PERSPECTIVES ON CINEMA: A CONVERSATION WITH TOM LUDDY

PHILLIP SIPIORA

TOM LUDDY IS AN AMERICAN FILM PRODUCER and executive notable for his involvement in the restoration and revival of foreign film masterpieces. Luddy has been associated with Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope since 1979. He collaborated with Jean-Luc Godard on two projects, *Every Man for Himself* (1980) and *Passion* (1982). Luddy's work also includes *Barfly* (1987), based upon the life of poet Charles Bukowski, and *The Secret Garden* (1993), an adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel. He was program director of the Pacific Film Archives in the early 1970s and currently serves as program curator for the Documentary Film Institute at San Francisco State University. Luddy was the Executive Producer of Norman Mailer's 1987 film, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. He is also co-director of the Telluride Film Festival, which he co-founded in 1974. My thanks to Michael Chaiken for his assistance with this interview.

Sipiora: You have been in the film industry for more than four decades and were the Executive Producer of Mailer's *Tough Guy's Don't Dance* (1987). You also worked, I believe, with Jean-Luc Godard as early as the 1960s, Can you tell us about the importance of Godard to those times and his impact on contemporary cinema?

Luddy: Godard was the most exciting Director for most of my generation of cinephiles and film-makers. The fifteen features he made between *Breathless* and *Weekend* represent not only the greatest creative "streak" ever seen in

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cinema, but were a principal reason for many in the sixties, like Susan Sontag, to consider cinema the most important of all art forms. His move into radical politics and left-wing collective film-making following May 1968 made him even more of a culture hero. I brought him to the Berkeley Campus in 1967 for a then-complete retrospective, and assisted him on his abortive project with Leacock-Pennebaker. Later at Zoetrope, I was responsible for Zoetrope's partnership with Godard on *Every Man for Himself* and *Passion*.

Sipiora: Mailer also knew Godard in the 1960s. Did you have a relationship with Norman in the 1960s? When and where did you meet Norman?

Luddy: I first met Norman thru Peter Manso in Berkeley in May 1965 when he [Mailer] came to speak at the Vietnam Day Committee rally in Berkeley organized by Jerry Rubin and others. I was in charge of a showing a series of anti-war movies as part of the overall two day program of the VDC.

Sipiora: Although Mailer said that Godard had significant reverence for him in the late sixties, in 2007 Mailer stated that "Godard was the second most evil person he had ever met." Can you tell us about your involvement in the fallout between Mailer and Godard? Can you set the record straight on the infamous Cannes napkin deal between Yoram Globus, Menahem Golan, and Jean-Luc Godard that set so much into motion?

Luddy: In Cannes Golan and Godard signed a deal on a Napkin (which Golan later framed) stating that Cannon would give Godard a series of monthly payments over twelve months adding up to $1,000,000 (as I recall), and that at the end of that period Godard would deliver to Cannon a Contemporary *King Lear*.

I don't think Godard put the words "William Shakespeare" on that napkin but Golan certainly thought they were talking about a film based on the play.

Golan put on the napkin that Godard must agree to work with an American Screenwriter approved by Cannon. Godard then asked if Norman Mailer would be pre-approved as the American Screenwriter. Golan said yes and it was written on the napkin that Norman was approved by Cannon.

Godard then found me in Cannes and asked me to work with him on the film, and as my first task, asked me to convince Norman to work with him.

I called Norman and met him in NYC on the way back from Cannes.

Norman was interested in the money he would make for writing the script, but said he would have to pass because he knew he would lose twice should he accept–once to Shakespeare and once to Godard, since he figured Godard would never shoot any script he [Mailer] would write. He said only one thing would make him agree and that would be if, as part of the deal, Cannon agreed to finance a movie he would direct from *Tough Guys Don't Dance* on a $5,000,000 budget. I thought Cannon would never agree to this as a condition to get Norman to write the script for Godard, but I was wrong. I called Golan about this from the restaurant where we were having lunch. Golan agreed on the condition that Francis give his name to the film and that I produce it. I agreed to this and Golan asked Norman to come to the phone and they spoke.

Norman did write a script, which he called *Don Learo*. I am not sure how much of it Godard read. After a lot of procrastinating, Godard got Cannon to give him an extension of time and a little more money by telling them that Woody Allen had agreed to be in the film. Finally, Godard got Norman to agree to go to Switzerland with Kate Mailer to begin shooting a film based, not on Norman's script, but on some notes by Godard and around the idea of Norman playing a Lear-like Father and Kate playing his daughter. I had to be in Telluride, so I did not make it to the set but, despite a few scenes shot, everything blew up around the fact that Godard was insisting that Norman play a character named NORMAN MAILER and Kate play a character named KATE MAILER, and that in their scenes there would be a hint of incest. Norman said that he would do whatever Godard wanted so long as he was not playing a character named NORMAN MAILER. This led to Norman walking off the film and Godard telling Golan that it was all Norman's fault that the film would have to be delayed further. I think that Godard expected this to happen.

Sipiora: How would you characterize Mailer's style of directing in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*? In what way was Mailer-as-filmmaker discernibly idiosyncratic in comparing him with other directors with whom you have worked?

Luddy: Norman as a Director focused on directing the actors. He liked actors and had done a lot of work with actors at the Actors Studio and knew what he wanted from them. He also set a great working mood for cast and crew by being so friendly and open with everyone. He understood that he

was working with some of the best craft professionals around, beginning with Cinematographer John Bailey. He listened to them and respected them. I wished that Norman Mailer the Director was a little harder on Norman Mailer the screenwriter. I had a lot of back and forth with him about the screenplay, which I thought had a lot of problems.

I remember once sending him a memo pointing out about eleven things in the script that make no sense. He told me that he agreed with seven or eight of my criticisms, but had solutions for only two or three and we would just have to get by on "movie logic."

Sipiora: Was there a pervasive atmosphere of tension, as rumored, among some of the major actors in *Tough Guys*?

Luddy: There was some tension at times between Ryan O'Neal and Norman, that's for sure. I think that Ryan knew some of Norman's dialogue in some scenes was way over the top and could come off as laughable. Ryan was undergoing a lot of personal drama during the shoot involving his son Griffin who was going on trial for manslaughter in the death of Francis Coppola's son, Gio, and this on a movie where Francis was Executive Producer. As I recall, Griffin was supposed to be in rehab while he was awaiting the trial and ran away from the rehab [center]. Norman also found Larry Tierney [to be] impossible at times. Larry would have one way he wanted to do a scene, and if Norman wanted him try it Norman's way, when the cameras rolled, Larry would do it his way again.

Sipiora: If you could relive the making of *Tough Guys*, which changes would you suggest?

Luddy: I would get another writer to adapt the book and convince Norman to focus on directing it. It was frustrating to tell Norman that certain things in the plot make no sense, and have him answer that he's no good at plots, and that even in his novels, plot is not his strong point.

Sipiora: I believe that you were one of the first individuals to call attention to *The Wire* as an example of how some of the best and most significant work in American film (in terms of narrative, acting, editing) has moved away from cinema and into the realm of television. Why has this happened and what are the most important implications?

Luddy: Television is now a Writers Medium and for the best shows and series, the targeted audience is an adult audience.

Movies, at least the commercial cinema, is targeted at teens who will go to see a film two or three times in the Mall, looking to see films modeled on amusement park rides and video games.