ket demand for "glamping" and command Takahashi and Mayuzumi to "get to work!" They must "move forward" with the project at top speed, on which their own paychecks depend. "No time like the present!," yells one of the bosses in a laughable Go-Get-'Em aphorism, even as Takahashi's tomato-red puffer jacket in the background of the shot screams for them to stop.

Following their Bad Bosses' wrongheaded green light, Takahashi and Mayuzumi get back on the road to Mizubiki. In one of Hamaguchi's signature "car talk" scenes, we glimpse Takahashi and Mayuzumi's humanity, but especially their mechanisms for suppressing it. This is not ambiguity as much as it is a more nuanced depiction of Bad. As Mayuzumi self-diagnoses, the two have "dysfunctional soul[s]," having learned to "go along to get along," which is how Takahashi rationalizes ignoring the signs of an implied #MeToo workplace predator. In the same way that he understands dating—to acquire a wife to bring him tea and to salve his existential angst—Takahashi understands Nature in instrumentalist terms. He rashly declares that he wants to take the caretaker job at the future glamping site, the absurdity of which Hamaguchi signals again with Takahashi's garish tomato-red puffer jacket—a similar color to *Drive My Car*'s Saab, and similarly symbolically loaded.

Arriving back in Mizubiki, Takahashi and Mayuzumi still aren't really listening. When Takumi informs them that their glamping site would interrupt deer trails, their obtuseness is insistent and, ultimately, fatal. They wonder about the deer's use value to Playmode: could glampers safely interact with them as part of the country experience? In response, Takumi informs them that deer "do not attack people... *unless* it's a gut-shot deer, or its parent." This warning, and finally Takumi's explicit hand signal to Stop!, will be the last ones Takahashi is able to ignore.

Just as *Evil Does Not Exist*'s ending might seem a departure from the rest of the film—yet is its logical conclusion upon further reflection—so, too, is the film itself a logical progression of Hamaguchi's oeuvre. Even the abruptness of the eruptive, truth-surfacing event is trademark Hamaguchi. See also, for instance, the return of Baku in *Asako I & II* (2018); the accidental broadcasting of a recorded conversation in *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*; and Oto's affair and sudden death in *Drive My Car*. Indeed, this unpredictable pacing, as if winding up a jack-in-the-box (to mix my children's game metaphors), imbues Hamaguchi films with psychological-thriller-level suspense, even in potentially mundane scenes. This is a trick Hamaguchi might have learned when studying under Japanese horror master Kiyoshi Kurosawa at the Tokyo University of the Arts.

This pacing—in which abrupt twists of fate feel coiled to strike at any moment—also suggests echoes of Hamaguchi's first project after film school: a three-part documentary composed of interviews with the survivors of the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami on Japan's northeast coast, which killed some twenty thousand people, displaced hundreds of thousands, and precipitated the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Throughout *The Tohoku Trilogy*, there is an implicit lament that humans ignored the signs of Nature, redeveloping the coast despite a long history of catastrophic earthquakes and tsunamis, and thus inviting the inevitable if sudden calamity. Ever since, Hamaguchi's films have tended to link the fragility of human existence with environmental disaster. See, for instance, the earthquake and radiation issues in *Asako I & II*; and the mudslide in Hokkaido in *Drive My Car*, not to mention the man-made disaster of the atomic bombs invoked in that film's Hiroshima locations. There are also echoes of *The Tohoku Trilogy*, and skills Hamaguchi gained making it, in two storytelling modes to which *Evil Does Not Exist* gestures: the documentary and the rural folktale, which is the focus of the trilogy's Part III: *Storytellers*.

Finally, *Evil Does Not Exist* contains direct echoes of Hamaguchi's beloved Anton Chekhov and specifically the ecological critiques within *Uncle Vanya* [1897], the play that Yūsuke stages in *Drive My Car*. After all, *Uncle Vanya* is the story of city folk, Professor Serebryakov and his young wife Yelena, whose arrival at a country estate in rural Russia tragically disrupts the lives of the estate's "conscientious steward[s]" and rightful inheritors, Vanya, Sonya, and the rest. Professor Serebryakov presents his plan to sell the estate and its surrounding forests in a way similar to Playmode's glamping site pitch: he only *performs* listening, while obdurately maintaining his obtuseness toward the downstream effects of his proposed actions. Like Takumi, Vanya is driven to a desperate homicidal rage. But it is *Uncle Vanya's* ecologically minded Dr. Astrov who diagnoses the "ignorance" exemplified by Serebryakov as a pathogenic source of destruction, lamenting the deforestation of Russia for the irresponsible consumption of Man, unable to see "further than the end of their nose."

In Chekhov's play, Yelena tells the distraught Vanya, "You're educated and intelligent, so you must surely understand that the world isn't destroyed by villains," a line read in *Drive My Car* in the recorded voice of Yūsuke's dead wife. But Yelena's self-rationalizing assertion is not meant to be taken at face value, any more than Hamaguchi's title *Evil Does Not Exist* is. Hamaguchi announces this in the animated title card that appears even before the aforementioned four-minute opening shot. The words "Evil," then "Exist," then "Does" are given in blue font, before the word "Not" is given in red—the first "Red Light" Hamaguchi flashes, commanding us to stop, look, listen, and think about the signs right in front of our faces, and to adjust our actions accordingly, before it's too late.—**Megan Feeney**

How to Come Alive with Norman Mailer

Produced by Jeff Zimbalist and Victoria Marquette; directed by Jeff Zimbalist; cinematography by Guy Livneh; edited by Alannah Byrnes; music by Jacques Brautbar. Color, 102 min., 2023. A Zeitgeist Films Release in association with Kino Lorber, https://zeitgeistfilms.com.

Jeff Zimbalist's very fine Norman Mailer documentary, likely destined for modest distribution but which will reward those viewers who seek it out, somehow pulls off an impressive trick—it manages to have its cake and eat it, too. Which is to say, *How to Come Alive* indisputably offers an unflinching look at the worst of its subject, admittedly a target-rich environment. As is well known, in 1960 Mailer stabbed and gravely wounded his second wife, Adele Morales, an episode that a clumsy hagiographer might have attempted to downplay, or somehow strain to contextualize. In contrast, Zimbalist (and his co-writer and co-producer, Victoria Marquette), choose instead not only to lead with it but also return to that ugly episode, repeatedly, as one of the fulcrums of the film, which opens with vintage news footage and the voice-over, "Norman Mailer was arrested last night, and booked on a charge on felonious assault," followed swiftly by "earlier this evening Norman Mailer was committed to the violent ward of a psychiatric hospital." Other difficult and unflattering episodes (and there were many) are similarly not shied away from.

And yet the Mailer of *How to Come Alive* ultimately comes across as a relatively affable fellow, with the edge sanded off some of his coarser characteristics (the pugnacious, often inebriated brawler was quick with the headbutt, as oft-rival Gore Vidal can attest). This kinder, gentler Mailer is partially a product of the fact that this enterprise is a family affair. Seven of his nine children appear on screen, as does his sister (Barbara Wasserman) and other relatives; their reflections are candid but imbued with warmth. And the thoughtful integration of archival interviews with Mailer represents the writer at his most canny, introspective, level-headed best.

More subtle is the way in which the documentary shades certain episodes. Clips from the notorious 1971 imbroglio on *The Dick Cavett Show* illustrate, tellingly, that Mailer was (justly) aggrieved by cheap shots leveled at him in print. Additional snippets (and Cavett's reminiscence), although certainly unflattering, still fail to capture the extent to which Mailer comported himself more generally throughout as a drunken ass, alienating the audience, fellow guests, and, ultimately, his host. In another encounter that year at New York City's Town Hall, Cynthia Ozick's skewering of the excesses of his masculinist posturing in the *Town Bloody Hall* (1979) debate is

well deployed—Mailer, having written in *Advertisements for Myself* that "a good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls," was cheekily asked by Ozick, "For years and years I've been wondering, Mr. Mailer, when you dip your balls in ink, what color ink is it?"—our protagonist is shown taking this haymaker graciously. Combined with interspersed testimonials of praise from Maya Angelou, Gloria Steinem, and Germaine Greer, uninitiated viewers will likely be left ill-informed about the extent to which Mailer's views on women were little short of puerile.

This quibble ought not dissuade potential viewers; rather, the skillfulness of this film's hidden hand is simply a reminder of the impossibility of the objective documentary. But it is unlikely that there will be a better Norman Mailer documentary than this, and we are living in a historical moment when the absence of his voice is deeply felt. Indeed, my principal critique of *How to Come Alive* is that it left me wanting more. At one hundred well-packed minutes, it is not slim. But Mailer lived so many lives that it would have been hard to include them all here.

With regard to his writing, Zimbalist focuses on what can fairly be called "the big three"—*The Naked and the Dead* (1948), the World War II novel that launched its twenty-five-year-old author into stardom, as well as *The Armies of the Night* (1968), and *The Executioner's Song* (1979), each of which won a Pulitzer Prize. It is hard to argue with these selections, but Mailer was a prolific writer of soaring, often thrilling prose, and little room was left for so many other essential contributions, including what I consider his greatest book, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968) about the Republican and (especially) Democratic National Conventions of that year. (As he would write, foreshadowing the police riot to follow, "Yes, Chicago was a town where nobody could ever forget how the money was made. It was picked up from floors still slippery with blood.")

Such choices are inevitably a matter of taste, and surely space must be allotted to a dozen close relatives and a gallery of distinguished talking heads (among them David Denby, Jonathan Lethem, James Wolcott, and Mailer friend, archivist, and official biographer J. Michael Lennon). But squeezed out, as a result, is an engagement with much of his very best writing. Mailer was the master of the long-form narrative nonfiction essay—perhaps the greatest of the twentieth century, and he also flashed an uncanny grasp of politics and power (the subject of many of those contributions). But Mailer on politics (with the exception of his quixotic campaigns for Mayor of New York, and his increasing apprehension about the latent capacity for fascism stirring in postwar society) is largely absent here. An early opponent of the Vietnam War (speaking out in 1965, when the then-popular effort was barely on most of the population's radar), he anticipated that its prosecution "would shift the moral center of America."

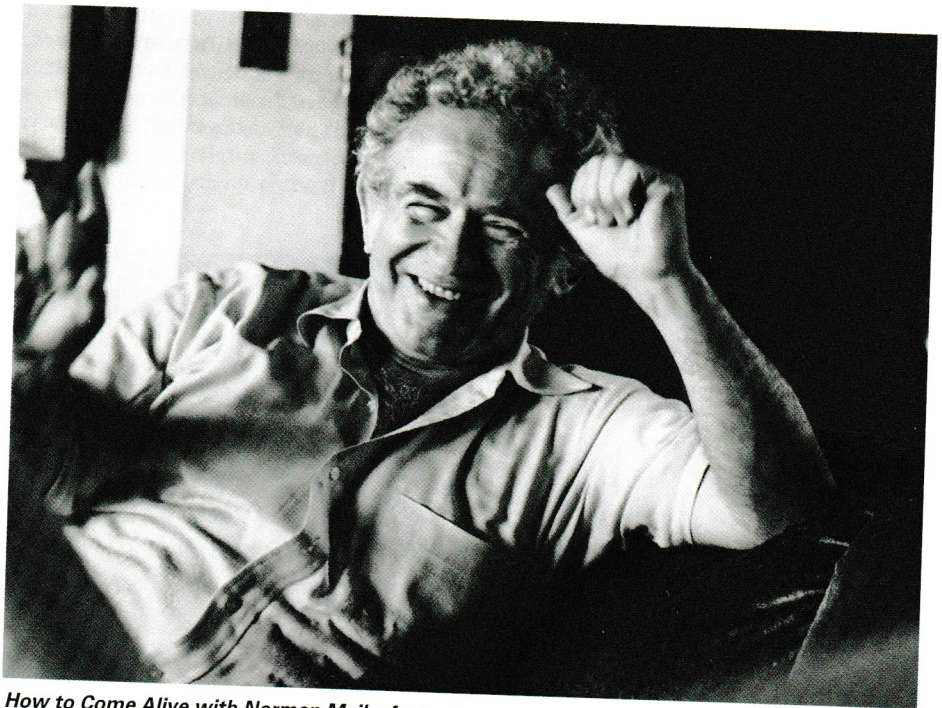
Mailer with his second wife (1954–62), Adele Morales, in a peaceful moment.

Absent as well is Mailer the Kennedy man. He saw the man up-close, and wrote about him extensively, in three distinct phases: first, with enthusiasm, as the presidency approached; then reverting to form, as an outsider and perennial critic; and finally, after the shattering blow, with some revisionist regret about the extent of his sniping from the sidelines. This Mailer is largely off screen—but one does not write (among other touchstones over the decades) nearly a thousand pages of finely researched nonfiction, an attempt to get to the bottom of the matter about the JFK assassination (*Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, 1995), without some personal passion for the subject.

To regret what might have been included in an additional hour of *How to Come Alive* does not reflect poorly on the movie as released, which is smartly structured, well-paced, and highly informative. As the production notes boast, the documentarians had access to the Mailer family archive and are able to offer "never-before-seen footage, outtakes, audio recordings, and interviews from throughout his life."

After opening with the stabbing, the film bends back toward a generally linear narrative, while providing solid historical context, especially in detailing the Fifties and the Sixties. In addition, and most effectively, the profile is anchored by recurring motifs, often introduced and well-articulated as life lessons recounted by his offspring.

The first theme inspired the movie's title; as Mailer admonished (echoing one of the most important lines in Bob Dylan's songbook) "Every moment of your existence you're either growing into more or you're dwindling into less." The search continues, and the search is the thing (or as Bob put it, "He not busy being born is busy dying"). Another lesson repeatedly drilled home is "Speak your mind." This will not always go well; Zimbalist cuts from a clip of Mailer, with some understatement, observing, "I've made a number of stupid remarks over the years," to more than one of those many foot-in-the-mouth moments—but that is the price to be paid for speaking your mind, something of a tragically lost art today. The achievements of the free speech movement, brought to you by the liberationist left, have been hijacked by the hate-speech right. As this documentary makes clear, Mailer would have witnessed today's authoritarian-curious Republican Party with enormous alarm, but



***How to Come Alive with Norman Mailer* features a more avuncular Mailer in several interview excerpts.**

Rip Torn takes Method acting to extremes in Norman Mailer's *Maidstone*, when he tries to assassinate "Norman Kingsley," portrayed by Mailer.

he would rightly have observed that many on the left are terrified of censure—from the left—should the wrong words ever slip out.

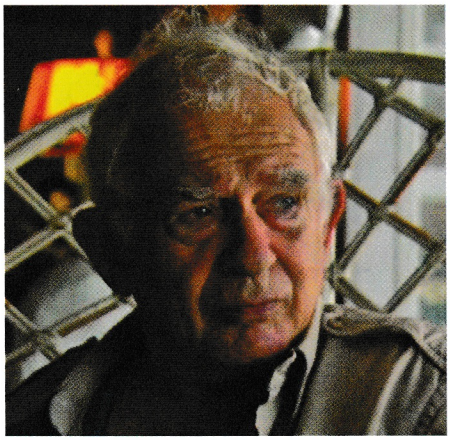
Mailer is also shown to be something of a "left-patriot"—another style not much in fashion these days. Right-wing patriotism commonly takes the form of mindless, flag-waving worship of undefined exceptionalism; left-wing patriotism held the country to higher standards, and over the years Zimbalist shows Mailer losing faith that America will truly live up to its principles (it "has not become as great and noble as I wanted it to become"; late in life he adds that it has also become "more loutish, more corporate driven"). Another theme that grounds the movie, inescapable to any serious engagement with Mailer, is that of violence (though his fascination with and participation in boxing is argued to be less about the thrill of knocking someone down, and more about a fascination, personified by the heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson, of the ability to take a terrible beating and having the wherewithal to get back up).

With that framing, *How to Come Alive* covers many of the notable events in Mailer's life, such as his co-founding of *The Village Voice*, and it lingers on the final infamous episode of Mailer's public notoriety: his role in helping secure the release from prison of Jack Abbot, whom he and others championed as a promising writer, only to see Abbot murder a waiter in New York City six weeks after being paroled from prison in 1981.

In a welcome inclusion, Zimbalist also revisits Mailer's flirtations with filmmaking. Of his three triple-threat cinéma-vérité-style efforts from the late 1960s (all shot by D. A. Pennebaker), the uneven 1970 *Maidstone* (also, wildly inappropriately, something of a traumatic family affair, as several children recount), brings together most things Mailer. The movie (or is that the movie within the movie?) is about a combative, sexually voracious megalomaniac embarking on a presidential run. *Maidstone* has its moments (and its limitations), but it is essential here, especially given the head-spinning overlaps between the actor Norman Mailer and character Norman Kingsley (Kingsley is Mailer's middle name). That distinction becomes blurrier still when Rip Torn, preternaturally menacing throughout the picture, finally took Method acting to a new level, attacking Kingsley (and/or Mailer) with a hammer, insisting in defense of his unscripted assault that it was obvious the movie must end with an assassination. A furious Mailer banished Torn from the premises but ultimately decided to include the melee in the finished film.

How to Come Alive with Norman Mailer is a welcome achievement, and one especially relevant for our troubled times. Those familiar with Mailer will be invited to reassess their views of a figure too easily caricatured (his own actions an open invitation to such summary dismissal), but who left behind an impressive, even astonishing oeuvre. Younger viewers will be treated to an introduction to one of the great American writers of the second half of the twentieth century, whose antics were surely outrageous, but whose voice is sorely missed.

—Jonathan Kirshner



Autumn of the Patriarch in *How to Come Alive with Norman Mailer*.

Hit Man

Produced by Mike Blizzard, Richard Linklater, Glen Powell, Jason Bateman, and Michael Costigan; directed by Richard Linklater; screenplay by Richard Linklater and Glen Powell, based on an article by Skip Hollandsworth; cinematography by Shane F. Kelly; edited by Sandra Adair; music by Graham Reyolds; starring Glen Powell, Adria Arjona, Austin Amelio, Sanjay Rao, and Retta. Color. 115 min., 2023. A Netflix release, www. Netflix.com.

"What you're about to see is a somewhat true story, inspired by the life of Gary Johnson," reads the crawl at the top of Richard Linklater's Rom-Comish, neonoir *Hit Man*, a film that, like its title character, shapeshifts seamlessly between personalities. Dressed up as breezy entertainment, it has an alter ego as a philosophical meditation on the nature of self and the immutability of character. The salutation is the first epistemological giveaway, the sign-off at the end the second: the real Gary Johnson, we are assured, was a chill dude who committed "zero murders—we made that part up." The (functionally) straight-to-Netflix-streaming hit doubles as a seminar in Philosophy 101.

Which is appropriate because Gary Johnson ("It" boy of the moment, Glen Powell, who with Linklater co-wrote the script, based on a *Texas Monthly* article by Skip Hollandsworth) is a dorky professor of philosophy and psychology at the University of New Orleans. Introduced lecturing to an unrealistically attentive, if passive, and mildly participatory class, he name-checks Nietzsche (not a throwaway reference) and approvingly passes on the German's advice to carpe diem and live dangerously. "Says the guy driving a Civic," snarks a student. (Later, the kids will chuckle appreciatively at a Plato-Descartes-Kant reference. They've all done the reading!)

Sure enough, Gary is no Übermensch. By all appearances, he seems to have serenely settled into a life of quotidian contentment rather than quiet desperation. He feeds his birds, waters his plants, dotes on his two cats (Id and Ego, cute), and kind of likes frying up his sad cuisine. If anything sets him apart, it is his tech-geek savvy with electronic devices, a talent not ordinarily associated with liberal artsy types, and a skill that lands him a gig moonlighting with a police squad. His crew is tasked with setting up sting operations that target disgruntled employees and vengeful exes seeking to hire a contract killer to solve their life problems.

Apparently, contract killing is a growth industry in the laid-back Big Easy, despite the fact that the job description is a Pop Cult fantasy. As a montage of cinematic guns for hire unspools, Gary reminds us that the profession is the creation of pulp novelists and Hollywood screenwriters. Disappointingly, the hit man is a creature as mythological as

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