

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Chronicle Review

January 14, 2005

An Inspired Collection Honors a Founder of the Indie Movement

By *DAVID STERRITT*

After a 1974 press screening of *A Woman Under the Influence*, an audience member asked the writer-director John Cassavetes if any parts of the movie were scripted, not improvised. Cassavetes looked puzzled for a second, then answered, "I guess if someone walked across a room we didn't script every step. But yeah, I wrote the picture."

While the questioner's premise was wrong, the mistake was understandable. "Cassavetes worked hard for [his] artless effects," as the critic Stuart Klawans writes in an essay for *John Cassavetes: Five Films*, a recently released boxed set of eight DVD's that stands out even by the Criterion Collection's high standard. In a program-booklet interview, Cassavetes acknowledges filming some scenes of *Woman* as many as 12 to 14 times, and that's probably an understatement. Take the great spaghetti-breakfast sequence, in which the title character, Mabel Longhetti, serves a morning pasta meal to her husband's working-class buddies, most of whom can't figure out what to make of her ebullient quirkiness. Scholarship suggests that Cassavetes shot parts of the scene about 40 times.

Cassavetes carefully crafted the freewheeling, rough-and-ready look of his best movies to highlight the aspect of cinema he valued most: acting. In turn, acting played a specific role in his technique -- the generation of raw, unmodulated feelings, as mercurial and sometimes inexplicable as those of life itself. "The emotion was improvisation. The lines were written," he told a 1970 interviewer about *Husbands*.

Before his 1989 death from liver disease, Cassavetes was generally a hard sell to critics and audiences. Ray Carney of Boston University, the leading scholar on Cassavetes's life and work, has

collated scathing notices from high-powered reviewers. Parts of *Faces* (1968) were "so dumb, so crudely conceived, and so badly performed," wrote *The New Yorker* pundit Pauline Kael, while John Simon deemed *Woman* a "muddle-headed, pretentious, and interminable" work.

Such attacks came frequently. But there were exceptions, and current critics -- including smart ones like Kent Jones and Phillip Lopate in the *Criterion* booklet -- are misleading when they suggest the reviews were almost always bad. I wrote rapturously on *Woman*, about a mentally unstable homemaker, and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), about a nightclub owner pressured into committing a crime, and no less a Cassavetes skeptic than Kael deemed *Shadows* a "very fine experimental ... film" and granted that *Faces* had "the unified style of an agonizing honesty." *Woman* even caught on with audiences, becoming the only Cassavetes picture one might reasonably call a hit. Still, it's unquestionable that Cassavetes was overlooked and undervalued as a writer and director -- although not as an actor, with memorable movies like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) among his credits.

Born in 1929 to Greek-American parents, Cassavetes grew up in the New York City area, attended Mohawk Valley Community College and Colgate University and then the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. He played small stage and television roles until 1954, when he started to land more-substantial parts and married actress Gena Rowlands, who remained his loyal spouse and favorite star to the end of his life.

Increasingly successful, Cassavetes was also increasingly displeased with what he saw as the simplistic, formulaic content of the stories he was appearing in. His first filmmaking effort was sparked by a 1957 radio appearance promoting Martin Ritt's film *Edge of the City*. He asked listeners to contribute money for a movie of his own that didn't yet have a story, a cast, or even a subject. The result was *Shadows* (1959), about African-American siblings caught up in racial tensions. It is identified as "an improvisation" in the credits even though Cassavetes disliked the first, spontaneously acted version so much that he remade most of

it from a script based on the improvisation.

After straining against TV's artistic limitations as the title character of the short-lived Johnny Staccato series, about a jazz-playing detective, Cassavetes made two unhappy efforts at directing Hollywood movies in the early 1960s -- the jazzy *Too Late Blues* (1961), cramped by a rushed shooting schedule and less music than Cassavetes wanted, and *A Child Is Waiting* (1963), where he wanted to portray mentally retarded children as creative and happy, the opposite of producer Stanley Kramer's agenda.

He decided the only route to artistic independence lay in working completely outside the studio system. That led to *Faces*, a drama about a marriage on the rocks, and Cassavetes's emergence as the most important founder of the modern independent-film movement. His passion and precision paid great artistic dividends, but often made him a hard director to work with, as even his strongest supporters have acknowledged. Citing the filmmaker's wife and other sources, Carney has reported Cassavetes's frequent indulgence in childish, self-defeating words and behavior. A friend said that Cassavetes, when directing, would live on scotch and cigarettes. He'd roll around the floor giggling, or mock-wrestle with a colleague on a TV talk show. Actors said the half-crazy antics sometimes loosened them up, but other times simply struck them as weird and self-involved. Carney sees the conduct as a defense against the potential humiliation Cassavetes dreaded in all interactions he couldn't control or dominate.

Along with the nine films he acknowledged as truly his own, from *Shadows* to *Love Streams* (1984), the inauguration of the indie scene is Cassavetes's most important legacy. Many young filmmakers have followed his lead. Steven Soderbergh stresses deeply personal screenwriting and the primacy of acting as a vehicle for cinematic creativity, especially in *Full Frontal* (2002) and the idiosyncratic *Schizopolis* (1996). Sean Penn's films as writer and director -- particularly *The Indian Runner* (1991), about two brothers with incompatible outlooks on life, and *The Crossing Guard* (1995), about a businessman consumed by grief and vengefulness -- are Cassavetes-like to their bones. Consider David Morse's deeply felt performance in the former and Jack

Nicholson's in the latter, and the pictures' reliance on words and gestures rooted more in fleeting emotion than in dry narrative logic.

Cassavetes's most noteworthy artistic heir is Martin Scorsese, who briefly worked for him as a sound editor on *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971) and enjoys quoting his words of wisdom, some of which are included in "My Mentor," an article in the Criterion booklet. Scorsese showed a rough cut of his early feature *Boxcar Bertha* (1972) to Cassavetes and listened breathlessly as the master unexpectedly said, "Marty, you've just spent a year of your life making a piece of shit." Then he added, "It's a good movie, but don't get hooked into that [commercial] stuff -- just try to do something personal." Scorsese took the advice seriously, as many of his subsequent films have shown with their individualistic themes and offbeat approaches to mood, atmosphere, and performance.

Ironically, one subsequent filmmaker who has not appeared to learn from Cassavetes's style is Nick Cassavetes, his son. Even such movies as *Unhook the Stars* (1996) and *The Notebook* (2004), which star the prodigiously gifted Rowlands (his mother), and *She's So Lovely* (1997), made from a screenplay by his father, have a cautious, stilted quality that flies in the face of everything John Cassavetes stood for as an artist. The younger Cassavetes said he tweaked the *She's So Lovely* screenplay by taking out the parts he didn't understand -- which are, I suspect, exactly the elements that might have made the movie sing if John Cassavetes had directed in his own intuitive, free-flowing manner.

I don't buy Criterion's promotional claim that Cassavetes can now be called "an audience's director," since the challenges he poses for his viewers -- mercurial shifts of feeling, out-of-the-blue plot twists, characters hard to understand because they don't understand themselves -- are leagues away from the neatly tied, emotionally safe packages Hollywood has trained us to expect. Watching his movies requires the same degrees of attention, empathy, and compassion that Cassavetes put into them.

Criterion's boxed set allows audiences to take on those challenges

more easily than ever before. Providing the original 135-minute version of *Bookie* is a major service in itself, and pairing it with the later 108-minute cut -- which Cassavetes also regarded as authentically his own -- is downright inspired. Equally exciting are definitive DVD transfers of *Shadows*, *Faces*, *Woman*, and *Opening Night* (1977), not to mention rarities like an alternative opening for *Faces*, silent clips of the *Shadows* improv group, a 2000 documentary on his work, and plenty more.

My only quarrel with the set is its accompanying booklet, whose commentators take a repetitive "here's the really important thing" approach in which worthwhile interpretation often gives way to self-congratulatory connoisseurship. Kent Jones is on the right track when he admonishes some Cassavetes sympathizers for reducing his films to a simple "actor's cinema" aesthetic; but it's a flat-out fact that Cassavetes counted performance as a prime conveyor -- probably the prime conveyor -- of emotional truths on film. Calling that "hogwash" is, well, hogwash.

In one of our many conversations, I asked Cassavetes if he wielded a strong hand on the set -- if he directed his movies a lot.

"I can't say I don't do it," he answered, "but I never do it well. ... Actors don't need direction, they need attention. I'll step in as a director -- I'm laden with an ego, like everyone else -- but whenever I have to open my mouth, I know I'm probably wrong. ... I'm a sucker for actors. ... I like them." What he liked them for most were the moods and emotions they were willing to reveal and explore. "It's one of the surest bets in town that people have feelings," he told me. "If you don't believe that, you haven't experienced anything in life."

Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg once dubbed his friend and colleague Jack Kerouac "the great rememberer," referring to Kerouac's knack for keeping a mental hold on every event in which he saw significance, however small or ephemeral. I'd call Cassavetes, who had much in common with the Beat sensibility, "the great experiencer." He fought like crazy to capture the experiences that grabbed him -- those he'd had, those he'd witnessed, those he'd dreamed up in his raging imagination -- and

the lukewarm receptions he received were among the hardest of those experiences to swallow. But those notwithstanding, he never stopped fighting, feeling, and filming until failing health forced him to.

In a 1980 interview, I suggested that *Opening Night*, a drama about three generations of theater people, may have failed to find distribution three years earlier because it was ahead of its time, and perhaps he should put it on the market again. "Those fucking distributors," he said with a grim smile. "They had their chance. If any museum wants a copy of that film, I'll give it to 'em, for free. Any university that wants a copy, I'll give it to 'em, for free. But those distributors can offer me anything they want, and 'fuck 'em' is what I say. They had their chance, and it's too goddamn late."

It took almost a decade for him to change his mind, but he allowed the New York Film Festival to show *Opening Night* at Lincoln Center in 1988, after which it made its way to theaters at last. I'm a little surprised he allowed that to happen even at the tail end of his life. But Cassavetes knew what he wanted -- and on celluloid, at least, he usually got it.

David Sterritt, film critic of *The Christian Science Monitor*, is a film professor on the C.W. Post campus of Long Island University and at Columbia University, and the author, most recently, of *Screening the Beats: Media Culture and the Beat Sensibility* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

<http://chronicle.com> Section: The Chronicle Review Volume 51, Issue 19, Page B15