

NORMAN MAILER: A REQUIEM

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I HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE TO WORK WITH NORMAN on his play *Strawhead* (*Marilyn, A Memory Play*) at The Actors Studio in New York, his film *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, and recently a staged reading of his play *The Deer Park*, which I directed and performed in. In addition to all that's been written about him with his recent sad passing, I would like to add a personal note about the kind of character he had.

When I visited him on October 26, 2007, at Mount Sinai it was pretty grim, but I was still hoping for a miracle. He couldn't speak because of the tubes but gestured for me to return when he got a little better. So I kept my hopes up. He had sounded so strong on the phone just a month before. Alas, sometimes old soldiers just fade away.

But I want to shout this from the rooftops: For me, Norman was living proof that there is some justice in the world—and I mean in the arts. Last June he called me to ask if I would help him direct the film of *The Deer Park* and do one of the leading characters as well. I was, of course, moved and thanked him. I can only describe that honor as the closest I would ever get to being invited into those hallowed halls of Cooperstown.

It had been a lot to take on, acting and directing at the same time, but Norman seemed pleased during the discussion afterward and it seemed as if everything had turned out well. Even though we had had a bit of a rocky start—the actor who had the opening line had disappeared for some mysterious reason. I had planned a sax solo to be played as an introduction and set a tone for the play. So I gestured for the musician to continue to play while we tracked the actor down. As I leapt from the stage and flew down the aisle, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of Norman. He was watching me with what I would have to describe as careful consideration and it occurred to me that he might be wondering if I were fleeing the theater and taking to

the hills. His eyes were lit up to a brighter blue than normal. After all, here was Stoodie (the “bad news bear” I had played for him in *Tough Guys*) and Rod (stuntman extraordinaire in *Strawhead*)—not exactly fellows whom you would describe as leadership material—directing this project.

I finally tracked down the actor (he was under the impression the play was scheduled to begin an hour later; luckily, he was only two blocks away). When I announced that to the audience, I again caught Norman’s look out of the corner of my eye: It was a combination of relief and triumph. I had hit one home on a full count and it was understood that these things happen in live theater. Did I mention that the house was filled to the rafters and a large contingent of his family was with him? Anyway, the performance then continued without a hitch, and maybe even had a little more zing because of the near disaster we had skirted.

So I was especially thrilled by the phone call from Norman. When I thanked him for his kind words, he quickly countered with, “I don’t want you to confuse this with kindness. I’m not being kind here. I just liked what you did with my play. I’ve seen it done badly too many times.” It should be pointed out here that in the Byzantine channels of producing or casting, that kind of thing is rare in the arts: choosing to work with someone just based on the merits of their work—and that is why Norman has always inspired me. And, finally, why I’ll miss him so much. His greatness as a writer goes without saying, but to copy a phrase I’ve heard him use, “he was a stand-up guy.”

That’s why when one of my colleagues over the years would mention something about “your friend Norman,” my hackles went up. He was not my friend. We were not barroom buddies. He was of another generation and his stature as an artist doesn’t need extolling by me. But, in fact, what he was was more important than that: He was an inspiration, a muse. A *fair man*. That was how I experienced him from the first day we met. The following is an excerpt from a book I am writing on my experiences working with Norman:

We met after a performance in an empty factory building. No kidding. The Actors Studio was being painted so we had been delegated to performing on the floors of a dusty industrial space somewhere else in Hell’s Kitchen. The whole experience had the surreal quality of a Fellini movie.

The performance had gone well. I was playing a Scottish gang leader trying to go straight and in some mysterious way, a Scottish accent was terrifically liberating. Maybe it was the distance it created from my own personal

reality and that gave me a mask behind which I could leave my particular self behind and be free—unless it was the terror I felt in front of such an audience of heavyweights—that put an extra zing into my performance but, suffice it to say, if there *had* been any scenery to chew I would have had a feast. And when it was over, with people milling around the way they do after a main-event bout at the Garden, 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. 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. Sure enough he turned and, as if it were 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." As we worked together on the role, the stuntman was, frankly bestial, but one which I was able to throw myself into because the writing was so good. His daughter played Marilyn and the production was slated for an Off Broadway production. At the time, the production drew a lot of attention and controversy.

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 channels of casting in theater and film. To give a young actor a break, without asking for credentials, or whom he knew, or was connected to, with the only consideration being the *work itself*, seems as if 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.

That doesn't discount the fact that I did feel a certain psychic tendril that was plugged into the work of Norman Mailer. And it was that connection that led me to his play *The Deer Park*. Years later when I was out in California and far from being the button on fortune's cap—I often felt as if I was living on the shards of civilization or at least at the very edge of its continent with no place further to go—I would get some solace by perusing the stacks at a comfortable, used-book store/café out at Venice Beach. And it was on one of these sojourns that I reached for a book and another one fell and either hit me on the head or dropped onto my foot, I can't remember exactly which. But when I bent down to pick it up, it was a volume written by Norman Mailer. Not in itself an extraordinary event; he had written many books.

But when I looked more closely, I noticed it was of all things, a play. And one that I had never heard of. Not in all the time we had worked on *Strawhead* at the Studio—a project that went on for six months—or during the film shoot up in Provincetown of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Never came up in conversation with Norman or anyone else. It was as if it had been forgotten or denied as a memory too painful to bear. And as I thumbed through it, I saw that it was about a director, and that he had suffered from an obsessional love with a Carmen-like *femme fatale*—something I had been all too familiar with in my own pathetic and wretched love life. Let me be blunt: there's nothing so painful for a man to be left by a woman for someone who has more status, money, and fame: A celebrity. So by the end of the night I had decided I would indulge my weakness for buying books, preferably old and forgotten ones, and spend the shekels to own it. By the next week, after flying through the entire text like a madman on wings, I had decided I had to do it and include it in The Great American Play Series, which I had founded (a series of “performances on book” of neglected American classics, performed by seasoned professionals). Not only did the play feel as important as any classic in the power of its writing, it was also as if I had discovered a play which was my own biography. And it deals with all the big issues: mortality, ambition, love, sex, wealth, power, and on and on. Norman must have been shocked when I called him and brought the subject of *The Deer Park* up, but when I told him I thought I couldn't believe no one wanted to do it, he said:

“Well, yeah, I think it's pretty good too.”

“But why doesn't anyone know about it? Or put it up?”

“Well, there was a production of it in the eighties. But I didn't like it.”

“Why?”

“Because it was put on by an all female cast who did it in drag.”

There was a long pause before I continued.

“But I can't believe no one sees its power and isn't begging to do it.”

“I don't know either. I put a lot of effort into that play.

“I'm trying to get it up out here but I haven't found any takers yet. I can't believe theater producers don't get it.”

Norman answered by saying,

“Well, how do you think I feel, I put twenty years into that play. Say, if you get it up, maybe I’ll come out and see it.”

Well, he never did make it out there but the prospect of his appearance made an artistic director of a small theater company in edgy Silver Lake drool enough to give me his theater to direct a staged reading of it in with Sally Kirkland that went pretty well. But the fact was it was like a feast that was just too big and no matter how delicious, was just too large to consume. Or at least that’s what it seemed at the time. So I wasn’t satisfied and wanted to take another crack at it, maybe even trim it down a bit.

Cut to five years later, when a cancellation of a play in The Great American Play Series now at The Makor Center of the 92nd Street Y in New York, left a slot open last March in 2007.

The screws were turning and now I needed to come up with something pretty spectacular—a play that was substantial and an event that would not disappoint. In a moment of inspiration I remembered my old friend, Norman, and *The Deer Park*. And thank God for it. Norman rearranged a meeting in Washington, D.C., and re-routed his trip to go through New York and declared that he would be able to attend. As Julius Caesar was fond of espousing, the trick was to turn a disadvantage into an advantage.

Norman was as good as his word. This time he did show up, the theater gods smiled on us, and we had a powerful performance on book. Norman had asked me to play the character of a bisexual pimp—a role that Rip Torn had played in the original—and since I knew of no one remotely capable of directing it, I took on both acting and directing a cast of fifteen. Norman would make a special trip down from Provincetown, which was not easy crabbing around on two canes as he was, and one of the preoccupations the night before, along with everything else on my mind, was how to get his large bulk onto the stage for a post-play discussion. As it turned out, he was euphoric afterward and hopped up onto the stage with nary a hitch. And after it was all over, I felt satisfied that, if nothing else, I had given a great artist a moment of fulfillment in the winter of his career and in what turned out to be the final months of his life.

So when he called a week later, I was of course thrilled and flattered that he wanted me to co-direct a film of it and play one of the leads. All based on

the merit of the work—which is what he insisted on pointing out. And which I think can't be underlined enough—that the strength of his character and the integrity of his relationship with colleagues is as rare as diamonds in this Byzantine world of the arts. How often does one hear someone talking the talk—rattling off the jargon effortlessly—but when it comes time to walk the walk, the work is nowhere to be seen. And so I am eternally grateful to Norman for having shown me that sometimes justice is done and the merit of the work is appreciated—indeed, it is all that matters. And when Harold Clurman refers to the kind of theater that makes people better people for having seen it, it's the kind where integrity and truth break through all the dark clouds and shine down on us and inspire us to keep going.