

THE THALIAN ADVENTURE

N O R M A N M A I L E R

“THE THALIAN ADVENTURE,” A SHORT STORY BY NORMAN MAILER, was never published. It is not known with certainty when Mailer wrote the story, but its date of composition is believed to be circa 1951. A transcription of the story follows the images. The Norman Mailer estate has graciously given permission to reprint the story. Images are courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

—*Phillip Sipiora*

THE THALIAN ADVENTURE

by

Norman Mailer

In the interval between the time I graduated from college and was drafted into the Army, I lived at home in Brooklyn with my parents. Every one I knew was in service, and many evenings, for lack of something better, I went to the movies. Invariably, it was to see a foreign film in one of the art houses around New York.

On a particularly rainy Autumn night, I decided after supper that I would make the long subway trip up to the Thalia Theatre on 95th Street off Broadway. They were showing two pictures I had heard a great deal about: M, and The Last Will of Doctor Mabuse, and it seemed too fine a double-feature to miss. As I remember, it was the last night the films were showing.

The outing would have been without incident if my parents had not decided to accompany me. It was all at my

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mother's instigation. We had a relation at the time which I suppose is not uncommon between mothers, and sons who have just acquired a college degree. She was eager to participate in what seemed to her the wholly impressive scope of my cultural interests. I, on my part, encouraged her with the notion that it was my duty to educate my parents. Indeed, I often felt enthusiasm for the project.

We were sitting in the living room after the dishes had been put away, when I started to go for my coat. My mother, who was reading, looked up. "Do you have to go out on such a rainy night, sonny? You'll catch a cold."

I answered with the habitual exasperated growl I considered appropriate to her questions about my health. "I don't want to miss these particular movies," I stated firmly.

"Well, what is there so special about them, dear? Why don't you go to the neighborhood theatre?"

I explained in the most superior tone that the worst of foreign films was not to be compared to the best which Hollywood produced, that it was the difference between art and commerce. "Moreover," I said, "these two films are classics. They are an emotional experience of the first importance."

My mother nodded doubtfully. I had conveyed the prejudice to her that foreign films were for aristocrats, and she felt somewhat defiant. "I don't know," she said, "when I go to the movies, I like to take off my shoes."

"And go to sleep," I added sarcastically.

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"Why not. I've paid my money, haven't I?"

I have really not emphasized sufficiently the desire I felt to remodel my parents. "You give me a pain," I said.

"Now, don't talk to me like that."

"You know what I mean. I'll bet you've never seen a foreign movie. You don't even know what they are."

"Why should I? Have I ever been to Europe?" This was said as much for my father's ear as mine. It was his pleasure to spend the evening reading the newspaper and doing the cross-word puzzle, and my mother said it sharply enough to rouse him from the sensual somnolence of his activity.

"What's that?" my father asked with an air of innocence.

"You know what I mean," my mother said ^hdaily. She had not the faintest desire to go to Europe. It was just to remind my father that a good husband provided well for his family and was never satisfied with his income.

"It's really shameful," I said to my mother. "You have such sensitivity. You're so capable ^{of} reacting to new experience, especially new aesthetic experience, and you just stick in a rut."

My mother glowed. No lover could have stroked the vanity of his mistress more adroitly. "You think I'd like these pictures?" she asked softly.

"I know you would."

My father decided it was time to enter the lists. He had the paternal talent for saying the wrong thing to so advanced

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advanced a degree, that I had once suggested to him he should always express ~~to me~~ the exact opposite of what he thought. This advice he disregarded majestically.

"Let me get this straight," he said slowly, pompously, and pleausrably. "You intend to go up to some godforsaken little hole on this rainy night in order to see a couple of pictures that no one has ever heard about?"

"It's a nice theatre," I said with fury. "You'll forgive me if my taste does not incline to the Radio City Music Hall."

"Oh, you modern generation," my father intoned, "you know all about it. There's no telling you anything." He applied his pencil to the cross-word puzzle with a certain elegance. "I cannot speak for your mother," he spoke with ducal contempt, "but as far as I'm concerned the whole idea is idiotic."

"Don't you call him an idiot," my mother bridled.

"I did not call him an idiot."

"Well, you did."

A silence, heavy and portentous for my father, settled upon our living room. "You know?" my mother said experimentally to my father, "I think maybe we ought to go too, and see what these foreign films are like."

Down came the newspaper, and up sat my father. "You can go!" he said to my mother. "I will not. I am not leaving the house on a rainy night to get in the subway and go up to a hundred and ninety-fifth street to see a rotten movie I never even heard about."

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"Ninety-fifth street," I shouted.

The balance of power had shifted absolutely against my father. My mother was on my side.

"Honestly, you could just sit there all night for a year," she said to him, "doing that jigsaw puzzle."

"Crossword puzzle."

"What do I care what it is? Is that a way to spend your time?" My mother glowered at the pencil and the newspaper in my father's hands. "Of course you wouldn't want to go," she told him. "You have no sense of adventure."

"All right, I have no sense of adventure," my father said in a pained voice. "I'm still not going." He put down the newspaper and held it against his knees as if to indicate that he expected to be pulled forcibly from his seat.

At that moment the phone rang. The call was from a relative. I could hear my mother talking in the bedroom, and I heard enough to be able to smile at my father. When my mother returned, it was with the announcement that my aunt and my cousin were going to meet us at the theatre.

My father had new expressions of indignation. "You've all gone out of your mind," he told us. My aunt lived at East Fifty-Fourth Street beyond First Avenue. "They're going to travel cross-town in this rain?"

"You'd think there was a tropical storm outside," my mother exploded. "It's just drizzling."

"Drizzling!"

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"Do you know, maybe Rose and Harry would want to go," said my mother.

"Let's get the whole family out on safari," my father said.

My mother telephoned her other sister. It turned out that she and her husband would meet us. "How long does it take to get there?" my mother asked with her hand across the phone.

"About forty minutes."

While my mother arranged the time, my father glared at me. "You see what you're getting everybody into," he said in a stage-whisper.

He continued to sit in his armchair while my mother and I put on our coats. At the door she turned. "Are you coming with us?" she asked.

My father threw the paper down. "Yes, I'm coming."

"Nobody's forcing you to," my mother said sharply. "Sit here and fall asleep if you want to."

My father put on his jacket, his rubbers, and his raincoat with deliberate superior motions. While he did this, my mother continued to scold him. "You're always the last," she said to him. "You knew you were coming, why do you have to make everybody wait for you?"

He addressed himself to me. "I want it understood that I consider the whole idea just part of your foolish nonsense. You're responsible, do you understand?"

"You'll like the pictures," I promised him, "they'll

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be something new."

"The Thalia theatre. I never heard of it. Some silly hangout."

The trip on the subway was without incident, except for my father's impatience. He would look at his watch from time to time and sneer at me. He had brought his newspaper along, and hunched in his raincoat, he worked at the crossword puzzle doggedly, trying to pay no attention to the straphanger in front of him whose elbows jabbed continually into the paper. Once he even relented to the extent of asking me the name of the "summer capitol" in the Philippines. "Six-letter word, third letter is 'g'," he said tersely.

When we got to the Thalia we were obliged to wait for our relatives. While we stood in the miniature lobby, my father delivered himself of sarcasms he considered as sharp as fish hooks, though I found them heavy as lead sinkers. "This is the kind of place your friends like, I suppose," he grumbled. "This is the monument to art which you find superior to the Radio City Music Hall."

"The lounge is very nice," I said defensively. I was fond of the Thalia. I liked its smallness, its intimacy, and the comfort in which one could watch a picture. It was nearly always half-empty, and one could choose a seat wherever one wished. "This is exactly," he went on, "what I expected it to be. Oh, I've heard of theatres that show pictures which are a year old, but I never heard of showing pictures which are ten years old or fifty years old."

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"Do be still," my mother whispered to him. "Give it a chance."

At that point my relatives came in. We all greeted, we all kissed, and we then entered the theatre. To my surprise, it was completely filled, and we were obliged to stand in wet raincoats, and separate one by one into the single seats which presented themselves. Each time this happened I would smile apologetically at one relative or another, and whisper, "We'll get seats together after this picture ends." I was quite relieved when they were all placed, and I could concentrate my attention on the movie.

The Last Will of Doctor Mabuse was being shown, and I watched it in horror. For I was viewing it through the eyes of my relatives and my parents, and it did not seem to be exactly the sort of picture one could recommend for them. The cutting must have seemed very abrupt, the story indecipherable, and the photography old-fashioned. I looked at it in the way a hostess will listen to the orchestra she has hired for a dress ball. I heard only the squeaks and the discords, felt only how hot the theatre was, and how it smelled of wet clothing.

When the picture ended, and the newsreel came on, my relatives began to leave one by one. They would tiptoe to my seat, and whisper that they had to get up early in the morning. "It was wonderful," one of them said to me, "I enjoyed it so much. But the photography gave me a headache."

"Stay for 'M'," I whispered back. "It's supposed to

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be wonderful."

No, they really had to be going. One by one, they left, until only my mother, my father, and I remained. The theatre had partially emptied, and I went to find them so we could sit together.

My mother was sleeping. She awoke apologetically. "I'm sorry, sonny," she whispered, "it was very interesting, only I felt so drowsy."

My father was beginning to taste his triumph. "Why don't we leave now like decent intelligent people?"

I had to continue to live in my parent's home. I staked all on the turn of the wheel. "'M' is the picture I wanted you to see."

"Oh," he said in a tone whose mildness was not genuine, "Then this Mabusey-Floosie thing was just thrown in?"

I did not answer. Only the next picture could save my reputation.

As it began, I was worried. To my parents, the photography would still be strange. Moreover, English was dubbed into the mouths of the German actors, and the sound track often hummed or gave off noises like static. My father was slightly deaf. I wondered if he could make out the voices.

But these worries began to dissipate. I was able finally to concentrate upon the film, and I began to be very excited by it. The fate of poor M aroused my pity. The film seemed a masterpiece. I watched it with complete absorption,

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was thrilled by Peter Lorre's speech when he is tried in the thieves' den, and sat blinking my eyes with shock as the picture ended, and the house lights came up.

My father turned to me. In his eyes his triumph was so complete that he could afford to be magnanimous. "Admit it, son," he said, "This was a lousy picture, wasn't it?" He was almost genial.

I turned to him with outrage. "It was marvelous," I breathed.

I thought he was going to have a stroke. "You mean to sit there and tell me you think it was marvelous," he repeated slowly.

I could only nod my head.

"Then there is no possibility for you or me to ever have anything to say to one another again. That silly thing." Now he was on his feet, now he was putting on his raincoat. "I don't blame the boy," he said in a cracked voice to my mother, "I blame you. He's your son. You can go home with him. I'm going home alone."

My mother stood up, too. "Don't you dare blame anybody," she answered back. "What if a mistake was made? What if the picture wasn't any good? Don't you ever make a mistake?"

Now, I became angry. "You didn't like the picture either?" I demanded of my mother.

"Well, it wasn't really very up-to-date."

"You're both impossible," I screeched at them.

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"Don't talk to me that way," said my mother in a trembling voice.

We all went home alone. We each left the theatre alone, we each put our own nickël in the turnstile, and we each sat in separate seats in the same subway car. My mother brooded over the harsh words said, I sat as a monument of protest against middle-class inflexibility, and my father snarled into his newspaper, made incoherent sounds, and glared at me across the length of the car. Once at a station stop, I heard him mutter an audible sentence.

"Marvelous, he says. Marvelous!" And with a final furious scowl at my mother, he added quite clearly, "The trouble with me is I have no sense of adventure!"

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IN THE INTERVAL BETWEEN THE TIME I GRADUATED from college and was drafted into the Army, I lived at home in Brooklyn with my parents. Everyone I knew was in service, and many evenings, for lack of something better, I went to the movies. Invariably, it was to see a foreign film in one of the art houses around New York.

On a particularly rainy autumn night, I decided after supper that I would make a long subway trip up to the Thalia Theatre on 95th Street off Broadway. They were showing two pictures I had heard a great deal about: *M*, and *THE LAST WILL OF DOCTOR MABUSE*, and it seemed too fine a double-feature to miss. As I remember, it was the last night the films were showing.

The outing would have been without incident if my parents had not decided to accompany me. It was all at my mother's instigation. We had a relation at the time which I suppose is not uncommon between mothers, and sons who have just acquired a college degree. She was eager to participate in what seemed to her the wholly impressive scope of my cultural interests. I, on my part, encouraged her with the notion that it was my duty to educate my parents. Indeed, I often felt enthusiasm for the project.

We were sitting in the living room after the dishes had been put away, when I started to go for my coat. My mother, who was reading, looked up. "Do you have to go out on such a rainy night, sonny? You'll catch a cold."

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difference between art and commerce. "Moreover," I said, "these two films are classics. They are an emotional experience of the first importance."

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"And go to sleep," I added sarcastically.

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"Now, don't talk to me like that."

"You know what I mean. I'll bet you've never seen a foreign movie. You don't even know what they are."

"Why should I? Have I ever been to Europe?" This was said as much for my father's ear as mine. It was his pleasure to spend the evening reading the newspaper and doing the cross-word puzzle, and my mother said it sharply enough to rouse him from the sensual somnolence of his activity.

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“*CROSSWORD* puzzle.”

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