was permanently useless. And Rip’s right ear also happened to be bad, and the way they were facing each other, on a rough diagonal, both malfunctioning organs were the ones doing the receiving or lack thereof. I actually saw this—the two of them mis-hearing half and inventing what was left, until they ended up with completely opposite versions of the same conversation. The hilarity of it must have cowed me, because I wasn’t able to reach out and stop it from happening. Frozen, like in a dream, I could only watch it unravel in front of me. And in this dream two brontosauri were engaging in a rather intimate family squabble and were farting at each other. That’s how surreal it was. Anyway, Rip stormed out wondering what stick Norman had been impaled on and Norman, in some shock, turned to a cohort and said, “That son of a bitch. I’ve known him thirty years and he walked out on me.” Rip never came back.

So we had our comic moments and sometimes they were actually part of the play. After all, Norman had nothing if not an incisive sense of irony and the humor that sprang from that. There was a memory scene when I came on as Joe DiMaggio swinging an imaginary bat. Marilyn was going through a phase of “joy through embracing nature” and said something like “I want to run through the flowers, feel the wind on my face, and be free.” To which I replied in Joe’s inimitable Bronx Bomber fashion: “Fine. We got a backyard. Invite some friends over. We’ll have a barbecue.”

Strawhead, though rumored to be headed for full production, Off Broadway, never made it, and faded into that large black hole of oblivion that so much Off Off Broadway sadly descends into. About a year later, out of the blue, I got a call from Judith, Norman’s journeyman assistant, asking me to hold while he came on the line. “I’m directing the film of my book *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*.” I congratulated him. He continued, “There’s the thinnest crack of a possibility” (another one of those lines that would never leave me) “that one of the roles is available. A star we had may be dropping out. Do you have time to come in and audition?” I heard myself say in my best

British, “Not bloody likely—unless I fail to win the lottery, thereupon which I probably will have some time.” Thank God it got a chuckle. Who knows where my impulse to amuse came from, unless it was from my desire to rebel against the obvious. Fact was, it was a plum of a project and every actor in New York had heard about it and was campaigning to get a berth on board. When I mentioned this to one of my more arrogant friends he thought “he should just give you the goddam role if you’re right for it.” Hadn’t the two incarnations of his play run, all together, over a period of several months and, if he didn’t know my work by then, when would he? But nobody gives an Olympic medal away and to an unknown theater actor and this was just that. So I had to work hard at it.

The third and final audition was to be an improvised, videotaped session, opposite another actor who was probably competing for the same role, though we were never absolutely sure of this. Up to now things had been going pretty well for me in the two meetings we had had and, as they say, it was so close I could taste it. In any case, that last day had a few surprises that I could have done without. The appointment was late in the afternoon, and I had to plan everything very carefully: I would get out of the survival job I had recently latched onto early enough to saunter across midtown and get my head together and end up at the Actors Studio, where, lo and behold, the audition was to be held. The character I would be playing was not too distant from the one in *Strawhead*, except this time a line had been crossed—murder was involved. I had packed my version of leathers to change into. I felt cool, tough, and scary—ready for anything. That’s when things flipped. My buddy, George Tsaganis, who ran the coffee shop next door to the topless bar where I had the afternoon shift, got held up. Every morning at 10 a.m. when I got there, George cheerfully greeted me with some filthy Greek about my night before with the unfortunate wench he was sure I had misused, and handed me a generously buttered roll and two coffees. Anyway, they had taken him into the back of the store and made him lie on his stomach, face down. Not an envious position. But *zoi*’ (the Greek for ‘life’) was with him. There was no blood, just some very large pistols and a lot of trauma for George. So I sat with him while he wept into my shoulder and shook and when he had calmed down and cleaned himself and his pants up a little bit, I was about fifteen minutes into my appointment. I would had to have been a cold fish, indeed, to have left him earlier. But by then no bus, train, even cab, would get me

through midtown early rush hour traffic, quick enough to salvage my audition.

My Brazilian barback assistant came through with a solution: his bicycle. Off I roared, literally, at anything in my way. There is nothing like a good dose of street rage to create the sociopathic state of mind. The entire universe despises you, is conspiring against you. For no discernible reason. And so retaliation is called for. Growling, spitting, yelling like a demon bike-messenger while sporting black, greasy motorcycle leathers, slicing through traffic of trucks, blessed jay-walking office workers, and obviously satanic pushcart-workers. By the time I slammed through the sacred portals of the Actors Studio, I was spitting nails. I was ready to do anything, criminal or otherwise and with great exuberance. I didn't know it, but this was a prescient moment for my future association with Lawrence Tierney, toughest of the tough guys. We would meet, through this very film, and I would understand him and the rage he held toward the world, at war with it as he was. No problem. As I plowed through the final scene, the events of the day had caused me to settle into myself and drop down a couple of notches, into a state of, say, grim determination.

Apparently I was convincing, because I got the job. After the formal session had ended, Norman and I stood around and swapped corpse stories. I had gone up into Cambodia from Bangkok, as part of a two year global pilgrimage I made after school, and had come across some grisly stuff during one of Pol Pot's offensives—dead people stacked like cordwood. Norman matched me. During WWII he had seen a Filipino man carrying three Japanese heads on a pole, like they were lanterns, who was trying to sell them to the G.I.s as souvenirs. *Look what I brought you, ma*. Later, it turned out that Stoodie, the character I was to play, had some truck with decapitated bodies, so it wasn't just idle chatter. So far as the other actor I had been up against in the "improv," I was like a buzz saw—he was his own lackadaisical self. In Actors Studio parlance, he was not forcing anything that wasn't there—he was just *existing* on stage. But apparently what Norman wanted was something a little more heightened. There was nothing ordinary about the denizens that peopled Norman's world. They were hot and ready to pop.

On the film shoot you were pretty much on your own. None of the ensemble feeling I was used to in the Off Off Broadway arena where most people were driven by a passion for the material. The first night I arrived in Provincetown I was brought to a dinner where an actress that I had known

in New York, and who had also been hired for the film, actually said “Welcome aboard,” as if I had just gained membership to an exclusive club. A celebration was going on as if the project had just ended and everybody was euphoric with the contribution they had made. Except that this was the first night. What was understood was that this was a step on the ladder to a large career, thus a cause for celebration. So be it. This was the big leagues, maverick production or not. A bridge had been crossed and Art was on one side of it and careerism was on the other. As my cohort in the film added at dinner, “Well, at least we’ll all work for the rest of our lives.” That was the thing. So much for art when lucre was dangled in front of someone. That it didn’t quite work out that way in the end was something everyone who worked on that film would have been surprised by. But more of that later.

There is a moment that has its own niche in the pantheon of rich moments that I hold from that time. It happened over a scene, that on the face of it was an unexceptional scene of exposition. Ryan O’Neal corners me and demands to know if I had put a tattoo on his arm the night before. It’s all a black void to him. I answered by imitating Ryan in his shitfaced state, crying that he wanted to put “Madeleine,” his wife’s name on his arm. As I did this I got an impulse to point to my cheek, instead of my arm. Plausible enough, he was that drunk and confused. Norman stopped me and said “That’s good. Wait a minute.” He looked down at his feet, pondering. Then. “But do this. Point to your forehead and say ‘Madeleine. I wronged you. I’m gonna put your name on my forehead.’ I could have fucked you good. I put it on your arm.” Think of it. A tattoo emblazoned forever across the forehead. Incredible. Norman was nothing if not good on his feet. And it happened not seconds before we were supposed to shoot it. And the script girl was madly scribbling this new dialogue down, so that I would have to not only instantly make it my own, but do it verbatim. Let it be said that there is tremendous pressure on the actor on a film set to not blow his lines. No matter that they were just handed to him, golden though they may be. No. That was the actor’s burden. Moreover, those of us who were not celebrities had been touted as *real* New York actors, as opposed to those West Coast denizens who were more cosmetically inclined and traded on the impact of their appearance. Norman’s conceit in the casting process was to use stage-trained actors who would presumably breathe a vital force into his lines and create the full, rich, offbeat characters his material demanded. So I suddenly found myself in the middle of a pressure-cooker of a moment. Fifteen people

stuffed into every nook and cranny of a room the size of a large bathroom, electric cables running over my feet, microphones inching up my thighs, reflectors bouncing galaxies of light, and all of this hanging on the words that would tumble from my lips, hopefully with some stuff. The Provincetown witches cracked a wicked grin and then let everything spill out smoothly. It's a honey of a scene. And I suppose the greatest flattery is that Norman's young son, John Buffalo, was apparently so buzzed by that scene that he would do an impression of Stoodie saying those lines at the drop of a hat.

Maybe it was the witches' blessing that did it, but I shouldn't have been surprised when *Tough Guys Don't Dance* became a cult favorite rather than a mainstream hit. I couldn't have agreed more. For those hardy souls who could handle its blood-darkness, Norman had written some of the best drug-rap, gutter-lingo dialogue, and created a fabric of delirious white-trash, Bohemian, Provincetown culture of supreme richness and exuberance. The axe I have to grind I hold up high, dripping with praise for his work and with no embarrassment.

At the premiere Norman stood up in front of the movie house and held a long sheet in front of him. It had the positive reviews on one side and the negative ones on the other. They had been divvied up like a balance sheet and he read them off that way. For every euphoric statement of wild praise there was its blood sister shrieking the most excoriating venom and scorn one could imagine. This is no exaggeration. It seemed like something in Norman's makeup, by that time in history at any rate, really provoked adoration and loathing in equal parts. It was almost like the mad preacher Robert Mitchum played in *The Night of the Hunter*, with tattooed hands of love and hate. Each time Norman held up one hand in victory, the other was ready to counter it with defeat. But I will say this much: Recently at a twenty year reunion of the cast and crew of the film, one of the production people said something that really stuck out in my mind: "It's been a long time since we did this film, and in that time I've worked on a lot of productions, but for none of them would it have ever even *occurred* to anyone to have a reunion." So I keep thinking about why it seemed like such a historic mission that we were participating in, that this particular project had some special kind of significance. It didn't try to answer all the questions in the universe. No, it was a genre film after all—although one where all the big issues were always lurking around the edges: mortality; murder and mayhem and retribution

for it; greed; obsessive love; the corruption of social climbing; even demon spirits. So why does it haunt me and other kindred spirits, in spite of its flaws? I can only think that part of it is if you knew Norman's writing on the page and the power he has, it would have been as if Abe Lincoln had asked you to aid him on The Gettysburg Address. That may be a little far flung, but the fact is that there are very few writers walking the earth who have the power he has on the page and who take on the issues that he does. And I've noticed that all too often many of his detractors eventually admit that they have never actually *read* much of his writing. Well, I *had* read a few of his books, certainly *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Barbary Shore*, *Prisoner of Sex*. Even, oddly enough, *Of a Fire on the Moon*—when it surfaced on a beach in a fishing village in Malaysia where I was recovering from a near fatal bout of the Hong Kong flu. (I can even remember being propagandized enough in my socialist-inspired youth to reject the moon endeavor as taking away funds from poverty programs—until I read his thoughts on the subject and changed my mind about the whole thing, mostly because the writing was so gorgeous.) And so knowing what his writing was like, I have to ask myself: would I have felt the same, for example, if Philip Roth, or Joseph Heller, or even William Styron, would have invited me to work with one of them on something? Probably not. No, *emphatically*, not. Terrific writers though they are, I don't think so, not on the level of anticipation and excitement that I and the others experienced working on Norman's project.

The question that begs to be asked then is why was half of the list of reviews he held up so excoriating? Why the absolute scorn from some quarters? Norman has said that political correctness is akin to telling people how to think and, whether it's in the guise of progressive politics or not, it's the great enemy. All we can do is persuade. Anything more is ushering in the dictates of the Thought Police. He is someone who has always clearly been on the side of those who plumb the depths for the truth—wherever it may lie. Apparently he's paid the price—and what a cruel irony. To me he is like those heroic figures who are embraced during the revolution but, once the revolution is won, are eliminated as liabilities to the new regime. Certainly in the role of Media Gadfly that he has always embraced, he fits the bill perfectly to draw heat. But I think that Norman as a *writer* must be given his just due as having hit the nail on the head, inside the head, and around every angle of the head on all the large issues more than any writer alive. If

there was a fire on the moon, he's got fire on the page and attention must be paid.

Again, it's not that *Tough Guys* isn't flawed. For one thing, I've seen it recently three times at the retrospective of his film work and keep discovering more parts of the puzzle that fit together each time. But there's a famous story about Harry Cohn, head of Columbia, screening Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* and, turning to the room when it was over, laid a thousand dollars on the barrel to anyone who could explain the film to him. No one took him up on the bet. So, if *Tough Guys* is dense, Norman's in good company. And Welles didn't have the dialogue that Norman could pump out. That's where I think its strength lies and upon which its longevity will depend. Norman has created the kind of artifact that lasts for two hundred years and glows (darkly) with a vitality that lasts forever. And to even *try* to do that in these days of car crashes and slasherfests is why we felt so privileged to participate in it.

I'm also often amazed at how much of the wit of *Tough Guys* is missed. It may give new meaning to gallows humor, but it's there nevertheless in spades. The audiences I recently saw it with were overwhelmingly attentive but definitely somber. I tended to cackle constantly at the humor of irony that's constantly pumping through it. Sometimes I was even joined by some of the hardier souls in the house. But that didn't happen too often and I think that's because there are no easy laugh lines or cues and it takes a certain bravery to let go and laugh at the absurdity of something—they're not quite sure about it as if a guffaw at an irony might take something away from its truth. It challenges the baseline of your perceptions of things—your heft of what's true in life and what's not. Are you an a-hole or do you really know what's what? But there are some hysterically funny lines in it. And more than the one that states that you should never call an Italian small potatoes—it could be bad for your health. That's just the best one, the capper. But there are many, even in the middle of the horror. Another gem that I can't quote exactly but whose gist goes something like this: The police chief, Regency, has appropriated (stolen) two million dollars and in jubilation says, "If someone gives you one potato—you eat, one hundred you can sell, but ten million you can run a country ... I think I'll run for president." Now since it's a known fact that Joseph Kennedy, father of JFK, was a well-known bootlegger and this line is as profoundly truthful as it is cynical and finally funny. A deranged police chief/narcotics dealer in the White House. Could be pro-

phetic who knows? You might also add, for example, the one about getting your girl's name tattooed on your forehead. And on and on. Who's writing things pound for pound, that good? Not too many, folks.

Having said that, I had been living in L.A. for a couple of months thinking that I would ply my trade there, perhaps snare some lucre, and then hightail it to Japan. This was my secret ambition. I had seen some Kabuki theater in my travels and had an interest in learning more about its history and tradition. One day I received a letter in the mail from Norman, who knew of my move, but I hadn't been in touch with him for a while. It was the most extraordinary document:

To whom it may concern:

This recommendation for Stephan Morrow's work is unsolicited by him. I have worked with Stephan as his director on two projects: "Strawhead" which we performed at Actors Studio in workshop for eleven performances, where he played the parts of Joe DiMaggio and a biker; and again in my movie *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, where he did a superlative job in the role of Stoodie. In both projects he did an exceptionally fine job. He's not only a strong actor with fine talents, but he's stand-up and always gives 100% of himself to the project and the people he works with. He's responsive and active in relation to a director, and I intend to use Stephan Morrow whenever I see a role for him in anything I'm directing in the future.

Sincerely,
Norman Mailer

To say that I was impressed by his thoughtfulness is insufficient for a gesture of such generosity, not to mention the mood of hope it put me in. Not every actor can brandish a letter of recommendation from perhaps our greatest living writer. Witness the following scene: I'm in a meeting with a casting person for some project or other, or maybe it was a super-agent, my memory fades. Upon reading the letter, this young woman whose instinct makes her eager to please, says something like: "Oh, Ryan O'Neal—I love him ... " (Pause. Noncommittal. It was not a blockbuster.) "I heard about that

show,” she continued. “And Norman *Mailer*. Oh yeah, we read him in high school.” (Her inflection might describe the oldest pair of shoes in her closet.) Then, with much enthusiasm. “I loved that famous play of his: *Death of a Streetcar*. It made me cry.” Me too. So much for letters of recommendation from literary giants in the film capital.

One other point that is salient, and one that I learned the hard way, is the sheer number of hurdles that have to be cleared for an actor to make an impact in a film. And how this is different from theater. The first hurdle that I’ve gone into is, of course, pulling down the gig. And it’s a lot more than just walking through the front door and “being the character.” At the time, and I’ve not much reason to think that it’s much different today, there was such a dearth of good roles in film for an unknown actor in New York that you’d have better odds betting on a Tibetan monk winning the Olympic pole vault championship on his first try than pulling down a choice role in a movie project. And that’s pretty much what it felt like for the first week, walking around about a foot off the ground in my best lama style. But this is only the first hurdle. Once getting the job is over the next is doing it as well as you can, without getting fired in the pursuit of that excellence. To wit: In Provincetown, one early evening after the day’s shooting was over, I’m telephoned by an assistant director. Norman would like to chat with me later that evening about 11 p.m. Nothing unusual in that and I’m not too nervous waiting around in my oak-paneled Cape Cod bungalow residence. First thing Norman says that night is, “I think I fixed it all. I don’t want you to worry. You won’t be fired.” To say that I was stunned is not enough. I saw stars without being slugged. My solar system was collapsing, simple as that. And then the rattlesnakes of my paranoia struck. Jeez, could I have done that badly that I was on such thin ice? Maybe I did blow that scene about the tattoo on Ryan O’Neal’s forehead. Norman continues: “I explained that in the theater everyone does everything from acting to costuming to set design. So that you’re used to having input into things like Stoodie’s shack.” The sickening feeling that comes from a dread truth slowly rising like a Nazi periscope in British shipping lanes rises in me. I had met someone outfitting the shack where my character, Stoodie, lived. Indeed, as I was brandishing my knowledge of the insides of my character I had reeled off the groups whose music he relished. Classic rock mostly, and this carpenter (I imagined) and I traded licks as it were, from the classic rock Stoodie listened to and the posters he would put up on the walls of his shack. As far as I can recall, that was it. Harmless

enough. An artist's opinion about an element of his work. Well, apparently it traveled up the pipeline and, little did I know, I was stepping on a designer's substance-altered toes. Because the posters that he, in his omniscience, had chosen were pretty different. The Partridge Family—yes, that lame—not the Led Zep or Sticky Fingers, Stones, or Janis I had yodeled about and with which he had jocularly agreed. He had allowed how he was himself an old-time rock and roller and knew where I was coming from. Ho Ho. Jokes on me. Anyway, Norman finished the conversation by asking me to pledge not to make any more comments about, or any more requests for, changes in my character's abode. Well, I certainly agreed. What the hell else could I do? Partridge Family be damned—I would have accepted Lawrence Welk as my spiritual guide by that time. But I did wonder, "Jeez, who *was* the General here?" That was my first step into the minefield without a map that is the film world and how I learned that in that world there was a social ladder in which the actor was at the bottom rung—unless he was the star—and that just meant that he got his own Winnebago (trailer). Even though I had been handpicked by Norman himself, I was very expendable. This is not to mention the fact that probably what saved me from being shitcanned was that Norman was both writer and director. As the saying goes in the film capital, only the Polish actress slept with the writer to get a job in a movie. Luckily, as it turned out, Norman liked what I did well enough so that all the scenes I was in stayed in the final cut. Truncated to be sure—and he apologized for that—but nevertheless up there on the screen and not on the cutting room floor. Another hurdle cleared, though many actors will tell you how often that is not the case. The supporting characters are the first to go and the rough cut was over three hours long, so no doubt about it: I was lucky.

The final hurdle of course, involves the fate of the film itself. If it generates revenue you're golden and doors open. If not, it's a novelty piece by a controversial and provocative author, or one notch higher—a cult film that has a hard core of devoted fans. Every now and then I encounter someone who indeed is passionately euphoric about Norman's film.

For the actors, it hardly gives you another chip to bring to the table for a play at a career. Far from "working for the rest of our lives," as my cohort in crime had prophesied up in Provincetown, the actors drifted their separate ways pretty much into oblivion. It didn't destroy anybody, it just didn't help. At all. Again, it's all guilt by association, so if you say two lines in a film that's a hit, you're in. If not, fuggedabouddit. No buzz.

This brings me back to distinguishing between acting in front of a camera and on stage. For a performer, when the play begins, everything is in his hands and the theater gods. There's no medium between him and the audience, just a raw experience where people are either moved or they're not. An entirely different trip from what happens on a film set. That's why I call what goes on in front of a camera re-enacting, rather than acting. It takes a certain number of psychological skills to get primed, that's for sure: there's no audience, if that's your fuel, and that's a magic that's not particularly easy to find. But sometimes I liken it to a vast costume pageant where people parade around and go through the motions of the civilization they're representing. Put a rifle in your hand, a soldier's uniform on you, tell you where to charge and you're on. "Yes sir, we'll get it." Cut. A costume pageant. It is different on stage where the actor has developed a character by making a myriad of choices on his own, let it mulch around in the hopper, and then let fly with no safety net under the frisson of the performance. There's no second take. Either you channel something extraordinary or you don't—so either the energy that flows back and forth between audience and actor launches the entire congregation—with its roots in religion, I can call it that—into experiencing the mysteries of the cosmos in a visceral way—or it doesn't. In any case, it's either a sublime experience or as deadly as watching paint dry. (There's nothing worse than a play where nothing is really snap, crackling, and popping on stage. And nothing better when there is.) Norman has a different take on theater versus film, though, from the point of view of the audience. It's stuck in my mind and goes something like this: "You might find yourself going to a play with a couple of martinis under your belt, but you wouldn't do that at a film. A couple of joints maybe. That's because film is closer to dreams and death—and theater is closer to a feast and a fuck."

A group of us are sitting having dinner after his talk in L.A. and out of curiosity I had asked if he had ever met Hemingway, so Norman is telling of the time he was set up to meet him. Shortly after *The Naked and the Dead* came out, he had written something rather harsh about Hemingway. George Plimpton, who was editing the *Paris Review* at the time, had mentioned it to Hem and he had dragged Plimpton to a bookstore where he stood there devouring what Norman had written. When he finished, he looked up and said "I want to meet him." Next morning Norman got the call. The old man had read the piece and wanted to "meet."

Plimpton said, “Stay by the phone. I’ll call you back when I find out where.” As the hours piled up, Norman started worrying. What if he wanted not so much to meet him as beat him, in retribution? Plimpton called back a little later, “I’ll know where it’s going to be, pretty soon. Don’t leave the phone.” This was sounding less like literary fellowship and more like a showdown with every call. He started to sweat now. In desperation, he called up his buddy Mickey Knox, who could handle himself, and back him up if things got rough. (Mickey was sitting at the table at Norman’s right.) They had a drink to calm down. And waited on into the afternoon. Had a few drinks more. Sunset came and went. They were doing some serious drinking now. Just around the time they were really getting into their cups, they stopped worrying—what the hell. With their high-octane courage, they were absolutely ready to take on Rocky Marciano if it came to that. Maybe they were even hoping. Well, Hemingway never gave them the chance. He stood them up. He never called and Norman never heard from him again.

As I sat there taking this all in, I thought: Christ, this is even better than the Roundtable at the Algonquin. And not just pretentious litterateurs. In addition to Mickey, there was Ronnie, a black raconteur, who regaled us with a story about hustling in an airport to get out of Rome, and from there it led to the high point of the evening. All in all, it was a great night. I felt as if I had been to the Garden on a night Ali was fighting.

Norman had described himself as feeling like a member of “The Ancient Regime,” meaning that he was once in the vanguard of the intellectual shock troops of the age that would change the world for the better, and later he found himself out of touch, dated, and defending the old guard, most particularly for its stance on feminism. There was a scene that took place early on in the process of developing *Strawhead* that has never left me. Shelley Winters’s complaints about his depiction of Marilyn have already been quoted, but at this session it was Ellen Burstyn, who at that time was Acting Artistic Director of the Actors Studio, who led the attack. I remember her as being very subdued in her tone, but her remarks carried the weight of a velvet sledgehammer. “[N]othing new is revealed here ... why write a play if you have nothing new to say about her...? We’ve seen so much of this before ... the writing is good but it’s so chauvinistic.” Well, Norman who was usually pretty cool during these discussions, got fierce—his silver hair seemed to have an electric current running around it as he bristled. He

slowly stood up, collected himself, and with great poise, said: “If you think that *this* is chauvinistic, my God, then this place [the Actors Studio] is going to end up being run by a bunch of Stalinoid dykes.” There was a long, thoughtful, perhaps uneasy pause, as some, if not all of us, were launched into a reverie of what brave new world we might be approaching. Then, incredibly, Shelley Winters again. With a deadpan delivery, she asked: “Norman, what’s the difference between Stalinist and Stalinoid?” It brought the house down. And Norman, with no condescension, answered her almost humbly: “Well, one is of style, and the other is of a period.” The studio audience roared again. End of discussion. Maybe it was the simplicity and honesty of the exchange, I don’t know for sure, but I had always heard about something called a *perfect moment*—when things fell effortlessly and perfectly into place. For me, that was one of them.

So finally, if Norman is a dinosaur, then I for one can only hope that as the wheel of life turns, their age may come around again soon. Spirits of such enormity are rare as diamonds.

If I describe Norman as a brontosaurus, there was another dinosaur that I would come to know who could only be described as the toughest of the tough guys, and who must have had tyrannosaurus in his genes—the legendary Lawrence Tierney. I can’t recall exactly how we hooked up in L.A. a couple of years after the film, but we became, dare I say, best friends for a while, if such a term could be applied to Larry—at war with the world as he was, even at eighty-three. But I was always flattered that he sanctioned what I did in *Tough Guys* and so never felt the whip of contempt with which he could so easily lash out at someone. That would include even someone who had given him a chance to act: like against the young Quentin Tarantino, who had just made *Reservoir Dogs* with him. It made sense really. Larry had rubbed shoulders with the criminal element like it was breathing. A self-described video geek, as clever as he might be, wouldn’t hold much water with the original Dillinger. Norman, I might add, he thought OK—and that was saying a lot in his book. So there I was, meeting Larry’s fellow denizens in the middle of the kind of brouhaha you would expect from ex-addicts and parolees in a halfway house, which was where he was residing when I first knew him out there. As near as I could get from him, the story went like this: when he was filming *Reservoir Dogs*, and playing the godfather of a crew of professional bank robbers, somehow a real gun had ended up in his room and it had gone off with the round going through the wall and almost decap-

itating someone sitting in the next room—it just missed. Did I mention that the gun was in Larry’s hand? So he ended up in the valley in a group house. The occasion for my being there was that I was taking him out to a gathering of some fellow actors at the famous Jerry’s Deli on Ventura Boulevard. When we arrived, one of the bunch who fancied himself a cut above the rest because he was an aficionado of old films was struck dumb when I introduced Larry. “You mean, *the* Lawrence Tierney,” as if he’d seen someone from the dead. And God knows he could’ve been back from Hades, because as Larry once put it, “Ahh. I lost five careers to the bottle.” And meant it. But I confirmed the young actor’s suspicion. Yes, no impostor, this was the man himself. So for a few minutes Larry basked in the adulation that an icon is given recognition in the film capital. Then the conversation went on to other things, as is the wont among young folks in Hollywood, to mostly career considerations. So Larry faded off, flirting with a young redheaded actress. Suddenly, someone was tugging at my sleeve. She had returned and was very nervous, whispering that I might want to check on my ward—I don’t know if that’s how she put it or I did, but that’s certainly what it felt like shepherding Larry around. So I went into an adjoining banquet room that was empty and there he was: stuffing mustards from the tables into the large pockets of his garment of choice—a dark raincoat. I got us out of there ASAP. There are more memories of Larry I have and not all of them quite so pungent, but which would occasion a longer piece on him alone. Some people break ground by writing, others just break the ground. Let’s just say, it was one of God’s little jokes that he would pass peacefully from this plane in his sleep.

I mentioned that I was superstitious. Well, that night at the Writers Guild Norman actually ended his talk by reading a passage from none other than *Ancient Evenings*. So a fitting finale for this piece might be a quote from the section he read from:

I had dreams of cities drifting down the Nile like floating islands. Yet when the work was done, I felt larger, as if my senses now lived in a larger space. Was it that my heart and lungs had been placed in one jar, and my stomach and small intestines in another? Leave it that my organs were spread out in different places, floating in different fluids and spices, yet still existing about me, a village. Eventually, their allegiance would be lost.

Wrapped and placed in the Canopic jars, what they knew of my
life would then be offered to their own God. (25–26)

FINIS

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