

MAIDSTONE, MAILER AND MASHEY: A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

M A S H E Y B E R N S T E I N

IN MARCH 1994, ON ONE OF MY PERIODIC VISITS TO NEW YORK from the University of California in Santa Barbara where I was teaching, Norman, whom I had known since 1978 when I wrote my PhD dissertation on Jewish aspects of his work, invited me to dinner at his home in Brooklyn Heights. As we sat around the dinner table, I said to Norman, in a moment of bravado, that I would love to see, *Maidstone*, (1970), especially the notorious scene where Rip Torn, starring in the movie, suddenly attacks Mailer with a hammer. With blood streaming down his face, Mailer continues the scene. At the time, the movie had been out of circulation for years and there were no copies of it available. (In a sign of the times, that infamous moment can now be viewed on YouTube!)

I was not sure how Norman would react to my act of chutzpah as it was obviously a rather painful memory, in more ways than one. To my surprise, he took my request in stride, only admonishing me that the scene had to be viewed in the context of the whole movie. He paused for a moment and stood up: “You know it’s been ages since I last saw it” and he went to his library and got the tape. He then made some calls to his children who were scattered over the city and got them to come over and we had an impromptu viewing. Norman and all present laughed at the shenanigans on screen. I was especially taken by Norris’s *sangfroid*, as on-screen were two of his ex-wives in various stages of undress and attitude. At one point, I turned to Norman and said that I was so glad to see that he was such a “liberated feminist.” Norman laughed at my comment. It gave me an insight into the family dynamics that I had never seen before: the rapport of his whole extended family and

the ease with which they communicated with one another and tolerated their respective personalities and quirks. As I left he signed one of his books for me with the inscription: “after one more good evening.” That it certainly was.