



WHERE THE RIVERS FLOW NORTH (1994) **An Afternoon With Anthony Quinn**

By Jay Craven

On a hot day in July 1992, Bess and I boarded the slow-moving train to New York – buoyed by Anthony Quinn’s declaration that he “had” to play the lead role of Noel Lord in our planned film, “*Where the Rivers Flow North*.” We intended to start production in just six weeks. We needed to find someone fast and Quinn could be just right for the part. It wouldn’t hurt that the legendary actor had won three Academy Awards and appeared in some 130 memorable films, from *Lawrence of Arabia* and Fellini’s *La Strada* to *Barabbas*, *Lust for Life* and *Viva Zapata*.

Once in the city, we took a cab to Quinn’s studio on the East Side of Manhattan. Nervous at the prospect of our meeting, we hesitated before we rang the outside bell to announce ourselves. Maude Chilton, an attractive young blonde woman, came to the door to show us in. Maude was Quinn’s assistant and helped him sort through possible projects. Once inside the apartment, she showed us to a long table.

Anthony Quinn walked in, looming large. The seventy-seven year-old actor was robust with a deeply resonant voice. “Are you ready to shoot this picture?” he said.

“We are,” I said. “That’s why we’ve come to meet you. To see if we can make this work.”

“Of course we can. I was born to play this man,” Quinn said.

I didn’t expect things to move so quickly. I was a little taken back by Quinn’s willfulness—and his seeming assumption we had a “done deal.” I squinted to take the measure of the man, as he took a seat across the table from Bess and me. I tried to visualize the barrel-chested Irish/Mexican as a 1920’s Vermont woodsman. A scared impulse coursed through me. “Zorba the Logger,” I said to myself. This might not work.

A second assistant entered the room. Also attractive and in her 20’s, Kathy poured out some soft drinks and took a seat at the far end of the table, opposite Maude.

Quinn worked to put us at ease. “Independent films,” he said. “That’s what I should be doing. Hollywood has nothing to offer.”

“We can’t pay much money,” I said. “That’s one disadvantage of independent filmmaking.”

“I’ll work for minimum scale,” Quinn said. “Then I can own a piece of the film on the back end.”

“Sure,” I said, still startled at the speed at which things were moving. And not knowing how big a “piece” he intended. I wanted to make sure our Vermont investors were positioned to benefit if the film was successful.

“I love independent film,” Quinn said. He half-turned to Kathy at one end of the table, then to



Maude at the other end. “What’s my favorite film,” he said. Maude quickly glanced at Kathy. “*The Crying Game*, Mr. Quinn.”

“That’s right. *The Crying Game*,” he said. “I like that picture. Who the hell would’ve guessed that girl was a guy?”

“Your picture reminds me of Fellini,” Quinn said, changing course. I was pleased to hear this, since I saw some parallels between Zampano and Noel.

“Fellini couldn’t pay me, either. But I was working on another picture in Italy at the time.” He looked to Kathy, then Maude. This time Maude spoke up. “*Atilla*, Mister Quinn.”

Quinn nodded, pleased that his assistants were so well-versed on his personal history. “That’s right. *Atilla*,” he said. “We didn’t start work on that picture till noon, so I told Fellini we could work all morning.” Quinn laughed deep and big. “Maybe I can find another picture shooting in Vermont.”

“We love *La Strada*,” I said.

“So do I,” Quinn said. “Fellini’s wife was in that picture,” he said.

“Giulietta Massina,” I said. “Your co-star.”

“That’s right,” he said. I suddenly felt like Kathy and Maude, prompting Quinn on his personal history.

Bess spoke up and explained that she had produced the world premiere of *La Strada* as a stage play, under a green and white striped tent in Vermont. Quinn looked at her blankly. “I’ve lost my train of thought,” he said.

Then, Quinn launched into a discussion about his interest in architecture, his homes in Italy and Rhode Island, and his early days as a prize fighter. He stood and offered to show off some moves, saying that his boxing skill would help during Noel Lord’s turn as a chain fighter at the county fair.

“I won’t need a stunt man,” he said.

Without missing a beat, Quinn segued into a discussion of the actresses he’d starred opposite, pausing and casting a coy glance on the mention of several co-stars to suggest something more than a strictly professional relationship.

“Who’s playing the housekeeper?” he said, referring to the character of Bangor.

“Tantoo Cardinal,” I said. “She’s an American Indian actress,” I said. “From *Dances with Wolves*.”



He offered another uncomprehending look. “I haven’t seen that picture,” he said, casting a quick look to Kathy. She nodded.

“Do you have a dialogue coach?” he said. “I’ll need one.”

I took a beat to imagine Anthony Quinn attempting a Vermont accent. I wasn’t sure it was a good idea.

“I don’t believe much in accents,” I said. “I’m more interested in the language itself—to provide a sense of time and place.”

Quinn didn’t buy it. “But this is your first picture, right?”

I felt diminished. “I’ve done short fiction,” I said.

“Yeah. Short,” he said. “That’s the problem. This is different. We’ll need a dialect coach.”

Feeling small, I nodded, not wanting to derail our conversation, but wondering if this could ever work.

“I once did a desert picture,” Quinn said.

“Lawrence of Arabia, Mister Quinn,” said Kathy.

“That’s right. We had a dialogue coach on that picture,” he said.

Maude was ready. “Hugh Miller, Mister Quinn,” she said.

Quinn turned in his seat, perturbed. “Hugh Miller?” he said. “I don’t know anybody by the name of Hugh Miller.”

“That’s who it was, Mister Quinn. Hugh Miller. I can show you the credits,” Maude said.

Quinn looked to Kathy who turned her head. He looked back at Maude. “Alright,” he said. “Hugh Miller. That’s the dialogue coach we need on this picture.”

“I can try to find him,” said Maude.

“We should do that,” said Quinn.

I explained that we had very little money and might find someone locally who could just read the script into a tape recorder (Peacham resident Dale Roy later did this for Rip Torn).

“What the hell good will that do?” Quinn asked.



Then someone knocks at the door—and a sudden commotion unfolds. Maude rises and goes for the door, but not before waiting a beat while Kathy stands and bolts from the room. Quinn tenses.

Maude opens the door and Quinn's agent appears. Quinn settles back into his chair. Maude disappears from the room and Quinn's agent apologizes for his late arrival.

"It's alright," Quinn says. "We're already made the deal."
Maude re-appears, followed by Kathy. Quinn senses my confusion.

"We have to go through this fire drill whenever someone knocks at the door," Quinn says. "You see, my wife, Yolanda..." he says, leaving the sentence open.

I look to him for his next line.

"She discovered something going on between Kathy and me. I swore to her it was over."

"But it's not?" I said.

"No," Quinn said. "I'm not a good husband."

A palpable unease fills the room. I'm uncomfortable, too.

"Whenever anyone comes to the door, Kathy goes to hide in the shower," says Quinn. "She comes back when the coast is clear."

"And if it's Yolanda?" I say.

"She spent three hours in the shower last week," Quinn says matter-of-factly.

Unlike Quinn, his agent seems reluctant to see his client make the trip to Vermont. Bess and I leave a half-hour later and head back to our friend's apartment to regroup and ponder possible next steps. Later that night, we go to meet Michael J. Fox who was in his production trailer outside of Bergdorf Goodman's Fifth Avenue store, where he's shooting the film, *For Love or Money*. We're mid-way down the long road to secure Michael's commitment to appear in *Rivers*. But that's another story.

Several days later, after Bess and I returned to Vermont, Quinn's agent called to confirm what I suspected—that he didn't think the part of Noel Lord was right for his actor. A couple of days after that, Anthony Quinn called from his home in Italy. He said he remained committed to the part and wanted to discuss it further. I told him that his agent didn't think it would work out, but Quinn said to ignore the agent.

"But we need to work out a deal," Quinn said. "I've got homes around the world. I will work for scale but I need to own the picture."



I thought of our Vermont investors. I couldn't possibly give the movie away to Anthony Quinn.

"This would be great—and very exciting," I said. "But I don't know if it can work."

"Why not?" Quinn said.

"This is my first feature film," I said. "And you were right in New York. You do know more than I do. That would help in some ways—and probably not in others."

"The time we spent we spent with you was fun and a revelation—and your were very generous with your time and terrific stories. But this is too small a film. I'm sorry."

"It's your picture," Quinn said. "You know how to reach me."

A couple of years later, while visiting New York, I noticed the cover of the daily New York Post. A bold headline announced, "Zorba the Stud" and told how Quinn's wife, Yolanda had again caught him with young Kathy and that Kathy was pregnant with Quinn's child. Yolanda reportedly stormed out and sued Quinn for divorce.

Later, Quinn had a second child with Kathy, one of thirteen he fathered. He died at the age of 86 and left behind a remarkable legacy.

I continue to appreciate the day we spent at Anthony Quinn's studio, imagining him as Noel Lord and listening to the outsized actor's tales of a legendary career on screen.