

Existential Gauntlet



A Tribute to John Cassavetes

by Jarrod Emerson

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Actress Gena Rowlands poses near a poster showing a stamp with her late husband, director John Cassavetes, during a ceremony unveiling a series of postage stamps dedicated to artists working behind-the-scenes in the movies.
Photo Credit: Lee Celano/AFP/NewsCom (2/25/03)

I enjoy a cinematic escape as much as the next person. Well, probably more so. And, while I'd been taught that the most fantastic stories are based in reality, that point was really driven home while I researched this tribute to John Cassavetes. To many he may be remembered as Cassavetes the actor - in front of the camera as Mia Farrow's traitorous husband "Guy" in *Rosemary's Baby* or as a member of *The Dirty Dozen's* ensemble. However, if those examples are Cassavetes' "Bruce Wayne", then surely his "Batman" was his career as a writer/director of cinema verité classics.

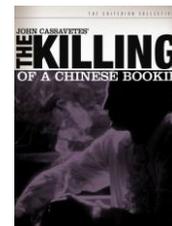
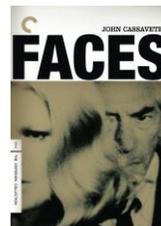
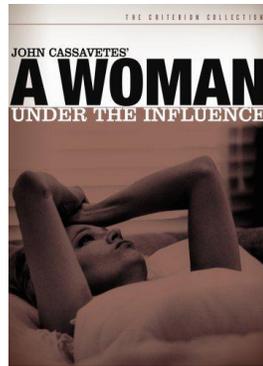
In this role as an American auteur, Cassavetes delivered fresh, original and **passionate** cinematic contributions. Using paychecks from his more commercial Hollywood projects, Cassavetes collaborated frequently with a small but incredibly talented pool of people (among them his wife Gena Rowlands, and the late actors Ben Gazzara and Peter Falk). Unlike Cassavetes the actor, Cassavetes the writer/director told stories that mainstream Hollywood didn't want to touch. No traditional three-act structure in sight, no concrete heroes or villains, and almost never a happy ending. Instead, we were treated to intimate, documentary-like portraits of real life.

Beyond personally financing these films, Cassavetes did whatever was necessary to get his movies made, including shooting over long periods of time as budget – or the lives of his actors – would allow. To make sure his movies were shown, he literally carried reels from theater to theater. The only regrettable aspect of his incredible métier is that it ended far too early, as Cassavetes succumbed to liver disease in 1989 at the age of 59.

I would encourage everyone to watch as many of Cassavetes movies as possible for a better understanding of his genius. Of his catalogue, I watched the following for this tribute:

A Child Is Waiting
Faces
Gloria
The Killing Of A Chinese Bookie
Lovestreams
Minnie & Moscovitz
Opening Night
A Woman Under The Influence

Check out these John Cassavetes films →



A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE 1974 ★★★★★ “Nick and Mabel Longhetti” (Peter Falk and Gena Rowlands) live and love in a house that is entirely too small (think sofa bed in the dining room), and far too frenetic. With three children, and numerous friends, neighbors and extended family filling their home at all hours of the day and night, the only space that offers a semblance of privacy is the bathroom. Quiet, tranquil moments are rare, but even Nick and Mabel contribute to the chaos. However, Mabel is unraveling as she makes desperate attempts to please those who surround her, trying to force happiness into their lives. While Nick recognizes Mabel’s instability and wants desperately help, he is hampered by his own manic behavior.

Like many of Cassavetes’ films, we are treated to a slice of life, filled with bitterness and uncertainty – along with a tiny sprinkling of hope. Rowlands (in an Oscar-nominated role) and Falk perform superbly in their respective roles. Rowlands does a first-rate job of showing us Mabel’s torturous turmoil, and Falk is totally convincing as a crass and macho husband, who is just as “crazy” as his wife. I found myself cringing at the unpleasant exchanges throughout the movie, yet I recognized that my discomfort was probably caused by how true the story rang. It is filled with shades of gray and none of the characters are inherently good or bad. As Roger Ebert pointed out in a review of this film years ago: “A dysfunctional family is *not* a *non-functional family*; it functions after its fashion, and in its screwy routine there may even be a kind of reassurance.”

Oh, and by the way, Cassavetes’ crew (including cameraman Al Ruban and composer/sound designer Bo Harwood), deserve kudos too. Combining their talents and using a minimalist approach they contributed greatly in making “*A Woman...*” an immersive experience. The result is one of the most raw, yet intimate films ever made.

OPENING NIGHT 1977 ★★★★★ Acclaimed, alcoholic actress “Myrtle Gordon” (Gena Rowlands) is preparing for an intense, new play. One rainy, post-rehearsal night, an ardent young fan approaches as Myrtle and her fellow cast members are heading to dinner. Even though Myrtle would perhaps like to linger and chat, she follows the others into a waiting limousine. Moments later, as the young woman dashes to follow the limo, Myrtle witnesses the young girl fatally struck by a car. This causes the already unstable actress to spin even further out of control, much to the

chagrin of her director “Manny” (Ben Gazzara), co-star “Maurice” (John Cassavetes) and the play’s writer “Dorothy” (Zhora Lampert). Will she be able to fight through it? Will the show go on?

If there's one thing John Cassavetes did almost as consistently as churn out films in the seventies, it was cast wife Gena Rowlands – and who could blame him? Yet again Rowlands delivers another top-notch turn, this time as a privileged woman whose fame and professional recognition can't hide her loneliness. While Myrtle is merely teetering at the beginning of the film, her young fan's dire fate pushes her over the edge by the end. Ben Gazzara, another Cassavetes regular, is sadly amusing as the play's frustrated director, stubbornly refusing to concede that his play is destined to fail.

GLORIA 1980 ★★★★★☆ Great responsibility comes with agreeing to be a guardian for a small child. “Gloria Swenson” (Gena Rowlands) doesn’t want that responsibility – she doesn’t even like kids. But, after knocking on the door of her neighbor “Jack Dawn” (Buck Henry), just to borrow a cup of sugar, she finds her world turned upside down. It seems Jack, a small time hoodlum, has double-crossed the Puerto Rican Mafia. With death inevitable, he asks Gloria to look after little “Phil” (John Adames). Sure enough, the mafia guns down the rest of the Dawn family, and Gloria must now cope with the responsibility of keeping Phil safe. The situation grows more complicated, as Gloria has underworld connections of her own.

John Cassavetes originally intended for another director to handle his *Gloria* screenplay, taking the reigns only when Rowlands insisted he do so. All I can say is: “John, thanks for listening to your wife!” Not only did Cassavetes direct his spouse to another Academy-Award nomination, but he also delivered a distinctively balanced little thriller.

Something of a standout in the Cassavetes catalogue, *Gloria* is slightly more polished and commercial than most of his other films. Absent is the raw, stripped down music of Bo Harwood – instead we experience the emotional, string-heavy score by Bill Conti (of *Rocky*, *Rocky II*, *Rocky III*, & *Rocky V* fame) Yet, despite a more mainstream approach, *Gloria* succeeds as a good time ride. The always-reliable Gena Rowlands is fun to watch as the reluctant guardian turned surrogate mother. Her transformation is convincing as it unfolds, largely due to the chemistry she and young John Adames share.

FACES 1968 ★★★★★☆ On his way home from work, “Richard Frost” (John Marley) makes a little detour to visit a prostitute. Once he actually makes it home, Richard ends up having an alcohol-induced – though incredibly cultured – conversation about sex with his wife “Maria” (Lynn Carlin). Immense bitterness pours out of both of them, leading Richard to demand a divorce. The remainder of the night sees these two alienated people looking for hope as they surround themselves with a series of attractive, colorful characters. Richard pursues the younger “Jeanie” (Gena Rowlands), while Maria flirts with “Chet” (Seymour Cassel). Is there an easy answer for either of them?

Initially, *Faces* was a difficult film for me to sit through. Perhaps it was the cinema verité style; the reliance on drawn-out soliloquies, or the raw, incomplete feel the style utilizes. Maybe it was also because it was the first Cassavetes-directed film I viewed. But the further I got into it, the more unique the film felt. *Faces* is a rather theatrical experience, in which we are subjected to each of these characters at their most vulnerable, looking for answers outside of their crumbling marriage. Lynn Carlin, who was nominated for an Academy Award, has a magnificent chemistry with Seymour Cassel's charming playboy “Chet.” Be prepared for an intense gauntlet of turbulence that is about as far away as one can get from a typical Hollywood outing.

THE KILLING OF A CHINESE BOOKIE 1976 ★★★★★☆ Strip club owner “Cosmo Vitelli” (Ben Gazzara), takes a few of his dancers out for a night on the town to celebrate the final payment of his gambling debt. Unfortunately, the night ends with Cosmo in debt again – only this time to a gangster, Mort (Seymour Cassel). Unable to cough up over \$20,000, Cosmo is pressured into

performing a hit on a small-time Chinese bookie. The problem is, the bookie is not just some small-time criminal – he is the head of the Chinese mafia!

Filmed in the same raw vein as other Cassavetes films, *The Killing Of A Chinese Bookie* moves slowly at times, but offers plenty of thrills as well. Cosmo is not a likeable character by any means, and Gazzara does a great job of bringing out his sleaziness. It's easy to believe that a man who operates like Cosmo can be backed into a corner so easily. However, once Cosmo is faced with the task of assassinating the Chinese gangster, the film becomes a pure suspense trip – and you find yourself rooting for him. Seymour Cassel and Timothy Carey (as “Flo”) are reliable as always in their roles. Once again, do not expect either a happy or a bad ending!

A CHILD IS WAITING 1963 ★★☆☆☆ Autistic 12-year-old, “Reuben Widdicombe” (Bruce Ritchey), is a “student” at the Crawthorne State Training Institute, a new type of school for children who are developmentally challenged. Reuben isn't responding to the intensive care of the strict “Dr. Clark” (Burt Lancaster) – perhaps because Reuben's traumatized parents have neglected to visit him since they deposited him at the school two years before. New music teacher, “Jean Hansen” (Judy Garland), though lacking the sort of qualification one would expect for such a job, is determined to find ways to connect with Reuben. This puts her at odds with Dr. Clark and Reuben's distraught parents, “Sophie” and “Ted” (Gena Rowlands and Steven Hill), but Jean is not easily deterred.

Jack Clayton was originally selected to direct *A Child is Waiting*, but when a scheduling conflict forced him to quit, Cassavetes stepped in. Interestingly, this film is one of the rare “studio” films that Cassavetes directed, as one of the few that he did not write. Yet another interesting tidbit might be the behind-the-scenes turmoil between Cassavetes and producer Stanley Kramer, another veteran Hollywood director: Cassavetes' love of improvisation clashed with Kramer's traditional methods. What I found surprising is how coherent the film manages to be after such a rocky start. For this, much credit goes to the stellar performances of Burt Lancaster, Judy Garland and Gena Rowlands. One scene stands out: Garland's character has written a somewhat dishonest letter to Rowlands' character as a lure to get her to visit her son. Rowlands magnificently pours her heart out about the loss of hope regarding “Reuben”. While the film's message regarding the mentally handicapped remains somewhat unclear, the acting, as well as the then-groundbreaking choice to use actual patients, make *A Child is Waiting* worth viewing.

MINNIE AND MOSCOWITZ 1971 ★★☆☆☆ Disillusioned museum curator “Minnie Moore” (Gena Rowlands) feels lonely, lost and frustrated when her married boyfriend (John Cassavetes) abruptly leaves her. Eccentric parking attendant, “Seymour Moscowitz” (Seymour Cassel) wanders through life with a series of misadventures, until a chance encounter finds him rescuing Minnie as she runs from a disastrous blind date. Seymour immediately falls in love with Minnie, and courts her rather energetically. Despite drastically different personalities and backgrounds, might these two be a perfect match?

An odd, but heartfelt little love story, *Minnie And Moscowitz* was part of a series of low-budget films green lit by Universal, attempting to recapture the success of *Easy Rider*. In addition to regulars Gena Rowlands and Seymour Cassel, the film sports a number of good performances by Cassavetes, Val Avery, and a creepy little cameo from another Cassavetes regular, Timothy Carey. But Rowlands and Cassel are the ones who really carry the film. Cassel gives one of the wackiest performances of his career as the crazy – but good-hearted – parking attendant. While his behavior may raise some eyebrows, Cassel convincingly forces us to see Seymour as someone deserving a chance a love. Though it seemed a little slow at times, the development of the two main characters is what makes this film worth watching.

However, not even the Cassavetes has a perfect record. I popped the following film into my DVD player with high expectations. It fell short:

LOVE STREAMS 1984 ★★☆☆☆

Writer “Robert Harmon” (John Cassavetes) leads a life plagued with alcoholism, gambling, and womanizing - basically, a life void of responsibility. Meanwhile, Robert’s sister “Sarah” (Gena Rowlands), is in the middle of a drawn-out divorce, and is pushed into a breakdown when her daughter chooses to stay with her father “Jack” (Seymour Cassel). Can these two troubled siblings help each other stand on their own two feet?

I know, I know – many have expressed the belief this was one of Cassavetes’ finest films. I had high expectations myself. Having gone through the bulk of Cassavetes’ catalogue before getting to *Love Streams*, I was ready for a truly memorable portrait of life’s emotional episodes. Even the prospect of Cassavetes teaming up with producers Golan and Globus, who occasionally went beyond cheesy action films during their heyday, seemed promising. But, as *Love Streams* progressed, I began to lose hope. For all the deeply intimate flicks that Cassavetes generated throughout the seventies, *Love Streams* feels repetitive and stale. Gena Rowlands is featured yet again; so are several other Cassavetes’ regulars. Although the actors do a more than adequate job, the material they have to work with just doesn’t feel as interesting or as powerful as earlier efforts.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

The words “genius”, “groundbreaking”, and “visionary” are just a few of the adjectives used to describe Jon Cassavetes. He was indeed all of that – and more. His films are an absolute “must see” for anyone even remotely interested in filmmaking.

However, be forewarned: Watching a John Cassavetes film by yourself might make you even lonelier than you already were at the start.

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A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improvisation, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line is: there can never be too much cinema in Jarrod’s life!

FF2 Editor’s Note:

Although we have seen many of the films mentioned in this tribute, we saw them all before we began FF2, so, alas, none of them are listed in our database.

Therefore, we are very grateful to Jarrod for going back into the archive to create a personal record of the highpoints of John Cassavetes’ extraordinary career.

How well Jan remembers her first Cassavetes film: alone in Boston on a rainy afternoon in 1974, seeing *A Woman Under the Influence*, and not being able to shake the powerful emotions for hours afterwards!