

OVEREXPOSED: MY FIRST TASTE OF FILMMAKING

M I C H A E L M A I L E R

MY FATHER, NORMAN MAILER, once wrote that film exists somewhere between memory and dream. We recall a film—a good film—the way we recall our memories: fragments crystallized in our minds as visuals of a dream (or a nightmare)—points of light dredged up from our subconscious.

I experienced my first taste of filmmaking when I was five years old. I was unwittingly a glorified extra—a day player in the parlance of the biz—and had my debut as a witness to the near death of my father at the murderous hands of Rip Torn. The film was *Maidstone*, the third and final attempt at underground filmmaking—*cinéma vérité* style—that my dad attempted in the late Sixties.

The cast was comprised of friends, ex-wives, sports and movie stars, and of course a few gangsters thrown in for good measure portraying some warped and far out version of themselves—persona extensions on steroids—if you will. They were summoned to Gardiners Island—a bucolic piece of land somewhere off the coast of the Hamptons—to vow their allegiance or disaffection of a certain Norman T. Kingsley (portrayed by who else), who happened to be a retired porn director running for President of the United States. Why not, after all? Qualifications for higher office being what they are you might argue that it was a prescient conceit. Those who arrived immediately drew tags from a hat identifying whether they became friend or foe to the candidacy. Though technically neither side knew the other's position, over three strenuous days the cast would exercise their voices, feelings, prerogatives and, in one case, an assassin's impulse.

And like those stories you hear of people being invited to spend a week-end in jail, some as jail birds, others as the jailers, who take to their role with

psychotic zeal so too did the denizens on Gardiner's act out their respective parts with manic intensity. I can't help but look at *Maidstone*—when I can look at it all objectively—as a testament to why the Sixties ultimately imploded. The movie embodies indulgence to the point of mental hazard. And yet the film stands the test of time as a sociological statement.

Cutting to yours truly, for some reason in the midst of preparation for the film, one or both parents decided it was a good idea to bring the family along. Let the kids enjoy the great outdoors while the elders make a movie or some such thought must have filtered through their minds. So into the vortex trotted my older sisters, Danielle, Elizabeth, Kate, my younger brother, Stephen, and myself. We soon found ourselves unwittingly part of the cast, filmed as cherubs wandering through the fields of the island. But that's where the idyll ended.

As the movie was winding down, Rip Torn, who putatively was playing Norman T. Kingsley's ungrateful brother, Raoul, realized that the only way he was going to save the film was by killing Norman T. K. or, more poignantly, Norman Mailer on camera. To that end in the final hours of shooting, Rip attacked Norman with a hammer to the head. Thank God, dad had a hard head which may have saved him some brain damage but not a healthy pouring of blood—head wounds do bleed like crazy—all of which commingled with Rip's bloody ear as Norman retaliated by gnawing on his ear lobe.

And there we were: Mother and children as eyewitnesses to the bloody carnage. My mother, exercising full lung-power, started screaming at the camera men to do something. However, the esteemed Pennybaker and Leacock realized they had something better to do. Keep filming. Why waste cinematic gold when they had it at their fingertips? Rip, after all, was right. It was the ending the movie desperately needed. Nonetheless, bearing witness as a child was hard on the system and to see yourself many years later on film watching the assault brings back a host of mixed feelings (the clip is available on YouTube—for better or for worse).

Just before my father died we discussed the impact *Maidstone* must have had on my young psyche and we laughed at the discovery that it was clearly the reason why I went into the film business. It was my first traumatic experience and of course the best way of dealing with trauma is by journeying into the heart of it—confronting it head on—so to speak. Ergo, my career choice.

As a postscript, my dad and Rip repaired their friendship; Art, after all, is thicker than blood. And while my dad had a few stitches in the head, Rip ended up in the hospital with an infected ear. When Norman visited Rip's bedside he told Norman that a human bite was far more infectious than that of a dog. To which my dad replied, "I should have bitten the whole thing off then."

I also became friends with Rip—perhaps as part of my trauma therapy—and ended up casting him as a co-lead in a film I produced called *The Golden Boys*. During the shoot, Rip would regale me, along with the cast and crew, of *Maidstone*-related tales, one of which was a funny story about him suing Dennis Hopper for libel. Hopper claimed that Rip attacked him with a knife on the set of *Easy Rider* after being told he was going to be replaced by Jack Nicholson. Rip won the case on the irrefutable claim that he could not have possibly knifed Hopper as he was, at the time, on the set of *Maidstone* trying to kill Norman Mailer.