

THE AMERICAN ANTONIONI

Political essayist / satirist / journalist and filmmaker

Noel Parmentel Jr. on his friendship with Norman Mailer

J U S T I N B O Z U N G

BOZUNG: Can we talk about your friendship with Norman Mailer?

PARMENTEL JR: Sure. I knew Norman for many years. I first met him in the late 1950's. At the time I was writing for Mike Wallace. It wasn't for *60 Minutes*—it was for a show called *The Mike Wallace Interview* [1957–60]. I met Norman and I said, “*Why don't you come onto the show.*” He said that he would. We did the show five days a week and we'd go so far as to kidnap someone from the lobby of the Algonquin hotel and bring them on to talk to Mike. We'd pay them one dollar. Norman came on *The Mike Wallace Interview* and not long after that—he called me up and invited me over to his apartment for a party. It was the night that he stabbed his wife Adele [Morales].

BOZUNG: What do you remember about that night?

PARMENTEL JR: Well, it was a party with lots of drinking going on. Norman's apartment at that time was over on West End Avenue. There was a odd group of people there that night.

BOZUNG: Did you witness the stabbing?

PARMENTEL JR: No, I had left just before. I was dropped off at home by C. Wright Mills and Allen Ginsberg. I had felt that it was time to leave because it had started to get unpleasant and there were some mean drunks there. Norman was spouting off about his muscles. When we left we didn't think

anything of it—but when we woke up the next morning and saw the newspapers—none of us could believe it. The producers of *The Mike Wallace Interview* debated whether or not they should air the interview with Norman, but in the end they decided to run it. Norman didn't go to jail because Adele decided not to go *whole-hog* against him and he had to make promises to behave himself for a long time. He disappeared out of view for a while.

Norman fancied himself a pugilist. Norman tried to pick a fight with me one night at Elaine's. Everybody used to go there. I was sitting there one night with a lady friend of mine and he came over to our table and joined us. I had just written a piece for the Village Voice but I wasn't happy with what they had done with it. I asked Norman what he thought about the Village Voice and I said, "*I think that they're a bunch of assholes.*" Norman got incensed because he had co-founded the paper. He said, "*You can't say that about the Village Voice.*" I said, "*Fuck you . . .*" He responded with, "*Hey, how'd you like to step outside?*" I said, "*C'mon, Norman . . .*" To humor him I did step outside. I had no intentions of hitting him but I certainly wasn't going to allow him to hit me either. I did it to try to calm him down and when I got outside he turned around and he tried to head-butt me. He fucked it up though and he head-butted me with his nose. I was too tall and when he stepped back—he had a bloody nose. We stood there for a minute and when we heard a siren coming around the corner we both walked quickly back inside and had a drink together. (Laughing)

BOZUNG: Was the night of the stabbing the last time you saw Norman for a while?

PARMENTEL JR: No, I saw him a few weeks after—maybe sooner than that. I was having a drink in my neighborhood bar off of Madison Avenue one evening when I saw Norman walk through the front door. Norman wasn't supposed to be drinking—but no one in this bar was going to report him. I saw him come in and I wondered what he was doing there. It was an oddball bar. He was there because Jeannie [Campbell] lived around the corner at the time and he would drop her off at home and then sneak over for a quick drink. We saw each other at this little bar often around then—because after the stabbing—he had to stay away from his usual haunts.

BOZUNG: Being friends with Norman for so long—Did his personality or his penchant for pugilism change over the years of your friendship in the aftermath of the stabbing?

PARMENTEL JR: Yes, it did. Over the years he became mellower and mellower. He liked to sit around and argue with people about current events or fads. He got in a public squirrel with the feminists. He was always arguing with Germaine Greer.

BOZUNG: Diana Trilling?

PARMENTEL JR: No, not Diana. She was a brilliant woman and she always knew what she was talking about. She didn't like me though, but I never liked her either.

BOZUNG: You're credited as the spark behind Norman's decision to run for Mayor of New York City at the end of the '60s

PARMENTEL JR: Well, I have to share that credit with Jack Newfield. Jack and I had dinner one night and we said, "*Let's run Norman for mayor...*" Because I was supposed to be the conservative and Jack was supposed to be the liberal. That was the deal . . . New York would secede and become the 51st State and there would be a lot of jousting and it would be a lot of fun. Someone wrote a book about Norman's campaign and I'm in there. . . .

BOZUNG: Joe Flaherty . . .

PARMENTEL JR: Right. Joe took that campaign too seriously . . .

BOZUNG: What was it about Norman that you thought would make him a able candidate for the Mayor of New York City?

PARMENTEL JR: We never thought that he would win! He just knew that our idea for the 51st State would get publicity because of Norman. We thought that Jimmy Breslin would be a good running mate for him and Gloria Steinem was going to run as his controller, but she chickened out. Jack and I dreamt the whole thing up and we got some great publicity out of it. Norman actually got more votes than [candidate] Jim Scheuer—who had spent several million dollars on his campaign.

BOZUNG: Were you behind any of the slogans that were devised during the campaign run? Like “51st State,” “I’d sleep better if Norman Mailer were mayor,” “Vote the Rascals In . . .”

PARMENTEL JR: 51st State was Norman’s idea. I think that Vote The Rascals In was mine. Norman called Jack and myself the “Hitler / Stalin pact.”

BOZUNG: How did Norman approach you about appearing in his second film, *Beyond the Law* (1968)?

PARMENTEL JR: He invited all of his friends to participate. At the time I was a partner with Richard Leacock and we had offices in a building on 45th Street. The company was called Leacock/Pennebaker. Ricky and I made films together. Norman shot both *Wild 90* (1968) and *Beyond the Law* there. He said, “Noel, c’mon and be in my movie.” I said, “Why not?”

BOZUNG: Did he explain his premise for *Beyond the Law*? Was he up for discussing his idea on the dichotomy of the saint and the psychopath. He had the idea that cops and criminals are closely linked together in their psychology?

PARMENTEL JR: Well, he thought that he was going to make serious films and be taken seriously as a filmmaker. At one point he said to me, “*They’re going to call me the American Antonioni.*” I said to him, “*Norman, they’re going to call you the American fix-it-again Tony . . .*”

BOZUNG: Was Norman’s audacity ever infectious?

PARMENTEL JR: Certainly. He was a great friend and he was highly-intelligent. But I never paid attention to his politics and he never paid attention to mine. I liked him personally. He was good company, well-informed and crazy enough to have fun with.

BOZUNG: What do you remember about the shooting of *Beyond the Law*?

PARMENTEL JR: It was shot with all of Leacock/Pennebaker’s cameramen. Norman went nuts and bought two KEM editing flatbeds. He bought two! I think after he completed *Maidstone* [1970]—he was out of pocket over one million dollars on his film experiments. He shot way too much footage. He had so much footage—he couldn’t have used it all.

BOZUNG: Did he afford you any direction as your character in *Beyond the Law*?

PARMENTEL JR: No, you made up your own lines as you went along. I played a District Attorney and I was in a scene with Michael McClure and Rip Torn. They played Hell's Angels bikers and somehow they got out of their jail cells and I ended up in a room with them and we wrestled around on the floor for fifteen minutes. They used some of the scene in the film. I told Norman that it was the best scene in the film. Rip agreed with me because it's the only scene that both Rip and I are in. (Laughing)

BOZUNG: You and Richard Leacock made some interesting films together. Why didn't your film with Leacock on the JFK conspiracy / Clay Shaw trial in New Orleans come to fruition around this time?

PARMENTEL JR: I'm from New Orleans. So I knew Jim Garrison. I knew Clay Shaw and I knew Judge Hennessey. I got both Jim and Clay to agree to the filming of the trial. It was too bad because it would've been an interesting film. It was Clay's lawyers who stopped it from happening for whatever reason. Even Judge Hennessey said, "*Well, this has never been done before . . .*" Jim Garrison went nuts with that trial. I knew Jim in college. He was in law school when I was at Tulane University. I thought that I had set up a miracle with the film—because they had agreed not to talk to anyone but Ricky Leacock and myself.

BOZUNG: The Kennedy assassination was a point of interest for Norman. Did you ever have any discussions with him about it?

PARMENTEL JR: Not that I can recall, but I'm the only person I know who thinks that Oswald acted alone.

BOZUNG: One of more interesting aspects of *Beyond the Law* is Norman's choice as an actor to speak in a Irish accent the entire film . . .

PARMENTEL JR: I sent him a telegram after I saw *Beyond the Law*. I said, "*Your British is Yiddish and your Erse is worse . . .*" (Laughing)

BOZUNG: He used an Irish accent in the film but also at times when he was on television or on the radio as himself . . . It was almost as if he was always acting.

PARMENTEL JR: He was acting. But there was always an element of seriousness in it. I never understood it.

BOZUNG: What are your memories of the shooting of *Maidstone*?

PARMENTEL JR: There was almost a murder out there on Bobby [Robert] Gardiner's mansion out in East Hampton. Do you remember that television show where the guy lived on an island with that dwarf? The little one from that show was one of our actors out there.

BOZUNG: Herve Villechaize.

PARMENTEL JR: That's right, Herve. And there was an actor who came from Memphis, TN. He was out there on the island with us as well.

BOZUNG: Lane Smith?

PARMENTEL JR: Right, Lane. I knew his family. I didn't know Lane well, but I knew his family—they were very social. One day at Gardiner's mansion—Herve heard Lane Smith use the “N word” and he walked up and stabbed him in the leg with a knife he was carrying. I don't think any of the cameras were on at the time though. The little guy Herve said, “*What do you mean by calling me a nigger?*” Lane made some joke and Herve stabbed him. The police were called and Bobby Gardiner had to ease the situation over. Everyone was drinking and somehow Lane was able to climb up into a tree to get away from that little monster.

BOZUNG: Were you around when Norman punched Lane Smith out during the shooting?

PARMENTEL JR: I was. Lane had a way of getting on your nerves. Lane got into a fight with Rip Torn during *Maidstone* too.

BOZUNG: How did Norman approach you to be part of the shooting of *Maidstone*?

PARMENTEL JR: Pretty much the same way he asked me to be part of *Beyond the Law*, but with *Maidstone* we had to sign contracts.

BOZUNG: Did you shoot any scenes for *Maidstone* that didn't make Norman's final cut of the film?

PARMENTEL JR: My character was part of PAX and there was a scene that we shot for the film where another character tried to assassinate me. They came at me from behind and put a wire around my neck. They pulled a little too hard and I got pretty upset.

BOZUNG: There was quite a bit of Mailer tension in the air during the shooting of *Maidstone*. How much of that do you think was brought on by Norman's approach to idea for the film and how much was brought on by the drugs and alcohol available during that week?

PARMENTEL JR: I thought it was the alcohol and marijuana. I hated all that. I was probably the only person there that didn't take a puff. There was lots of liquor going around. All the drinking—it was fun. It was a seven day cocktail party.

BOZUNG: Did you stay with the others at night at the local hotel when the cameras were turned off?

PARMENTEL JR: I did, but I couldn't stand it for long. I lasted two or three days before I had to leave there. Norman paid for me to have my own room there even. I had a lot of friends on the island so I didn't have any problems finding someplace to stay for the rest of that week.

BOZUNG: In the New York social circle that both you and Norman were apart of—were his films taken seriously while they were being made or after they had been released?

PARMENTEL JR: Some took them seriously, but I didn't. George Plimpton took Norman's films very seriously. He tried to explain to me once what Norman was trying to do with his films but I couldn't take any of it seriously.

BOZUNG: Not even as a filmmaker yourself?

PARMENTEL JR: Well, I believe in a script.

BOZUNG: One of Norman's principal ideas about cinema was how the medium had no true reality inside of it.

PARMENTEL JR: That's right. I didn't personally buy into that whatsoever, but I'm a reactionary. Ricky Leacock bought into some of that bullshit. Ricky was a documentarian though and he didn't like scripting. He bought into it, but he himself, could only work that way for so long as well before he got tired of it. Norman had a yen to be a serious filmmaker—but I just don't think it was in the cards for him.

BOZUNG: Looking back at your friendship with Norman . . . What is your fondest memory of him?

PARMENTEL JR: Well, I miss him. I just miss talking with him. I used to love going over to his place in Brooklyn Heights. He always had great parties and dinners. I used to go over there and watch the fireworks. You'd go over there and you never knew who was going to show up.