

NORMAN MAILER'S DARK FORCES

JUSTIN BOZUNG

*Cinematographer John Bailey, A.S.C., on working with Norman Mailer in Provincetown during the shooting of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. This interview was conducted in December of 2013.*

JUSTIN BOZUNG: How did you come to work with Norman on *Tough Guys Don't Dance*?

JOHN BAILEY, A.S.C.: You know, Michael Lennon asked me the same thing last year when he interviewed me for *A Double Life*, and I don't even remember now . . . (Pause) But it probably came through [*Tough Guys* producer] Tom Luddy. I had worked with Tom on the Schrader film *Mishima* in Tokyo in the Winter/Spring of 1984. Tom produced *Tough Guys* and so I think he got a hold of me and connected me with Norman.

Were you a fan of Norman prior? Had you read Norman's book *Tough Guy Don't Dance* before you were hired to shoot the film?

Oh yeah, I did read the book. But I hadn't read *Tough Guys* ahead of time. I had read both *An American Dream* and *The Naked and the Dead*, previously—and I had read a lot of his journalism. I particularly liked *The Executioner's Song*. I had read a few of his essays. I had seen a couple of his earlier films. I had seen *Maidstone* (1970). But, I was really kind of unprepared for a film like *Tough Guys Don't Dance*—which was really unlike any of his earlier films.

Or any other film for that matter . . . (laughing)

Or any other film that's ever been made . . . (laughing)

Being that you deal with textures in visuals—What kind of inspiration did you derive from Norman’s book of *Tough Guys*—it’s a novel that is visually poetic on its own terms, right? Did his book put any sort of visual ideas into your head for the film?

Well, the book is written as a sort of hard-boiled classical noir novel. Like David Goodis, Raymond Chandler, or Dashiell Hammett. In a way it is written in that genre. But those kinds of novels tend to be pretty visceral and literal in terms of their delineation of the world. It’s a hard-boiled, realistic, kitchen-sink-kind-of-world. Norman’s work, to me, has always kind of dealt with realism in a certain way. What I remember from reading *The Naked and The Dead*, and this is something that people who don’t really like Norman’s work think about it, is that it’s a literal war story. They don’t really hang onto the spiritual, metaphysical, and surreal aspects in his work. Which is very much a part of *An American Dream*.

When I read the *Tough Guys* screenplay, I felt that I needed to read the novel so that I could get into the substructure of it—the state of mind that Norman was trying to express in the adaptation. I really felt that kind of juggling or balancing that you would find in that classical hard-boiled noir mystery with that metaphysical and spiritual dark world that Norman seems to be focused in on. I think that’s one of the strong elements in the film. A lot of people, and a lot of critics did not get that about the film. But that’s also layered over with Norman’s particularly impish or dark and perverse sense of humor. It’s a gallows-type of dark-humor. That’s very much a part of the film—and if you don’t get that—it just comes across as being this sort of baroque or Grand Guignol work. One of the things that Norman talked to me about, and this really made me understand where he was coming from: Norman talked to me about Provincetown, and how it was the genesis of America and how the Pilgrims had landed there first before they had gone onto Plymouth. And that in its geographical location, out there in the middle of nowhere at the end of this hook of land that’s surrounded by sea—it has a tremendous tradition of dark spirituality. He very much believed, as he did in the real world, that dark forces rule us all. And, to him, Provincetown was this sort of locus for a lot of those dark forces.

Spalding Gray, who I worked with on *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987), once talked of that “cloud of evil that floats around the world and from time-to-time comes down and settles . . .” in a place like Germany, Chile, or Cambo-

dia. I think Norman really believed in that. That there was an ambience of evil that was embodied in a certain part of the idea of Provincetown. It's not really part of the United States. Spaulding Gray said that Manhattan wasn't part of the United States either, but that it was really an island off the coast of the United States.

When you look at the West Coast—which is where I'm from—I feel more connected out here to the desert and the sea. One of the most spiritual and secular moments I've ever had was when my wife Carol and I went up to Big Sur to tour Robinson Jeffers's house. Jeffers's whole notion of the Big Sur area, where he lived and built his house, was that it was a kind of anti-bod of what Provincetown was. In other words, if the myth of America started with where the Pilgrims landed in Provincetown, with a kind of hope that they might have had—we spent the next several centuries traveling across the great continent eventually coming to land's end—the California Coast—ending at Big Sur. Robinson Jeffers evoked that whole idea in his poetry. This end of the end of America. Norman loved poetry, and he wrote poetry. I don't know if he ever wrote about Robinson Jeffers, or if he ever spoke about him, but in a way—to me—Mailer and Robinson Jeffers represent the opposite sides of the idea of America.

Mailer and Jeffers were both hard men. Men's men. Jeffers was very much an intellectual but he wasn't into the whole Hemingway aesthetic, but he was self-created very much in the way that Norman Mailer was.

One of the things that has always fascinated me, and from the very beginning, was how *Tough Guys*, the book and the movie, dealt—within the context of a genre—with much larger ideas and a consideration of the whole of the American ethos. So many people missed that about it. So much of Norman's work isn't categorized or ordered. It's not coherent—it's messy. Everything about Norman and how he wrote and presented himself—it was pure instinct. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* almost feels like an improvised-instinctive movie.

How about the supernatural? I've heard stories about Norman not feeling comfortable at certain shooting locations or about how he wouldn't walk into certain rooms if the vibes weren't right during the shooting of the film. Did you experience any of that first hand?

What I experienced was how Norman was very much obsessed with the idea of Race Point. On the North Shore there. We shot a couple of the big scenes

there at night. Race Point seemed to be the kind of focus, or nexus, of a lot of his ideas about evil and darkness coming together. I think he was fascinated by the idea of that. It was very important to him, too, to shoot in his own house. At a certain point he said that was because it was the only location that he could afford to shoot in inside of Provincetown—but I know that house had huge meaning to him. It was the notion of the water coming in and out and how the sand stretched out to almost an infinity point during low tide.

And the fog coming in. . . . It was a startling sequence when Larry Tierney went out in the boat to dump the heads in the film. The fog came in and it was very bizarre. It happened almost unplanned. As I recall, Tierney almost got lost in the fog out in the boat. The whole thing was so surreal. There were situations like that. Another where the weather was coming in—it was such a bad storm that we couldn't go outside to shoot. It battered Norman's house. So we did a whole sequence of shots where the waves were crashing up against Norman's house. I remember, some of waves coming in and hitting the sliding glass doors on his deck. We thought that the glass was just going to give way. We incorporated that into the movie with the idea of the insignificance of man against the forces of nature. That's one of the subtexts of the film. It was so odd. There was no way that we could've predicted that was going to happen. We had such a short shooting schedule. I think like twenty-five days or so. In that period of time, to have the kind of weather we had, with that storm and the fog—it almost seemed like Norman was a kind of Prospero calling the forces of nature in for the film.

During the pre-production did you and Norman talk about films that he may have been influenced by or wanted to emulate with the visual style of *Tough Guys*?

I don't think we did.

Would you have discussed David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986)?

Was that out before *Tough Guys Don't Dance*?

It came out a couple weeks before you started shooting the film . . .

I doubt it, because I didn't see *Blue Velvet* until much later on. What I remember, in talking to Norman, was that he wanted me to do the film rather than any number of New York-based indie people that he could've hired—

because he wanted the film to look like an A-List Hollywood film. As bizarre as that was, maybe he hoped that in having that kind of cover on it—would give it a sort of mainstream legitimacy. Because he had done those free-wheeling improvised movies prior but they had never achieved any kind of general distribution.

What's so damn impressive about *Tough Guys* is that you have that sense of Chandler and Goodis and genre, but yet, the film doesn't have that traditional noir visual style . . .

We didn't reference any other films visually. But what we did reference—he was very articulate on how important the Cape light was to him. Also, he noted how unique the air was, and how the sun was so close on this little spit of land. He was very clear on that. This was a human drama that was cast amidst all of these forces. He talked about the importance of light. I was familiar with Joel Meyerowitz's book *Cape Light*. Joel felt a kind of proprietary ownership about the idea of cape light. He and I didn't really hit it off because he considered me to be this interloper. When I went off and shot what is essentially the title sequence of *Tough Guys*—those shots of the landscape and seascape with the changing light—Joel had really wanted to do that and he pressured Norman about it. I made it very clear to Norman that I had wanted to do it because I really considered that the heart and soul of the film. So Norman and I did talk about the whole idea of images that could capture the whole essence of the spirit and geography of Provincetown and that part of the Cape. Norman's clarity and sense of importance of that really was a major focal point for me. That was more important than referencing anything from any other films. We may have talked about some of the noir films from the past, but that might have been because Larry Tierney had been cast in the film. Tierney had been in a lot of those noir films of the '40s. And that might have been why Norman wanted the voice-over narration in the film.

I certainly didn't try to emulate any noir composition or lighting, even though I was very familiar with both Nick Musuraca and John Alton's work—the two main noir cinematographers. We weren't trying to channel any of that noir style directly. Norman was very clear that he wanted it to look very mainstream, but also sensual and beautiful. I didn't try to go for any of that grainy and hard-edge look. I wanted it to be almost dream-like. Norman and I did talk, too, about the lushness. That contrast between the grotesquery of the severed heads and the blood with the spit of land and the

lore or evil that is embodied there juxtaposed against that beautiful light. That was very important to him.

Norman talked a lot about the Pilgrims and the notion of fundamental American Protestantism. Johnathan Edwards. The fire and brimstone, the presence of evil. We talked about those things as dramatic and religious tropes. That gave me the conviction to do certain framings in the film that weren't particular artsy but four-squared. Very Protestant if you will.

What do you remember about the Ryan O'Neal "*Oh God, Oh Man...*" 360 degree turn with the camera going around-and-around...

Oh yeah. That was one moment where Norman and I really saw things differently. I thought it was ridiculous. I thought he was going to get a lot of abuse for that and I didn't know how he could pull it off. It seemed to me that it skirted the edge of unintentional caricature. But Norman may have wanted that. It wasn't always possible to know what Norman's own personal subtext was. But I was not uncomfortable doing that shot. I thought it was arch and unbelievable. I just remember Norman reveling in this intense and perverse laughter in doing it. He enjoyed that. He really wanted to do that shot. I didn't think it would ever end up in the movie. That's my opinion. You might think it's one of the high moments in the film!

Do you remember shooting the seance sequence in the film?

B: Barely. I haven't seen the film in almost twenty-years. I just remember that it was very disturbing because of how Norman really believed in that stuff. I was raised Catholic. I'm not religious now at all. My sense of religion was codified in the hierarchy and structure of a formal church. Norman's was very atavistic. Norman's conception of religion and everywhere was much more primordial and much more rooted to the earth and natural forces. The religion of sexuality.

The seance sequence is quite frightening visually with the way the shot is composed.

That particular shot was done with a split diopter, a half of a diopter lens that allows one half of the frame to be in focus at a distance while holding focus in very near foreground on the other half of the frame. The trick is to hide the blend line—which you try to do in a vertical. The blend line was hidden in the dark between the tip of the profile of John Synder's nose and then on

the edge of Debra Sandlund's right shoulder. If you look closely you can see the fuzzy break in the scrolled chair where the lower edge of the wood is out of focus and the same line at her arm is in focus. I recall doing a number of split diopter shots at this time. They can be very unsettling as they are inconsistent with the laws of optics.

What are your thoughts on the notions of homophobia in the film?

The homophobia in the film. . . . It was made some time ago, and I don't want to say that that stuff was permissible then, but it certainly didn't have the overtones of political-incorrecness then that it does now. It's almost absurd in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. What I've gathered from reading Michael Lennon's recent biography on Norman, and I'm just now getting into the section on *Tough Guys* and Provincetown, is that Norman was almost ambivalent about homosexuality. He was almost afraid that he was a latent-homosexual. I don't know anything about that though. My only feeling about it is that men who are compelled to be anti-homosexual or homophobic have something unresolved in their own notion of male identity. I do remember Norman saying once to me, "We're all bisexual to a certain extent."

In articles written around the time that *Tough Guys* was in production in Provincetown, there are often mentions of tensions on the set between Norman and the actors . . .

Yes. Tierney was just a hard-ass guy that tried to out-tough Norman. Tierney was angry, belligerent, and very uncooperative. I almost think that at one point Norman regretted casting him. He was undirectable. John Bedford-Lloyd and Norman got along very well. For the most part, Ryan and Norman got along well, but as I recall—they had their moments. I don't think that Ryan felt that Norman understood his process as an actor. Norman saw Ryan and the other actors in a very operatic way. His notion of the characters was like a part of the score of the film and all they had to do was interpret what he saw as obvious. Because he had no experience in that kind of cinema, and even though he had directed some theatre—I don't think he understood the film actor's process.

How about Wings Hauser?

Wings was kind of a loose cannon as I recall. I know the character is supposed to be Coke'd up all the time—Wings might have been as well. He was

kind of in his own movie. I think Norman saw him as a force that needed to be dealt with, wrestled to the ground. I think Norman had an ambivalent feeling about Wings. Wings' madness and unpredictably—he's a very scary actor—was exactly like cat-nip to Norman. He was very attracted to it, but as a director—it was very unsettling to Norman. There was, at times, a real disconnect between Norman and Wings. But I think that Norman found Wings's crazed approach to the character as being essential in making the film work.

How about Debra Sandlund?

Norman was mesmerized by her. But he loved blondes and blondes with big tits. And as I recall, she was pretty well-endowed. Norman, I think, in an old-fashioned way embodied the duality of womanhood: Mother and Whore. Debra, in a way was a whore, but in a maternal way. Whereas Isabella was very much the virginal mother, but strong.

It's quite amazing how masculine Norman allows Debra Sandlund to be in the film . . .

That's true. It seems to me that he was always attracted to that as far as I can tell from reading Michael Lennon's biography.

Were you at the Cannes screening of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*?

I wasn't. In those days I was doing three films a year. It was shown at Cannes? Was it in competition or in the market?

It was show out of competition in 1987 as Norman was on the jury that particular year.

I didn't know that!

Tom Luddy once told about the screening of the film at Cannes, and how he saw the film there with David Lynch and Isabella Rossellini. He told me that after the screening, David Lynch was telling people that he thought that *Tough Guys Don't Dance* was a masterpiece . . .

I think it is in its own way. It defies genre certainly. You can't categorize it. It's a film . . . Well, I don't know. I've done many films over the years, and there are many that I feel that still haven't had their day in the sun.