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WORDS + VOICES

Robert Mailer Anderson, Novelist, Playwright, Filmmaker, and Producer

Robert Mailer Anderson is a novelist, playwright, filmmaker, and producer of Grammy-nominated jazz albums. But an art form he particularly relishes is that of conversation: old-fashioned, face-to-face conversation. “I may be the last person in America without a cell phone,” he chuckles. The man is an erudite bundle of charismatic energy.

We’ve barely sat down at Caffè Trieste in San Francisco’s North Beach when he begins sharing reflections, personal and cultural, about having lived in an SRO apartment above Trieste while finishing his first novel, *Boonville*. The café had served as his *de facto* living room.

“This particular kind of café culture used to be thriving in San Francisco,” he says wistfully. “We used to say we were the only international European city in the United States. Part of that is to get your coffee, start your day, read your newspapers, and talk about politics and the city and art and expression.”

Trieste is also the setting of his recently published play, *The Death of Teddy Ballgame*, which takes place during an apocalyptic time of societal breakdown. Anderson participated in a Litquake Festival reading of the work, assuming the role of a red-neck survivalist character. A performance by the San Quentin theater group is planned for later this year.

He excels at weaving witty banter into tragicomic scenes. At one point in *Boonville*, the protagonist contemplates his failed relationship with his girlfriend. “We can’t even have a basic conversation without breaking into a hostile Abbott and Costello routine,” the guy muses, which is unfortunate for him but fortunate for Anderson’s readers, who can delight in all the clever repartee.

Anderson attributes his keen ear to the varied personalities he was exposed to in childhood. His father ran a home for juvenile delinquents in Mendocino County. “I was raised by wolves and I gravitated to comedy,” he says. As a teenager, he relished his dad’s comedy records. “Richard Prior was a huge hero to me.”

Other voices from his youth were those of his half-Mexican grandmother, the Ecclesiastical Latin of Sunday mass, and the respective *patois* of Mendocino’s hippies and rednecks. “And urban black culture,” he adds, again reflecting on the changes his native San Francisco has undergone. “When my dad took me to see the Ali-Frazier fight at Winterland, it was a 95% black crowd.”

Mendocino is the setting of his novel-in-progress, *A Sin to Stay Down*, which explores the place’s relationship to the Mexi-

can state of Michoacán, where he says a majority of the area’s recent immigrant population hails from. He brings to the project his perspective as an eighth-generation Californian with Spanish Colonial roots.

Immigration is also at the core of his forthcoming film, *Windows on the World*, starring Edward James Olmos and due for release September 11, about a boy from rural Mexico who travels to New York in search of his missing father who was working in the Twin Towers as a busboy on 9/11.

Anderson’s creative wits were put to the test on the set in New York when he was informed he would not be able to use Tony Bennett’s classic “Rags to Riches” in a karaoke scene scheduled to shoot that day. “Having been raised watching a ton of black-and-white musicals on my grandparents’ TV and at the Castro Theater,” he says, “I decided to pen my own song like I was a Fred Astaire character out of *Tin Pan Alley*.” In the ensuing hijinks, Anderson sang his freshly created lyrics into his assistant’s cell phone so the crew’s musical composer could write the piano part around it.

Several niches of the artistic world have been impacted by his endeavors, some public (Anderson spearheaded SFJAZZ’s \$65 million capital campaign), others quietly private. Years ago, he and his wife Nicola Miner, daughter of Oracle co-founder Bob Miner, donated seed money toward the first film by Barry Jenkins, who later went on to write and direct the 2017 Academy Award Best Picture-winner *Moonlight*. And *Moonlight*’s Oscar-winning cinematographer, James Laxton, had originally earned his union card on *Pig Hunt*, Anderson’s 2008 horror movie filmed in Mendocino. “He was part of our five-man crew that went up there with me to get pick-up shots. Isn’t that cool?”

Anderson’s patter is at once earthy and free-associative. As he discusses movies, he recollects another conversation about the late screenwriter Terry Southern. “. . . And so I asked: ‘Was he crazy or just high?’” he says, deep into his anecdote.

A fellow at the next table who has been eavesdropping interrupts to opine: “Crazy.”

Anderson turns to him. “Did you know Terry Southern?”

“Yeah. Crazy guy. It’s okay: crazy is good.”

“Yeah, crazy is good,” Anderson agrees.

“Hunter S. Thompson? Crazy!”

“And good,” Anderson parries. He extends a hand. “Robert.”

“Josh,” the guy says. They shake. —FREDRIC HAMBER



PHOTO: JACK HUTCHESON