

With a sheaf of summers in Bar Harbor as his inspiration, *Wall Street 2* heartthrob **John Buffalo Mailer**, 32, is daring to live on the knife's edge, taking on the world as actor, playwright, screenwriter, editor, blogger, and scene-stealer. Would you expect anything less from the son of two-time Pulitzer prize-winning author Norman Mailer (1923-2007), who for decades treasured Maine as his fortress of solitude?

When Your Name Is Mailer

INTERVIEW BY COLIN W. SARGENT

Congratulations on your recent role as Robby in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. You were also "Speechwriter No. 2" in *W.*, right? How did you first meet Oliver Stone, and how did these acting assignments come about?

I first met Oliver because he had read a treatment for a Hurricane Katrina movie I had written. Our mutual friend, Richard Stratton (who plays the prison guard in the first few moments of *Money Never Sleeps*), had gotten the treatment to Oliver and now he wanted me to come to Los Angeles for a meeting. Simultaneously, Laura Dawn, the Cultural Director of MoveOn.org (who also makes an appearance in *MNS*), had asked my brother Michael and myself to produce a commercial suggesting we listen to the Iraq War veterans on what to do about the situation. I took a leap and asked Oliver if he would be interested in directing

it, and with hindsight, not surprisingly, he said yes. The weekend is too much of a story to get into here, but suffice to say, meeting with Oliver as a writer was a fantasy come to life; producing a commercial he was directing, that led me to believe that antacid might just be the most important product on the market and something everyone should pick a company and buy stock in. Nerve-wracking is one way to put it. Bruce Lee once said that the goal is to be like water: Always maintain your own substance while still remaining flexible enough to take on the necessary shape you need in order to deal with the moment at hand. It's a good idea when working with Oliver in any capacity. If you try to maintain a rigid stance on how you are going to go about doing your part (be it writing, producing, or acting), you are fighting the magic and putting yourself in the jeopardy of not rising as high as he can bring you. Oliver has the ability to pull exactly the per-



You Can't Phone It In

formance he needs from you (which in turn makes you shine) in ways that don't even allow you to know it is happening. At one point over that weekend I produced the commercial for him, he turned to me and said,

"You look like Russell Crowe."

"I'll take that," I said. "I've gotten Jason Priestley all my life."

He smiled and looked at me with a cross of sizing me up and checking me out—almost undressing my soul with his eyes. Then he grinned.

"You could be my Russell Crowe."

"I'll be your Russell Crowe, Oliver." I said it with a laugh, and while I certainly appreciated the comparison, after seventeen years of hoofing it in New York theater as an actor, writer, and producer, I forced myself not to take it too seriously, as I did not know how many more times I could come within striking distance of living my dream, only to see it fall apart for reasons out of my con-

trol. So I laughed and we went on going through footage of veterans talking about bringing the troops home.

Several months later, when Oliver cast me in the role of Paul Medlo, one of the unfortunate troops who lived through the My Lai Massacre, a sizable role in *Pinkville*, one that does not ordinarily go to theater actors with limited film credits like myself, I thought that dream had finally come true. It happened to come at a crazy time in my life, as my father was dying in the hospital and I was flying back and forth between L.A. and New York for callbacks. I did get to tell my dad that Oliver had cast me in the film before he died. There was a good deal of comfort in that. The day after my father's funeral, I had to fly to L.A. to start rehearsals. It felt like an acid trip. By Friday, when Oliver told me the movie had fall-

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en apart and was not going to happen in the foreseeable future, I had to laugh. I had buried my dad the Tuesday before, and tough as I like to think I am, the news that this movie was not going to happen made the death of my father all too real and I nearly crumbled, suddenly weak in the knees now that I no longer had this adventure with Oliver to escape into and put off dealing with the loss of my best friend, my dad.

"I've had a bad week," Oliver said to me on the phone, sensing a bit of shock on my end. "But you've had a really bad week!"

When I heard he was in New York casting *Money Never Sleeps*, I emailed his assistant, Evan Bates, who told me no one but Shia LaBeouf and Michael Douglas had been cast yet. The next day I got an invitation to go to dinner with Oliver, Shia, Eric Kopeloff (the producer), and Oliver's mother, Jacqueline. First audition.

That night outside of the club we went to after dinner, Shia told me that Oliver had spoken to him the day before and told him he was casting me as his best friend. That it was a done deal. Now, Shia is a really nice guy, and I think, looking back on it, he kind of liked me and was just trying to give a guy a little confidence, because I had to audition my ass off for this part. After three rounds, Oliver sent me a text saying, "You're good, man. Get ready." I thought I was in! So much so, that I went up to a buddy of mine's farm in western Massachusetts to celebrate, not quite breaking, but certainly swelling my nose to twice its normal size by making the foolish mistake of sparring with my pal. When I got the call the next day from my manager telling me it was down to me and two other actors (both badass actors who had an impressive amount of credits behind them that I could not claim), and I would have to do one more audition, I came close to panicking.

In the end, it may have been the shiner and swollen nose that cemented the part for me, as Robby is a good guy but a bit of a brawler. You never know how these things can shake out.

Once I had finished the audition, a slight grin formed at the corners of Oliver's mouth. "So, I can count on you to look out

for Shia?"

"If you cast me, you absolutely can!" I was about to collapse from the tension of not knowing.

"I'm casting you, I'm casting you. Relax."

"So, it's official?" I still had no idea what was going on.

Oliver extended his hand. "It's official."

Kathleen Chopin, the casting director, gave me a wink to suggest she had been pulling for this and was happy both Oliver and Fox were taking a chance on an unknown. I walked out of her office, took one look at Kathleen's assistant and the other actors waiting to go in, then allowed myself to drop to the floor and exhale in a way I had never done before. The fantasy had become, once again, reality. Only for real this time.

THE NAKED AND THE LIVING

“My father completely taught me how to write. Part of it has to be born in your ear—the same way you can teach someone how to play jazz but you can't teach them how to be Miles Davis.”

But even in that moment, I already knew the adventure was just beginning.

If there were a 'word cloud' for your acting instructions in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, what would some of those cloud words be? There's certainly a sense of you grounding Jake's character as his fellow options trader and Long Island best friend—"a deft little performance," according to ew.com, as well as some tension.

'Love,' 'Protect,' and 'Bring The Sex.'

What specific acting considerations did Stone ask you to keep in mind while shooting? Which of the other actors was most helpful to you on set?

Oliver was adamant about us all doing our homework and really understanding the world we were embodying. From the accent

to the swagger to the energy shots, he wanted us to eat, sleep, dream, and honor where these guys were coming from. Oliver doesn't go in for judging his characters, which is why he is able to pull off the kinds of movies he does. He comes at it from a genuine sense of curiosity, of wanting to understand his subjects for all their faults and virtues. He asked the same of all us.

Getting to work with this cast was like going to work in my fantasy every day. Each one of them affected me probably much more than they know. Getting to spend a day standing next to Michael Douglas may have been the highlight. We have one scene together at the Metropolitan, where my character is telling Gordon Gekko what an inspiration he was to him

growing up as a kid, which amounts to about thirty seconds of film time but took six hours to shoot. As a now iconic actor who started out as a producer, and also grew up under the shadow of a larger-than-life father, Michael has always been an inspiration to me. What I learned that day is he's also a terrific guy—real, grounded, and humble, yet aware of who he is and what he has accomplished. I was sweating bullets at the beginning of the day, but after about twenty minutes with him, I felt at ease. It was instrumental for my character, who is also talking to a legend he admires in that scene.

However, Frank Langella and I have become the closest out of everyone I got to know from the cast. Frank is the genuine article, and it is incredible to see him starting to get his due as one of the greatest actors of his generation. He has been generous with offering advice on acting, women, and life. And as a result, the fantasy continues on.

Your father has written eloquently (no surprise) about his having to climb Otter Cliffs in Acadia National Park as an Episcopalian rite of passage, in *Harlot's Ghost* and in *Esquire*, saying the black rocks at the base of the cliffs hissed like a gas-station floor. Reading the mutual interview you and he wrote for *New York* magazine, I found myself wondering if you were ever asked to perform the same feat? Or was it at least discussed?

“It started to **hail** as we were on the middle of the **Knife’s Edge**. I don’t think I had ever been quite as **scared** in the **eight years** I had been **alive**, than I was in that moment.” —John Buffalo Mailer



Clockwise from top: Knife’s Edge, Mt. Katahdin; Norman and John Buffalo Mailer; Fortune Rock, the Somes Sound house where Norman, John Buffalo, and the rest of the Mailer clan stayed. To read more, visit: portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2010/06/finding-fortune



Every summer, my father would gather all of my brothers and sisters and cousins and we would train for months, getting ready to hike Mount Katahdin. I was young at the time, and it is really more my siblings’ place to talk about these outings (indeed, several of them have written about those adventures eloquently in various publications), but I will say that the time when it started to hail as we were on the middle of the Knife’s Edge (for those unfamiliar with Mount Katahdin, the Knife’s Edge is a half-mile stretch of small, sharp rocks forming about a three-foot-wide path from one peak to the next, with an extremely steep drop-off on either side, which would most likely send one to an early grave if you were to take a tumble). I don’t think I had ever been quite as scared for my life in the eight years I had been alive, than I was in that moment. When we got to the bottom of the mountain, we all went out for cheeseburgers. I think a part of me understood why my father would push us so much farther than we thought we could go; I had never had a better cheeseburger in my life. He instilled in all of us from a young age

that Courage was the highest virtue, and that it was only through confronting one’s fears that life could fully be appreciated.

Tell us about what you’re writing right now—what this interview is interrupting (sorry), whether it’s a screenplay, novel, article, or non-fiction piece.

Currently I’m producing a feature documentary about using hip-hop as a core curriculum in inner-city high schools called *Follow The Leader*, directed by David Ambrose; cowriting a screenplay about the life of Rita Gigante; and working on two books, one of which is called *An Insider’s Guide to the Heterosexual Underground of Provincetown*, which is a tour through the last ten years in America, with a focus on exploring the Columbine massacre, 9/11, the flooding of New Orleans, and the bank bailouts. Which is a good deal of fun, believe it or not. The other book is called *3 Days in Detroit*, which I’m writing with Matt Pascarella. That one is about the experience of going to see Matthew Barney’s opera adaptation of my father’s book *Ancient Evenings*, essentially turning Detroit into his canvas, while also taking a tour through the ghettos and burned-out buildings

of a city that can legitimately claim to have 40 percent of its buildings abandoned.

In addition to that, I am working on several books with my family and the Wylie Agency of unpublished collected works of my father’s for the Mailer Estate.

If you were to write a bizarro sequel to your ebook *Music, Food, and Death* that took place in Maine instead of New Orleans, who would the strippers be? Where is Maine’s underbelly, and who’s running it?

Unfortunately, I couldn’t tell you that off-hand. But if you’re interested, I’d be happy to put on my investigative journalist hat and get to the bottom of it for you...so to speak.

Because Maine seemed to be your father’s fortress of solitude across the years, or at least one of his fortresses, you’ve surely spent more than a few vacation days here. Where and when were you here, and what do you like to do specifically when you’re here?

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ROBERT WITKOWSKI (2); COURTESY JOHN BUFFALO MAILER; TOM CRANE

INTERVIEW

My strongest memories of Maine were those summers we spent hiking Katahdin.

We ran a story this summer, written by an architectural blogger known as the Down East Dilettante, where he describes a fantastic house in Somes Sound, Maine ["Finding Fortune," *Summertime* 2010]. At one point, Norman Mailer suspends his very young son above the surf of this house he's renting. Was this you, and do you remember this?

I'm not sure that ever happened, to tell you the truth. While my father always pushed us hard, he was never cruel. He did encourage all my brothers and sisters to jump off the porch into the water. I was too young to even attempt it at the time. I believe he made a deal with my oldest brother, Michael, that if he would jump off, then my father would dive off, head-first. Of course Michael did jump off, and my father was not altogether comfortable with having to make good on his end of the bargain. Luckily, he was madly in love with my mother and was not about to give her the sense that he was scared to do it, so he got up there and even realized there were certain advantages to diving instead of jumping, one being that you have that far less to go when you leap out head-first.

What other adventures have you had in Maine?

The most foolish adventure I've had in Maine would have to be the time some buddies and I decided to climb the Beehive in Acadia National Park while under the influence of more than one substance. Going up was all well and good, as the path is clearly marked and all types of handholds have been put in place to aid you along dangerous patches. But that wasn't quite exciting enough for us, so in our tripped-out state, we decided to go down the back side, which remained untouched. About halfway down, I realized that if I fell, it would be the end of me. I have never felt more like one with a rock in my life as I took the painstakingly long journey back to level ground, sweating all the way. It is not something I would ever do again, and I



do not recommend it to anyone. But it certainly felt like an adventure.

Tell us about the Maine that's yours and nobody else's.

It may be safe to say that the back side of the Beehive is the only part of Maine I could make that claim on, as I don't believe anyone before or since has been as foolish as we were to try a stunt like that with no ropes.

So far, what's the best writing you've done in Maine, and what were the circumstances? Did you work on *The Big Empty* here at any point? Did you have to distance yourself from New York, for example, while you were writing *Crazy Eyes*? Many people came up to Maine from Manhattan immediately after 9/11, because we seemed like a kind of Brigadoon, unstuck in time, where they could take stock of the world situation.

I have to admit that I have not done any writing in Maine, although the extraordinary beauty one encounters on the coast has certainly inspired a good deal of my abilities with description. I've always seen Maine as the most beautiful state in the Northeast when it comes to terrain.

What's your next film project?

There are several possibilities I am weighing at the moment, but at the ripe old age of 32, I've learned not to talk about them until the deal is signed, because in the movie business, you never know if it's real until you're in the theater watching the final cut. But I will say that thanks to *Wall Street*, each of the possibilities is exciting, and I would be thankful to be a part of any of them.

Andrew Wyeth purposely chose never to teach Jamie Wyeth to paint. How did, or didn't, Norman Mailer teach you to write?

He completely taught me how to write. As much as anyone can teach another, that is. Part of it has to be born in your ear, particularly with dialogue. The same way you can teach someone how to play jazz but you can't teach them how to be Miles Davis. But from the time I was seventeen I was showing my father stories and he would take the time to edit them, tell me what I was doing right and what was like tin scraping on aluminum to his

ears when I would make the stupid mistakes all writers need to do when they are first starting out. A great deal of what he taught me is in his book on writing, *The Spooky Art*, which I recommend to any serious writer, although I was mad as hell at the time he wrote it. "You're giving away the family secrets, Pop?!" In truth, it is a little-known gem and perhaps one of his greatest gifts to writers for generations to come.

In her memoir, your mother, Norris Church Mailer, has written, "Well, I bought a ticket to the circus. I don't know why I was surprised to see elephants." How much does your mom figure in your creative career?

She is an equal inspiration. I think she has her own strengths as a writer that I have learned from, particularly her descriptive skills and sense of plot and structure. One reviewer called her writing 'painterly,' and I believe that's an accurate statement. As someone who has fought cancer for 12 years and beat the odds time and time

again, having endured pain to levels that most of us don't even want to know exist, she has taught me that anything is possible, and I carry that with me every day. My mother is a superhero in my book.

Tell us three things you have to do to reassure yourself you're in Maine when you're here.

First and foremost, Harbor Bars [ice-cream treats]. Gotta get a real Harbor Bar. Second, jump into that freezing cold water that makes you know you're alive in ways you just can't explain to anyone from a tropical climate who has not had the pleasure. Third, go hike Mount Katahdin.

How good was your father getting at blogging by the time he

is a collection of his radical columns from the 1950s and 1960s, and it is fascinating to discover the similarities between those columns and some of the finer blogs around today. I think in some ways, he would have been excited by the possibilities inherent in blogging if he were a young man today, but at the time he discovered it, he knew that his attention had to be focused on his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, if he was going to be able to pull off what he set out to do with that book.

Your dad is famous for his nose as a writer. What's your organ of privilege, creatively speaking?

Now that's a saucy question! I would have to say it's my ear. You can't teach someone

a wordsmith.

Tell us about your alter-ego of Beau Buffalo Mailer.

You have certainly done your homework. Wow. Well, when I was getting ready to enter the world, my parents still had not decided on my first name. They had it down to John and Beau but were having a hard time pulling the trigger on one or the other. When I told my college roommate, Neil Stewart (who was with me when we discovered *In The Heights*), that I easily could have been called 'Beau Buffalo Mailer,' he immediately concluded that if they had [named me that], I would have had no choice but to become a boxer. "You know, Beau Buff, the wild middle-weight who

could have become a contender," was along the lines of what he imagined. But, aside from Neil and myself, I was not aware that anyone else knew about my frustrated middle-weight boxing alter ego. I'm extremely impressed.

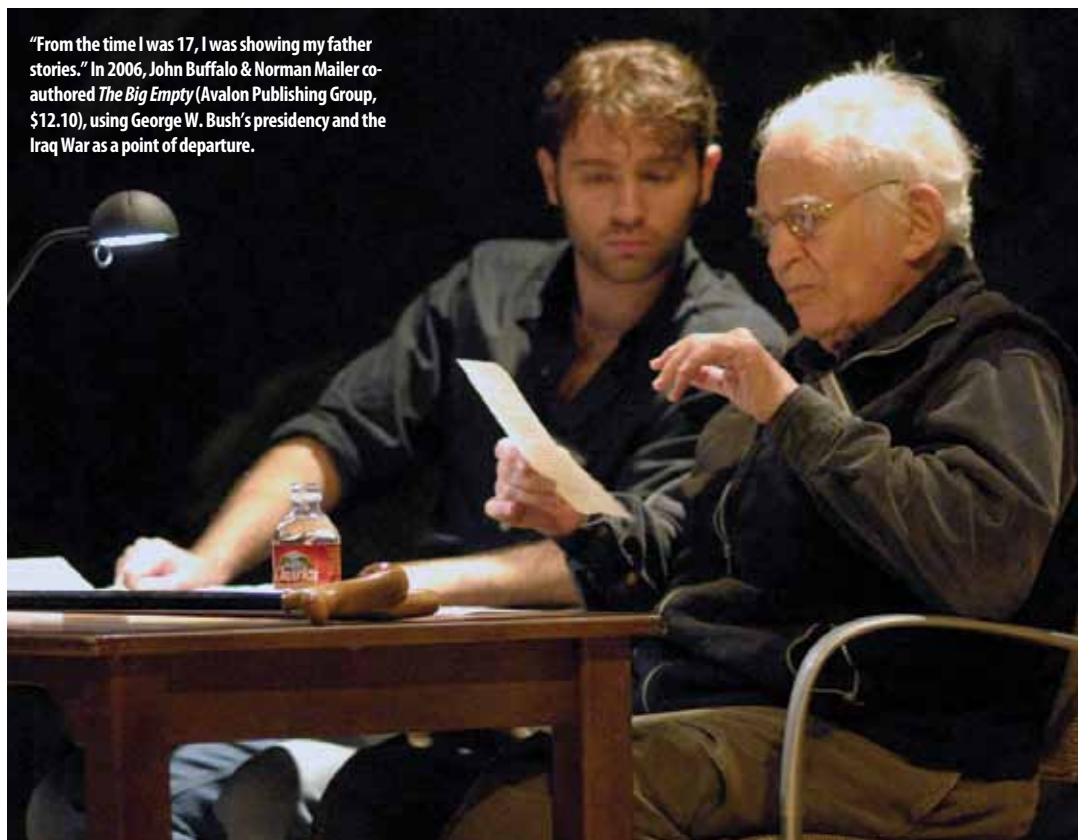
In the first *Wall Street*, Josh Mostel, a summer Mainer, played one of Gekko's lieutenants. Were you aware of his performance, and his connection to Maine, while preparing for your role?

I have to admit I would be lying if I told you I was aware of his connection to Maine, but I have enjoyed his work in every single movie I have ever seen him in. I think he is an incredibly underrated character actor who I would love to see get the chance to do a dramatic lead.

Is *The Naked and the Dead* still in production as a feature film?

We have a script my father loved and are in discussions, but are not in production yet. Our goal is for it to be in a theater near you sooner rather than later, as I feel it is incredibly timely now that so many of our men and women who have been stationed overseas will hopefully be coming home. From the conversations I have had with friends of mine who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, who

(Continued on page 82)



"From the time I was 17, I was showing my father stories." In 2006, John Buffalo & Norman Mailer co-authored *The Big Empty* (Avalon Publishing Group, \$12.10), using George W. Bush's presidency and the Iraq War as a point of departure.

died, and did you correspond with him about that?

He did a couple posts for the Huffington Post when it was just starting out, partially out of curiosity and mostly because he liked and respected Arianna [Huffington] and wanted to see her succeed. He had a little bit of fun with it, but left it at that. Dwayne Raymond, his last editorial assistant, wrote about it quite well in his book, *Mornings With Mailer*. However, one of the books I am working on for the Mailer Estate

how to write dialogue. They are either born with the ability to hear and write out how someone talks, or they are not. Of course there are tricks and rules one can and should learn, but at the end of the day, like Atticus Finch taking no pride in his ability to shoot a rifle well, a writer who is lucky enough to have an ear for good dialogue should equally take no pride in it and instead just be thankful they can take the time to work on their weak points as

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A uniquely scenic, recreational, and historic site, Fort Williams Park is used and enjoyed by visitors from near and far. But well-maintained public spaces depend on many sources to provide the necessary financial support. Improvements such as the new Play Structure have been funded through grants. Many more, like the Cliff Walk, are achieved with the support of “friends”, people who care enough to contribute to preserving the Park’s natural beauty. People like you. Our current focus is on establishing an educational Arboretum and restoring the Battery Blair gun emplacement.

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Plan design by Mitchell & Associates

INTERVIEW

When Your Name Is Mailer... (continued from page 39) have also read the screenplay, [no matter the battle,] war is war is war. It would be nice if the movie of *The Naked and the Dead* could serve as a mode for them to distill and understand what they just endured, through the perspective of World War II. That’s the goal.

Please ask and answer a question of your own that will take you out of your comfort zone. Or just tell us when you’re next coming to Maine.

There is no question that takes me out of my comfort zone. The ones that create an uncomfortable spark in you tend to produce the most interesting answers, and on occasion can even teach you a little something about yourself. But as for when I will next be in Maine, all I need is an invite and you will see me there, Harbor Bar in one hand, a list of strip clubs to investigate in the other, and the rest of me ready to tackle the Knife’s Edge once again.

Considering your work as a whole, you are the embodiment of an integrated media person. As a magazine writer [New York] and editor [High Times] yourself, tell us about the future of magazines.

...The experience of holding a magazine you care about in your hands, seeing the surprises the editors have in store for you with each issue, not quite sure of what will interest you or what will not, cannot be duplicated with any other medium. I have been very fortunate to come along at a time when it was still possible to get in on putting out magazines that made a stir in the public mind. Of course we will adapt, and there are a great many benefits to what you can do with an interactive, online magazine, but the smell will never be there. The texture, or the ability to fold down a page, a page that might be discovered by someone else who happens to be reading it in your house and takes a second look because you have marked it, all that will be lost. Which is perhaps my biggest gripe with the extent the virtual world has permeated and altered our own; namely, there’s nothing sensual about the Internet. The more time we spend with machines and virtual friends, the colder and more detached we seem to become. ■

Read an excerpt from Mailer’s latest short fiction piece “Bleed” on page 93. For more, visit portlandmonthly.com.

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