

TOUGH GUYS DO DANCE

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Editor's Note: This essay is an excerpt from Stephan Morrow's book-in-progress, The Unknown and the General, in which Morrow chronicles his experiences with Norman Mailer on stage and screen. Morrow played the role of Stoodie in Tough Guys Don't Dance.

THERE IS AN AXIOM OF THE GREAT FILMS that it is the supporting characters that add to the depth of the whole. If a filmmaker paints them vividly, the picture as a whole deepens in its richness. Lubitsch was the master at elevating moments like this to such a degree that they became known as his signature as a filmmaker, the "Lubitsch Touch." Think of *Casablanca* with so many rich scenes that have become iconic. Take, for example, the scene that takes place at the gambling table when Rick suggests to the young husband in need of cash for an exit visa to play number twenty-two. And then again the same number. He wins. Rick then tells him to cash in his winnings and never come back. Rick turns to the croupier and asks him how the house is doing tonight? "Well, a couple of thousand less than I thought there would be," he answers. Or at the bar with the jovial but careful waiter ("Cuddles"), who checks his pockets after bumping into the pickpocket. Scenes or moments like these each add to the richness of the tapestry of that world. And what is important to point out is that they are not moments that are casually handled. Each actor makes them count, so the scenes are short but compelling. None of the actors walks through these scenes—the moments are all writ large by them—either by design or by instinct. As a result, there is texture and detail to the film that launches it into the realm of great work.

I think that Norman Mailer was more savvy in this respect than people give him credit for and he was more of an auteur than is recognized, at least

as demonstrated by *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, where he was one of the few filmmakers who resurrected film noir in the 1980s. As in *The Maltese Falcon* or *The Big Sleep*, it was the supporting cast that created the dark world the film lives in. If a scene added to the feel of the underbelly of Provincetown that Mailer was trying to show, he kept it in and it didn't matter if it were an actor who gave him an idea or a line. Filling out the supporting characters gives detail to a script and is the kind of moviemaking that separates the wheat from the chaff, and that is why I keep beating the drum for *Tough Guys* to be reconsidered as an important film.

During the hibernation of the Provincetown winter, big betting on a cold Sunday afternoon supplied the only hot blood there was on the Cape. The dens of P-town were a wintertime haven for football, gambling, drugs, and drink. So Spider, my cohort in crime and I, Stoodie, were watching a football game in which it looked as if Spider was about to lose a lot of money. The scene as written is pretty straightforward exposition. We watch the game, Spider loses his bet, and I win mine. Spider is pretty pissed. In fact, he suggests in his anger that his moth-eaten wife Beth drink something to stop her whining.

That is what we were given, but Norman's writing was rich enough to suggest more and instead of creating it as a ho-hum moment during the game, I volunteered to try something a little more dramatic and we decided to make it the moment that my team crossed the goal line and beat the spread as the clock ran out. (For non-gamblers that does not mean that my team would win the game.) In fact, they would lose by seven points. But they wouldn't lose by as much as the bookies had said they would, which was fourteen points. And so, even though the Patriots would lose, I would win my bet, much to Spider's chagrin. It wasn't in the text but the explosive cheer that came out of me, accompanied by my buddy's groan, made an otherwise flat moment come alive and it revealed a mother lode of insight into the inner lives of our characters. These were not coldblooded dudes. No, these guys had hot lead in their veins and the room smoked when they popped off.

As a further challenge to the actors, the fact is that we had no television. Or even the sound of a game. Far from it, we were looking at a pathetic pink laundry basket. That was our TV. Now this is a common situation in filming and the actor has to make do and still "deliver the goods" that are expected of him. Imagination, after all, is supposed to be an actor's stock in trade. Still, it wasn't easy and there was no help from the basket/TV. Nevertheless, we were able to come up with some convincing glee and concomitant rage. The icing

on the cake for me was that Norman liked what happened so much that he even kept a line that I threw in. “Go get ‘em.” It’s a guy thing. Comes out when your team scores a big one. Small as it was, it gave a final punctuation to the scene and I was pretty happy about having made this small contribution. But more was going on here. I was thrilled about belting that out for two sets of reasons. One was along the creative line I’ve mentioned—that it confirmed that we had ignited in the scene despite our imaginary TV, and that it would be the second time that Norman and I were collaborating on dialogue in the film. But the other was more personal, which was that I had earned the right to own “Go get ‘em” and it wasn’t from football.

It’s not that *Tough Guys* isn’t flawed. There are some questions about the film. I have recently seen it (three times) at a retrospective on Mailer’s film work and I continue to discover more parts of the puzzle that fit together each time I see it, but that were impossible to figure out the first couple of times. To be sure, it isn’t the easiest film to follow. Jerry Stiller who sat with me at the Lincoln Center screening, said it best: “I’m so impressed with how free the actors were. (To Norman): You left them alone and really let them live in the story. Of course, you’d want to see it a couple of times to connect all the dots.” But there’s a famous story about Harry Cohen, head of Columbia, screening Orson Welles’ *The Lady from Shanghai*, when he turned to the people in the room when it was over, laid a thousand dollars on the table, and challenged anyone in the room to explain the film to him. No one took him up on his offer. If *Tough Guys* is dense, Norman Mailer is in good company. And Welles’ didn’t have the dialogue that Norman could pump out. That’s where I think the strength of the film lies and what its longevity will depend upon. Norman has created a kind of artifact of the time and place that lasts for two hundred years and glows (darkly) with a vitality that lasts forever. To even try to do that in these days of car crashes and slasherfests is why we who were in the film felt so privileged to have participated in it.

There is one thing on a more personal level about the story. The spirit of the whole story depends upon Ryan O’Neal’s character, Tim Madden, waking up one morning after partying so hard that he can’t remember what happened the night before, only to discover some blood-soaked clothing in his jeep. Not knowing what he was capable of, could he have done some unspeakably violent thing? Tortured by that black gap in his memory, his quest to find out begins. Now, it is not out of the realm of possibility to question whether anyone could really be that “out of it,” but I happened to know

from personal experience that such things do actually happen, so it gave me a personal hook into the validity of the story. And it wasn't just a fantasy that Norman had cooked up.

One final moment during the shoot that Jerry Stiller's remark reminded me of, all those years later during the screening at Lincoln Center, was a harrowing moment where I had come up against a wall and was just at a loss. And this incident shows that Norman was not perfect in his methodology. In this particular scene, I had dragged myself over to Ryan O'Neal in the local dive and in the script I was supposed to be so out of my head that I made some peculiar bird sounds, as code for threatening him with a dire end. Sounds pretty straightforward to me as I write this now, but things that seem self-evident later in life can seem awfully dense and impenetrable when you're in the driver's seat. Maybe it was the fact that I was involved with a sense memory and was trying to concentrate on being really shit-faced, I guess, but I just didn't understand what I was doing in the scene. Norman came over and said in a low voice, "You've turned in such a terrific performance so far, I'd hate to see you spoil it in the final scene."

This warning was not exactly an inspiring thing to tell an actor floundering around. If Norman had just explained how bird sounds were hooked into Stoodie being out of it, or explained anything about it, instead of what was in the script, which read: "Stoodie is drunk and makes cooing sounds." But Norman wouldn't budge—for him saying anything more would be crossing the line into the actor's domain. He watched as I did my damndest, blowing out my lungs—but I still wasn't connecting it to anything and we all knew it. For my part, if he would have crossed that forbidden line and given the actor a *line reading* of how the lines sounded or the bird sounded for that matter, I wouldn't have cared at all. But that was not to be. Thankfully, in the end Norman just changed the lines and made them more to my understanding—without the bird sounds—and we continued on with the scene. So much for letting actors alone. What I've come to believe in since then is that when lines have a meaning, the actor either makes contact with that meaning or he doesn't. If he doesn't, he needs help and even Harold Clurman, the godfather of the "Method," said, "Give him [an actor] a damn line reading. In the end, you do whatever you have to in order to communicate the meaning of a line. That's what counts, the meaning. And anyway, who'll know the difference as long as he makes it his own, he's the one delivering the line."

What's ironic here is that years later, when I was at the helm of the staged reading of *The Deer Park* that pleased Norman so much, I had focused on making what the actors were saying to each other as clear as possible. Working hard with each actor to draw every bit of meaning out of a line, I thought that it was crucial for each actor *to make his or her points*, because in a play with such large ideas, that was at least as important as actors' emotional commitments. What I call "making your point" is crucial to illuminating conflicts between characters, who are stand-ins for the author's views. It is also how the author constructed the lines, how he heard them being said in his mind, and how they made sense to him. Apparently Norman thought it worked because it was after that that he invited me to co-direct the film of the play. He was quoted in *Vanity Fair* as saying: "Finally, there was someone who understood the language and what I was trying to say."

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For some unknown reason, in Provincetown there are many large skunks—the largest I imagined ever seeing. As I was walking back from the local "den of iniquity," the much heralded "Widow's Walk," I saw a shaggy black and white dog—black furred and blazing white-striped. I watched it amble about until I realized that this particular skunk was indeed the size of a not-so-small dog. It appeared to be manicured, clean, and fluffed by a beautician's blower—with a sense of entitlement. I surmise this because of the size it had attained. Somebody must have been feeding it pretty well for it to swell into a fat collie. This animal was an emperor among skunks and I was struck dumb at its size and how blasé it was to my approach, poking around near some bushes in front of a house. I just had to see more of him. I climbed up about six feet on a nearby tree. As I was conducting this survey of the extraordinary flora and fauna of Provincetown, who should come walking along but the General himself—with the blonde vixen playing the wicked femme fatale of the movie. I can't remember who said what first, if they saw me or I whispered a warning, but I did hear something like this: "What are you doing up there?"—Norman cracked while putting the lid on that stentorian voice of his. A warning burst out of me and I gestured fiercely to back off from the danger. Norman hit the deck, like any good soldier, partly shielding his escort as he went down. But it was every person for himself or herself. "What is it? Goons from the teamsters ready to jump us?" Who

knew? I spread my arms to show how large it was and said loudly, “Skunk.” Norman sat up and with an abrupt harrumph and said: “You’re protecting me from a skunk?” Well, what could I say? I was basically a city kid and had been momentarily fascinated by this vestige of the wild. But it was not altogether ridiculous. If his spray were as potent as his size and Norman had been its target, who knew what the ramifications could be? There had already been union labor hassles on the shoot, and filming was already behind by two weeks. If this mishap occurred, well, you couldn’t very well direct a film with the stench of skunk following you everywhere. Any more delay and the whole shoot might be called off. Or maybe it was my impish libido coming out. She was blonde, beautiful and one is never without hope. I had put a little pepper on this late night excursion of theirs, God forgive me. But Norman was good-natured enough about it in the end and we all went our separate ways.

One of the very subtle things that Norman was able to create in the script of *Tough Guys* was an undercurrent of tension between the supporting characters and the leads. Supporting characters such as Stoodie had a particular take on the main characters. In my case, as Stoodie, there seemed to be a submerged antagonism between my character and Tim Madden that kept threatening to explode onto the surface. Tim was a pretentious writer, had a beautiful wife supporting him, and maybe even social class factored into the equation. Stoodie was Portugese blue-collar and Tim was a queer bird who, in Stoodie’s mind, didn’t deserve the spoils that he had received. Whatever it was, this tension built into a final confrontation scene where Ryan and I would duke it out in the Cape Cod woods. But there was a problem.

Ryan wanted to bring in some professional stuntmen. Norman wanted us to do it ourselves. There was a lot of back and forth about this issue. It would take time to get the professionals to the set and, of course, the cost. Anyway, Norman won the argument by saying, “*Indulge me*. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll bring in the pros.” I thought that was a pretty handy phrase and I have never forgotten it. Because I was pretty athletic, I threw my two cents on Norman’s side of the board and volunteered to do my own stunts. This could be called setting yourself up. In addition to the dustup with Ryan, there were a couple of rolls where I ended up on my feet and I thought I could do them pretty well, perhaps even better than anyone else. I could inject them with more malevolence than a stuntman just going through the moves. Hell, it was exciting. I could possibly contribute an added moment of excitement by

diving into the frame like Bruce Lee. It would be like the old days in *Strawhead* [a play about Marilyn Monroe], looking to make a contribution above and beyond being that of a soldier doing his duty. We did those rolls first and I felt pretty good, lunging for Ryan and going over in a judo roll, spinning around ready for the next go round with him.

Norman was delighted. Things were going the way he thought that they would. Finally, we came to the fight with Ryan. We choreographed things a little. The climax was when I got slugged in the jaw and knocked out. In rehearsal, I can't pretend that I knew what everyone around me seemed to be familiar with—you didn't really get smacked at all. The fist goes whispering by your head and you whip your head as if you were struck. You fake the smack and they loop the sound of skin on bone later on. (Actually, there isn't the kind of BAM, SOCK, POW that we hear in movies). That's an invention of celluloid reality. There is nothing like it in real life, which is closer to a muffled thud that doesn't travel far and doesn't sound as if it were real. The damage done is apparent only from the reaction of the guy receiving the punch. It just doesn't sound that loud, knuckles on bone. (Gloves are a little different).

It does make me wonder whatever happened to the kind of guys that Norman knew, like Cus D'Amato who would take it out to the back alley and settle scores personally with no further retribution beyond the best man winning. D'Amato trained Mike Tyson and was responsible for turning him into a champion. It might be added that when Cus died, Tyson lost his guidance and suffered because of it. Norman quoted a line from D'Amato that has stayed with me and really perks me up when I need it. You could call it the street version of FDR's "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." It goes like this: "We are intelligent men. And as intelligent men, if we apply ourselves, we can solve the problem. But we must not give in to fear." I came across that once in an article that Norman had written about Cus D'Amato and I was moved enough by it to cut it out and carry it around in my notebook as a mantra. It came in useful on more than one occasion.

D'Amato's version of the story was pretty brutal. As best as I can recall, it goes like this. He was set to meet and settle a score with someone. After a long and tense night when he didn't sleep much, he didn't let fear stop him and finally solved the problem by taping a knife into his palm that seemed like the best way to counter his opponent's expertise in knife fighting since D'Amato's skills were as a boxer. He also realized how much fear he would

have to cope with the next morning when he showed up at the assigned empty warehouse. However, the next morning it became clear that his opponent wasn't going to show up and Cus was flooded with relief. You don't have to be involved in street wars, or even boxing, to appreciate how useful an axiom like that is.

We were in the middle of the Provincetown woods on a very cold winter night when that swing from Ryan came. It was up to me, an actor and recipient of the shot, to flick my head back convincingly. Well, I missed the first moment. It didn't register with me at all, it was that quick. The punch went by my head and I just looked at Ryan. He returned the look and said, "Come on. Make me look better than that, fella." That meant that I should flip my head back as if it had collided with a punch with a little lead in it, instead of reacting to his punch as if I had been whisked by a feather duster. We tried it again, and I felt a little more to the moment. When the cameras actually rolled and we tangled with each other, I suddenly saw stars. Ryan had clocked me right on the jaw. Needless to say, I jerked appropriately. After the scene was over, I sat there massaging my jaw and Ryan quickly came over to me and asked me "Are you OK?" I just nodded. "God I'm sorry. I didn't mean to land that one. I'm really sorry." Then, turning to the crew guys, said "Man," with a little glee at his own power (this is where the machismo of these kinds of things comes out). "I really connected. Lucky he didn't get a broken jaw." I don't know if I was the surrogate for Norman and collecting some payback for him or not, but the fact was that from my sparring days at the Gramercy Gym in New York, I knew that I could take a beating better than most. There had been moments when a stringy black kid with lightning-fast, long arms would shout out to the trainer, "Man, I really opened up on him but he didn't move."

I had had good training for this. When I was a naughty imp and my father would whale away on me, I would look up at him and feel a grimace of defiance spread over my face. It was an involuntary grip of a will not my own: "You think that's funny, Hah? OK, here ..." That of course would lead to more slamming around. What I had no idea of at the time was that Ryan also regularly worked out at The Gramercy Gym and was reputed to be not just a capable fighter, but a vicious one who brooked no quarter. And to prove my point, recently, I ran into a guy named Sal, who had sparred at The Gramercy with O'Neal regularly. Ryan wasn't given to socializing with his sparring mates, apparently, and a grudge had developed between them.

People in L.A. would understand that it is *de rigueur* that a member of the Hollywood aristocracy might get down with someone say in a gym, but always with the knowledge that there was a wide divide in their social interactions outside of the ring. One day they pissed one another off enough to really go at it. When boxers spar it is always understood that you hold back a little. It's a workout, not a match. But that day Sal had walked away with a jaw broken in three places. If someone tells you that they box, and they mean it, you should be very careful about what you do next. It's not called a sweet science for nothing and if you occasionally take out some gloves and move around a ring and spar with someone, you better get ready to have your clock cleaned once you put your hands up and are facing a legit boxer. It's a little like a lounge player telling Arthur Rubenstein that he plays the piano, too. So if Ryan was as deadly as Sal said that he was, and Sal had ultimately paid him the highest compliment when he added, "He could have been a professional." I said, "Are you serious, a pro-boxer?" I needed to confirm what I had just heard. "A real pro. Right. He broke my jaw," Sal said. As surprising as it may seem, I had gotten off luckier than I had imagined. After all, Ryan was the "pretty boy" actor and I was supposed to be one of the tough guys.

Anyway, it all turned out well. Ryan invited John Snyder—"Spider"—my partner in crime and I over to his trailer and we shared a little Martell's and hung out. I guess that I had earned his respect for not whining. He was genuinely interested in what the Off-Off B'way arena was like. It was clearly out of his purview. He felt more comfortable talking about "The Fighting 69th," as he put it. But he had a sincerity and charm that made it apparent why there are some people who have a kind of a glow that make others want to watch them. I don't mean just plastic beauty—Ryan, by that time was approaching middle age and, although still handsome, was beyond the bloom of young manhood. No, this was some internal state of being. The honeyed corners of his soul beamed out at the world more than most people.

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Some people might be surprised at this, looking at Stoodie, but the boy could dance. Real down and dirty. There was rubber in his bones and he led with his pelvis. Learned from watching the best: the King. And as I sat there in one of the screenings of the retrospective, it saddened me that no one would ever know that.

There was something in the script about a party scene with a lot of wild dancing that originally hadn't really registered for me. After I had returned to the city, I had heard about it from one of the young female assistant directors. Now this scene was tantalizing because I knew that I could boogie. I was a dancer from my teens on. I loved to kick out the jams. I had been paid as a professional dancer in college in a Martha Graham inspired modern dance troupe. A friend of mine from the Bronx had liberated me from male attitudes about dancing by regaling me with tales of dancing in his special dancin' shoes to the sounds of the master, Ben E. King on 137th St. and the Grand Concourse. I loved seeing who could really rock out at a big concert—who was doing something really inventive with their arms or in their swaying, and what moves were being invented on the spot. At these sort of things there was open permission to approach someone and just float along with them and follow and if there was some *simpatico*, a match of moves began and a dance would finally happen. I had no little scorn for the patterned steps of the disco years, so dull in their unoriginality—people moving like puppets on a string all doing the same moves like a school of mackerel. And so I knew that if I could make it back to P-town, I could do something that very well might ignite the party into something exciting.

A young female assistant had helped me out on the set and I had been flattered by her attention. I was not particularly moved to reciprocate, however. For one thing, during the shoot as a whole, I was in a peculiar state of being what can only be described as one of self-oriented grace. I couldn't help it. As Spider says to Ryan about a football bet they have going, "Better keep yourself pure, man" and for me that meant no fooling around or casual flings.

I concentrated on the task at hand and I felt that anything social would either interfere with the process or be a distraction from the psychic construct I had been directed to create as Stoodie. Any wolf-like tendencies just evaporated. So I had not encouraged her. Now she was telling me on the phone from the Cape that there was this party scene and she was in some way connected to the budget for it. However, if I wanted to return to P-town I would have to speak with Norman as she could do nothing for me. I had successfully discharged my responsibilities for the film and had done what was expected of me, but I was a little leery of jeopardizing it all. Or worse, appearing desperate in any way. I felt that the alchemical mixture that went into the making of the film was still jelling and it was delicate. I didn't want

to inject the wrong salt that could spoil the whole potion. Finally, I did call Norman. As we spoke I tried to get out something about my abilities, but it was tough. “You know, Norman, I can like, *dance* . . .”

“You can dance?” He was as surprised as I had expected.

I answered, “Yeah, I got some pretty good moves. You know, like Elvis. Kind of ... filthy.” And I chuckled a little relieved at finding something that might have some leverage with Norman. To this day, I don’t know if Norman ever moved a girl around the dance floor in his life. And he laughed with me for a long time. Then he said, “*You mean tough guys do dance?*”

“Right on”, I answered.

Son of a bitch, he got me. What a line. And then we both laughed hysterically.

Finally, after things abated, I said, “Well, it’s that I got this idea. I think I can help the scene. The party ...” My instincts told me that a party scene would really benefit from Stoodie’s boogeying, others might pick it up and it might give the scene a punch below the belt as it were, some dirty dancing that could be helpful to the whole.

Norman said, “I’ll see what I can do about it. I’ll check with the logistics person.”

That would be the department of none other than the young female to whom I had spoken. Norman came back and said, “No dice.” There was no allowance in the budget for my return to P-town for this party scene. My scenes had been shot and if I couldn’t return to P-town on my own, the producers weren’t willing to spring for the change.

Finally Norman said, “Well, I can’t tell you to come or not to. You have to make the decision on your own.” As they say, it was one of those moments that are either as substantial as the ether—which is to say nothing more than a speculation—or one of those that entire lives and careers swing on. I suppose that if there had been anything more amorous that had gone down with my young friend and she had had a vested interest in having me return, budgetary solutions would have been found, but that wasn’t meant to be. Was the cosmos coming around to bite me on the ass? Well, as much of a Lothario as I was capable of being, I was never one to barter for favors so it was just as well.

In the end, I begged off. It just all was too complicated. Although, to be sure, it’s the kind of thing left undone that comes to haunt you at the end of the night The heebie jeebies come creeping and you feel like you’re suffocat-

ing with “what ifs?” If I had done the deed and been as good as I thought I could be and inspired the rest of the dudes or women at the party, it might have added some small but significant moment to the whole. Another contribution. Further, it would have revealed an entirely different side of Stoodie. Who knows what it could have done? One pelvic thrust could have made all the difference. After all, Jerry Stiller in his flattery of what I had done, had said “You want to see more of you.” Well, that might have been that little bit more that could have made a profound difference. Another Lubitsch touch to the P-town tapestry. By all accounts folks in P-town partied hard and this would have been one party where people really got down.

So when I saw the party scene again at the retrospective, I thought that it had indeed been an opportunity missed. Nobody probably noticed it but me, but the dancing was so blasé that I wondered if the actors had to fake listening to music, they were moving around so listlessly. Hardly the wild party scene that was written, at least in my mind. Norman livened things up with Patty Lorraine’s bugle and scorched pussy hairs but it could have been so much more. Well, he couldn’t be expected to get everything right. What can I say? Or perhaps he put the ball in my lap and I had dropped it. *C’est la guerre*. If Napoleon had just listened to his generals about Waterloo ... ?