

Cassavetes on Cassavetes

Ray Carney is Professor of Film and American Studies and Director of the undergraduate and graduate Film Studies programs at Boston University. He is the author or editor of more than ten books, including the critically acclaimed *John Cassavetes: The Adventure of Insecurity*; *The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World*; *The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies*; *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra*; *Speaking the Language of Desire: The Films of Carl Dreyer*; *American Dreaming*; and the BFI monograph on Cassavetes' *Shadows*. He is an acknowledged expert on William James and pragmatic philosophy, having contributed major essays on pragmatist aesthetics to Morris Dickstein's *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* and Townsend Ludington's *A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States*. He co-curated the *Beat Culture and the New America* show for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, is General Editor of the Cambridge Film Classics series, and is a frequent speaker at film festivals around the world. He is regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on independent film and American art and culture, and has a web site with more information at www.Cassavetes.com.

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Cassavetes on Cassavetes

edited by Ray Carney

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I have such admiration for people who can recount their lives in autobiography, because the connections are so complicated. I would never be able to straighten it out.

John Cassavetes

Introduction: A Life in Art

This is the autobiography John Cassavetes never lived to write. In his own words Cassavetes tells the story of his life as he lived it, day by day, year by year. He begins with his family and childhood experiences, talks about being a high-school student, college dropout and drama-school student. He describes the years he spent pounding the pavement in New York as a young, unemployed actor unable to get a job – or even an agent. Then he takes us behind the scenes to let us sit in on the planning, rehearsing, shooting and editing of each of his films – from *Shadows*, *Faces* and *Husbands* to *Minnie and Moskowitz*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, *Opening Night*, *Gloria* and *Love Streams*. He describes the struggle to get them made, and the even greater battle to get many of them into movie theaters. He talks about the reaction of audiences and reviewers to his work, and responds to criticisms of it.

The tale is a personal, passionate one: of dreams, struggles, triumphs, setbacks and frustrations; of hair-raising financial gambles, crazy artistic risk-taking and midnight visions of glory. But it is also the story of an artistic movement that extended beyond Cassavetes and defined an era in film history. Between the lines, as it were, these pages chronicle the history of one of the most important artistic movements of the past fifty years – the birth and development of American independent filmmaking, and the response to it by critics and reviewers.

Cassavetes pioneered a new conception of what film can be and do. His vision was of film as a personal exploration of the meaning of his life and the lives of the people around him. It was a way of asking deep, probing questions about the world in which he lived, and of asking others to question and explore their own experiences. The pages that follow trace the cultural trajectory of that idea, and the wildly opposed responses it elicited: the incredible energy and excitement it engendered among certain artists, critics and viewers; and the fierce resistance it met

with from uncomprehending studio heads, producers, distributors, reviewers and audiences fighting to hold on to their notion of the movies as ‘story-telling’ or ‘entertainment’. In fact, the battle is far from over; it continues today.

Since this is the first time Cassavetes’ life story has been told, very few of the following facts have been known outside of the circle of his intimate friends and family. Many facets of the story (from Cassavetes playing ‘chicken’ on the Port Washington sand-pit cliffs during his teens, to his feelings of oppression at the narrowness and conformity of American culture when he was in high school, to his playwriting and repertory theater work in the final decade of his life) will be unfamiliar even to someone who has read all of the standard journalistic biographies. Most of the events are appearing in print for the first time.

To verify the facts, I tracked down the actual participants to the events whenever I possibly could. I conducted scores of interviews – with Cassavetes in the final years of his life and with dozens of actors, crew members and friends who worked with him over the years, including Peter Falk, Ben Gazzara, Seymour Cassel, Elaine May, Lelia Goldoni, Sam Shaw, Larry Shaw, Hugh Hurd, George O’Halloran, Al Ruban, Maurice McEndree, Ted Allan, Lynn Carlin, Tim Carey, Erich Kollmar, Michael Ferris, Meta Shaw, Jonas Mekas, Amos Vogel, and many others. (Many of the interviews took the form of panel discussions or post-screening question-and-answer sessions I organized and moderated at film festivals.) Over the time it took to complete the project, the original interviews were supplemented with hundreds of hours of follow-up telephone conversations, e-mails and handwritten notes, memoirs and recollections provided by these figures and others, which were incorporated into the narrative.

My hope is that this will be a book with surprises and discoveries on nearly every page, even for someone who may already be a Cassavetes ‘buff’. I have written four books and dozens of essays and program notes about the films, and yet was astonished to discover something new about Cassavetes’ life or work almost every single day I worked on this project. Many of the facts I uncovered turned the common wisdom about his life, the accepted truths about how the movies were made, upside down and inside out.

One of the most striking things that emerged for me personally was the realization of the degree to which Cassavetes’ films were quarried from his most private feelings and experiences – far beyond what I had imagined when I began. Cassavetes is *in* his films, and his feelings about life are *in* characters like *Shadows*’ Ben, *Faces*’ Richard, *Minnie and*

Moskowitz's Seymour, A Woman Under the Influence's Mabel, The Killing of a Chinese Bookie's Cosmo and Love Streams' Robert – to an extent that stunned me when I ultimately grasped it. I hope that one of the functions of this book will be to help us understand Cassavetes' work, and the work of artistic creation in general, in new ways. We need to rethink the films in the light of the secrets Cassavetes reveals in these pages.

Cassavetes was a legendary talker. He talked about his work to virtually anyone who would listen: in conversations with actors and crew members on the sets of the films; in introductions preceding screenings and question-and-answer sessions following them; in discussions of his work with friends and with me; in formal interviews with journalists. He also wrote about his work: in introductions to the two books of screenplays he published; in personal statements included in the hand-crafted press-packs he prepared for many of the films; and in hundreds of letters to reporters, agents, studio heads, friends, and to me. There was no shortage of material to choose from. When the initial compilation was assembled, there was an embarrassment of riches – much more than could be included in a book. The present text represents a selection of less than one-fifth of the total amount with which I began.

Though, as noted, much of the material has never appeared in print before, I would point out that even the sections of the following pages that are based on newspaper or magazine interviews published during Cassavetes' lifetime are, in many cases, appearing here for the first time in the words Cassavetes actually spoke. It's no secret that, because of limitations of space, what appears in a given issue of a newspaper or magazine is almost always a highly edited version of what an interviewee actually says. In every possible instance, I have gone back to locate the original audio tape or unedited transcript of the interview and used that and not the abridged printed text as my source.

At an early stage in the process of compiling the text, the decision was made to organize the body of material into a sequential, chronological narrative in order to provide the most meaningful reading experience. This necessitated my one major editorial intervention in terms of the presentation of the hundreds of paragraphs that comprise the quoted text. I took shorter statements that Cassavetes made on different occasions and placed them back to back to form one longer, more comprehensive statement. The filmmaker often found himself answering the same question about his life or work many different times in front of different audiences or different interviewers. Consolidating several briefer responses into one longer response was the only way to allow

him to make a coherent presentation of his complete thought, as well as the only way to keep the narrative moving meaningfully from year to year and topic to topic without constant thematic digressions, asides and interruptions.

I also want to mention a few minor editorial changes I made in the text. In several dozen cases, I have silently ‘corrected’ factual errors in Cassavetes’ statements. In the rapid flow of speech (and sometimes even in his written statements) Cassavetes occasionally misremembered or misstated a date or name. I felt it would serve no useful purpose and would only confuse the reader to include obvious errors in his statements, when they seemed attributable simply to a slip of the tongue or a momentary memory lapse.

On the other hand, there is another kind of misrepresentation which was retained in the final text. In many cases Cassavetes consciously and deliberately shaded, suppressed or embellished the truth. Sometimes (as when he lied about his height or told people he majored in English at Colgate) it betrayed an insecurity. Sometimes (as when he told interviewers that the final version of *Shadows* was improvised) he did it for PR reasons. Sometimes (as when he claimed that Paramount called him up and asked him to come to Hollywood to make *Too Late Blues*, and that he wrote the script in a drunken weekend, when in fact he initiated the contact and wrangled for the job months in advance) he was engaged in an effort to rewrite history in order to cover up a mistake or an embarrassing fact about himself. Sometimes (as when he denied he had problems working with certain actors) he suppressed facts out of tact, to avoid hurting or angering someone. Sometimes the prevarication was fairly innocent: on occasion, he engaged in the perfectly understandable embellishments of vanity, or changed facts simply to ‘improve’ a story by making it funnier or more dramatic. These sorts of falsehoods or evasions fall into a different category from slips of the tongue or lapses of memory. They reveal important things about Cassavetes’ feelings and attitudes, and I have not only kept them in the text but usually discussed them in the headnotes.

I ‘cleaned up’ the text in several other small ways. If the antecedent of a pronoun was unclear (which often was the case simply because I had cut an earlier statement to avoid repetition), I replaced the pronoun with the noun to which it referred (generally the title of a film or the name of a character). At many points, I also edited out a little of the syntactic and dictional sprawl that inevitably accompanies spoken language (the use of empty phrases like ‘you see?’, ‘right?’ and ‘you know?’ to engage a listener, and the occasionally loopy syntax that creeps into

almost all speech). In every case, the goal was to clarify a potential confusion without changing the fundamental meaning of what Cassavetes was saying.

At the same time, in other cases, I deliberately avoided making some of Cassavetes' explanations simpler, clearer or more logical. Almost everything in the following pages originated as speech, and there is no reason to conceal that fact or to attempt to edit it to mimic the entirely different cadences of written language. More importantly, some of Cassavetes' strangest and potentially most puzzling expressions communicate important ideas. As an example, he frequently employs odd, undefined pet phrases that are fairly cryptic at first glance to explain aspects of his work (e.g. making references to 'the rules of society', 'mores', the importance of 'your mind's eye view of yourself' and his need for 'comfort'). I initially considered eliminating the passages containing these and several other offbeat terms since they seemed unclear. But as I worked with the text over a long period of time, these concepts, however oddly expressed, became extremely meaningful as they echoed across the discussions of different films.

There are a number of eccentric leaps of association or idiosyncratic jumps and elisions in Cassavetes' thoughts and syntax which may seem confusing or haphazard at first, but eventually become quite revealing. I'll cite only one example: it is not at all uncommon for Cassavetes to begin talking about a character and in mid-sentence switch to talking about the actor who plays the character. The shift occurs so subtly and so frequently that at many points it is simply impossible to tell whom Cassavetes is referring to. He often compounds the confusion by using the actor's name in place of the character's – talking about *A Woman Under the Influence*, for example, by saying something like, 'Peter surprised me; he *wanted* Gena to be committed.' To clarify these expressions by substituting the 'correct' name in place of the 'wrong' one would be to miss the point. Cassavetes' conflation of the actors' and the characters' personalities, with the actor and the character inhabiting the same skin, reveals deep truths about how he thought about his actors and his films.

I have provided extensive headnotes to fill in the events and people that are the necessary background to Cassavetes' statements. Printing his words in a vacuum would have provided an incomplete and misleading picture. It's not only that his ideas were affected by his experiences and were a response to events he lived through; but, more importantly, it's crucial to appreciate that he 'lived' his philosophy every bit as much as he put it into his work. In fact, it might be said that his

Challenging, uncompromising, truth-telling filmmaking. Cassavetes lining up an exterior shot for the opening of *A Woman Under the Influence*. © Michael Ferris

words would be so much hot air if they hadn't been expressed in every pulsebeat of his existence, in every interaction and decision he made every day of his life.

If Cassavetes himself stood for anything as a filmmaker, it was truth-telling, and in the vein of his own work, I aimed at the same elusive target. It was not easy. In a project of this sort, the siren song of simplification continuously beckons. It is always simpler to draw in black and white; to transform a figure into a hero or a villain – which is why the bookstores are full of self-promoting, fairy-tale, Hollywood hagiographies. There have been several documentary films devoted to

Cassavetes' life, but, to my mind, none of them has even come close to capturing the man who made the movies. The struggles, defeats, pains, fierceness, determination, the sheer work of doing it are all missing. As Cassavetes filmed *Husbands*, his mantra to his actors was: 'No cute. *Nothing* cute!', and my own as I wrote this book might have been: 'Not a saint, not a visionary, not a hero – but a man.' The goal was to get past the press-release version of the life and work to explore the complex reality of this all-too-human depicter of our all-too-human fallibilities.

I repeatedly paused as I lightly edited Cassavetes' remarks or fretted over the wording of a difficult headnote to ask myself whether what I was doing would pass muster under his own eyes if he were making a movie about his life. Cassavetes was not a simple person. He could be stunningly generous and thoughtful; but he could also be exasperating, foolish, willful and manipulative. He was an idealist, but he was also a con-man. He danced with artistic angels, but he also wrestled personal and professional demons. He worked like a fiend, and played like a child. He could dazzle you with his boyish charm, but he could also terrify you with his fits of anger.

Every effort was made to check and cross-check facts; yet I make no claim of definitiveness or finality. There may be events I have overlooked or errors which have crept in, despite my best efforts. There were times when my sources contradicted each other, and many times when Cassavetes directly contradicted himself. Perhaps some truths are forever irrecoverable, lost in the dark, backward abysm of time. In every case I did my level best to sort and sift, and where it seemed necessary, I pointed out in a headnote that there might be more than one way to understand something. I would be delighted to augment or correct future editions with additional information, or to include material by Cassavetes which I may not already have located.

This book has been a labor of love, more than eleven years in the making. It was written as a personal tribute to a crazy, inspiring man whom I feel lucky to have known, even a little, and whom I shall always miss. I dedicate it to the next generation of American actors, screenwriters, playwrights and filmmakers. May you dare to follow in Cassavetes' challenging, exciting footsteps – down the road not taken, away from the pack, along the path of the artist.

Ray Carney
Boston University
Boston, Massachusetts

Beginnings (1929–56)

A Frank Capra story.

My father, Nicholas John Cassavetes, came to America with his sister and brother when he was fourteen. He was born in Larissa, Greece, in 1893, and heard about this country when a missionary came through town one day saying there was brotherhood in America, that if you wanted to work and learn, the American people would open their arms and hearts to you. They went first to Bulgaria – where they deposited my aunt with relatives – and then to Constantinople, where they worked until they saved up the boat fare. On 1 January 1908, my dad and his brother Arthur arrived at Ellis Island. When they were asked who they knew in America, my father, who'd heard of Providence, Rhode Island, and liked the name Providence, said he knew someone there. He was asked for written proof of this and he said he didn't have any because the man, a very wealthy man, had arrived in New York on the boat before theirs. And then my dad pulled out his big line: 'I want to work and I want to learn.'

An immigration officer gave my father and my uncle five dollars for the bus fare to Providence, and when they arrived, they didn't know a soul. My dad began looking for Greeks all over town, searching for that familiar dark-olive skin tone, until he found fellow immigrants who gave him work. Shortly after that, he got a job just outside Boston, working in an ice-cream parlor.

As a teenager and young man, Cassavetes' father took low-paying jobs in coffee shops and restaurants in the New England area. He saved as much money as he could to go to college and entered Harvard on a partial scholarship in 1911. (His filmmaker son would later embellish the Harvard story in a number of different respects: for example, telling people that his father knew Franklin Roosevelt and used to borrow his books for

class, although the two men weren't there at the same time. Cassavetes would also say that his father majored in Classics, but in fact his concentration was in Chemistry – though he did take courses in French, German, Greek and Latin. And he would tell people that he was an outstanding student, when in fact his grades were almost entirely Bs and Cs.)

Two years after he'd come here – at the age of sixteen – he'd really put it all together: he'd learned English to add to the Greek and French he already knew; he spent six months at the Mount Hermon School, near Boston, on a scholarship; and he won a partial scholarship to Harvard University, where he studied Classics. He was in the class of 1915, but didn't graduate. He worked his way through school, and almost had to drop out a couple of times. He went to the Dean each time, and somehow or other always got the money he needed to continue his studies. Every time he'd run into money difficulties, he'd say to someone, 'I want to work and I want to learn,' and he did work and learn.

Money was a constant problem during the father's college years. As he had at the Mount Hermon School, on top of his courses he worked menial jobs from 6 p.m. to midnight six evenings a week to earn enough to stay in school and to send to his parents back in Epirus. He also depended heavily on a series of direct financial grants from Harvard. Nicholas Cassavetes' student file is full of letters he wrote in which, year after year, he successfully persuades the Dean of the College to agree to one *ad hoc* financial arrangement after another which will allow him to continue his studies for one more year. A little bit of the spunky persistence, negotiation skills, and faith in the fundamental goodness of people to understand and sympathize with each other's needs that the son would later display is visible between the lines of the father's carefully argued petitions.

After he left school, in 1915, having completed the equivalent of three years of course work, Nicholas Cassavetes briefly served in the US Army as an interpreter, and from 1915–22, as Honorary Secretary and then Director of the Pan-Epirotic Union in America. In that capacity he wrote *The Question of Northern Epirus at the Peace Conference*, published by Oxford University Press in 1919. It is a passionate, personal plea for the assistance of the American people in helping the Epirote people (his own national group) free themselves from Albanian rule. The book couches its argument not only in terms of humanitarian issues of human suffering, but in terms of historical and cultural parallels that link the Greek and American republics. As a personal letter included in each copy puts

it: '[This publication] deals with the case of a race which has striven for 3000 years for Liberty, for Democracy, and for the ideal of Beauty.' The young man, still in his mid-twenties, also wrote a series of letters to American officials repeating his requests for assistance in the Epirote cause. While he was working on these projects, he supported himself by continuing to hold a series of low-level kitchen and janitorial jobs in restaurants and coffee shops.

Nicholas married Katherine Demetri, approximately fifteen years his junior, on 24 April 1926, and the couple had two sons: Nicholas John, who later became a Wall Street stockbroker, on 21 December 1927; and John Nicholas, on 9 December 1929. The father had moved into a series of slightly better paying jobs, but none of them lasted very long and the family finances fluctuated from year to year. The euphemism Cassavetes would employ in interviews was that his father 'made and lost millions' in the course of his life. It was true in a metaphorical sense, but for most of Cassavetes' childhood, the father didn't have millions to lose. The family was quite poor.

My father was an exporter, an importer. He held great stock in the Cunard White Star Line at one time, but they forced him out. During the Depression, he went to work in an ice-cream factory. I remember how this affected us. I remember when we didn't have anything to eat and my mother used to take us down to a restaurant, a little coffee-pot, and this restaurant-owner would give us something to eat. My mother would give me all the food and give my big brother all the food. I remember this restaurant-owner, because when we walked out of the restaurant I'd see some candy – and I didn't know we were poor or anything – so I'd say, 'I'd like the Life-Savers' – those mixed things, one cherry, one lemon, and so on. He'd say, 'Oh, here, take it.' My mother would look very tense, and I'd take the Life-Savers and get carried away, as a kid would, with the candy.

The parents had a lot of pride and protected the children from the reality of their situation.

It was the Depression and everybody was poor, but it didn't matter. We never knew we were poor when we were poor. We didn't have any money, but we never worried about it. We never knew what poverty was. At one point during the Depression, I remember this Armenian trader of Turkish rugs came in, and he wanted to buy all kinds of tapestries and lace that my mother had. He offered my mother, for these Damascus tablecloths, twenty-five cents apiece. She sold everything we

had in order for us to eat, and she never batted an eye. She made it seem very jolly and gay and happy so that we wouldn't be upset. Later on in your life, you begin to realize; you have great recollections of people selling these things, and the way they do it. My mother and father were never frightened of anything. They always felt that they should go through life happily and without fear, and they did that. And it was a great boon to my brother and myself.

In the early 1930s, the father took the family back to Greece for six years. John was two.

The family went back to Greece when I was young and we returned to America when I was eight. I'm told that at school at the time I couldn't speak English, only Greek. But the language barrier means nothing to me. Language is just a bunch of symbols. People's emotions are fundamentally the same everywhere.

The family moved around a lot, apartment-hopping from neighborhood to neighborhood – from Forrest Hills to Kew Gardens to Jackson Heights and elsewhere – while the two children were in elementary school. With a few exceptions, most of the places they lived were fairly marginal 'cold water flats'. Cassavetes exaggerates the frequency of the moves, but only slightly:

We would move every thirty days. Landlords were so anxious for tenants that they'd offer a month's rent free for moving in. When the month ran out, so did we. But all during these fluctuating periods, during which we must have moved twenty-five times – from lavish apartments to brownstones in Woodside, Long Island – there wasn't one moment of doubt in my father's mind or in my mother's mind. My father was a gambler – he gambled with us.

In the 1950s and 1960s, having improved their financial situation, the filmmaker's father and mother lived in an apartment at 90 Riverside Drive, Sutton Place, on the East Side of Manhattan. The mother ran a chic Upper East Side boutique and the father ran the Olympic Travel Agency at 203 West 42nd Street, only a few blocks from where most of *Shadows* was shot. In the early 1970s, after the father retired, the couple moved to Studio City, California, to be close to their son.

The mother's and father's personalities complemented each other. The father was bookish, intellectual and idealistic. He instilled a love of the Classics in his son that would endure throughout his life, reading

Plato and Sophocles in Greek to young John, while the boy planted and weeded the family garden. (The son had an exceptional memory – for everything but people’s names – and as an adult could quote by heart long sections of all of the Greek tragedies, much of Aristophanes – a personal favorite for its bawdiness – as well as extended excerpts from Shakespeare’s plays.)

My father was a quiet, serious, thoughtful man – very artistic and creative and original, but he did it on his own. He wrote two books that were never published. For the first, *The Sanhedron*, he went to Israel and researched Jesus’s trial. After *Shadows*, I wanted to work with Dreyer on a movie of it. The screenplay was called *Thirty Pieces of Silver*. Then there was another, *Blood and Oil*, taking on Standard Oil. When he finished it in 1939, he knew he could never get it published, but he wanted to tell the truth about what the company had done. He was an idealist and a real intellectual. As a nation, he admired the British, because they had done so much with so little. They had few natural resources, but had built a culture the world looked up to.

Nicholas Cassavetes was a serious student of history and world culture who saw America as, at least potentially, a new Athens. He personally subscribed to the ideals of classic Greek civilization and judged America insofar as it realized – or failed to realize – those ideals. As is the case with many immigrants from less democratic cultures, and as someone who was personally quite conservative, traditional and ‘old world’ in his own values, the father had strong convictions about the failure of Americans to live up to the ideals on which their culture was founded. He felt that America was being eroded from within by social divisiveness, narrow self-interest, personal immorality, and lack of what he called ‘discipline’. In his words, ‘to escape the destiny of Greece and Rome’ America needed to return to ‘traditional ideals of discipline, patriotism and moral value’. During the 1920s and 1930s, the *New York Times* published more than twenty letters by him about a range of matters, and in 1944, he published a thirty-four-page booklet titled *Near East Problems*. Young John Cassavetes grew up in an household swimming with exalted and passionately held historical and political ideals – in which American cultural values were, for better and for worse, continuously compared with those of classical Greece. The boy was told of both the potential greatness and the actual shortcomings of American society, and reminded that he was from a background that should allow him to be better than most other Americans.

The filmmaker's mother and father, Nicholas and Katherine Cassavetes, in the mid-1970s. © *Sam Shaw*

The father was a Roosevelt Democrat in the 1930s. In later years he crusaded on behalf of a range of social causes and political reforms. He was a Greek patriot, collecting Greek art and religious icons, and defending traditional Greek values against being watered down by modernization. In the following passage, the filmmaker talks about his father as he was in his seventies.

He still works close to eighteen hours a day. He won't stop; he's in travel and immigration, and plans to make millions. He's probably responsible for bringing in most of the Greeks who now live in America. My mother calls him the champion of lost causes; he's one of those Greek-American patriots who tries to move mountains. Right now, he's fighting an archbishop because the archbishop wants to replace Greek with English as the language in church services. A few months ago, I was having dinner with my mother and I asked her where my dad was. He was out on the street picketing the archbishop.

Katherine Cassavetes was extroverted, animated and status-conscious. The daughter of a Greek ship captain (a prestigious position within Greek society), she was a member of the Park Avenue high Greek aris-

toocracy (where the family joke was that Aristotle Onassis was an upstart businessman without true ‘style’ or ‘class’). She was fluent in Greek, Italian, English and Yiddish.

She was known for her wit and vivacity. As a young girl she was said to have been a great beauty, and dreamed of becoming an actress. More than thirty years later her son would allow her to realize her dream by casting her in *Minnie and Moskowitz*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and *Opening Night*.

She was also strong-willed, opinionated and outspoken. She was not fond of her son’s films, telling an interviewer years later, ‘I prefer him as an actor. His face should be on screen and not behind a camera.’

My mother had an extreme flair for living – a great sense of humor, a great love of life. She was very elegant and refined. She was very devoted to me. She just adored me.

Cassavetes was deeply attached to his parents throughout his life and remembered his childhood years with great fondness. By all accounts, the family was a little like the one in *You Can’t Take It with You*. (The moment near the end of *A Woman Under the Influence* in which the relatives gather round the table and the children briefly clown around for them represents a brief glimpse of Cassavetes’ own childhood.)

My family was a wild and wonderful place, with lots of friends and neighbors visiting and talking loud and eating loud and nobody telling the children to be quiet or putting them down. The children were treated with as much respect as the adults. Sometimes more! There was great love in my family and a great dignity. My parents are highly individualistic and they allowed their two sons to be individuals. When I was five I used to recite poetry and perform. My family was highly instrumental in giving me freedom – the freedom from fear – to become a person who would like to express himself in this world.

When we had money we went to the movies. When we didn’t, we sat around the kitchen table and told stories. There were always people everywhere, laughing and talking. I don’t know if you remember what your own family life was like, but it probably was quite emotional. Most families are. Family life is emotional. When I was a child my mother used to say to me, ‘I’d cut off my arm for you, my leg for you, I’d do anything for you.’ It was a way of saying, ‘Whatever you do, you’re still my son.’ Family is very important. I grew up with this extremely strong family tie and I just can’t believe anything bad about anyone.

On occasion, the clowning around took the form of moviemaking.

When I was a kid, eight or nine, my four best friends and I would take a Bolex camera and make our own movies. I would be on the beach, in a bathing suit, shooting 8mm. And playing [shifts into a deep voice] ‘The Killer’! Nothing much has changed really. I’m still making them with my friends! We’d pretend to be disc jockeys. Fantasizing is instinctive. It makes things better than in real life. I grew up on films and books. But even when I was growing up, books were going out and film was coming in.

The young Cassavetes was a sports fanatic – the kind of boy who idolized sports heroes, memorized team statistics and studied the preceding day’s results in the paper every morning. Even as an adult, the sports section was the only part of the paper he read. When the family lived in the city, the boy would frequently cut school to go to Ebbett’s Field and watch the Brooklyn Dodgers play (days that are paid homage to in the Yankee Stadium shots at the beginning of *Gloria*). Cassavetes had a lifelong love of the sport, at one point in the seventies attempting to persuade a group of friends to form a consortium to buy the Pittsburgh Pirates. Basketball was another passion for both the boy and the man who, as an adult, was often one of the noisiest and most passionate fans at Lakers games.

Cassavetes liked to play sports as much as he liked to watch, and played football, basketball, baseball or softball on pick-up teams throughout his life. What he lacked in ability he more than made up for in drive and passion. Everyone who played with him commented on his fierce competitiveness and desire to win.

In later years, Cassavetes looked back on the movies that had impressed him as a boy. He thought of his own work as a continuation of this tradition.

I grew up believing in the rich and the poor, and labor and Roosevelts, and all those people. You know, when I was first watching films, I thought Frank Capra *was* America. He’d seen and understood that fairness thing. He knew the poor were fairer and have more fun. He knew the good guys won and justice prevailed. Capra’s heavies are the mighty, the unbeatable, until they are made to care by the innocent persistence of the heroes, who make them realize that there’s joy to living. *Meet John Doe* was, and still is, my favorite. Capra created a feeling of belief in a free country and that there is goodness in bad people; that everyone reaches a limit where they would stop and be sane again because what

they really wanted was to have compassion for other people and live in a spirit of friendliness and brotherhood.

I loved Frank Capra when I was a kid. I saw *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and I believed in it. I believed in the people in our country and our society. I believed that the rich were not that bad and that the poor had a gripe, but that people could come together and that made America a better place for me to live in and be proud of. And every Capra film I've ever seen showed the gentleness of people. There were corrupt people within that framework, sure. The poor people were always oppressed, but they were oppressed with such dignity and loveliness that they were really stronger than the rich; the rich had to be educated. I grew up with that idea.

I grew up on guys that were bigger than life. Greenstreet, Bogart, Cagney, Wallace Beery. *Those* were my favorite guys. I'd think, God, what a wonderful life they had – to have an opportunity to stand up there in front of people, in front of a camera, to express yourself and be paid for it, and say things and have it mean something to the audience. Cagney was my idea of a star. He could take a bad film and make it good. I'll never forget the violence of *Public Enemy*. I loved it! I didn't care how many people got killed. But Cagney played a man you didn't want to see die. He was my childhood idol, the guy most responsible, I suppose, for getting me into films; I loved him. He always portrayed an average guy who could somehow knock down giants. He was almost like a savior to all the short guys in the world, of whom I am one. As a kid, I idolized him just because he was short – and tough. One of my favorite movies is *Angels with Dirty Faces*. I remember seeing it as a kid and crying. It was a great, enigmatic movie. Cagney went to the electric chair and you never knew if he was a coward or a hero. I felt such compassion for someone I liked who had to die. I think all things relate to death in our limited time. That's an unspoken thing with all people. You can defeat fear through humor, through pain, through honesty, bravery, intuition, and through love in the truest sense. *Captains Courageous*, *Gunga Din*, *High Sierra* and Dick Powell musicals were others that really got me. Those movies were better than the current ones. They understood feeling.

As Cassavetes was entering his teens, the family's financial situation improved slightly (though only a few years later, in the early 1940s, the father lost his job again). The family moved to the suburbs. In his teens, Cassavetes became known as a delinquent and a bit of a daredevil.

My father got a job working as an immigration man, in an office, and built his way up. But when the war broke out, he lost his entire business again, and had to go to work as a secretary. When I was about twelve, we moved to Port Washington, Long Island, on Sands Point. We'd do the usual things that kids would do – go out and turn over cars and be very devilish.

Sands Point, Port Washington, was a prosperous, upper-middle-class community. The ethnic boy from the city was uncomfortable there. The town's conservatism was alien and oppressive. He felt out of place and different.

I had no society by which I lived. I was free to do whatever I wanted to, and to express myself the way I wanted to. But the Port Washington kids were afraid. We would go by these sand-pits – they had the largest sand-pits on Long Island out in Port Washington – and they didn't want to go near the edge. They didn't want to take chances. They had to be home at a certain hour. They had a society that they were living by at the age of ten, twelve, fourteen. It irritated me that the kids had no freedom.

When they went to school, their parents packed a lunch the same way with the same things – the apple in the basket – and they'd drive us to school in this little town. And the talk – I noticed that one of the husbands would give his wife an allowance. Now, my father never gave my mother an allowance. I saw these things and they bothered me. I never could really fit into that kind of thing. Though I got along with the kids, I never could get along with the parents. I'd walk into the house and they'd say, 'Do you want a sandwich?' and I'd say to myself, 'I don't want a sandwich like that. I'll make *my own* sandwiches.'

I saw the kids having their lives planned. They were going to go to certain universities and they'd work for that. Most of them aimed for Princeton or Yale. Their whole lives were mapped out before they began. They had no chance to say, 'This is what *I* want to be.' They were what their families wanted them to be; they expressed themselves as their families wished them to express themselves. Their prejudices were the prejudices of their families. Their wants, likes, dislikes, political ideas – if it was a Republican town they would all be Republicans and they'd dislike you if you were a Democrat, or vice versa. So it became a thing where people could not think freely, and without knowing it, I reacted to this to the point where I would take an opposite stand on anything, everything, and I would try logically to find out why I took

that opposite stand, and I would fight them every inch of the way. I wasn't very popular.

His high-school yearbook reports that he was nicknamed 'Cassy', was 'always ready with a wisecrack', and was voted 'Class Wit' by his classmates. As he had bounced from school to school, the dislocations had encouraged him to joke, clown around and perform to make friends.

When I was fourteen years old, I think I was just about five feet tall, which meant that I had enormous problems getting dates with girls. So you have to compensate for it: you become funnier, more outgoing. Being short is a great character builder, even though it sure as hell doesn't seem that way when you first start out.

I used to size up what different people wanted from me. Once, when I couldn't break through to a really tough bunch of kids, I told them, 'Go ahead, try to break my hand by squeezing it!' Well, they didn't know it, but I was double-jointed and nobody could break my hand that way. The trick worked, and I was accepted. Other times, I'd work up routines. By doing all those things I inadvertently trained myself to be an actor.

The boy's adolescence wasn't all brashness and bravado; there were also the usual youthful awkwardnesses and pains. After an accident, he became so embarrassed about the appearance of his teeth that he stopped smiling. Many people who met him in later years would comment on his 'smirk'.

I didn't smile at all for a long time. I had an accident and some of my front teeth chipped. When I finally got enough money to have them fixed as an adult, I had gotten out of the habit of smiling.

His mother also embarrassed him at times. Late in life, Cassavetes told a story about how she would make him perform for her friends. He used it to illustrate one of the fundamental premises of his work – namely, that there are as many different understandings of a situation as there are individuals in it.

My mother used to take me to tea with friends and go on and on: 'Johnny is *so cute!* He's *so adorable.* Oh, Johnny, *please* do something for the ladies.' It was OK when I was little, but when I went through puberty I just hated it! It embarrassed me terrifically. I wanted to be *myself*. But she did it because she loved me so much. And the other

High-school yearbook photos of John (class of 1947) and his brother Nicholas (class of 1944). *Courtesy Louise Fearon*

women loved it. So if it was in a movie would it be comic or serious? Would it be embarrassing or nice? It depends on whose view you have. I understand that now that I have children of my own. I tell that to my daughter when she thinks I embarrass her. Even simple things are not simple.

He jokingly traced another aspect of his work – the imperfection of our knowledge of ourselves – to a formative experience in his teen years.

I used to have a girlfriend who thought I was the funniest man alive. Whenever I went out with her and thought I was being romantic and dashing, she simply used to roar with laughter – at everything I said and did. This taught me a very basic, necessary lesson: that we really aren't ourselves, and the impression we make on people is often the direct opposite of the one intended.

Cassavetes graduated from Port Washington High School in June 1947. A few years later, in early press releases and interviews, he would tell a number of white lies in the interests of enhancing his image and covering up his insecurities: the chipped teeth accident was transformed into a 'fight' in line with his rebel image. His height became 5' 10" rather than his actual 5' 7". (As an adult he almost always wore boots with heels to make him look taller.) He claimed to have majored in English Literature at Colgate University, though he had never attended the school for a day. He bragged that he had studied drama and been inspired to become an actor by reading the works of Maxwell Ander-

son, Robert Sherwood and Moss Hart; in reality, the first time he ever heard those names was when he acted in television adaptations of their works. And he couldn't resist telling interviewers that he had once held a job as a sports announcer – though it was nothing more than a boyhood fantasy.

I was a totally uninterested student in high school and didn't want to go to college, because college in the 1950s was just a way of getting a diploma, that ID card which would permit you to get a job after graduation. But it was important to my family that I should go to school, and I had to get out of Port Washington.

When my brother got out of the Army, he enrolled at Mohawk College, a veterans' school in upstate New York. I went along. I stayed there for a year and then Mohawk was closed down and I went to Champlain; but I got kicked out of there pretty quick, mainly because I didn't want to be there. College was the same as being in Port Washington. Professors were only interested in their individual expression, and forced upon the student their particular background. It was almost like the parent thing again. Classes were held in huge assembly rooms seating more than 200 students; the teachers would shout into microphones. I never enjoyed a second of it because there wasn't anyone there enjoying it. When I found a professor that enjoyed what he was talking about, I enjoyed it. I had a history professor named Williams who was a fantastic guy. He made me love history because *he* loved it, because he was so excited about what he was saying. I'd never had an interest in it before that, but he made it so vital and interesting, without any personal force.

Cassavetes failed out of Champlain at the end of the first semester. He had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. His only desire was to get out of Port Washington. He decided to hitch-hike down Route One to find something different. But when he arrived in St. Petersburg and 'saw all the old people', he was overcome with loneliness. He called home and had his father wire him the bus fare back.

John was a disappointment to his parents, who had almost given up on him ever amounting to anything. As far as they were concerned, he had wasted every chance he had been presented with. He had done nothing with his life but drift, play basketball and chase girls. His father (who had dreamed of both of his sons going to Harvard) was especially disappointed in his younger son's disinterest in school. His mother thought of him as a bum. Both parents thought he lacked drive and discipline. John was under all the more pressure because his older brother

was so different. At this point, Nicholas had already done two years of Army service, and was a serious and hard-working Chemistry major (as his father had been). Cassavetes dearly loved his brother, but although he denies it in the following passage, felt the sting of not being able to live up to his example.

I had no ambition. I had been a rather dilettante kind of a kid, without any particular experience or background. My one fear was work. All I'd ever done was play basketball and run out with girls. I'd never studied or applied myself or been anything but completely lazy – and I'd never felt guilty about it.

Going to acting school was one more way to put off deciding what he wanted to do with himself.

When I got back home from Florida, I bumped into some friends of mine – funny, funny guys who said, 'Hey, John, we just signed up at the American Academy to become *actors*, man! Come with us – the school is packed with girls!' So I went home to ask my family for some loot. I went to my father and said, 'I don't want to go to college. I want to be an actor and go to this school.' That was a lie, of course; I just wanted to be near all those girls. My mother said, 'An actor?!' But my father – he was very disappointed about my leaving college – said, 'At least it's *something*, let him be *something*!'

Then he gave me this very solemn look and I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm really going to get it.' And he said, 'That's a very noble thing to do. Do you know what kind of responsibility that is? You are going to be representing the lives of human beings. You will speak for all the people who have no voice.'

At the age of nineteen, on 8 February 1949, Cassavetes auditioned for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. His mother accompanied him. As his audition pieces he chose speeches from a book that the school provided. One was a passage from Philip Barry's *The Youngest* in which a boy who wants to be a writer must triumph over the resistance of his family, and the other was Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The audition report described him as a 'dark', 'short', 'Latin' type, of 'sensitive temperament' and a 'fine and intelligent boy'.

The Academy was quite different from what it is today. Operating out of a few rooms at Carnegie Hall on 57th Street and Seventh Avenue, it was a two-year program – with approximately 140 students entering in

the first-year class and half that number staying on to graduate at the end of the second year. (There were sixty-seven students in Cassavetes' graduation class.) The school's strongest point was that its teaching was focused almost entirely on stage work, which lent a purity to the classes and downplayed the commercial side of the profession.

We hated Hollywood. Hated everything it stood for. Mainly because there was no chance for us to ever get there!

The curriculum involved taking a Junior course in the first year which covered various aspects of theatrical practice (from make-up to voice to pantomime), and a Senior course which basically involved having the students function as a repertory theater company for six months, staging a large number of afternoon productions at the Carnegie Lyceum and the Empire Theater. Junior students had their choice of three different five-month periods to complete their first year of study. The October class studied from the end of October to the end of April; the January class from mid-January to the end of June; and the April class from the beginning of April through the first week in September. Cassavetes was admitted to the April class. He then entered the Senior course in mid-September 1949, continued his work through the spring of 1950, and graduated in mid-March. (Anne Bancroft would become the most famous member of his graduation class, though at the time she still went by Anne Italiano.) Tuition was \$500 a year, which his father paid at the start.

I did some part-time work for a few months and then I asked him for some money and he gave it to me. I went on a parental scholarship! At first, I didn't do very well, because I was carried away with the girls there and the freedom, as all young people are carried away. You have to learn a lesson. Just escaping from the conformity of the possibility of entering into a business life makes you so heady and makes you feel so fantastic that – you know? And you don't want to go back into that business world, or you don't want to have anything to do with that world that you came from. So you act nuts. Just nuts. Madness and insanity. Girls and everything – just everything.

I didn't take advantage of the place at all the first semester. Then the second semester came around and my family said, 'Look. You wanted to be an actor. If you want to stay there, as we know you do, you go and pay for yourself, and from now on you're on your own.' I said, 'OK.' So I worked that summer in a drugstore and earned enough money to pay my tuition and go back for a second semester.

I was remembered by fellow students as a rebel and something of a rowdy. A hint of things to come! I immediately thought I knew all about acting. You know how it is with kids – you’re scared you know *nothing*, but sure you can play *anything*! I’d get up on stage and shout; a couple of the teachers liked that because it showed enthusiasm. For a long time, that’s all I thought acting was about – to show a lot of emotion. The louder I screamed, the better I thought I was. I really didn’t learn much about acting except through osmosis, absorbing the life we led, learning from people I was lucky enough to meet.

Cassavetes said he learned a great lesson from one of the teachers, but it took him years to understand it.

The teachers were very good people. There was a fellow named Edward Goodman. There was a fellow named Deestal. And there was one named Charles Jehlinger, who was, I think, the greatest teacher that ever lived. He was a terrific man. He was a man who said only two things: he said, ‘You’re not talking,’ or ‘You’re not listening.’ He said, ‘You’re an idiot, child. You went to college and you didn’t learn a thing. You didn’t learn to *think*, to *talk*, and you didn’t learn to *listen*.’ That’s all he taught, and he was teaching for some fifty years, and he never said anything more than that to the actor. One day he kept me up on the stage for two and a half hours to say my entrance lines, and I couldn’t understand what he was talking about. He said, ‘But you’re not *talking*, John.’ I said, ‘But I *am* talking, Sir.’ He said, ‘No, you’re not *talking*.’ Finally, five years later, I understood what he meant. Most actors today still don’t know how to talk and how to listen.

Fred Draper, John Finnegan and Gene Darfler, whom Cassavetes would use in subsequent films, were classmates and roommates. Bill Stafford, James Joyce, Burt Lane and Vince Edwards were others Cassavetes met and hung around with at this period in his life.

Fred Draper and I were in all the plays together, and he always could get a lot of laughs, always a lot of laughs, and I resented it. He would do little things to play to the audience. He taught me a lot about acting, about not going right to the scene.

During the first semester, Cassavetes lived at home, but in September 1949, he moved into a tiny Manhattan apartment to get away. (The AADA did not allow students to hold jobs, but the rule was much violated.)

I'd lived at home up to that point – well, I didn't, I was in the city with my friends all the time and came home to get money, to take a bath, to relax. But then in my second year I went into the city and lived there. I lived in a room with ten fellows, and none of us had a job when we were at the Academy. None of us had any source of income. So we would take turns working. Now, there were ten of us. Only one of us had to work to earn enough money to live in this apartment. We lived up on 96th Street, near Riverside Drive, this one-and-a-half-room apartment ten of us were in.

Cassavetes' use of a tape recorder to capture the tones and rhythms of real speech dates from this time. In later years, he would use tape recordings of conversations (in addition to writing down a lot of what he overheard people say) to help him create dialogue.

We would take a tape recorder and practice. We'd do Shakespeare. We'd do everything we could, and we'd clown around and keep it a game. I would study Shakespeare – *Hamlet* – read with friends of mine. We would work and work and work, because our one aim was to be great actors. The one thing in life that every young actor wants to do is to be great. This is the spur, fame is the spur. At night we'd go to parties.

On two visits to the school twenty years later, he said the chief advice he could give was to remind the students that acting was fundamentally a process of self-exploration:

Be in touch with yourself. That's the main thing – to be in touch with yourself – to find the courage to deal with *your own personality*, to find something in your life that will let you recognize what you read on a page, and then put it into a form. And as you go along in your life you realize more and more how much you want to develop yourself. The main thing to do is to stay *individual*. To be an actor you have to be a *person*, and once you are a person, then you want to express some part of what is in you. You have to find something in the part that you can identify with in your own life. It's a discovery – like we're scientists.

Good acting, writing and directing demanded remaining true to an aspect of your identity, which he called 'your mind's eye view of yourself', that remained unchanged and uncompromised by what he called 'the rules of society'.

To tell you the truth, when I started out I didn't really have any ideas or

feelings about an 'epic value' or being an 'idealist' – or anything. It was just sheer enjoyment. And I think youth is really a creative time for people, a time to enjoy. You will start to suffer long and hard as the years go by and you lose your youth. You should have a good time and be loose. Just enjoy yourself and take advantage of what you've got at school. Make your world, create your own world, and forget that outside thing. I wouldn't work with an air towards working outside. I think it would waste your time. You have something better than the outside. The outside, you get there and you have three lines and some guy says, 'Don't say it that way, will you?' After you graduate you go outside and get the hell beat out of you, but *not* because you don't get the job, but because you begin to lose your mind's eye view of what you think you are right now. And if you can keep that always, there's no way that anyone can stop you from doing what you want. The terrible thing is that, as you go through the years, you'll get to know different people and you'll make it. But, by the time you do, you may not have anything left of *yourself* and the one thing that you have to protect is what you are yourself and what you feel about life, and what you feel about other people. How to keep yourself straight is the hardest thing. You must be straight. You can only put out what you are yourself. And if you haven't got any desire to put *that* out anymore, then you have nothing to say, even if you make it. You become one of those washed-out people that are on the screen that make money, that read the scripts, that are afraid, that talk to agents and business managers and have no individual care and can't reach anybody. And one of the reasons probably everyone came into the business is to express something personal that you're not allowed to express in your own lives. Individual expression is the highest paying commodity. Anyway, I always thought that being in the arts was better than working in a factory.

Nothing changes from where you are right now. Nothing will ever change except your own attitudes. *Nothing*. You'll be put down. And you'll get better. And you're stupid, just stupid, if you get put down and you don't find some way to fight that put-down. The main thing of being an actor or an actress is you have to fight the put-downs in *yourself*. You have to keep your mind's eye view of what *you* think you are. You've got to keep it when you're twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy – as long as you're acting. As long as you're doing it, you have to keep your own mind's eye image because, when you get to be my age, what are you going to do? You'll be impotent. The loss of your own unique thoughts and feelings makes it impossible to make a film that expresses what you're trying to say.

What happens is that we graduate. There's a distinct line between being a student and being a filmmaker that I don't understand and I don't see. I know that every filmmaker that I know personally, from Don Siegel to anybody – to anybody! – is *still* beset by the *same problems* on every single film, including how to overcome the commercial aspects of the film. And as you get older you make more complicated films. When you're young you make very simple films, and they're probably better. But as you get older those complications make you sell out much easier. Not your age, or your standing, or your money, or anything else, but the fact that you really don't have any *ideas* that *aren't commercial*. You *really* don't.

Cassavetes knew how hard it could be after graduation but always saw the blame-game – where artists blame business or society for their troubles – as a self-destructive one. In his view, it was the artists' own responsibility to build a community that would support serious artistic work. The artists could not look to the money men for the solution; they had to look to themselves.

If you don't get any good parts, you have to keep preparing. You can't go slumming. You can't *ever* slum. The main thing is to support *art*. If we the artist kill *our own* avenues of acting – the theater, television, etc. – we ourselves suffer. *Television* isn't crap. It isn't. It is only if it's handled badly. The *theater* is not dead. It is only if it's handled by people who don't love it. *Off-Broadway* is not dead. *Theater* throughout the country is not dead. It's really there – even in California! There are little theaters all over the place. *Movies* are not dead. The artists in our business have to be encouraged. And if somebody says to you, 'Ah, I don't know, this picture's not going to make money,' or 'That play's never gonna make it,' you've *got* to attack them. You've got to *attack* them! Because they will only get away with that social custom if you don't protect your art. And if you don't, next year *you* will come into a dead business and *you're* gonna suffer! Find the people that you want to emulate and support them. No matter *where* they are and *what form* of art – whether it's music or anything. Support them because they are later on going to be *your* support – by keeping that thing alive. No one wants to go into a depressed business. Nobody wants to go where the critics are casual. Write them letters. Tell them, 'Look, why don't you ever talk about acting in that thing?' I mean, you have to shape it and make it, so that when your opportunity comes, you're not just in something that's saying, 'I got nothing better to do. You know, I gotta make

a movie, blah, blah, blah.’ You have to be an artist for real. You can’t be a phony and say, ‘I’m an artist but I’d *also* like to be a *movie star*. I’d *also* like to be *commercial*.’ You’ve got to make up your mind what you are, and then if you address yourself to that, that’s what you *will be*.

For years after graduating, Cassavetes drifted – dreaming, reading, talking a good line, but not really doing very much. He later estimated that his total earnings in 1950, 1951 and 1952 averaged less than \$200 a year.

In 1950, it all ended. School was over and I was dumped. The old gang broke up. We were thrown into the big wide world. Now there were three of us in one room, a smaller room, going around looking for jobs. This is called round-making. I made rounds for four and a half years. For anyone who doesn’t know what rounds are, that’s going from door to door of casting directors’ offices, producers, agents, directors, writers – anybody that you can get a job from – and asking for a job. I didn’t do too well. I starved waiting for a chance to act. My first real job wasn’t until years after I graduated. I spent years making the rounds by day, and chasing women and liquor at night.

Since none of us had any money, we had to use our wits. We had to get girls to give us their apartment, come in and cook for us, bring food over. We found that trying to get along with actresses who are broke too is no good. We had to go out and find people who weren’t actresses – airline hostesses, women who worked in grocery stores who could pick up some groceries for us. We had to find librarians to get a better book collection, and stuff like that. We had a wonderful time. I couldn’t wait for the next day to come so I could get involved with some new girl and promise to marry her and then stop seeing her. In those days, I promised to marry just about every girl I took out. I felt if that’s what they wanted to hear, that’s what I’d tell them.

Cassavetes only slightly exaggerates the length of time he looked for a job and the number of offices he visited.

We had those pictures printed up. Our first stop was Bruno’s of Hollywood to have some pictures made, leaving them at various offices. Now, what you say is, ‘My name is John Cassavetes,’ and they say, ‘Who? How do you spell it?’ They say, ‘Please leave a picture, and we’ll tell the producer or the agent that you were here.’ The person who does this is a secretary that comes in and looks for a job, gets \$50 or \$60 a week, and is there to send all the actors away.

Now, I went to fifty places a day for four and a half years and never

got one job. I would go in and say, 'My name is John Cassavetes,' and they would say, 'Fine, would you leave your picture?' I'd say, 'I *have* left my picture here!' They'd say, 'Now look, I don't want any trouble with you – we've seen actors before. If we have your picture, we'll call you.' Well, of course they *never* call you; they're *only* there to send you away. They only call who they want to call.

It was rough. Some poor sucker would sit in an office and look at you and say, 'Oh, I'm sorry. You're too short.' I sat in offices waiting for someone to discover me. You'd go out and they always leave the door half open, and you could hear them saying *terrible* things. Just terrible things. All I wanted was *a job*.

As the months turned into years, and the demoralizing search went on, Cassavetes grew disillusioned. His father's situation haunted him.

When an actor is out of work a long time, he grows self-centered and bitter. I know. I went through it for five years. I used to walk around angry all the time. You get so wrapped up in your personal worries and miseries, you lose interest in other people. That's deadly for anyone – especially an actor. Watching people is the only way to discover what they're like. How else can you expect to understand them?

As you look for a job, you get tired of constantly exposing yourself. A man in a regular business will have a job, and he'll get fired from that job. Then he'll go looking for another job. If he's looking for a week, he gets so depressed that his family can't live with him, and his life becomes so miserable and almost broken. Now, here's an actor that, no matter how long he's been working, has got to go look for a job every time he has finished one. Later on, you get agents that do it for you, that you pay ten per cent, but when you're a young actor and you don't have an agent, you have to do this yourself. The best you can hope to get is a job as an extra, one that pays very little and cannot hope to make you a star or teach you anything about acting or give you any experience. Or you can get a one- or two-line bit part.

Everett Chambers, a television casting director on NBC's *Philco Playhouse* and subsequently a good friend, said Cassavetes was the most persistent unemployed actor he ever saw. Cassavetes would come to his office; Chambers would, only half-facetiously, yell at him to get out and throw a telephone book at him; and Cassavetes would return the next week without fail. At one point, Cassavetes chained himself to a radiator at CBS to force them to give him a walk-on in *You Are There*.

Underneath the nutty behavior, it was an extremely discouraging time. Cassavetes later said he could never afterward bear to ride the New York subway because it reminded him of these days of round-making.

The problem Cassavetes and his friends were up against was that Actors Studio graduates were the only ones taken seriously by the early television producers.

The Actors Studio was flourishing at that time, and if you didn't dress in a certain way and if you didn't act in a certain way, you were out. I guess today it's the same thing. Dresses are different. Styles are different. But the thinking is still standardized. It's in the thinking.

When he says he couldn't get a job, Cassavetes is not counting work he did playing bit parts while apprenticing in regional theaters. In his first summer after graduation, at the Chapel Playhouse in Guilford, Connecticut, Cassavetes apprenticed and played a 'waiter' and a 'passenger' in Benn Levy's sex farce *Clutterbuck*; and Ensign Jamison in *2 Blind Mice* (which the local newspaper reviewer immortalized as a 'symphony of missed cues and forgotten lines'). Even decades later, Charlotte Harmon, who was theater manager at the time, remembered Cassavetes as being 'very intelligent' but 'a full-of-energy wacko'. For two years after that, Cassavetes got a few other bit parts in Rhode Island regional theater. At a particularly low point, he worked as a comedy writer. (Jerry Lewis was his idol in stage comedy.) To make a little money and avoid being drafted, he and roommate Bill Stafford joined the Army Reserves, where he did Army theater in a headquarters on 42nd Street. (Cassavetes would later give Stafford several small parts in his films.)

Those were the Korean conflict years. In the Army I met some interesting guys and did some drama there. I did some other acting in *stock*, followed by *winter stock*, followed by *summer stock*! I did two years of repertory theater *in the sticks* in Providence, Rhode Island, and kicked around for four years trying to land *something*!

Even at this point in his life, Cassavetes was well on his way to establishing his reputation as a 'crazy' who would do almost anything to draw attention to himself or get a response. Burt Lane remembers seeing Cassavetes hanging around the AADA's locker room the year after the aspiring actor had graduated, manically jumping around, shouting and beating his head on a locker to get the attention of the younger students (a group that included an apparently intrigued but embarrassed Gena Rowlands). Lane also remembers a lunch in an automat where he

and Cassavetes ended up sitting next to a bodybuilder at a neighboring table. Cassavetes kept talking louder and louder about ‘meatheads who spend their time in front of mirrors admiring their bodies’. When the bodybuilder got up from his seat and headed towards them, Lane wanted to run out of the restaurant or hide under the table; but Cassavetes just talked louder – noting that it figured that someone like this would have to resort to physical violence to settle disputes rather than use his brain to discuss his differences of opinion. As Cassavetes had apparently calculated, his comments stopped the bodybuilder dead in his tracks. (Looking back on these events fifty years later, one of Cassavetes’ closest friends wonders if the closet drinking that would shorten his life had begun even at this point; whether the outrageousness of his behavior suggested that he was already functioning on a more or less continuous alcoholic ‘high’.) But, whether he was drunk or sober, the young actor seemed to lack the customary inhibitions or self-consciousness about the effect of his behavior on others. He seemed to operate outside of the limits that normally constrain social encounters. He was capable of saying or doing almost anything to anyone at any time.

He was a trickster, a joker, the life of the party, but at the same time, to almost everyone who knew him in these years, Cassavetes seemed strangely distant and emotionally unreachable. He was the quintessential outsider – a lone wolf hidden behind a wall of jokes and routines. Wherever he was, he wasn’t really there. He might be surrounded by people, but he never really opened himself to them or let them into his life. It was as if the child who had gone off to Greece had never recovered from the schoolyard alienation he must have felt on his return. Cassavetes was still the skeptical and aloof Port Washington teenager who held himself imaginatively outside of any group he was nominally a member of. He was the short boy still trying to prove something to everyone he met; the college flunk-out who covered it up by pretending to know everything. There was, to Lane and others, a maddening elusiveness to him. Everything was a performance. Many of the people around him felt like he was always half-laughing at them, not really listening to their side of things, but merely humoring them and finding a way to placate them as he continued to use them for his purposes.

In the 1950s, Burt Lane knew Cassavetes as well as anyone other than Rowlands; but Lane said that in almost ten years of doing things with Cassavetes he felt that, with two or three exceptions, Cassavetes had never actually revealed anything personal to him. He would never let Lane get close. When Lane would try to talk personally, Cassavetes

would get nervous and start clowning around. According to Lane, one of their few ‘sincere’ encounters took place when Lane, puzzled by Cassavetes’ preternatural drive and ambition, asked Cassavetes point blank, ‘What makes Sammy run?’ The two men were sitting at a table in a restaurant with the silverware, salt and pepper shakers and condiments between them, and in silent answer Cassavetes frenetically grabbed each item, pulled it to his chest as though he meant to absorb it, then dropped it noisily to the floor as he grabbed for the next thing (needless to say, attracting a good bit of attention from neighboring tables). He kept it up until the table was bare and the floor was littered with objects. Lane took it to be a deeply personal revelation: ‘He was telling me that he felt a void inside himself that he couldn’t fill no matter how fiercely he grabbed for things.’ Lane said it was the only interpretation possible, based on the two men’s years of friendship. Perhaps. Or it could have just been another zany, trademark Cassavetes performance – for Lane and the rest of the people in the restaurant.

The only other time Lane thought that Cassavetes confided in him was when Cassavetes told him a story about how as a boy he had a friend who asked for his toys, one by one. Cassavetes gave them to him, and when he was done, the friend said he didn’t want to play with him anymore. He had gotten everything he wanted; he had no more use for him. The story itself is less interesting than the fact that Cassavetes was apparently still thinking about the event twenty years later. There are several similar anecdotes that Cassavetes’ friends told over the years about how he confided in them that he felt that he was constantly ‘giving, giving, giving’ to the people around him, but never getting anything back, not even their gratitude.

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Though he came across as supremely confident in public, Cassavetes had a number of insecurities. He was always self-conscious about his singing ability – joking throughout his life that he was ‘tone-deaf’. He was also uncomfortable about his lack of formal education (which is the reason he invented the Colgate story) and for many years would begin interviews by apologizing in advance for what he felt was his ‘inarticulateness’. Finally, since he never paid much attention to the way he dressed as a young man (and was criticized by his mother for looking like a ‘slob’ because of his habitual dishevelment), he was self-conscious about his appearance, alternating between being fastidious to a fault in public and reverting to sloppiness in private.

The young actor's only television and film roles were non-speaking parts in a few television shows and roles as extras in two films – Henry Hathaway's *14 Hours* in 1951 (where his scene was cut from the final print) and Gregory Ratoff's *Taxi* in the summer of 1952 (where he played a hot-dog vendor).

Over the next two years, Cassavetes would exploit the connection with Ratoff in every way he could. Once *Taxi* had finished production, the young actor volunteered to work as a 'gofer' in a television series called *Cradle of Stars* that Ratoff produced (where he talked himself into two small acting parts). The men became good friends and spent a lot of time together. In January 1953, Cassavetes followed Ratoff to Broadway, where Cassavetes took a job as Assistant Stage Manager in Ratoff's Cort Theater production of *The Fifth Season*, which starred Menasha Skulnick and Richard Worth. It might sound like a triumph, but it was actually an admission of defeat. It was a boring job and meant Cassavetes was effectively giving up his attempt to become an actor. (On his résumé, Cassavetes would say that he understudied the leads, but it wasn't true.) He now wouldn't be able even to make the rounds of agents and producers. He took the job because he simply had to make a little money.

The only anecdote I am aware of from this period in Cassavetes' life describes how the production featured three knock-out beautiful actresses in small parts and how he used to go on stage to talk to them between acts. He would get a little carried away by the conversations at times so that one day, when the stage manager opened the curtain, Cassavetes was still sitting on a sofa on stage talking to the girls. Since the set was supposed to be the living room of a penthouse on the ninetyeth floor, for years afterwards every time Skulnick and Worth ran into him they would remind him of the time he dove headfirst out of the window from the top of a skyscraper.

The job Cassavetes didn't want to have may have been boring at times and unexpectedly embarrassing at others, but fate took a hand on one particular night when Cassavetes met one of the formative influences on his life – news and film photographer and sometime movie producer Sam Shaw. One evening during a performance Shaw was backstage on a photo assignment and spotted Cassavetes entertaining himself by spouting poetry and clowning around (according to Shaw, doing a series of standing backflips at one point). Shaw was amazed and impressed, all the more so since he had just come from a photo shoot at the Actors Workshop, where for three hours he had watched actors doing improvisations on 'actors' freedom', not one of which was as free, creative or exciting as what Cassavetes was doing.

I got a job as an assistant stage manager in *The Fifth Season*. I was making \$85 a week. A fellow backstage saw me doing a trip. I just got so frustrated one night I started doing trips all over the stage and so he said, ‘Gee, you’d be a terrific *actor!*’ [Laughs.]

When Cassavetes told him he *was* an actor, Shaw said he wanted to help him in any way he could. The older, more experienced man immediately ‘adopted’ the younger. Shaw would be one of Cassavetes’ closest friends and collaborators for more than thirty years – initially introducing him to most of the movers and shakers of the New York artistic and cinematic scene, and subsequently advising and doing uncredited photography on *Shadows*; producing or co-producing *Husbands*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, *Gloria* and *Love Streams*; and (with the assistance of his daughter Meta and son Larry) doing most of the photography, layout, design and writing for the films’ press packs, theater posters and newspaper ad-campaigns.

Shaw was a more worldly and slightly younger version of Cassavetes’ own father, with a similar reverence for art and artists, and brought to the relationship a vision of film’s artistic importance that inspired Cassavetes. Shaw believed in the importance of art and treated Cassavetes as an *artist*, in the most exalted sense of the word. He had boundless faith in and unfeigned enthusiasm for Cassavetes’ projects, no matter how uncommercial. Cassavetes’ *ad hoc* ‘repertory company’ would later consist of individuals of varied backgrounds and interests. Some were actors of the highest level of accomplishment (Rowlands, Falk, Gazzara and Cassel), others had technical abilities (Bo Harwood’s musical ability, George Sims’ and Mike Ferris’s abilities with a camera, George Villaseñor’s editing skills), and still others had organization skills (Al Ruban and Moe McEndree’s ability to run the business side of a production). But Shaw was the ‘poet’ in the group – less interested in lenses, focus and f-stops than in the ‘music’, ‘poetry’ and ‘truth-telling’ power of a work (to invoke terms frequently on Shaw’s lips).

As part of his job as a photojournalist Shaw had to make the rounds of scores of galleries and artistic events, and Cassavetes tagged along with him whenever he had time, in the process being exposed to a wide range of classic, contemporary and popular arts – from poetry to photography to painting. Shaw also gave Cassavetes his first taste of jazz and burlesque (which he did photo features on) with trips up one side of 52nd Street to hear Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Charlie Mingus, and down the other side to see the leading burlesque performers of the day – including Gypsy ‘Rose’ Lee and Georgia South-

ern, of whom Cassavetes was particularly fond because she ‘had a sense of humor’ when she did her frequently playful routines.

Sam and I became good friends. Sam introduced me to a lot of things I wasn’t aware of – art, music, sculpture, painting. And when you see the films that I make I know you wonder, ‘What *has* this man learned?’

Shaw’s first attempt to help Cassavetes would not pay off until a few years later. He introduced Cassavetes to Robert Rossen, who was at that point engaged in pre-production work on *Alexander the Great*, and lobbied Rossen to consider Cassavetes for the title role in the film. Rossen rejected Cassavetes for the role, but the blacklisted director and the young actor became close friends over the course of the next few years. They shared many opinions about dramatic construction, acting and directing, and Rossen gave Cassavetes a lot of help a few years later on *Shadows*. Shaw also got Cassavetes his first agent – with a little subterfuge.

When I told Sam I wanted to act in films he went to an agent, Robert Lang, and said he’d found a boy who was a great writer. And he showed a lot of old, unused filmscripts by the top boys as if they were mine. Naturally this agent is impressed and wants to sign me. But my friend explained how I’m an eccentric and, in spite of my literary genius, my great ambition is to be an actor. ‘Sign him as an actor,’ he said. ‘And then he’ll do the scripts for you.’ The agent agrees. I spilled a little soup on my collar before we met and sure enough I get a feature part on television. After a while he stopped asking me about the scripts.

Cassavetes stayed with Lang for less than a year. But the connection did net some minor television roles.

I remember one night – wasn’t until four years after I graduated from the Academy that I got my first television job. I remember it was an extra job, and it was on *Kraft* and Richard Greene was on that show. I’ll never forget it. I said to my friends, ‘I’ve done it! I’ve gotten a job. It’s fantastic! I’m the star of the show! You can’t believe it!’ So they were all watching. When it was over, I raced from the TV studio and said, ‘Did you see me?’ They said, ‘No, we watched the whole show, and we were looking.’ I got furious. I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, they didn’t see me?!’ ‘You morons,’ I shouted, ‘I was the man in the iron mask who ran on and said “Hark!” I was magnificent!’ [Laughs.]

It’s that terrible ego. What I mean is: don’t be ashamed of your ego. Because it’s the only thing that’s gonna carry you through. Can you

imagine going on a show and saying, ‘Jeez, I have to put all this armor on and I’m not gonna be good doing “Hark!” the best that ever was?’ An actor is a rare animal. He only feels what he feels and is completely unaware of what anyone else feels. He’s a passionate person – passionate to the point where he has no logic as far as the rest of the world goes. He’s a person that has got to believe a dream. In other words, there’s a character. You read it – Dr. Wasserman – and you must play Dr. Wasserman to the point where society doesn’t bother you anymore. The life and love of this person must be the only important thing to you at this time. The person who is affected by society, and worries whether he’s making a good impression or people like him, fails because he’s not in what he’s supposed to be in, not fully concentrated on what he is, does not believe – and therefore cannot spin the dream that is so important to making films, theater or anything theatrical.

Cassavetes vividly remembered this particular television appearance because one of the people who hadn’t recognized him was a young actress named Virginia Cathryn Rowlands. And he had asked her to watch because he was vying with another actor for her attention. Rowlands was six months younger than him and had attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in the academic year following his own graduation (entering the Junior course in 1950 with the October class), but left at the end of the term, in April 1951, and never returned for the Senior course. In her brief time there, she had seen Cassavetes hanging around the school’s ‘green room’ (where students’ lockers were located and they congregated to talk and compare notes) and at the soda fountain in a drugstore called the Carnegie Hall Pharmacy, another student hangout. They had seen each other on other occasions: when Cassavetes went backstage to congratulate her on her performance in her first-year examination play, and in the summer of the same year, when he visited her at a summer theater job she had in Provincetown, Massachusetts. But they didn’t actually strike up a relationship until a few years later, when she had been out of school for two and a half years and he had been out for three and a half, in December 1953.

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Rowlands had been born twenty-three years earlier, on 19 June 1930, in Cambria, Wisconsin, a predominantly Welsh rural community just outside Madison. Her English- and Welsh-speaking father and grandfather were highly respected members of the community and her family was

financially secure and socially prominent, in a small-town way. Both of her parents had strong personalities and senses of themselves, and functioned fairly independently of each other (just as Rowlands and Cassavetes later would in their marriage).

Her father was Edwin Myrwyn Rowlands, who was, between 1924 and 1940, vice-president of the local bank (where his father was president), a Wisconsin state assemblyman and a Wisconsin state senator. Between 1941 and 1948, he worked in Washington, DC, serving in various governmental positions. During some of this period of time, the Rowlands family lived in Arlington, Virginia. This was the period during which Rowlands, in her early and mid-teens, first became involved with amateur drama, acting in plays at Washington and Lee High School and a tiny local theater called the Jarvis Repertory Company, before moving back to Wisconsin.

Her mother was Mary Allen (Neal) Rowlands, who stayed at home with the family and dabbled in various arts, including music, drama and amateur oil painting, which Rowlands also practiced in her young adult years. (Several of the paintings on the walls of Cassavetes' home, which are visible in the background of the films shot there, are by Rowlands' mother. Many of the photographs in Cassavetes' house were taken by Sam Shaw.)

Rowlands had one brother, David, who lived as an adult in San Diego, where he served as an officer and pilot in the Navy, and who plays small parts in six of Cassavetes' films (as well as having a photograph of him appear in a seventh). Rowlands' mother, who moved to the West Coast shortly after her daughter and son-in-law did, acts in five (under the stage name of 'Lady Rowlands', a nickname the Cassavetes children gave her).

Rowlands was a somewhat coddled, hypochondriacal child and teenager: sickly, bedridden, shy and withdrawn. She says she developed a vivid fantasy life in compensation. Though she was not academically inclined, in September 1947, at her mother's request, she enrolled as a freshman at the University of Wisconsin.

On the surface, with a financially successful father and a doting mother, everything may have appeared to be perfect as Rowlands moved into her late teen years, but underneath there were serious problems. In the course of the next three years, Rowlands and her parents would undergo a series of personal and familial crises, which, without going into personal details, culminated in what Rowlands herself has described as a 'breakdown' in the spring of 1950. After completing her junior year as a Communication major, Rowlands withdrew from school. In the

summer of 1950, her mother took her to New York, enrolled her at the AADA and helped her move into a boarding-house for female students.

It was an extremely difficult time in her life. She was in a vulnerable emotional state and, to make things worse, had very little spending money. She took a part-time job as an usherette at the Little Carnegie Cinema next to the school on 57th Street. It's indicative not only of her emotional state at the time but of many of her enduring attitudes that, after she saw *The Blue Angel*, Marlene Dietrich became her idol as an actress. Rowlands was fascinated with Dietrich's blend of feminine sexual allure and almost masculine toughness and swagger. She watched the film over and over again while on her job, sneaked friends in to see it and even adopted a few of Dietrich's gestures and mannerisms (sitting backward on a chair and such).

In 1951, 1952 and 1953, while Cassavetes had been unsuccessfully trying to get his foot in the door in television and film, Rowlands had been undergoing the same struggle in terms of a stage career. (At least up until the time she made *Faces*, she regarded film and television as far less serious and important forms of expression than theater.) She had done a series of bit parts in small productions, none of which led anywhere.

In the summer of 1951, following her first year at the AADA, she took a job as a seamstress (even though she didn't know how to use a sewing machine) at the Provincetown Playhouse on Cape Cod. Rowlands used the opportunity to inch her way into a series of tiny parts – playing Miss Howard in *The Straw*, Claire Clairmont in *An Innocent in Time* and Dolly Clandon in *You Never Can Tell*. She was spotted by George Hale, who liked her looks and invited her to audition for another small part, as the narrator in his production of George Axelrod's half-hour musical revue, *All About Love*, which was staged at the Versailles nightclub on the upper East Side from October 1951 to June 1952. When Rowlands got the part, she dropped out of the AADA and never completed her second year.

The role was small, not very interesting and opened no doors for her. (When asked about this part of Rowlands' life, Cassavetes said all he remembered was that she worked as a 'hat-check girl' at the club – though that may have been a typical Cassavetes joke about how unimportant her dramatic work there was.) In the summer of 1952, she was back playing summer stock bit parts again. She toured with the Boston Summer Theater in Roland Alexander's *Season with Ginger* (later renamed *Time Out for Ginger*), from theater to theater up and down the eastern seaboard from Ogunquit, Maine, to Princeton, New

Jersey. She again played the tiniest of parts, and after Labor Day she was again out of a job, with no future prospects. In 1952 and 1953, to keep a little money coming in, she was reduced to writing dialogue for *Crime Does Not Pay* comic books (though the title was not entirely correct: the series paid \$60 a story).

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In 1953, Rowlands got another touring role – playing one of the dream girls, Elaine, in the road company production of George Axelrod's *The Seven Year Itch*. It was another ten-line part. She returned to New York in December, which was the point at which she began her relationship with Cassavetes, following the man-in-the-iron-mask show. Cassavetes was smitten by her from the start.

Before I met Gena, I was a bachelor going out and torturing people. I think that's good for young people. When I saw her, that was *it!* The first time I saw her, I was with an actor, John Ericson, and I said, '*That's* the girl I'm going to marry.'

Cassavetes may have been determined, but his courtship of Rowlands was far from easy. Cassavetes came on strong, but Rowlands resisted his advances. The first problem he faced was that she had resolved to become a professional actress and did not want to be sidetracked by romance or marriage. Another issue was Cassavetes' emotional possessiveness. The couple almost broke up more than once over his jealousy if she even looked in the direction of another man. Rowlands was as fiercely independent as Cassavetes was romantically possessive, and, in her way, was as strong-willed as he was. Cassavetes was a ladies' man used to having his way with women. With Rowlands he finally met his match.

From my point of view, if I was going to give up my precious self to a woman, she was going to have to love me unconditionally. I kept Gena under constant scrutiny, I was enormously jealous, filled with suspicions about other men and with the terror that those suspicions might be correct. She wouldn't put up with that. And finally I relaxed.

The relationship was tempestuous in the extreme – full of arguments, struggles and misunderstandings. Rowlands and Cassavetes were about as different as two people could be, their personalities and upbringings as different as night and day. She had grown up in the country and was

from a financially comfortable setting. She was artistic and from a 'musical background' (to put it in terms of a phrase that shows up in a comparable mismatch of personalities in *Faces*). He was the fast-talking, street-smart city boy. Rowlands was socially smooth and refined; Cassavetes rough-hewn, impulsive, passionate and driven. She cared what people thought; he didn't. She was cool, poised, charming; he was half-crazy, hot-blooded and Mediterranean. Sparks flew.

It was a hard struggle to convince Gena. She and I have friction in terms of lifestyle and taste. We agree in taste on absolutely nothing. She thinks so totally opposite to anything I could *ever* conceive!

Cassavetes' career didn't really take off until he secured a new agent named William McCaffrey. The meeting was an accident and occurred only a few weeks after Cassavetes and Rowlands began seeing each other regularly. Cassavetes was still working at the Cort Theater and feeling frustrated at the lack of opportunities to act on television or in film. In January 1954, James O'Connor, the stepson of William McCaffrey, one of the most influential radio and television agents of the era, struck up a conversation with the unemployed actor in an Eastside bar, was impressed with his intelligence and sense of humor, and introduced him to his stepfather. Only a month later, in February 1954, McCaffrey would help Cassavetes land his breakthrough role. It was for the bullfighter in the 'Pasa Doble' episode of *Omnibus*. The main reason the young actor got the role was because he didn't have the manner or the appearance of a matinee idol. He had an olive-skinned complexion, pock-marked face, slight build, wiry frame and jittery energy. But it took a series of accidents for Cassavetes to end up with the part.

It started with *Omnibus* firing me as an extra. I was in a little French show. They used to do all these little French shows. And they had me as an extra riding a bicycle. And, God, I was so happy to have a job! I really went riding through on the bicycle. I was waving and laughing and having a good time. But the actor was trying to do his lines, and he turned to the director and said, 'Get him out of here!' So I was fired by the producer, a guy named Paul Falgay.

The next week McCaffrey sent me back up to *Omnibus*. And Yul Brynner was the director that time, and he had a Mexican show and I was to play a bullfighter. So I went up and the producer, Falgay, took one look at me and he said, 'Geez – you're the guy who was fired last week.' So I was thrown out of there.

I went back to McCaffrey and I said, 'Gee, that would have been a

good part.’ And he said, ‘There’s another story about a Mexican bull-fighter coming up on *Omnibus* in two weeks that a man named Dan Petrie is directing.’ So I went up again and when I met Petrie he said, ‘I think you’d be wonderful in this part.’ He didn’t know about me getting fired as an extra a couple weeks before. Now, the script was very easy to read – even for me! So I read it, and Petrie said, ‘You have the part.’

So he went in and the producer, Paul Falgay, came out, and he looked at me and he went, ‘Oh! God!’ – and ran back into the room. And Dan Petrie said, ‘What’s the matter?’ And they always leave the door half open and you can hear this fight, and Petrie said, ‘I promised this actor the job.’ And Falgay said, ‘I don’t care.’ And finally Petrie said, ‘I won’t do this show unless this guy does the show. If he doesn’t play the part, I quit.’ They said, ‘Go ahead and quit.’ But Dan meant it. So they had to go out and bring him back. And I got the job! And this is the way you get started. Somebody stands up for you. Dan Petrie stood up for me. He discovered me. And I’ve been working pretty much since. And I wasn’t too good either.

I weighed about 128 pounds in those days and really looked like a bullfighter; I was skinny and dark. And I’d been around New York enough to pick up a Mexican accent. I started rehearsal and I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I’d never done anything and here was this wonderful part and I’m playing opposite Kim Stanley – she was already an established actress. Now Budd Schulberg, the writer, took one look at me and says, ‘This guy stinks. I don’t want him. Get him out of here.’ Kim Stanley said to me, ‘Forget about him, just look at me; just concentrate on what we’re doing, forget about what they’re saying.’ And if somebody said something to me she’d stand up and scream, ‘Let this guy alone! He’s fine, he doesn’t need your shit!’

Cassavetes’ performance was a hit.

After the *Omnibus* show, I went into a bar to bask in my great reviews and I bumped into a director named Carter Blake, who’d been one of my teachers at the American Academy. Carter said, ‘You really did a good job.’ And I said, ‘Why, thank you, Carter,’ really feeling and acting like a contemporary. And then he said, ‘You know, you’re not going to do another job like that for a long, long time. You’ll probably never work that hard again. You’re never going to be that scared and that respectful to what you’re doing.’

I had such a big head and I thought, ‘Hey, this guy’s a dope,’ but he turned out to be right. I did the next show and I was terrible, and the next

show, and the show after that. Just like any other young kid, I had a big head from all the newspaper space. I thought, 'I'm a star on television.' I don't think I ever did find anything I worked as hard on as that show with Stanley because there was four and a half years right behind me.

There's something about the motivation of fear that makes you work terribly hard. I'd learned every word; I went back to find the meaning of every word; I really believed that this character was the greatest. I had to because I was so insecure, so unsure of myself and of being an actor. I don't think I've ever done a better job of acting than I did that first time, because I made such an investment in it. So everything I use as a director I learned along the way by making all the errors myself.

McCaffrey taught Cassavetes a lesson that he would draw on for the rest of his life about how to use the press for all it was worth. Cassavetes publicly attributed his success in the next few years to luck, friendships and hard work, but the truth was that a lot of what happened was due to the flood of press releases, interviews and photo opportunities McCaffrey orchestrated, beginning with a *Variety* article in February 1954. McCaffrey and Cassavetes worked every imaginable angle to get Cassavetes' name in print. On an almost weekly basis for more than two years Cassavetes (and later Rowlands) gave interviews to every conceivable trade paper, magazine, fanzine and gossip column, and posed for every photographer in New York (including Sam Shaw, who unhesitatingly exploited his own press connections to further their careers in every way he could).

One of McCaffrey's slyest tactics was to have Cassavetes and Rowlands personally write a series of sycophantic letters to Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, promoting the project of the moment and flattering her about the importance of her own work. The ploy worked. Hopper took a shine to Cassavetes – not only favorably mentioning his work in her columns many times in the next five years and inviting him to appear on her television program, *Hedda Hopper's Hollywood*, in 1960, but personally interceding with studio heads on his behalf at several points. As a sample of Cassavetes' self-promotion, one of more than fifteen handwritten notes follows.

March 2, 1954

Dear Miss Hopper,

It is fortunate that there are people like you in the world, who realize the importance of opportunity for the striving. I thank you from the bottom of my heart; for myself and for the reading public who will

be secretly thrilled and excited by the possibility of the unknown reaching his goal.

You will keep on hearing from me from time to time, and I will try to keep you posted on my progress.

Gratefully,
John Cassavetes

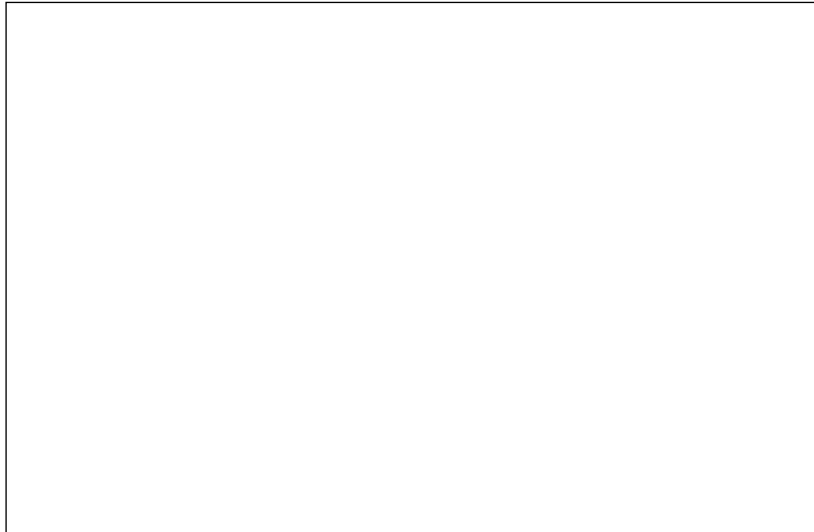
P.S. Bill McCaffrey, my agent in New York, sends his best love. And news that my first show here will be on *Kraft TV* in Tennessee Williams' 'You Touched Me.'

With Hopper's help, 'Pasa Doble' led to a much bigger opportunity. Marlon Brando had recently backed out of *The Egyptian*, and Hopper used her influence with Darryl Zanuck (who was too intimidated by Hopper's box-office clout to resist) to have Cassavetes tested as Brando's replacement. In the ethnography of 1950s Hollywood, Mexican and Egyptian were practically the same thing. Cassavetes was flown out to the coast. (The letter to Hopper printed above was Cassavetes' thanks to her for recommending him for the role.)

Though he was not officially notified of the result until ten days later, it is clear from the following story that he drew his own conclusions on the spot based on the tone of voice of Zanuck's secretary.

The day after the show, Twentieth Century Fox called my agent and asked, 'Who was that Mexican guy? Does he speak any English? We may have a part for him.' And a few days later, I was on my way to Hollywood for a screen test. I was up for the lead in Michael Curtiz's *The Egyptian*. Edmund Purdom finally got it, but I had my shot. The studio was a scream. They flew me out, gave me a suite in a hotel *and* a beach-house *and* two cars. I went in for the test, then returned to my hotel. Then Zanuck looked at the test and the phone started ringing. It was his secretary: 'Turn in the keys to the suite. Turn in the keys to the beach house. Bring the two cars back. *Immediately!*' 'But I can only drive one at a time,' I told her. She said, 'Don't you have a *friend?*'

March 1954 was a turning point in Cassavetes' life. McCaffrey milked the fact that Cassavetes was being considered by Twentieth Century Fox as 'Brando's replacement' for every column inch he could squeeze out of it, and by the beginning of March, some serious television offers began to come in. A week later, Cassavetes finally had the confidence to quit his Assistant Stage Manager job and devote himself full time to acting.



Copy of Cassavetes' and Rowlands' marriage certificate. *Courtesy Little Church Around the Corner*

And, on Friday 19 March, he and Rowlands got married in a small, brief ceremony at the Little Church Around the Corner in downtown Manhattan. It was a whirlwind courtship; they had been going together only four months.

One of the great things about America is that when two people fall in love it erases all that's gone before. Love's the great eraser. Gena came to me when we got married. She said, 'Look, one thing you gotta get straight. I got a mother complex and this is my mother and you gotta be nice to her always.' I said, 'OK. You gotta be nice to *my* mother – maybe it's even more difficult for *you!*'

Cassavetes would act in more than twenty-six television productions in the remainder of 1954, twenty-three in 1955 and twelve in 1956. The number went down in the second and third years because he was increasingly busy acting in films and because the networks cut back on the number of dramatic shows being aired. He appeared in all of the highest quality dramatic series of the day – including *Omnibus*, *Playhouse 90*, *Kraft Theater*, *Goodyear Playhouse*, *The Elgin Hour*, *Alcoa Theater*, *The American Tobacco Theater*, *Studio One*, *Pond's Theater*, *Armstrong Circle Theater*, *The United States Steel Hour*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Twentieth Century Fox Hour* and *The Philco Television Playhouse*.

Television came along and opened up a big field. It was an enormous opportunity. I think I was lucky. As all young actors know, you just gotta be in the right place at the right time. If you're lucky enough to hang around and be in the company of artistic people, you *become* that way. You don't start out that way. I happened to be around a lot of very creative people. I suppose I picked up those impulses.

While Cassavetes' career flourished (with the joke that you couldn't turn on the television without seeing his face), Gena Rowlands' was still not going anywhere. A few days after her marriage ceremony, she was on her way to Chicago to continue her dreamgirl walk-ons in *The Seven Year Itch* touring company. A year later, very little had changed. She was finally working in New York, but still only as a dreamgirl. She had been promoted to the main company in April 1954 when one of the regular dreamgirls became pregnant, and she finished out the last year of the play's New York run at the Fulton Theater. It may have allowed her to live at home, but it was just another trivial bit part. When *The Seven Year Itch* closed in August 1955, Rowlands was again out of a job with no prospects. Her entire résumé consisted of bit parts spread over four years of theater work, most of it in summer stock or as part of a second company touring show.

Though Rowlands was scornful of television work, Cassavetes convinced her to consider acting with him and finally succeeded when the two of them made a joint appearance in 'Time for Love', on NBC's *Armstrong Circle Theater* on 21 June. There was a second joint appearance broadcast on 9 October on an episode of *The Goodyear Television Playhouse* written by Reginald Rose, 'The Expendable House'. Rowlands was reluctant to take the second role because the part was so small (only about three or four minutes long) and in the end did it only because of the challenge it presented (her character underwent a nervous breakdown on-camera). It was a fateful decision. Josh Logan happened to be watching that Sunday night and was in dire need of an attractive young actress for his upcoming Broadway production of Paddy Chayefsky's *The Middle of the Night* after Eva-Marie Saint, whom he wanted to use, proved unavailable at the last minute. He invited Rowlands to read for the part. Years later, Rowlands modestly described the screening process as Logan's 'listening to every actress in New York read' and herself 'being called back twenty-five times' before she had the role. What her stage work hadn't done for her in four years of living in dingy hotels, television did in a single evening. She landed the breakthrough role she was questing for on stage. She would star opposite Edward G. Robinson. Her

life would never be the same. (Robinson would become close friends with Rowlands and her husband and personally introduce them around when they eventually moved to the West Coast.)

The Middle of the Night began rehearsals in December, went ‘out of town’ to Delaware and Philadelphia in January to work out the kinks, and opened at New York’s Anta Theater (currently the Virginia Theater) on West 52nd Street on 8 February 1956. The show was critically and commercially successful, running for 477 performances through 25 May 1957 (followed by a brief road tour reuniting the Broadway cast at New Haven’s Shubert Theater and San Francisco’s Curran between October 1957 and March 1958).

Cassavetes and Rowlands renamed their cat ‘Reggie’ in only half-joking gratitude for what Reginald Rose had done for their careers. Rose was the author of both ‘The Expendable House’ and *Crime in the Streets*, a 1955 television production directed by Sydney Lumet that led to Cassavetes’ first important movie role in the 1956 Hollywood film of the same name. (Rose and his wife Barbara eventually became close friends with the couple.)

*

While Rowlands was appearing on Broadway, Cassavetes was making a gradual transition from television to film work. The move wasn’t as extreme as it might seem today, since it was common practice at the time to port productions from one medium to the other, often with the same lead actors in both. An actor lucky enough to pick the right role could play a part once on live television and again, six months or a year later, in a movie. (This was the case for Cassavetes with *The Night Holds Terror* and *Crime in the Streets*.)

Another factor that assisted Cassavetes’ film career was that he was spotted by an agent at the Newborne Agency named Marty Baum. Baum functioned as a New York talent scout for Max Arno at Columbia (which was such a small studio that it didn’t have its own New York talent office) and took a personal interest in Cassavetes early in 1955 and began recommending him for film roles. Cassavetes loved to shock people – particularly if he had sized them up as timid, conservative ‘establishment’ types. Even at this point in his career, however desperate he was for a job, there are many stories of how he would yell or swear at producers, agents and studio executives just to see how they would react. He loved playing the temperamental, creative ‘artist’. According to Baum, when he invited the young actor to his office for their initial meeting and

rhetorically asked him 'if he could act', Cassavetes leaned across the desk, grabbed him by his shirt front and ripped it off, shouting, 'Can I act! Can I act!' As Baum sat there not only astonished but naked from the waist up, Cassavetes neither flinched nor apologized. Baum recommended him for *The Night Holds Terror* that very visit. As Cassavetes set his sights increasingly on film roles in the late 1950s, Baum replaced McCaffrey as Cassavetes' agent. (He continued to represent him up into the 1970s.)

Baum was not above occasional deception to help Cassavetes get a part. He tells the story of how, when Cassavetes was to read for *Edge of the City* (the television version of which, titled *A Man Is Ten Feet Tall*, Sidney Poitier had starred in and in which he had already been cast), the technique of the time was to bring the established actor and the new actor together and see how they reacted to each other cold when they played selected scenes. But Baum didn't want to leave it to chance; he brought Poitier and Cassavetes together in his office, gave them the script and three days to work on it. The result was that they blew away the casting director with the brilliance of their supposedly unrehearsed, spontaneous performance. Cassavetes not only got the part but Poitier became a lifelong friend.

Cassavetes believed that the only way to do anything was to throw himself into it completely. But, as would happen throughout his career, what he thought of as commitment (jumping off a pier onto a moving boat in the following example), others usually thought of as stupidity, swagger or showboating. He might be willing to 'die for the movie', but the director might just want to kill him.

I've never seen a successful person in this business, *artistically successful*, that gives way on important issues. And that consider themselves beyond the picture that you're doing. Though you don't say it, because it's too corny to say, you've got to be ready to die for the movie. That's it. There's nothing else. Because you will. I mean, in *Edge of the City* I had to jump from here to twenty feet, and the director said, 'Jump! Jump!' and there was a tugboat going with propellers going. I didn't realize that. I just wanted to make the jump look good, you know? So I jumped over the thing and Marty Ritt was the director. He came up to me and punched me right in the face! Because his whole career went out the window! [Laughs.] His twenty years of waiting for that picture, to direct that picture, went out. He was prepared to kill. And if you're not, you'll never make it because you'll be polite and you'll fall into a lot of stuff that has nothing to do with what you're doing, you know.

Machismo motivated a lot of what he did. He had to live up to his ‘tough guy’ image.

In *Saddle the Wind* somebody spread a report I was the greatest rider alive. Why, I couldn’t ride at all! They hoisted me aboard this four-legged package of muscled dynamite and I got thrown so fast I bounced before I hit. I got hoisted up again and got bounced again into the wild blue yonder. A third time up, and this time I grabbed that horse’s mane and yelled, ‘You four-legged so-and-so, I’m gonna ride you and you’re gonna like it!’ Well, I rode him sure enough, but the way that horse carried on I guess neither of us liked it. Maybe he figured like I did, ‘Well, it’s a living.’

The previous story omits to mention that the reason the riding rumor arose was that Cassavetes secretly took horseback lessons prior to the shoot in an attempt to look good (just as he secretly took motorcycle riding lessons prior to showing up for the biker film, *The Devil’s Angels*). He had contempt for anyone who went into a shoot unprepared.

The director of *Virgin Island* didn’t know *anything*! He was a complete fool. One day we went out in this boat. There were all these sharks in the water. So I took Sidney Poitier aside and said, ‘Let’s push him overboard. Let’s *really* do it! Get rid of him!’ They dragged me off him. They laughed about it afterwards, but I *meant* it.

*

Though his early film roles paid only about \$500 and his early television appearances less than a quarter of that, by 1957, Cassavetes’ salary had skyrocketed to an astonishing \$25,000 – equivalent to approximately ten times that amount in contemporary dollars – not even counting Rowlands’ *Middle of the Night* paychecks. He and Rowlands were financially secure, with every expectation that things would only continue to get better year by year. The icing on the cake was that, in early 1957, each was offered and signed a long-term movie contract with MGM (they signed at the same studio in the hope that they might occasionally work together). They were both making more money and had had more success in their respective professions than they had ever dreamed of when they started out six years before.

As their fortunes improved, the couple moved up in the world in terms of their living situation – from the tiny apartment they lived in when they were first married at 36 East 36th Street to a slightly larger

apartment at 162 West 54th Street a year later and to a penthouse at 40 East 75th Street in 1956. (As penthouses go, the 75th Street apartment was not exactly luxurious, but it did have its own small yard and roof garden. Various parts of it are visible in *Shadows*, including the scene in which Rupert, Sam and Hugh talk and get dressed prior to Hugh's Philadelphia job, all of the 'literary party' scenes, including Tony interacting with the 'existential psychoanalysis' woman, the exotic dancer, and Lelia and David, and the scenes in Ben's and Lelia's bedrooms.) Rowlands' gentle calm was an ideal counterbalance to Cassavetes' wild passionateness.

Home is the place where a man can let down the guard on his weakness.

By 1957, though Rowlands' desire to start a family was still unfulfilled, she was deeply satisfied with her career and the rest of her life. She had established herself as a Broadway star and launched a second career in film. (Between the end of the Broadway run of *The Middle of the Night* and the beginning of the road tour, she had flown out to Los Angeles to star in her first movie, *The High Cost of Loving*, opposite José Ferrer.)

By the same year, her husband had every reason to feel equally gratified by his accomplishments. Between 1954 and 1956, he had made almost eighty appearances on the best 'golden age' television shows and done four decent film roles: *The Night Holds Terror* and *Crime in the Streets* in 1955, and *Edge of the City* and *Affair in Havana* (a.k.a. *Fever Tree*) in 1956. Cassavetes had two even more important film roles in 1957: *Saddle the Wind* (a.k.a. *Three Guns*) and *Virgin Island*. But, unlike Rowlands, Cassavetes was neither happy nor satisfied. He had made many friends he would remain close to for the rest of his life on these productions (from Don Siegel to Sal Mineo to Sidney Poitier), but beyond that felt that almost none of the work he had done had any value beyond an economic one.

I can count on the fingers of one hand the parts that I've really enjoyed. An actor always has got to play a part from a standpoint of economics, and there just isn't any other part to play, you know. You're only offered a certain amount of parts and you have to play what you're offered eventually – otherwise you sit around twiddling your thumbs. Of all the experiences I've had, I think there were only five or six where it really was pleasurable. I must have given three good performances in my whole time on television. I did a hundred shows. I made one good film, in my life, out of six.

I played in a picture called *Edge of the City* with Sidney Poitier that Marty Ritt directed which was a pleasure from beginning to end. I did a show called *Crime in the Streets* by Reginald Rose that was a pleasure from beginning to end, and one by Budd Schulberg, my first television show, with Kim Stanley, called 'Pasa Doble' on *Omnibus* that was a pleasure from beginning to end. And these few shows, if you divide 'em up through ten years, the television shows are only a week's work and the movie was ten weeks' work and it doesn't really make for great experiences over a period of years.

Television, far more than film, had been his greatest creative outlet in the middle years of the decade; but, after 1955, Cassavetes felt that the shows became bland, boring and safe.

There was a great period of creativity in our business, in television, from 1953 to 1955. In that period, writers like Reginald Rose and Robert Allen Aurthur, Tad Moselle, Paddy Chayefsky, David Shaw, J. P. Miller, Horton Foote – there were just so many wonderful writers – came out of television, thanks mainly to a fellow named Fred Coe. These people had a chance to express themselves and were paid to express themselves, as they felt, as they wanted to express themselves, which is the highest achievement in acting or any creative field: to be paid to express yourself as you feel.

Now, at the end of 1955, the sponsors came into television, time became expensive and the shows became much more expensive. And now the dramatic show has dwindled away to the point where they may have had forty on the air at one time, and today they have *Playhouse 90*, *Armstrong Circle Theater*, *U.S. Steel* and maybe another one – and that's it. Four dramatic shows – and *they're* on their way out. Television was the only independent American art form. We discovered it, we made it, we built it, and then we turned it into a thing that exists for the benefit of ratings. Now the creative writer cannot write creatively and the creative director does not want to direct an uncreative show, a show that doesn't have anything to say.

He understood the extent to which entertainment in America was more a business than an art, and that the business inevitably got in the way of the actor's, writer's and director's personal expressions.

There are people in Hollywood who fight creativity all the way down the line. There are book-keepers that are controlling these studios. There are people in advertising that are controlling the television and

radio media. In the theater, the backers control the theater today, and the plays that are being produced are pretty godawful.

Rather than helping artists, Cassavetes felt that critics stood in the way of creativity.

The young creative writer has been frightened away by bad reviews that kill his livelihood. Brooks Atkinson and Walter Kerr should really take a look and see why Chayefsky isn't writing more plays, why Reggie Rose hasn't written one, why Robert Allen Aurthur wrote one and got terrible notices. Here are a bunch of writers coming in that are the lifeblood of the theater, and what the critics do is kill them. Michael Gatto certainly shouldn't be hurt by the critics because these people are giving an honest expression, and this expression can be disagreed with and criticized to the point of being a flop play, but the author himself shouldn't be hurt. The author himself gave an honest show that hasn't been written for the mass stage audiences up in New Rochelle and out on Long Island. He's written a play that he wants to put in the theater, and the theater should be a place for creative enterprise as well as commercial success.

I feel that these damned critics should see when a playwright has talent, however unformed, and help him along by saying, 'I wish that you would write another play,' and criticize on a constructive level, rather than try to give the people that go into the theater a chance to get out of a thing that isn't technically perfect. This doesn't happen. People in the theater don't help each other the way they should. People in movies definitely never help each other.

Cassavetes felt that the roles he was playing on television and in film were a tissue of clichés.

I've been typed. The only things I've been offered are little gangsters. When I worked on *The Fifth Season*, Menasha Skulnick, the star, told me, 'If you can't have fun and be comfortable, there's no sense in being an actor.' I've never forgotten that. Lots of performances claim to be realistic, but you see hundreds of phony copies where everyone's *acting* realism and that makes me angry. If you're playing a juvenile delinquent, there are five alternatives and they all add up to the same thing: jeans and a sweatshirt. To creative people it is exciting to say something *different*, something *new* – to say *somebody else's* ideas and to make them come out right; or to say their own ideas or interpret those ideas. That is fun. That is what is interesting. If everybody has to do everything the same, it's no fun for the artist and I don't think it's any fun for the audience.

Cassavetes' dissatisfaction with Hollywood methods of filmmaking would ultimately motivate him to go off on his own. One of the reasons he became a filmmaker was to see if movies could be made a different way from what he himself had experienced as an actor.

It's a very hard job, being an actor. Because the camera comes down in your face, and someone says to you, in essence, 'Be big, now!' Because after they finish powdering you, and dusting you, and messing with your hair, and throwing you in front of the camera, then there's the tension: 'QUIET now! It's a long scene!' And you're standing there with a bunch of strangers that you have nothing in common with, whom you're supposed to love or hate, and with a bunch of words that you don't really want to say. And a different kind of acting is born of that, and that is a professionalism, a professional, theatrical kind of acting, which all actors have done. They get up there and they're all alone. And the only thing they have is the material to support them. And in between times a person says, 'I don't like what you did. Perhaps if you did *this*, it might be better.' And no matter how you say that, it always comes out just as crudely as that. And the actor's feeling is, 'You don't like the way I sat? I've been sitting down that way all my life! Stay out of my life! Stay out of my guts. I don't need you around.' Actors come to know what they know at great personal expense. If someone contradicts what they are doing, or how they do it, this can make you feel very insecure and afraid someone is trying to take away all you've worked for.

The actor must be respected.

I think that the *performing* arts are greatly under rated, especially acting. The interpretation of a writer's thoughts is handled by the actor directly, by the director indirectly. You can't say which is most important – the indirect or direct action of trying to fulfill an idea. I think one falls in love with the entire concept of communicating abstract ideas, of somehow finding a way of connecting surprisingly with an audience. That much is absolutely rewarding in *every* facet of our thing.

Cassavetes understood how youthful ideals gradually gave way to the routine of work.

Actors come into the business and have great enthusiasm because they think they're going to make it. They think they're going to be great. Then people tell them they're not so great, and they feel they're not so great. And the one thing they've always wanted in their lives – to be

great – they realize they’re not going to be. Their own vision is crossed out and replaced by the vision of the way other people see them. They have no dream anymore; they only have a profession. They are businessmen. They are looking to make a dollar; looking to enjoy themselves the best way they can; looking not to make too many enemies in meeting people because then they won’t be working. They are looking to please the public, please the director, the writer, everybody – so that they are not concentrated, they’re not contained. Working for money and working under pressure they can no longer spin the dream for an audience.

It’s like somebody that says ‘I love you’ to a girl. Now, if it’s a guy that’s said it a million times, there’s something the girl can see in that guy that says ‘You don’t love me, and maybe I’ll play the game with you,’ but it’s not the same as when some young passionate guy says, ‘I love you.’ It’s the same with an actor. An actor must really believe what he’s doing, and he mustn’t care whether he’s good or bad at the moment, it’s only the creative effort that counts. And you can’t have that if you have some ulterior motive, like making money, pleasing people, enjoying yourself at a cocktail party that may lead to a bigger job. The great danger for actors is this success drive. The success drive is so great, and eventually every actor gets his opportunity to go out to Hollywood or be in a Broadway show. They get this opportunity – sometimes they succeed, sometimes fail – ninety-nine per cent fail. But they’re still there in the business, they’re still capable people. What happens is, now they have failed, they have to go for that big opportunity again.

Actors keep on driving for that big opportunity, selling everything in their past just for that one big opportunity. That opportunity comes again, but by that time they’ve sacrificed all the things in which they really believed and they feel like hypocrites. They get in a group of people that haven’t done quite as much, and they talk a creative game. They talk about ethics and creativity – but they’ve perjured themselves all through their careers. It’s not their fault. It’s just the society in which we live and the nature of the business and the nature of the need to express yourself.

Cassavetes’ reflections about the hypocrisy of the actor who ‘talks a creative game’ but functions as a businessman are self-referential. In 1955 and 1956, he was afraid he himself was headed down this path.

When his work doesn’t satisfy him, the actor can grow bitter. He knocks everything – knocks the political life, life in America, other

actors, knocks himself – everything. That happens when an actor wants something so greatly and in his own mind doesn't believe that he will ever achieve it. He has discovered for himself that he will never be a great actor. So he goes out to get something else – material gains – and the material gain, even if he achieves that, is not what he really wants. His motivation, his life's force, is slowed up to a halt, and he has to go and get another reason to go on in order to survive. So it becomes money or success, or the cocktail party, or knowing people, being able to say hello to more important people than himself.

An actor has no ethics when he first starts. He doesn't judge or think or compare. He doesn't know a good script from a bad script, or a good part from a bad part, he just wants to act. Once he gets smarter, he develops what you call ethics. He begins to know a good script from a bad script, he begins to know a good actor he's playing with versus a bad actor, or a good director versus a bad director. These are the things that make an actor smart. And they're not good things, particularly. It's that first flush of enthusiasm, that first flush of wanting to be something more, that gives you the desire. Whether it's a bad script or good script, you want to go in there and do the very best job that you can and not handicap yourself by criticizing things before you begin.

When I first started, I had that crazy enthusiasm, but now I don't. It's a terrible thing when you lose your enthusiasm for acting. When you do, you reach a point where you become like all the other actors. You go into a thing and you're the 'pro', and you say to the young actor, 'Look, it's a job. Let's do it the best we can. It's not a good script, but let's do it the best we can.' The actor, who is hungry, who has great enthusiasm, says to himself, 'No, no. I'm going to do it better than the next guy.' And he's the guy that wins, because his dream is stronger than the stereotype idea of making a living.

In 1956, as Rowlands went off to act in the evenings and twice on Wednesdays and Saturdays in *The Middle of the Night*, Cassavetes found himself sitting at home or hanging out in bars. He did a lot of thinking about where his life and work were headed. He was really quite unhappy. The work was starting to get boring. He began meditating on a project that would change everything. That summer he left the city to play Silva Vicarro in Tennessee Williams' *Twenty-Seven Wagons Full of Cotton* at the Westport Country Playhouse in Connecticut. When he returned to Manhattan in August, he decided to be less of a 'hypocrite' and do something different with his life.

As an actor you don't get the freedom to function the way you'd like to. I know I never got the lines I wanted under other directors. I couldn't stand the idea of sitting around for a couple of years waiting for the phone to ring. It drove me crazy. So I found other people that it drove crazy too and we started working together. I started a workshop because I went crazy. It saved me from going off the deep end.

Shadows and Johnny Staccato (1957–9)

Burt Lane (Burton E. Lane, later married to Coleen Farrington, and the father of Diane Lane) had been in Gena Rowlands' class at the AADA. He was a year younger than Cassavetes and had been the House Manager and a member of the company at the Provincetown Playhouse in the summer of 1951, where Cassavetes occasionally visited Rowlands. The two men had been close friends for years, working on a succession of projects together. In early 1954, when Cassavetes was offered the 'Pasa Doble' part, Lane had helped him learn his lines, spending weeks going over them with him in a warehouse on the upper West Side where Lane was a night watchman. That same year, the two men had done some scriptwriting together; and (although Cassavetes abridges the events somewhat in telling it) in 1955 and early 1956, they had organized the precursor to the workshop they would later start, conducting informal scene-readings with actor friends several evenings a week. But none of it brought in any money, and when Lane ran into Cassavetes in the fall of 1955, he had decided to give up acting.

I was waiting at a bus stop in New York when I saw an old friend of mine named Burt Lane. A few years before, we had spent about thirty weekends writing a script based on a book about Belmonte, the bull-fighter. The characters had come alive for us; but when we finished it, Burt and I disagreed about one scene, and nothing – screaming, fist-fights, you name it – could get us to resolve the situation. So, to show our manhood, we threw the script away: we both felt it would demonstrate that we had the confidence and ability to write again. Anyway, the next time I met Burt, he told me he was about to take a job at an advertising agency and I was stunned. 'You can't do that, Burt,' I told him. 'I won't *let* a friend of mine do that. You know more about acting and writing than anybody in the world.'

In early 1956, Cassavetes and Lane rented a room on an upper floor of the Variety Arts Building at 225 West 46th Street (the site of the old Malin Studios) and invited friends to come and read scenes with them. A few months later they moved into the vacant ground floor which was available for around \$800 a month. It had not been used for years and was a complete wreck. Lane and the actor-students threw up interior walls to make a few small offices, a medium-sized classroom and a practice stage. Everything was done on a shoestring and the result was not very fancy. The stage was tiny and interrupted at one end by a stanchion that supported the floor above. Stage lighting was provided by a single ceiling spotlight in front and seating consisted of four rows of folding chairs (which were later replaced with seats from a razed movie theater) – thirty or forty seats in all, which was at least twenty more than they needed. Since the room was not soundproofed, the thumps of dance classes on the floor above could be heard throughout the day. The official name of the group was ‘The Cassavetes–Lane Drama Workshop’, but most of the students simply called it ‘Variety Arts’ or the ‘Workshop’.

The workshop was extremely small and fairly informal, with classes held in the evenings a few nights a week. Initial membership was almost entirely by invitation, with only seven or eight actors involved at the start (though the number doubled in the first few weeks). The workshop was divided into groups based on experience. Lane worked with the beginners and intermediate students, and Cassavetes worked with the advanced group, where some of the actors had a little previous experience. Hugh Hurd had done some television and film work, including singing in the chorus in *Carmen Jones*, and had met Cassavetes earlier in 1956 when they acted together in *Edge of the City* (though Hurd’s role is so small it is uncredited in Ritt’s film). Tom Allen and Cliff Carnell had done a little prior television and stage work. Tony Ray and Lelia Goldoni arrived a few months later. Ray had had a small part in Anthony Mann’s *Men at War* and had done some soap-opera acting. Goldoni was an eighteen-year-old from Los Angeles who had danced a little with Lester Horton and studied drama with Jeff Corey but never performed professionally. If truth be told, the members of Cassavetes’ group joined more because they hoped the connection with Cassavetes might lead to a paying job than out of a desire to take classes.

As a hot young actor Cassavetes was a powerful draw, but he had little or no involvement with the day-to-day operation of the school, which he left to Lane, who paid the rent, handled the official responsibilities, and did all of the formal teaching. Lane felt a little put upon, not only because Cassavetes (who was far better off financially) contributed

nothing to the workshop financially and reneged on their initial agreement to share the responsibilities, but also because the young actor thought nothing of disappearing for weeks at a time while he pursued his own acting projects, generally not even telling Lane in advance.

There was also a certain amount of resentment from Cassavetes' so-called 'students'. A number of early participants in his group quit because they were turned off by his lack of seriousness and crazy antics. Actors came to audition for the workshop, having spent a week or two preparing a serious scene, only to have Cassavetes clown around on stage behind them while they were attempting to deliver their lines, pop out from behind pieces of furniture to throw them off, pinch an actress's bottom to surprise her, or suddenly jump on the back of an actor and ride him around the stage in the middle of the scene. Cassavetes would protest that he was just trying to 'loosen them up' and get them to act more 'naturally', but to many of them it simply seemed to be a big ego trip, a chance for him to show off in front of a crowd and get laughs at their expense. A number of the students also felt that Cassavetes shamelessly used them, then threw them away when they had served his purposes. He promised most of the actors who joined his group (who were desperately poor) that he would give them paying jobs as teachers in the school. He got them to fill in for him and conduct acting classes when he was out of town, then told them there was no money to pay them. He then promised to make it up to them by getting them acting jobs outside the workshop, then reneged on that promise as well. One of Cassavetes' and Lane's ideas was to run a dramatic showcase, but the experiment was a flop.

I got about nineteen young actors. Everybody paid two dollars a head, including me. It wasn't to be a school. It was to be a place where people could just perform and I could invite all the casting people down. I had a lot of very talented actor friends who were out of work saying, 'Please see what you can do, talk to some of the producers and directors, and get us some work in this town.' So we said, 'All right, actors, come on in and work, do your scenes, and we'll invite the casting directors, writers, directors and producers along to see you.' But everybody wants to discover for himself, nobody takes anybody else's word, so it's no use going to a producer or director and saying, 'Please see this actor, he's marvelous.' Nobody showed up.

Now we were paying considerable rent for this place and had it on a year's rental basis, so we decided just to open our doors and invite anybody who wanted to to come in. I took an ad in the paper and invited

anyone to come in and act, because I didn't want to just let it go to waste. So the next day, maybe a hundred people came in off the streets: cops and pickpockets and college kids and I don't know what – guys from the sanitation department, you know, they all said, 'I'll be an actor.' Very few had any experience whatsoever, hadn't even had a part as an extra or maybe not even seen a camera before. By January our classes had grown to more than seventy pupils who worked as a cooperative unit – actors, writers and others, chipping in to build scenery and contribute props as well as write and act.

Cassavetes exaggerates the number of students which, even at its height, was only about forty in all, with no more than twelve to fifteen in his group. To an interviewer who visited the workshop, Cassavetes somewhat vaguely described the classes as being designed to teach students to act 'naturally', so that their work didn't look 'staged' or 'artificial'. He said his goal was to bring 'realism' back to acting, and that the highest compliment that could possibly be paid to one of his actors was to say that he or she didn't appear to be 'acting', but simply 'living' his character. The journalist regarded the explanation as fairly trite until Cassavetes added that the 'artificiality' of the expression of emotion was more than a dramatic problem. It was a problem in life. The young actor argued that most lived experiences were as 'staged' and 'artificial' as most dramatic experiences, and that the real problem 'for modern man' (as Cassavetes inflatedly put it) was 'breaking free from conventions and learning how to really *feel* again'. It was a daring leap: lived experience could be as much a product of convention as dramatic experience, and in fact the one sort of convention could be the subject of the other. It was the first and most succinct statement of the subject of *Shadows* and all of Cassavetes' later work.

The workshop was founded as a conscious alternative to the Actors Studio. Cassavetes had both personal and intellectual differences with Lee Strasberg's group. To start with, he was resentful about the power the Studio exerted over casting directors, which he felt was what had held him back early in his career. He was also scornful of what he called the 'guru' aspects of the Studio and pointedly described his and Lane's school as 'anti-guru'. He felt that the Method was more a form of psychotherapy than acting, and believed that although figures like Clift, Brando and Dean had had a salutary influence on acting in the late forties and early fifties, by the mid-fifties the Method had hardened into a received style that was as rigid, unimaginative and boring as the styles it had replaced ten years earlier. The slouch, shuffle, furrow and stammer

had been turned into recipes for profundity. The actor filled the character up with his own self-indulgent emotions and narcissistic fantasies. (The dismissive term Cassavetes and Lane used to describe this process was ‘organized introversion’.) Normal, healthy, extroverted social and sexual expression between men and women dropped out of drama. Inward-turned neuroticism became equated with truth. The result was lazy, sentimental acting.

The Method was loved by actors because it enabled them to be playwrights without knowing anything about dramatic construction, plot development or motivation. In the workshop we stress the heroics of acting. Heroes have been forgotten – nowadays everybody wants to play the schmo. We don’t allow negativism of any kind – a student doesn’t attack another’s work. Our school is not for psychoanalysis or airing personal problems. It’s a time and place for work and creative happiness.

It’s also possible that Cassavetes’ low opinion of the Actors Studio may have been a bit of sour grapes since, according to several unconfirmed accounts, prior to this point he had applied and been rejected twice. In this version of it, one of the reasons Cassavetes launched the workshop with Lane was because he couldn’t get into Strasberg’s group. Be that as it may, as luck would have it, shortly after Cassavetes and Lane began their workshop, Cassavetes was invited to audition for the Actors Studio. Instead of being flattered he was angry, since he felt that when he had needed the Studio five years earlier they wouldn’t talk to him, but now that he was successful they were suddenly interested. When he showed up for the audition, he brought Lane along and told Strasberg the two men were going to do a scene from a new play entitled *Bill Bower’s Boys* about two black siblings who were ‘passing’ for white. But it was a trick. Cassavetes and Lane improvised the scene on the spot (after having done a single quick run-through that morning).

To Cassavetes’ delight and Lane’s amazement, Strasberg fell for the ruse. He believed the story, loved the piece and performance, and offered Cassavetes immediate admission to the Studio. Cassavetes then sprang the second part of the trap: he told Strasberg a sob story about how little money he had and that he could not afford to attend. When Strasberg agreed to give him a scholarship, Cassavetes gleefully revealed the ruse and told him he wasn’t interested in studying under someone who obviously knew nothing about acting since he couldn’t see through any of the lies that had been inflicted upon him.

It was a typical Cassavetes prank, but it also summed up the fundamental philosophical difference between his approach to acting and Strasberg's. The Studio's sense of acting was that it was something serious, labored and earnest. Cassavetes' understanding was that acting was fun. It could be zany, comical and madcap. In Strasberg's vision, the theater was a church; in Cassavetes' it was a playground. While the Actors Studio specialized in moody, broody anguish, Cassavetes felt that acting was fundamentally an expression of joy and exuberance.

There was another difference between Strasberg's philosophy and Lane and Cassavetes'. As Lane told an interviewer in 1958, the problem with the Method was 'In focusing on core emotions, it removed the masks of the characters and deprived them of personalities. In real life, we rarely act directly from our emotions. Feeling is simply the first link in a chain. It is followed by an adjustment of the individual to the situation and to the other people involved in it, and this in turn leads to the projection of an attitude which initiates the involvement with other persons. On top of that, there is the problem of characterization. Actors who are preoccupied with themselves – with examining and recalling their own innermost experiences – cannot properly interact with others on stage, much less approximate the interactions of others with themselves. Since most dramatic conflict arises either from characters trying to get behind the personality masks of others or from trying to prevent others from seeing through their own masks, a method which neglects the recreation of a character's mask is essentially destructive of dramatic values.'

Cassavetes drew many of his early understandings of drama from lengthy conversations with Lane, and there is no more important concept in *Shadows* than the notion of the mask (perhaps because it tallied with Cassavetes' own personal presentation of a false face in so many of his social interactions). Not only are there explicit references to masks in the scene in the MoMA sculpture garden and in the post-coital scene in *Shadows*, but at one point or another in the film the fundamental drama of each of the main characters can be described as dealing with the mask he or she wears. Like the idea that at the end of a work a character should undergo an 'epiphany' (which Lane said was another central tenet of the workshop teaching which he and Cassavetes had frequent conversations about), the mask idea informs all of Cassavetes' films. (In 1968, when Cassavetes was asked by an interviewer to describe *Faces*, his next major independent work, in three words or less, he proposed simply: 'Masks and faces.')

The one thing Cassavetes had in common with the Actors Studio was the use of improvisation as a way of exploring a text.

I wasn't a teacher or director – had no desire to be – only an actor, but I took the problems that were bothering me and used the people on the stage to help me solve my problems, which were mainly how to make an entrance on a stage, how to interpret a part, how to mix improvisation with acting, how to start off a play properly, how to contact and communicate with an audience, how, once you got a laugh, to keep the laugh coming – all the problems an actor would face that I could think of.

During the course of this we were dealing with improvisations. Actors would be on the stage doing an improvisation and it turned out to be very bad. I found out that by giving an actor some definite activity to do, it would make him better. But it still wasn't very good, so we threw actors who were improvising into the midst of a written scene. What happened was that actors could not go on with the written material. I found out that my study had to be deeper. After a lot of work the people who did the improvisations started coming in legitimately, you know, really amplifying. And then we started writing in the class. We started rewriting Maxwell Anderson and anyone else, trying to write in his style, and trying to find out how we could come in and integrate. And we took beats. We just started a whole thing of learning how to work in a freer way. Then we would go back to the written material without any improvisation. And that worked out very well because we were freer, less uptight, less anxious to please the next actor and to make the scene work.

The students kept pestering Cassavetes to help them get work. He came up with an idea – which he presented in his trademark 'mysterioso' manner (one of the modes he could shift into when he wanted to make an impression – at many later pitch sessions he would switch to a similar whisper to make sure he was heard). At a break in one of the classes in early January, he went around and whispered in the ears of a small number of his favorite students that they should show up at 3 p.m. for a special Sunday session. Since they had never met on a Sunday before, everyone was mystified as to what was going on and Cassavetes would answer no questions. When they arrived a few days later, he described a complex scene in great detail. Since the actors played under their own names, the characters were named after them. The scene Cassavetes outlined involved an African-American family consisting of two brothers and a sister who lived together in a small apartment. The sister, played by Lelia Goldoni, was light-skinned and 'passed' for white. The younger brother, played by Ben Carruthers, was also light-skinned and somewhat undecided about his racial identity. The older brother, played by

Hugh Hurd, was clearly black and was an aspiring singer. The specific moment Cassavetes asked the actors to imagine was that the girl had just had sex with a white boy, played by Tony Ray, and returned with him to her apartment where her brother Ben was hanging out with two of his buddies. After some interaction, the buddies then leave and the dark-skinned brother and his manager, played by Rupert Crosse, come back to the apartment and Tony suddenly realizes that Lelia is black. Cassavetes asked his actors to improvise how the situation might play out. From the moment Ben playfully said 'Hi, sister!' to Lelia, the scene caught fire. The actors excitedly went on with variations for more than three hours. Lelia Goldoni says what made the scene so exciting was precisely that the problem it posed could not be solved in a decisive or clear way. Because the scene asked a question that didn't have an answer, the actors were not able to predict what would happen next. It was that open-endedness and uncertainty that kept Cassavetes and his actors excited not just that afternoon but for almost three years.

Shadows began as a dream in a New York loft on 13 January 1957. I dreamed up some characters that were close to the people in the class, and then I kept changing the situations and ages of the characters until we all began to function as those characters at any given moment. One particular improvisation exploded with life. It was about a black girl who passes for white. It was a basic melodramatic situation in which she was seduced by a young man, who then realized that she was colored. I chose a situation like this so that the actors would have something definite and emotional to react to. The wild dream grew that this improvisation could be captured on film. Until dawn that morning, the dreamers talked.

What they talked about was the possibility of turning the improvisation into a movie. Cassavetes got a cameraman, Erich Kollmar, who had recently completed a documentary feature in Africa, to commit to the film. Then he swung into action in his best street-hustler manner. Within a few days, he gave an interview to the *New York Times* announcing the film as being a non-profit venture dealing with the 'Negro-White problem', and that all that was needed was \$7,500 to make it. When that didn't bring in any philanthropic offers, a few weeks later Cassavetes called the host of a local New York radio talk show and asked if he could make a visit. Cassavetes had been on the show many times before and knew the format well. It was custom-made for someone like him – both playful and outrageous, yet slyly serious at the same time. Over the

years, Jean Shepherd had gathered an enthusiastic following of eccentrics and free-thinkers, whom he referred to as his 'Night People'. At Shepherd's behest, they performed a variety of pranks and stunts throughout Manhattan – a forerunner of what would later be called 'guerrilla' or 'street' theater. Some examples of Shepherd's merry mayhem: 'Go to Marlboro Books tomorrow at ten and mill.' 'Tonight at midnight, open your window and shout as loud as you can "Screw New York."' 'In the morning commute tomorrow, everybody give an extra dime to the toll-taker for the person behind you.' In the following account, Cassavetes acts like the plea for money was an accident, but he knew exactly what he was doing and what the likely result would be when, according to a contemporary account, he began talking about how 'if there can be off-Broadway plays, why can't there be off-Broadway movies?'

In February I was going on Jean Shepherd's *Night People* radio show, because he had plugged *Edge of the City* and I wanted to thank him for it. I told Jean about the piece we had done and how it could be a good film. I said, 'Wouldn't it be terrific if *people* could make movies, instead of all these Hollywood big-wigs who are only interested in business and how much the picture was going to gross and everything?' And he asked if I thought I'd be able to raise the money for it. 'If people really want to see a movie about *people*,' I answered, 'they should just contribute money.' For a week afterwards, money came in. At the end it totaled \$2,500.

Some of the money was mailed, but most of it was hand-delivered, since Shepherd gave out the address of the workshop on the air and, in his zany way, told his listeners to go down and 'buy an advance ticket for two dollars'. The show was broadcast live on Sunday night. At 10 a.m. on Monday morning, people started streaming into the Variety Arts building. They kept coming all week long. Hundreds came, including a number of aspiring actors, trying to get into the movie.

One soldier showed up with five dollars after hitch-hiking 300 miles to give it to us. And some really weird girl came in off the street; she had a mustache and hair on her legs and the hair on her head was matted with dirt and she wore a filthy polka-dot dress; she was really bad. After walking into the workshop, this girl got down on her knees, grabbed my pants and said, 'I listened to your program last night. You are the Messiah.' Anyway, she became our sound editor and straightened out her life. In fact, a lot of people who worked on the film were people who

were screwed up – and got straightened out working with the rest of us. We wouldn't take anything bigger than a five-dollar bill – though once, when things looked real rough, we did cash a \$100 check from Josh Logan.

Shepherd visited the workshop frequently, made three different fund-raising appeals on Cassavetes' behalf over the next two years and kept his listeners apprised of the progress of 'their film'. With Sam Shaw's help, Cassavetes also secured a number of contributions in the \$100 to \$500 range from better-off donors. In addition to Logan, they included Robert Rossen, Sol Siegel, Charles Feldman, José Quintero, Reginald Rose, William Wyler, Marty Baum and even Hedda Hopper! Shaw also talked Spyros Skouras, the owner of Delux Film Labs, into contributing film stock and letting Cassavetes use the lab for processing (where Otto Paoloni, one of the best technicians in the world, gave him occasional advice). Some of the 16mm filmmaking equipment was rented and some borrowed. Once Erich Kollmar joined the project, he provided his own Arriflex camera.

Shirley Clarke, who was working in those days as one of the few independent filmmakers, had the only equipment in town, so she brought it down and said, 'Go ahead, make it. I'm not doing anything for six months. Take the equipment.' Other people brought in stuff. And they all contributed to this thing. People started building sets.

As would be the case with all of Cassavetes' subsequent work, he was less interested in a product than the process.

It didn't matter to me whether or not *Shadows* would be any good; it just became a way of life where you got close to people and where you could hear ideas that weren't full of shit. We had no intention of offering it for commercial distribution. It was an experiment all the way, and our main objective was just to learn. Not one actor was paid for his services, nor were the technicians given anything. What kept us going was enthusiasm. We were working for the fun of doing something we wanted to do. It is more important to work creatively than to make money. We would never have been able to finish if all the people who participated in the film hadn't discovered one absolutely fundamental thing: that being an artist is nothing other than the desire, the insane wish to express yourself completely, absolutely.

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Though most reviewers treated *Shadows* as being about race problems, Cassavetes always thought of the film as more personal. Almost all of the scenes were based on his own experiences and feelings. In his early auditioning days, Cassavetes had once sung 'A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody' to introduce a girlie line in the Hudson Theater and been humiliatingly told to 'shut up, sit down, and let the girls come on' in his place. Many of the characters had parts of him in them. Ben's aimless alienation and cruising for girls was not only modeled on Cassavetes' own jobless drifting and carousing with his two roommates in the early fifties, but figured a lonely, nighttime, wandering side of his personality that endured throughout his life. Lelia's romantic impulsiveness, Rupert's and Hugh's belief that friendship was more important than business, and Tom's tirade about colleges and professors all embodied aspects of his feelings and beliefs. Though the relevant scenes were later cut from the print that comes down to us, it is also significant that *Shadows* initially focused on the idea that Tony 'stole' David's girlfriend, which tied in with Cassavetes' competitiveness with other men about women. Hugh represented the side of Cassavetes that felt drained by and resentful of the demands placed on him to do things for others. (Cosmo Vitelli would later constitute an even more extended self-portrait of this side of Cassavetes' personality – the part of him that in his view of himself did everything for everyone else and nothing for himself.) Most profoundly of all, Ben's and Hugh's relationship mirrored the relationship of Cassavetes and his older brother Nick. Hugh was a version of Nick – dutiful, responsible, hard-working and somewhat frustrated; while Cassavetes was a version of Ben – a self-centered slacker, who mooched off his older brother in the early part of the decade, and then watched him experience a discouraging series of setbacks to his career and finances at the end of it.

Beyond these specific references, the general subject of *Shadows* was close to Cassavetes' view of his own situation at this point in his life. He thought of himself as doing the same thing in his world as Lelia and Ben did in theirs. In their different ways, he and they were attempting to 'pass' for something that was not necessarily a reflection of their true identities. As would be the case with all of his subsequent works, the issues in the film were close to Cassavetes' heart. He could not satirize or mock characters who were so similar to him.

We tried to do *Shadows* realistically – not Andy Hardy. I just was as tough and as mixed up and screwed up as anyone else and made a picture about the aimlessness and the wandering of young people and the emotional qualities that they possessed.

Years later, he would tell me that I had written the only essay about the film that he ever really liked, because it treated the film as being ‘not about racial but *human* problems’.

The story is of a Negro family that lives just beyond the bright lights of Broadway; but we did not mean it to be a film about race. It got its name because one of the actors, in the early days, was fooling around making a charcoal sketch of some of the other actors and suddenly called his drawing *Shadows*. It seemed to fit the film. The NAACP came to us to finance it, but we turned it down. We’re not politicians. One of the things that has to be established when you’re making a movie is freedom. Everyone will get the wrong idea and say we’ve got a cause. I couldn’t care less about causes of any kind. *Shadows* is not offensive to anybody – southerners included – because it has no message. The thing people don’t like is having a philosophy shoved down their throats. We’re not pushing anything. I don’t believe the purpose of art is propagandizing.

However idealized his attitude may seem in hindsight, Cassavetes thought of race less as a biological reality than an imaginative stance.

At the time I made *Shadows* I wished that I was a black man, because it would be something so definite and the challenge would be greater than being a white man. But now, American black men are white men so there’s no challenge and I don’t really wish to be that anymore. I don’t know about other men’s desires but it is my desire to be an underdog, to win on a long shot, to gamble, to take chances.

Cassavetes was opposed to the notion of art having a negative or satiric agenda, and to works that mocked or denigrated their characters.

There is a great need in the cinema for truthfulness, but truth is not necessarily sordid and not necessarily downbeat. Unfortunately, the art films have dealt mainly with the evils of society. But society is more interesting than rape or murder. I think you can do more through positive action than in pointing out the foibles and stupidities of man. Yes, any man is capable of killing any other man, we know that, we don’t have to stress that. To say that it’s right and normal, to continue to say it, to have society *and* the Establishment confirm that view, is wrong.

Art films reach for the most obvious fallacies of society, such as racial prejudice. That’s been a fault of the art film – devoting itself to human ills, human weaknesses. An artist has a responsibility not to dwell on

this and point it up, but to find hope for this age and see that it wins occasionally. Pictures are supposed to clarify people's emotions, to explain the feelings of people on an emotional plane. An art film should not preclude laughter, enjoyment and hope. Is life about horror? Or is it about those few moments we have? I would like to say that my life has some meaning.

I think that there are certainly many, many wonderful things to be written about in this day and age of disillusionment and horror and impending doom. We must take a more positive stand in making motion pictures, and have a few more laughs, and treat life with a little more hope than we have in the past. *Shadows* is a realistic drama with hope – a hopeful picture about a lower echelon of society in the United States – how they live, how they react. The people are hopeful. They have some belief. I believe in people.

The worst kind of art of all, in Cassavetes' view, was the fifties 'exposé'.

I'm not an Angry Young Man. I'm just an industrious young man. And I believe in people. I don't believe in 'exposés', as exposés have just torn America apart, and the rest of the world. I don't believe in saying that the presidential campaign is all phony, going inside it and looking at it. It's been going on for years this way, but for the first time in history we're going in and saying, 'Yeah, see what they do? See how they get votes? See how this is done? See?' Human frailties are with us. People aren't perfect. But we have good instincts that counterbalance our bad acts. The main battle is you don't make ugliness for the sake of ugliness. By attacking, constantly attacking everything in sight, no matter what anyone does, it's not good enough because it can't be trusted. And nobody, starting with the top of our government, can be believed. Everybody is a phony. So if everybody's a phony, what's the sense of going on, because there isn't anybody worth making a picture about, talking about, writing about. There's no hope in living and you might as well pack it all in and forget about it. Why should young people's minds constantly be filled with the corruption of life? Soon they can't do anything but believe there's total corruption.

Both the conception and the style of *Shadows* were indebted to the neo-realists. The young actor went to the Thalia frequently in the fifties and was deeply affected by the work of Visconti, de Sica and Rossellini, which was just making its way to the United States at that point. Cassavetes was also familiar with other New York-based independent film

that preceded his own work. Commentators who regard him as ‘the first independent’ are only displaying their ignorance of the history of independent American film, which goes back to the early 1950s. Cassavetes was personally fond of the work of Morris Engel, Lionel Rogosin and Shirley Clarke, which he had seen before he began *Shadows*. He was particularly fond of Engel’s *The Little Fugitive*, *Lovers and Lollipops* and *Weddings and Babies*, and Rogosin’s *On the Bowery*. (I would note that although Cassavetes mentions Godard in the following statement from the mid-seventies, the works of the French New Wave had not been released in the United States at the time *Shadows* was begun.)

I adore the neo-realists for their humaneness of vision. Zavattini is surely the greatest screenwriter that ever lived. Particularly inspirational to me when I made *Shadows* were *La Terra Trema*, *I Vitelloni*, *Umberto D* and *Bellissima*. The neo-realist filmmakers were not afraid of reality; they looked it straight in the face. I have always admired their courage and their willingness to show us how we really are. It’s the same with Godard, early Bergman, Kurosawa and the second greatest director next to Capra, Carl Dreyer. *Shadows* contains much of that neo-realistic influence.

As different as *Citizen Kane* was stylistically from his own work, it was also a personal favorite. Welles’ example not only blazed a path for later independent filmmakers, but his sassiness, iconoclasm and panache (and that of the title character in *Kane*) inspired Cassavetes, who had similar personal qualities.

Welles was a big influence on me. The proof it could be done. *That* way. He showed me it was possible. I’d want to work with him. I don’t care *what* the problems are, because he’s an exciting man.

Yet, at the same time, Cassavetes knew that every director was ultimately alone with his vision.

I’d *like* to feel that people have influenced me, but then when you get on the floor you realize you’re really alone and no one can influence your work. They can just open you up and give you confidence that the aim for quality is really the greatest power a director can have – if you’re in quest of power. In a way, you must be out for power. We wouldn’t make films if we didn’t think that in some way we could speak for everyone.

I’m not part of anything. I never joined anything. I could work anywhere. Some of the greatest pictures I’ve ever seen came from the studio

system. I have nothing against it at all. I'm an individual. Intellectual bullshit doesn't interest me. I'm only interested in working with people who like to work and find out about something that they don't *already* know. If people want to work on a project, they've got to work on a project that's *theirs*. It's not mine and it's not theirs. It's only *yours* if you *make* it yours. With actors, as well as technicians, the biggest problem is to get people who really want to do the job and let them do it their own way. The labels come afterwards. If your films have no chance of being shown anywhere, if you don't have enough money, you show them in basements; then they're called underground films. It doesn't really matter what you call them. When you make a film you aren't part of a movement. You want to make a film, *this* film, a personal and individual one, and you do, with the help of your friends.

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When he spoke with interviewers a few years later, Cassavetes exaggerated or outright lied about many aspects of the production, bragging that he had shot the film in forty-two days, that most of the footage was 'grabbed' on the streets of New York, and that the movie was entirely spontaneous and improvised. In fact, it would be two and a half years before the final film would be completed, and even the initial period of shooting took more than ten weeks, from the end of February to the beginning of May 1957. Much of the final version was scripted and all of it was carefully, meticulously planned. Many of the interiors were filmed on a stage in the Variety Arts building. And many of the apparent exteriors were actually shot from inside restaurants or stores, looking out their plate-glass windows onto the street. Cassavetes relied heavily on the advice of Robert Rossen. Rossen had pioneered the use of 16mm cameras and documentary footage in his studio work and sat in on most of *Shadows'* early shooting, helping Cassavetes in every way he could – teaching him how to light, load a magazine and position a camera. But beyond Rossen's input, the film was an amateur, outlaw production all the way. Although Cassavetes grossly exaggerated the number and severity of run-ins with the police in subsequent accounts, there were a few times when New York's finest did interfere with the shoot. Cassavetes and his merry band frequently had to run cables across a street or block a walkway with a tripod, and since they had no permits (because they couldn't afford the required insurance), lookouts were posted so they could pack up and run for it when necessary. If they were caught by police they either gave them a

small bribe to look the other way or the shoot was moved to a less conspicuous location. (It was especially handy that one of the actors was a part-time cab driver and would park his cab next to wherever they were shooting so that they could throw the camera into it and make get-aways.) The difficulty of the outdoor shooting is why, as much as possible, it was done at night, from indoors (e.g. through a restaurant window looking out), from a concealed location (e.g. from a rooftop or movie theater marquee) or with a telephoto lens (so that any attention the camera and crew attracted was relatively far from the performers – as in the scene in which Tony and Lelia talk on the sidewalk in front of his apartment).

The shoot frequently ran into the wee hours of the morning with Cassavetes taking everyone out to breakfast at Horn & Hardart when they were done. Rowlands, by necessity, had almost no involvement, since she was busy starring in *The Middle of the Night* through the end of May. One member of the crew reported that the only regular interaction they had with her was when Cassavetes would send someone down to the Anta each night around eleven to ride back in a taxi with her to their apartment. On the rare occasions when she would show up while they were shooting or rehearsing – not counting the two scenes in which she appears in the film – it was to pose for a publicity shot (on the classes the fanzine articles would say ‘she ran with her husband’) or to have a brief private conversation with Cassavetes. In the words of another member of the cast, ‘Cassavetes, the crew and the actors would be sitting there, dirty, sleepy, exhausted from being up all night, bumming cigarettes from one another, John wearing awful mismatched clothes, one sock blue, one brown, and Gena would float in, looking like a real lady, a big star, gorgeous, covered in furs and jewelry.’

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In Cassavetes’ view, the actors’ creation of their characters was the most important step in the entire process, taking precedence over decisions about the film’s events or dialogue.

The real difference between *Shadows* and any other picture is that *Shadows* emanates from character while in other pictures the characters emanate from the story. I invented, or conceived, the characters of *Shadows* rather than a story-line. The idea of the story fitting the character instead of the character fitting the story is perhaps the main different point about the film.

The principal actors filled in the backstory on their characters. For example, in answer to the question of how they had ended up living together in an apartment, Lelia, Hugh and Rupert decided that their parents had died. In terms of their racial attitudes, it was decided that Hugh had accepted his race, that Ben was undecided and attempting to 'pass' and that Lelia as the 'baby' of the family had been 'spoiled rotten' by her brothers, with the result that she 'lived in a very special world' where she had never before had to confront racial realities. The principal actors were also asked to explore and deepen their relationships with each other. Hugh, Ben and Lelia were instructed to become an off-screen 'family' so that they could more convincingly portray an on-screen one. It is undoubtedly one of the reasons their relationship in the film is so convincing. Lelia was already close to Ben (whom she would marry six months later) and fond of Hugh (who did, in fact, treat her as if she were his 'little sister' and gave her advice and help on many occasions).

Before shooting began, the actors went out to do life study. Hugh Hurd went around trying to get a job and finally got one in Philadelphia in a third-rate nightclub. There were three other actors, guys I knew. First, I sent them out to get acquainted with the streets down in Greenwich Village. I gave them neighborhoods to go to and then we would shoot in those neighborhoods. They hung around Broadway and different places downtown. They would listen to jazz musicians or go out and have a beer and try to pick up girls. They kept going out for about a month, observing everything. They saw the way people dressed and acted and they got into it. And when we finally started shooting, they had assimilated. They pretty much became the people they were playing. They had something to say and they took it seriously.

The actor's personal understanding of his character was incorporated into the film not merely as a courtesy, but as his essential contribution to it. As Cassavetes said on many different occasions, his goal wasn't to get his own point of view into the work, but the points of view of the characters. The job of each actor was to play according to *his own* point of view, according to *his character's* self-justifying understanding of himself.

If the film is primarily the creation of the director or the writer, then you have only a single viewpoint upon the theme. It is the creation of only one imagination. But if the film is created out of the actors, then the work has as many facets as there are actors; the action is seen in the

round – the communal creation of several imaginations. Consider the movie as artwork on canvas. You begin with ideas, something of your own; sometimes somebody else adds something different and it changes a bit. Stylistic unity drains the humanity out of a text. I cannot help feeling that the stories of many different and potentially inarticulate people are more interesting than a contrived narrative that exists only in one articulate man's imagination.

Another difference between the methods of Cassavetes and Strasberg was that Cassavetes studiously shunned *group* discussions of character. Actors developed their characters separately and even kept secrets from each other about what their character felt, wanted or knew. If two actors discussed their roles with each other, they might unconsciously incorporate each other's views into their own and play their relationship falsely. Cassavetes wanted his actors to defend independent understandings of experience. One of the practical ramifications of this approach was that in his later films, at the start of the shoot, Cassavetes would promulgate a rule actually forbidding the actors to discuss their characters with each other. They *were* their characters; they *entered into* their characters' viewpoints; they *justified* their characters' understandings of life and *defended* their characters against attacks from others – all of which would be negated by leaving their characters behind ironically to comment on them or analytically discuss them with other actors between scenes. As Gena Rowlands later put it, 'You were *never* to talk about your character with other actors. Not a word. Nothing.'

I differ from the working method advocated by Stanislavski and followed by the Actors Studio, which involves group discussion of the characters. For me each role must be an individual's conception as well as an individual creation. If each role is the result of communal study by director and ensemble, everything will dovetail; it will all be nice and neat and smooth; but the conflict of the characters won't be truthful. The actors don't discuss their interpretations sitting around in a group. The general theme of the work, of course, must be studied by the whole group so that we share the same overall conception; but each actor must come at his own interpretation of his role, without the sort of group study and mutual criticism that one associates with Method work. The only talent that I might have is to get you to express yourself the way *you* want to, *not* the way *I* want you to!

It's not unimportant that the actors play under their own names. The

events and characters in *Shadows* were quarried from his actors' real lives and experiences. Hugh Hurd was an aspiring opera singer, who functioned as a kind of 'big brother' to the younger actors because of his age, experience and maturity. Lelia Goldoni was perceived as a bit of a flirt with her head in the clouds and an inflated notion of herself by some of the boys. Tony Ray was more than a bit of a poseur (he had a way to go to get over his famous father's legacy). Ben Carruthers was not very different from his character – a hipster drifter who was, in fact, one-eighth black and unresolved about his racial background, having chosen to 'pass' for white in most situations. And there were racial tensions within the workshop. As in all of Cassavetes' later films, the point was to 'use' these off-camera realities to enrich on-camera performances. Nothing was wasted. If you were upset or tired, that became part of the performance. If you didn't like another actor, that too could be used. Acting was not the product of a fantasy or 'as if' state but was tapped into the turbulence and turbidness of present-tense feelings and experiences.

That's one of the assets to improvisation. If an actor came in and he was completely in a bad mood, and he'd been up late the night before, then he used this within the framework of the scene. And these people were very closely related to the parts that they played, and so it just helped them become more human in the different situations that they were thrown into.

Although Cassavetes often denied it, it is important to emphasize that the actors' improvisations were severely constrained. Before each day's shooting, Cassavetes and his close friend and personal assistant, Maurice McEndree (who would be involved in every aspect of the film's production), would dictate the 'given circumstances' for the new scene in great detail. Cassavetes deliberately cultivated the opposite impression in many of the interviews he gave, which attempted to cash in on the post-Beat fascination with 'improvisation'. He had complete control over most aspects of the narrative structure and presentation – over the characters the actors played, their relationships to each other and the situations within which they were placed. Any improvisation that took place was limited to the actors' choice of words they would say. That is why Cassavetes thought that the importance critics placed on the use of improvisation was misguided.

I thought it was funny when critics took the improvisation thing too seriously. It was a joke. I don't think the ultimate effect of the film has anything to do with improvisation. That's only a method. The reason

Shadows was done that way was that I didn't think I'd be able to write a script, and I couldn't afford to hire a screenwriter. So I explained the general ideas to the actors. If we had had a writer, we would have used a script. There was no script, but there was an outline. We stuck to it very carefully. We would work on the idea of each scene before we would shoot it. It was just like revising a script, except that there were no written words – we kept the idea and the script in our minds. We started out with just a couple of typewritten pages of background, but as we went along a lot was written down about the characters.

Only bits and pieces of these notes survive, but the following examples can provide a taste of what they must have looked like. As the reference to Janet in the first one indicates, the part ultimately played by Lelia Goldoni was intended at one point for another member of the workshop, Janet Conway, who dropped out when her actor-boyfriend, Tom Gilson, who was originally supposed to play the role Tony Ray took on, had a fight with Cassavetes during the planning stages of the film and was thrown out of the workshop. Cassavetes had promised Gilson that he could act in and produce *Shadows*. But when Gilson asked Cassavetes to put his duties and profit-participation in writing before filming began (partly in response to the fact that he had filled in for him as an unpaid workshop teacher and felt that he had already been 'used' by him), Cassavetes simply fired him on the spot and had him and his girlfriend replaced in the cast. As would be the case in most of his subsequent productions, he was unwilling to share control with anyone and treated the mere request as an act of disloyalty. Many a subsequent crew member would learn the hard way never to publicly disagree with him or question his judgment.

'Bennie is driven by the uncertainty of his color, to beg acceptance in this white man's world. Unlike his brother Hugh, or Janet, he has no outlet for his emotions. He has been spending his life trying to decide what color he is. Now that he has chosen the white race as his people, his problem remains acceptance. This is difficult, knowing that he is in a sense betraying his own. His life is an aimless struggle to prove something abstract, his everyday living has no outlet. Before Bennie can find his place in life, he must first find his own identity.'

'Hugh is a nightclub singer on the decline. His manager, Rupe, persuades him to take a third-rate job introducing a "girlie" show. His misgivings are confirmed when, at his first appearance, his own act is humiliatingly cut by the entry of the girls.'

‘Lelia’s interests are wider and more ambitious than either of her brothers. She moves in “bohemian” circles – searching for her own identity. She hides her insecurity behind an assumed boldness and independence – a facade of pseudosophistication.’

‘Tony is a weak, handsome young man who sees himself as a budding Don Juan.’

The plot was worked out by Cassavetes and McEndree backwards and forwards from the initial improvisation.

Every scene in *Shadows* was very simple; they were predicated on people having problems that were overcome with other problems; at the end of a scene another problem would come in and overlap. This carried it forward and built up a simple structure. Once I had the structure it was a matter of writing a character breakdown and then working on that with the individual. For each scene I give the basic idea of the scene. First we improvise to get the feel of the characters; then as the actors become easy in the roles we go back to the text. If it doesn’t work out, then we go back and improvise some more; and again return to the text. We keep working like this till we feel complete identification between actor and role.

There was a struggle because the actors had to find the confidence to be quiet at times and not just constantly talk. This took about the first three weeks of the schedule. Eventually all this material was thrown away, and then everyone became cool and easy and relaxed and they had their own things to say, which was the point. Once they relaxed and gained confidence, many of the things they did shocked even me, they were so completely, unpredictably true.

As would be true of all his future work, when Cassavetes was attempting to capture a certain kind of moment on film, he was absolutely relentless in his pursuit of it. And he was willing to expose as much film as it took to get it (in this instance, approximately thirty hours of footage for what eventually became a sixty-minute movie). He talked a good line about letting the actors do what they wanted to but was, at the same time, extremely hard to please. As an illustration, Cassavetes shot the first version of Lelia’s love scene with Tony more than fifty times until her lips were swollen and bleeding from the effects of Tony’s repeated kisses – and was still not satisfied with the result. He wanted to continue and was only prevented by Goldoni’s protests that she just couldn’t go on. None of the takes was used in the final print.

Since it was my first film, I thought everything had to be painstakingly planned: ‘Go here. There. Do it again. Again, again, again!’ I was a maniac because I was so scared of making a mistake. After the second, third and fourth films I didn’t need to plan the shots anymore because making a movie wasn’t so frightening for me.

Cassavetes worked on his actors’ emotions. Another technique he employed was to give actors conflicting directions in certain scenes or to put them in slightly different emotional states. Goldoni tells how, for the sidewalk scene with Tony Ray, while Tony was given his lines in advance, she received hers at the last possible minute, just before shooting began – which then made his performance more confident and hers more tentative. In the scene in which Ben returns with the apartment keys following his fight with Hugh, Cassavetes privately gave contradictory directions to each actor – a technique he would occasionally employ in subsequent films.

To Ben: You go in there, and you’ve had it – I mean *had* it. You hate your brother. Throw your keys in his face – you don’t give a damn. Just go in there and get your clothes and get the hell out. I don’t want you to give in to Hugh, to compromise because *I* want you to.

To Hugh: Hugh, all I have to say is don’t let him out. He’s your brother. Keep the family together. You’ve got to be bigger than he is.

The result was an ability to elicit performances that other directors simply could not get. In the following passages, he talks about the philosophy of directing that emerged in *Shadows*:

In my own case I had worked in a lot of commercial films and I couldn’t adjust to the medium. I found that I wasn’t as free as I could be on the stage or in a live television show. So, for me, making *Shadows* was mainly to find out why I was not free – because I didn’t particularly like to work in films and yet I like the medium. Directors can kill off an actor. You know, often they just treat them – even featured players who have an important part in the plot – as though they weren’t there. But the actor is the only person in a film who works from emotion, in whom the emotional truth of a situation resides. If you kill that, you kill the film too. If we had made *Shadows* in Hollywood, none of the people could have emerged as the fine actors they are. It’s probably easier technically to make a film in Hollywood, but it would have been difficult to be adventurous simply because there are certain rules and regulations that are set specifically to destroy the actor and make him

feel uncomfortable – make the production so important that he feels that if he messes up just one line that he is doing something terribly wrong and may never work again. And this is especially true, not for the stars, but with the feature players who might be stars later on, or with the small players, the one-line players who might become feature players. There's a certain cruelty in our business that is unbelievably bad. I don't see how people can make pictures about people and then have absolutely no regard for the people they are working with.

Nobody defends the actor who has to put the character on the screen. I don't defend the actor because I love the actor, I defend him because I know that without him I'm going to look like an idiot, and with him he's going to make me look like a genius. I want to get the live emotional truth across, and you can only do that by giving the actor his head to live his part and create it as he goes along.

The main advantage of making a film in the way we did was that we had complete freedom. It was probably as free a film as has ever been made. It gave absolute freedom to the actor. He was allowed to express just what he felt about a problem or an idea. Their enthusiasm was allowed to flourish because we had a good producer, a cameraman that stayed out of the way and just followed the action rather than tell them, 'I'm going to solarize here,' or 'This is going to be a great montage of action, words and voices.'

Though he was reluctant to give specific directions to an actor about how to play a part, throughout his career Cassavetes was willing to talk to actors in general about their characters in order to inspire and encourage them to think deeply about their character. A myth has arisen that Cassavetes never discussed actors' characters with them. It is not true. When an actor needed it, Cassavetes was more than willing to talk with him about his character (though generally in private away from other actors). He would talk about the character's feelings or needs; the character's relation to other characters; the character's past or future. What he didn't do, except rarely and only when absolutely necessary, was dictate what the actor should do with that information. He wouldn't tell them how to play their parts, what thoughts and feelings they should express at a given moment in a scene, what tones of voice to use, what gestures they should employ.

I will continue to talk for hours with actors. In *Shadows* this was important. Dreams come out in improvisation, not only the exterior things. Furthermore, an actor is concerned with his dignity as a person – he

wants this to show in the characterization. The director has to service his actor in this way.

When there were problems, Cassavetes always believed that the actor himself had to find the solution.

I could neither stage the action nor communicate to the actors an idea that might have helped to clarify or unravel a clumsy situation. Nor could I stop a scene if it was sagging. One of the hardest times is when you can see it all going that little bit wrong, and know just what would put it right, but can't say so because that would break the actors' confidence and introduce a false reaction. You see my reaction is an outside reaction – as director I have to be objective – but theirs is inside and *true*, whether right or wrong from the point of what I want them to convey. The big thing is not to let the actors know precisely what the ultimate point of what they're doing is; as soon as they know, they try *consciously* to express it instead of letting it emerge as in life, and so they falsify it.

I loved the relationship that I had with my actors and that they had with me. If they felt they were in a hurry to do something they said, 'Get out of the way, John! Just leave us alone and we'll have it right.' I'd sit down and anxiously await something, and I felt like screaming when they did something that wasn't any good; but I didn't, and they'd say, 'All right, all right, we didn't get it right, we'll try it again.'

Cassavetes felt that working with a skeleton crew was not a drawback but an advantage. *Shadows'* crew seldom exceeded five or six people: Cassavetes, Kollmar, Jay Crecco (an electrician/fledgling actor who managed lights and sound), David Simon (in charge of power), Maurice McEndree, Seymour Cassel and Cliff Carnell (producers/equipment carriers who doubled as actors in bit parts).

Normally to shoot somewhere like Broadway there would be ten or a dozen gaffers [lighting men], then another five or six grips to move the cameras and cables, and then all the producers and directors on top of that. They wouldn't want anything out of focus; everything would have to be clear-cut. In a Hollywood picture you have marks to hit, and the lighting cameraman always lights for you at a certain mark. The actor is expected to go through a dramatic scene, staying within a certain region where the lights are. If he gets out of light just half an inch, then they'll cut the take and do it over again. So then the actor begins to think about the light rather than about the person he is supposed to be making love to or arguing with.

Cassavetes' method was to force the lighting and photography to adapt to the actors, not the other way around. The 'tape recorder' Cassavetes refers to was a 1/4" RCA synch system, which had replaced earlier 'wire recording'. The recent invention of Tri-X film by Kodak made the night-time shooting possible.

We used a tape recorder and a hand-held boom. We used a 16mm camera, partly because it was cheaper and partly because we could do more hand-held stuff with it and it was easier to handle in the streets. We rarely had rehearsals for the camera, even though Erich Kollmar, the cameraman, likes rehearsals. I encouraged him to get it the first time, as it happened. Erich found that the lighting and photographing of these actors, who moved according to impulse instead of direction, prevented him from using a camera in a conventional way. He was forced to photograph the film with simplicity. He was driven to lighting a general area and then hoping for the best.

So we not only improvised in terms of the words, but we improvised in terms of motions. The cameraman also improvised. He had to follow the artists so that the actors could move when and wherever they pleased. The first week of shooting was just about useless. We were all getting used to each other and to the equipment, but it was not because of the camera movement that we had to throw footage out. In fact, when you try it, you find that natural movement is easier to follow than rehearsed movement since it has a natural rhythm. Whereas when they rehearse something according to a technical mark, they begin to be jerky and unnatural, and no matter how talented they are, the camera has a difficult time following them.

I think the important contribution that *Shadows* can make to film is that audiences go to the cinema to see people: they only empathize with people and not with technical virtuosity. Most people don't know what a 'cut' or a 'dissolve' or a 'fade-out' is, and I'm sure they are not concerned with them. And what we in the business might consider a brilliant shot doesn't really interest them because they are watching the people, and I think it becomes important for the artist to realize that the only important thing is a good actor.

Cassavetes' comments tactfully skirt a delicate issue. He found working with Kollmar extremely difficult. It was a lesson about working with professionals that would be painfully repeated throughout his career. Kollmar was the only one on the entire crew with prior filmmaking experience, and was the most difficult member to deal with. The more

experienced the crew member, the harder it was for him to adapt to Cassavetes' unorthodox methods.

Another aspect of Cassavetes' method was to shoot entire magazine loads to avoid breaking up the actors' emotional rhythms.

Once the improvisation began, it sometimes ran for twelve minutes of shooting. In an ordinary film, the shots are much shorter and camera directions are written into the script. We used to shoot a long overall sequence – say, in medium long-shot – and then, if I wanted a close-up, we went through the entire scene again. Often this second improvisation produced good things that hadn't been in the original improvisation.

Though his subsequent accounts usually romanticized it, making the film was not all fun and games.

When I started, I thought it would only take me a few months; it took three years. I made every mistake known to man; I can't even remember all the mistakes we made. I was so dumb! We did everything wrong, technically. We began shooting without having the slightest idea of what had to be done or what the film would be like. We had no idea at all. We didn't know a thing about technique: all we did was begin shooting. Having acted in movies, I kind of knew how they were made, so after doing some shooting I'd shout out something like, 'Print take three!' I'd neglected to hire a script girl, however, so no one wrote down which take I wanted – with the astounding result that all the film was printed. The technical problems of the production were endless and trying. The 'Sound Department' often looked at the recorder, only to see no signal whatsoever! It was really the height of ignorance. The only thing we did right was to get a group of people together who were young, full of life and wanted to do something of meaning.

There were also a number of personal conflicts. I've already mentioned the fight with Tom Gilson, the friction with Kollmar and the stress of the kissing scene with Goldoni. From the moment Cassavetes went on Jean Shepherd's show, Burt Lane was upset that Cassavetes had not included him in the film's plans, resentful at the attention Cassavetes was getting and understandably disgruntled that Cassavetes had, without asking permission, simply taken over many of the workshop spaces and sidetracked the students from their dramatic studies for his own personal filmmaking project. Lane's initial understanding was that the stage would be used by all three classes of students, but once *Shadows* began filming, it was completely taken over by the film for almost six

months, so that scenes Lane's classes wanted to mount had to be canceled or rescheduled. Then there were the drunken post-production parties, and the tendency of a few members of Cassavetes' group to bring in friends for all-night carousing. It was not unusual for Lane or the landlord to show up in the morning and discover that some of the actors had brought in girls and spent the night in the building, or that the vending machines or other property had been destroyed. Lane's biggest shock occurred several months into the project. Sometime in the summer of 1957, with no advance notice, he received approximately \$20,000 in bills that Cassavetes had charged to the workshop account, for which Lane was legally responsible. Though Cassavetes did eventually pay them, it seemed to Lane that he should have asked permission or at least alerted his partner to what he was doing.

His friends thought of Cassavetes as the most driven and ambitious actor they had ever known – desperate to succeed and make up for the years of idleness and unemployment. Others regarded him as willful, self-centered, cavalier and willing to do almost anything to further his own personal projects. His ambition led to a kind of ruthlessness. They said he would lie, cheat and steal any time it suited him, and then lie about what he had done if he got caught in the first lie. One of his closest friends reported that his typical response when confronted with someone who got in his way was to say, 'Well, we'll trick him.' Or, 'That's OK. I'll just lie to him about it.' As proof that it wasn't just big talk, on more than one occasion Cassavetes would say something like that, pick up the telephone, dial a number and unload a pack of lies to whomever the problem of the moment was, right in front of the friend. Far from being embarrassed or ashamed by his behavior, he seemed to love doing it. (Various friends report that, in an era when agents were infamous for taking advantage of their clients, Cassavetes 'played' his agent, Marty Baum, 'like a violin'.)

Another friend added that even Cassavetes' parents were aware of this side of his personality, saying that when he was introduced to them, they half-jokingly warned him about their son, saying, 'Watch out for him. Don't let him use you. He'll try to get something from you. Don't believe a word he says.' Another shocked friend listened to Cassavetes brag that one time when he needed money he stole his mother's silverware and sold it. (Whether he really did or not matters less than that he would say he did.) There was a high-handedness, an open contempt for anyone who stood in his way that did not endear him to those who had a different view of things. If Gilson didn't agree with Cassavetes, he was out. Instantly. If an actor didn't see eye to eye with Cassavetes on the

director's plans for him, that was the end of the relationship. Of course, Cassavetes did get things done, while others sat around and only talked about doing them. If Cassavetes wanted or needed something from you, he was absolutely relentless and unyielding. He had numerous fights with actors and crew members on this shoot and all of his others. Cassavetes' version of these events is invariably favorable to his own view of things, but from the point of view of the actor or crew member, he could be the most difficult and demanding person they had ever met, and over the years many of them regretted working with him or vowed they would never do it again.

The whole experience of getting people to do things was incredible. There was a guy named David Pokotilow that we used a lot; one of the people who hadn't acted before. He played the boyfriend and was a chess player and a violinist. He did the first party scene and said, 'Listen, that's it.' And, as you know, that can't be it. 'You *have got* to do this!' He said, 'No, I don't want to do this.' So he promised me he'd do a scene running through the park. He didn't show up. We were standing out there in the park. I knew where he lived and I ran over to his house with a couple of other guys. 'John, I'm with a girl for Chrissake. I'm not an actor, God, I'm so fat and ugly and I don't want to do this. I don't want to. I just hate it. I hate you.' So I said, 'David, you have got to do it. If you do it, I swear to God, I'll get you a chess set.' I knew he loved chess. 'You get the chess set. You come back with the chess set and then I'll do it.' So we ran out like a bunch of idiots, got the chess set, came back. He says, 'Put it by the door so I can see it.' He opens the door and he says, 'OK, I'll do it.' So we get down to the park. There's a scene with Tony Ray and I said, 'Hey, you run after him.' He said, 'I'm not running for anybody.' I said, 'Please, you can run twenty yards?' He said no. I said, 'Please run twenty yards.' I'm reduced to nothing. And I'm standing there in the sunlight and the cold and everything and Bennie says, 'Jesus, man, I'd just deck him.' 'David, what can I give you?' He said, 'A Stradivarius.' 'I can't give you a Stradivarius. You know I can't afford a Stradivarius, but maybe we can rent it for you.' So he ran twenty yards. He said, 'That's it.' He went home.

Pokotilow says he doesn't remember the event in the park but does remember that Cassavetes told him throughout the shoot, with great conviction, that he was 'the hero of the movie' and that he felt deceived and embarrassed when he saw the final film. He felt Cassavetes had made a fool of him. It may be said in Cassavetes' defense that the lie was

probably the only way to guarantee that the actor would take his performance seriously enough to make it as true as it is. It is, in the end, not a foolish performance to be embarrassed by, but a sincere one to be proud of. Cassavetes may have needed to have deluded his actor in order to capture the delusion of the character he played.

By the final day of shooting, the thrill was gone.

In the course of the filming, the tide of outside enthusiasm dwindled and finally turned into rejection. The *Shadows* people continued, no longer with the hope of injecting the industry with vitality, but only for the sake of their pride in themselves and in the film that they were all devoted to. On the last day of shooting, I couldn't turn on the camera. I was so fed up with doing it because there was no love of the craft or the idea or anything. We're doing this experiment, and now it's the last day, nobody's here except McEndree and me. He couldn't turn on the camera and I couldn't turn on the camera and Ben was standing there asking, 'Are you going to roll this thing or not?' We're just standing there looking at each other. We couldn't turn on this camera because it had been such a hassle.

On top of everything else, Cassavetes was racing a deadline in the spring of 1957. He was scheduled to act in two Hollywood movies in quick succession: *Saddle the Wind*, on location in Colorado and California from the beginning of June through August (while Rowlands was in Hollywood shooting *The High Cost of Loving*), followed by *Virgin Island* in the Caribbean in October and November.

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Shooting was finished in early May 1957 – but editing would take more than eighteen months. It was begun, while shooting was going on, in one of the tiny offices adjacent to the Variety Arts stage, which was converted into an editing suite (the same office where the opening 'rock-and-roll party' sequence of the film was staged). After about six months, the work was moved to a professional editing suite in a now demolished studio on 63rd and Madison, and done mainly by Maurice McEndree, Len Appelson and Wray Bevins. (Cassavetes himself wasn't in New York much of the time even to supervise.) Several problems immediately presented themselves: first, the sheer amount of footage to edit (60,000 feet); second, the fact that not very much thought had been given to the shape of the overall narrative or to the filming of transitional moments

to get a character from point A to B; third, none of the people involved had ever edited a film before. But most importantly of all, Cassavetes and McEndree discovered that a good part of the dialogue was so poorly recorded that they would not be able to use it. Unfortunately, they hadn't thought to keep a record of what was being said to use as the basis for looping. (Lelia's question to Tony in front of Rupert and Hugh – 'Where are you going?' – is the most obvious example of a line that was looped in later by someone else.)

When it was finished, we didn't have enough money to print all the sound. There was no dialogue written down so every take was different. And most of the sound was incomprehensible. We looked at it and said, 'What the hell are we going to print here? I don't know what they're saying. It looks terrific, everything's all right, it's beautiful – we'll lay in the lines.' We had a couple of secretaries who used to come up all the time and do transcripts for us. They volunteered their services to create a looping script, but they had nothing to do! We had all silent film. So we went to the deaf-mute place and we got lip-readers. They 'read' everything. It took us about a year just to figure out the dialogue and dub it in.

The musical scoring presented another set of problems. In his accounts, Cassavetes pretends to be more of a jazz aficionado than he actually was. The reason he initially thought of Mingus was a combination of Sam Shaw's suggestion and a poll Jean Shepherd took of his listeners on the lines of 'Who do you want to do the music for our film?' It was another disaster in the making. Cassavetes wanted Mingus to improvise the entire score in three hours.

We were a little bit crazy in those days; very pure. First we were going to use Miles Davis, but then he signed with Columbia Records and I got so angry I didn't want to use him. Anyway, someone said there was this great improvisational artist down in the Village who'd cut a few records, so I listened to a couple and *oh!* – this guy was wonderful! Charlie Mingus. So Charlie said, 'Listen, man, would you do me a favor? I'll do it for you, but you have got to do something for me.' 'Sure, sure,' I say. 'Listen, I've got all these cats that are shitting all over the floor. Can you have a couple of your people come up and clean the cat shit? I can't work; they shit all over my music.' So we went up with scrubbing brushes and cleaned up the thing. Now he says, 'I can't work in this place. It's so clean. I've got to wait for the cats to shit.'

Finally we get together to record. So, double session, three hours,

double session with the projectionist sitting there and I'm watching. He's got fourteen seconds' worth of music. Everybody's saying, 'Why don't you just tell Charlie to improvise?' All the advice then starts. So I said, 'Come on, Charlie. You guys can improvise, you're wonderful, you can do that off the themes that you have.' 'No, man – can't do it! Can't do it! We're artists. It's gotta be *written*.' They did some of the score, improvised the rest; Charlie sang 'Leaning on Jesus' and played some piano, and Phineas Newborn, Jr. took over the bass. So I said to Charlie, 'Charlie, Charlie, it was great. It's perfect for the picture.' He says, 'Man, I got to work six more months. It's going to take me a long time, you know. I went to Juilliard.' That first session he had about two and a half minutes of music.

Charlie finally finished the score about two years after the film was released and played it in clubs. We had the same kind of artistic fury. We pretend we're loose and in the end we're dictators. But I do think Charlie was more of a structured person than I am. He lived in a very structured way even though he was a wild man.

The finished compositions Cassavetes jokingly alludes to are 'Nostalgia in Times Square' and 'Alice's Wonderland', which bear virtually no similarity with the music included in the film. Cassavetes had to turn to another musician to complete the project. Cassavetes liked Shafi Hadi's music so much that he helped him record an album inspired by the film, but they were never able to talk a record company into releasing it.

Two years later, I looked for Charlie. He went down to Tijuana. So I get ahold of Shafi Hadi [a.k.a. Curtis Porter]. I say, 'Shafi, listen, we got to fill in some music here. Do you know where Charlie is? We can't find him. I mean I've got to finish this picture. I've been on it for three years now.' So he said, 'OK, I'll come over. We'll do an improvisation. I've gotta have a hundred bucks.' I said, 'OK, you've got a hundred.' Shafi Hadi was a big tall guy and he was a kid. He comes in with his saxophone and behind him is his life, you know – trying to keep himself, being married, living in an apartment, being thrown out of an apartment. He played. It was terrific. He played the story of his life to music. He played for an hour. He said, 'Tell me a story. Tell me a story. Tell me a story of myself.' I would sit down and tell him a story.

Jazz musicians are all Raskolnikovs. They have these little tin weapons – they don't shoot; they don't go anywhere. The jazz musician doesn't deal with structured life. He just wants *that night*, like a kid. I've always been able to work with anybody that doesn't want success.

Jazz musicians don't want success. They want a good time and millions of memories to share of nights locked in.

The literary allusion undoubtedly came from Cassavetes' acting experience in a 1956 television adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* that transposed the novel to Greenwich Village. He played Raskolnikov. It's an illustration of how he often drew on his acting experience to appear to be better read than he actually was.

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Just shy of two years after it was begun, *Shadows* was finally ready to be screened. Cassavetes had spent approximately \$25,000, almost four times what he originally thought the film would cost. In late November 1958, Shepherd announced that there would be three free midnight screenings at the Paris Theater. Though the screenings inspired many future artists (including Robert Frank, who reportedly made *Pull My Daisy* in response), they were not happy experiences for Cassavetes and his friends. In the first place, Cassavetes grossly exaggerates the size of the audience, which was only around a hundred people per screening. Second, the sound was so bad that McEndree and Cassavetes had to keep running back to the projection booth to try to improve it. And, most importantly, much of the audience left before the film was over (including Burt Lane, who walked out part-way through).

I went to a theater-owner friend of mine and I said, 'Look, we want to show our film and we can fill this theater.' It was the Paris Theater in New York and 600 people filled that theater and we turned away another 400 people at the door. About fifteen minutes into the film the people started to leave. And they left. And they left! And I began perspiring and the cast was getting angry. We all sat closer and closer together and pretty soon there wasn't anyone in the theater! I think there was one critic in the theater, one critic who was a friend of ours, Jonas Mekas, who walked over to us and said, 'This is the most marvelous film I've ever seen in my life!' [Laughs.] And I said, 'I don't want to hit you right now. I'm a little uptight, not feeling too hot and none of us are, so . . .' And he said, 'No. This is really a very good film.' So, like all failures, you get a sense of humor about it and you go out and spend the night – when it's bad enough, and this was so bad that it couldn't be repaired.

Cassavetes was present at the screenings and held discussions with the

viewers. He decided that there were ‘holes’ in the narrative that needed to be addressed, as well as stylistic issues.

I could see the flaws in *Shadows* myself: it was a totally intellectual film – and therefore less than human. I had fallen in love with the camera, with technique, with beautiful shots, with experimentation for its own sake. All I did was exploit film technique, shooting rhythms, using large lenses – shooting through trees and windows. It had a nice rhythm to it, but it had absolutely nothing to do with people. Whereas you have to create interest in your characters because this is what audiences go to see. It was filled with what you might call ‘cinematic virtuosity’ – for its own sake, with angles and fancy cutting and a lot of jazz going on in the background. The style employed in the film, of which we were all so proud, stood surrounded by the thinness of the characters, the lack of all-around design in the storytelling and the inconsistencies within the character development. But the one thing that came at all alive to me after I had laid it aside a few weeks was that just now and again the actors had survived all my tricks. But this did not often happen! They barely came to life. I said, ‘Well, I’ve really gone haywire,’ and my producer, Maurice McEndree, and Seymour Cassel got together and said, ‘Now look, John, we’re going to have to do some reshooting. We have all the faith in the world in you, but you’re an amateur.’ So I decided to reshoot it.

Cassavetes does not mention that another reason reshooting was the only course available to him was that in a drunken party after the Paris Theater screenings he had made a bonfire of all the old, unused footage. There were no outtakes left from the first shoot to cut into the new version. Nikos Papatakis, a European producer and filmmaker (he produced Jean Genet’s *Un Chant d’Amour* in the late forties, directed and produced *L’Abysses* in 1962 and worked with Warhol a few years later), offered to put up \$5,000 for the reshoot. (Papatakis has a tiny part in the reshoot as Lelia’s masher in the Times Square movie theater scene, the same scene in which Cassavetes makes an appearance.) Cassavetes was promised \$10,000 from two other investors, when he began shooting. But both of them changed their mind at the last minute, forcing him to cover the rest of the costs himself.

It seems clear that part of the inspiration for the reshoot was the death of his older brother, at the age of thirty, in February 1958. Cassavetes absolutely adored his older brother. The two boys were extremely close emotionally, and his death hit Cassavetes extremely hard. It was one of

the formative experiences of his life. It represented a wake-up call for the filmmaker, a reminder of the brevity of life and of the importance of using the little time available.

The [shortcomings of the first version] came as a shock, a shattering admission of our own ineptness. It would have been easy to side with those few who refused to believe the film was anything but marvelous, for it is one weakness that all human beings are prone to. It would have been easier just to call it a day, to wrap up the criticisms and say that those who didn't understand are idiots and that we weren't trying to impress anybody. However, it is my belief that films can educate, enlighten, entertain and give people release from their hidden fears, their individual terrors, their prejudices. For me, it is imperative that we [filmmakers] sustain our integrity as far as it can reach, because the position of leading and being listened to involves a responsibility that must be responded to. Otherwise, the man lives with the knowledge that he is a fake. It would be impossible, for me personally, to have people think I am ethical and pure and to know inside me that I am a fraud. It would make me live with the fear of time, the fear that I would waste the only life that I have.

He and Robert Alan Aurthur (whom he had gotten to know during *Edge of the City*) collaborated on almost an hour of new scenes, filming them in the spring of 1959 (using the living room of his apartment on 75th Street between Fifth and Madison as the set for the new party scenes and the bedroom as the set for the 'morning after' conversation between Ben, Hugh and Lelia, since he no longer had access to the Variety Arts stage; in any case, the original set had been destroyed after the first version was filmed). More than eighteen hours (40,000 feet) of new footage were shot. With Maurice McEndree's continued help in the editing, Cassavetes intercut new scenes into the old print during the summer of 1959 (leaving less than twenty-five minutes of the original remaining).

Cassavetes devoted a third year of his life to a project he was beginning to feel might never end. It was a difficult time – financially and personally.

I was broke. I had to borrow money everywhere and finally ended up with \$10,000 from various people. I borrowed money from Gena's mother and father, from my mother and father, to reshoot the picture. And we were already badly in debt. We owed the milkman in New York City over \$1,000. Gena was seven months pregnant and couldn't go out to work. There she was with a big stomach and every time she went to

the door she'd meet a bill collector there. I'd stay out all night shooting, come home in the morning, take a shower and go back out. So Gena's pregnancy was spent alone. She didn't know what the hell was going to happen when I took the last \$300 of her baby money to have the baby. I told Gena, 'I'll do it myself. Don't worry about it.' She said, 'You won't be here, you'll be shooting.' The door slams, all right?

We started again, and I tried to shoot it from an actor's standpoint. And I think we succeeded because the actors are wonderful, whereas before you couldn't see them for all the trees and cars.

To make the second version we shot again and replaced about three-quarters of it. I reshot the film in fifteen days. I had to scrap most of what we shot in the first eight weeks' shooting. The second version is completely different from the first version. In my opinion, it is a film far superior to the first. Some of the 'music' is gone, the 'poetry' of overall expression, but the individual expression of individual people is there. The cinematic style which was so prominent in the first gives way to the emotional experiences that the characters encounter. The scenes, in my opinion, are fulfilled, the imagination of youth that sparked the first version came back stronger, clearer and more determined to enlighten rather than prove. The emotional expressiveness of the first version was dissipated in its generality – the emotions were not precise and particularized. The second version was more exact.

Cassavetes had the new version blown up to 35mm and rented it to Amos Vogel to screen at 7.15 and 9.30 p.m. on 11 November 1959 in a program titled 'The Cinema of Improvisation' in his Cinema 16 series at Fashion Industries Auditorium at 225 West 24th Street. (*Shadows* was preceded on the program by Robert Frank's and Alfred Leslie's recently completed *Pull My Daisy*.) Vogel believed in the film so much that he paid Cassavetes a \$250 rental, four or five times more than his customary amount. After three years of work, it was the first revenue Cassavetes received for the film. The screenings couldn't have gone better. The audience of artists and critics (including Parker Tyler, Paddy Chayefsky, Kenneth Tynan, Meyer Shapiro and Arthur Knight – Louis Malle had seen the film at a private screening a few days earlier) responded with sustained ovations.

There was apparently only one unhappy person present: Jonas Mekas, the critic who had loved the first version. Mekas felt personally betrayed – both by the re-edit and by Cassavetes' fairly shabby treatment of him personally. The year before, following the Paris Theater screenings of the first version of *Shadows*, Mekas had declared the film the recipient of the

first 'Independent Film Award' and announced a \$10-a-ticket fund-raising benefit at the Waldorf Astoria in January 1959 for the tiny magazine he edited, *Film Culture*, at which the film would be shown and the award presented to the filmmaker. Cassavetes agreed to the idea. The press release was issued, the programs were printed and the tickets were sold. Then Cassavetes suddenly told Mekas that neither he nor his film would be there since he intended to reshoot the movie. Mekas was placed in the uncomfortable position not only of having to cancel his ceremony and refund the ticket purchases, but of having publicly championed a film which the filmmaker had renounced. When the second version was screened, Mekas unleashed an attack on it as a softening and dilution of the original in order to secure commercial distribution. Cassavetes attempted to appease Mekas by allowing the first version to be screened four or five more times at the shortlived 92nd Street Y 'Film Center' in mid-January 1960, but after viewing the earlier and later versions back to back, Mekas was more convinced than ever that he was right in his judgment. In various forums – in lectures and in print in the *Village Voice* and *Sight and Sound* – he accused Cassavetes of selling out.

Surprisingly enough, several members of *Shadows'* cast and crew took Mekas's side in the argument, expressing the opinion that the film had been reshot simply to please a distributor. Ben Carruthers, David Pokotilow and Erich Kollmar were particularly vocal on the subject. The origin of the rumor was not only that David Kingsley, a representative for British Lion, *had*, in fact, approached Cassavetes after the Paris Theater screening and told him that the only way to make the film commercially palatable would be to reshoot it, but also the fact that when Cassavetes persuaded the cast and crew to regather to reshoot the film in early 1959, he had in his typically hyperbolic way told several of them (who at this point had to travel back to New York from as far away as California) that 'he had a big deal to sell the film that would make them all rich and famous, if only they would agree to shoot a few new scenes to add to it'. It wasn't true, and if it had been, the distribution of the second version would not have been such a struggle. Cassavetes simply lied to persuade various people to come back for the reshoot. But his own words came back to haunt him.

He himself was not present for the Cinema 16 screenings because he was in Los Angeles shooting *Johnny Staccato*, but heard reports of both the support and the attacks from Vogel.

Now, a lot of film buffs heard about the two versions of *Shadows* so they said, 'We want to see the *first* version, which was the great version

of *Shadows*!' [Laughs.] It didn't matter to them that it was an absolute disaster! Now rumors spread that I had made the film for distribution and that we had gone back to make it more commercial. But in my opinion the second version of *Shadows* was much deeper and I think the greatest scenes in it, I mean the best scenes in the film, were shot in that reshooting. It in no way was a commercial concession.

It is impossible for the contemporary viewer to judge for himself since, unfortunately, the second version is the only one that now exists. Although Cassavetes possessed copies of both versions for many years, he told me in the 1980s that when he got tired of paying the storage bills he threw the print of the earlier version in a dumpster along with at least fifty other cans of film, never imagining anyone would ever be interested in seeing any of it.

The charges stung all the more insofar as Cassavetes had not only spent three years of his life on this project, but had gone deeply into debt – to the tune of around \$30,000 of the \$40,000 total cost.

Now, the reshooting's over, the cutting, everything. The second version of the picture is finished. Suddenly I walk in, I see the bill collectors. It's the first time I noticed them. I'm also bothered by my wife's pregnancy. I suddenly realize, 'Hey, my wife is going to have a baby.' It was like coming out of a three-year trance and seeing that you have somebody around, somebody that's been caring and loving and just there quietly waiting. I see this lovely, beautiful woman whom I love and have neglected for three years while I'm making *Shadows*. And all of a sudden I have no way of getting any money. It's been three years. I can't get a job anymore. I'm out of fashion. I have appeared on over eighty television dramas and done a couple of movies, but I've been out of circulation for three years so my career is over. I couldn't even get a job doing a commercial. Nobody knew me. I was broke, out of work, and I couldn't get a job as an actor and nothing was going well. So I went out in the daytime and went to bars and played football and did anything that I could do. I said to Gena, 'Gee, I don't know what I'm going to do.'

The offer to do the *Staccato* television series came after the reshoot of the second version of *Shadows*, but eight months before the re-edit was completed. Cassavetes' and Rowlands' salaries had dropped precipitously between 1957 and 1959. Rowlands had terminated her MGM contract and cut back on her acting when she learned she was pregnant in the fall of 1958; and Cassavetes' own acting career had languished

while he was busy with *Shadows*. Without *Staccato*, he probably would not have been able to finish the edit and make the 35mm blow-up that Vogel would show.

The phone rings and it's somebody from Universal Pictures who says, 'Johnny, I want you to do a television series.' I said, 'Are you mad?' and banged down the phone. I look at Gena and I say, 'Can you imagine that son of a bitch wants me to do a television series? What the hell do you think I've been working for? I'm an *artist*! I don't *do* television series! What kind of crap is that? Go out and do something for a sponsor of deodorants? Am I insane?' And she said, 'You're right. You're absolutely right.' And because she said that I went to the phone and called up California and told the man, 'I thought it was a practical joke. I just got up. I was sleepy. Yes. I'd love to do the series.' And that's how I came to sign the contract and did the show *Johnny Staccato*. I worked in it for six months and by then I was going crazy. I mean insane. But it finally worked out all right because I got all my *Shadows* bills paid off and my wife had the baby, a beautiful boy called Nicky, who is sensational and happy.

The Cassavetes' first child, Nicholas David Rowlands Cassavetes, was born on 21 May 1959 at one of the most hectic times of Cassavetes' life – just as he was finishing the mad dash to complete the re-edit of *Shadows* prior to rushing out to Hollywood to begin work on *Staccato* at the beginning of June.

To protect himself creatively as much as he could, Cassavetes insisted on naming his own producer. He wanted a friend in the bureaucracy. When he approached Burt Lane and asked him if he would do the job, Lane pleaded that he was too busy running the workshop (which he would continue to manage for the next ten years). Cassavetes went to Everett Chambers, the casting agent whose door he had darkened on many visits in the early fifties. (When Cassavetes proposed naming his own producer at an early meeting, it was considered an outrageously unacceptable request, since a network producer had already been assigned to the series and Chambers had never produced anything before; but as Cassavetes so often would in the future, he got his way simply by saying the deal was off unless his terms were agreed to.) He also demanded input into casting, giving jobs to as many of his friends as he possibly could – including Lelia Goldoni, Tom Allen, Marilyn Clark, the 'existential psychoanalysis' woman in the refilming of *Shadows* (who had appeared with Rowlands as one of the dreamgirls in *The*

Seven Year Itch and would go on to play the Countess in *Too Late Blues*, Cliff Carnell, Mario Gallo, Val Avery, Paul Stewart (who would play important roles in *A Child Is Waiting* and *Opening Night*), Rupert Crosse, Dennis Sallas, James Joyce, and even his producer Everett Chambers, and Gena Rowlands (in the 'Fly, Baby, Fly' episode).

Cassavetes' engagement with Hollywood at a creative level was dicey from the start, but he put on a brave face and expressed the belief that it could be much better than the usual television fare.

I came to Hollywood with a lot of preconceived notions. When New Yorkers came back from California, they were always so terribly happy to be back. They claimed their creative prowess had been stopped. They complained about the 'powers that be'. So I was prepared to fight on sight. Things weren't very pleasant at first. People in Hollywood seemed to have pretty much the same preconceived notions about New Yorkers that we had about them. There was an air of unspoken condescension and quiet hostility. There was a great deal of tension between me and the agency people. Each of us expected the other to be 'different', so our defense mechanisms were cocked. Well, I finally discovered that the 'they' my New York friends were always complaining about really didn't exist except in the mind. I went through a long soul-searching bit one night, and when I got to the set the next morning I found that the whole attitude had somehow changed. The production manager came up to me and said, 'John – anything you want, you ask for. Just ask nicely and you'll get it. Just be reasonable, that's all.' Anyway, as of right now I have never worked harder or been happier.

With its jazz piano-playing, crime-solving private detective, the series was not that original. In the typical television way, it was a mix-and-match variation on three already existing programs: the recently canceled *Pete Kelly's Blues*, which featured Jack Webb as a cornet-playing detective; *Peter Gunn*, which starred the Ivy-Leaguish Craig Stevens triumphing over vice with brains more than brawn; and *The D.A.'s Man*, whose main claim to fame was that it was actually shot on location in New York (as *Staccato* only pretended to be).

The show aired on NBC on Thursday evenings, with the first episode, 'The Naked Truth' (directed by veteran Joseph Pevney), broadcast on 10 September 1959. The show didn't fare very well with either viewers or critics. And Cassavetes himself was disappointed with the quality of the scripts, the directing and much of the acting. A few weeks into the broadcast, rather than adopting the standard public relations stance of

telling interviewers what a great show he was in, he began admitting that he was unhappy with the program and pleaded with viewers to give him time to improve it. He attempted to make it better in two ways – first, by upgrading the acting by employing figures like Cloris Leachman, Elijah Cooke and Dean Stockwell; and second, by directing five of the episodes himself, all of which are quite different from the rest of the series. Every one of them is a character study, with the focus less on events and whodunit than on subtle, subtextual psychological expressions ('Solomon' and 'Murder for Credit' being the best two of the group). The episodes Cassavetes directed are: #2, 'Murder for Credit' (air date: 17/9/59); #7, 'Evil' (29/10/59); #13, 'A Piece of Paradise' (10/12/59); #16, 'Night of Jeopardy' (21/1/60); and #18, 'Solomon' (11/2/60). He also co-wrote an episode with Everett Chambers: #25, 'A Nice Little Town' (10/3/60), one of the most unusual (though far from the best) episodes in the series – leaving the detective genre completely behind to present a cross between *Meet John Doe* and *On the Waterfront*. An interesting fact about the 'Murder for Credit' episode is that it features the entrance of the Variety Arts Studio, where *Shadows* was made, in one of its exterior shots (which were filmed on location in New York by a second unit crew and edited into the West Coast interiors).

I'm fighting to make this a good series. Each episode is going to be different. I've directed five of the shows myself and tried to do each one differently, hoping to develop some kind of style and technique. Just don't judge us on the first few scripts. We're working on better ones. We've needed time to get rolling, time to find the best writers and directors. If you put a hundred per cent effort into something, it's going to work. I don't just *feel* that – I *know* that.

However, as the weeks wore on, Cassavetes felt that he was losing the battle for quality. He was warned by the studio that there had already been a few letters objecting to specific episodes with references to religion and sex. Some of the best scripts, in his opinion, had been vetoed because they were judged 'too controversial'. The last straw came when an episode to which Cassavetes was particularly committed, 'Wild Reed', was pulled from the broadcast schedule at the last minute on Thanksgiving evening, being deemed inappropriate for the holiday season because it dealt with drug addiction. In an attempt to get the production company to change its mind, he took his battle to the media, as evidenced by the following two statements:

It is virtually impossible to get approval on a script that has substance,

more so since the outbreak of the TV scandals. There is no limit on violence; you can get approval on a story in which a woman is slaughtered, but an honest story, about a dope addict, is rejected because it would be injurious to the sponsor's product – an underarm deodorant! When you point up the folly of this kind of thinking, you're told, 'Well, with all this payola talk and the FCC giving television a close look, we could be thrown off the air with a story about dope.' We looked pretty silly, I thought, particularly since I had given out interviews about the 'dope' episode. I think it's one of our best episodes. And I'm champing at the bit to do more like it. There are five or six fantastically good scripts on the shelf, offbeat, substantial stories, but we can't get them approved.

Revue Productions, the producers of the series, are fully aware that the situation is impossible, but they're not doing anything about it. Revue stocks are soaring, so why change things? I'm terribly disheartened. I'm tired of pap. I'm tired of hearing even my own crew say this is terrible. Strangely enough, if the sponsor people could read the scripts I'm talking about, I honestly feel they'd approve of them. It's their advertising agency that insists on playing it safe. Everything must conform to a bland pattern. Our stories shouldn't have a message, shouldn't offend anybody.

When Revue refused to change their policies, Cassavetes decided he simply wanted out. He unleashed a series of deliberately outrageous attacks on them and the sponsors in order to force them to let him break his five-year contract. The first story is only a little exaggerated for effect. He actually did pose with Jake LaMotta (who had been arrested on a morals charge) and threatened to send the photos to the newspapers.

What can I do? Fight, I guess. Either I will make all parties so unhappy they'll release me from the contract, or they'll give in to me and let me put a little guts into the series. I went to New York and took pictures with child molesters and called the agent. There was a Greek statue that one of the sponsors had, with the underarm deodorant, the arms were up like this and it swung around! I said, 'This is terrible.' I told them it was offensive to me as a Greek to put armpit soap under a masterpiece of Greek art.

I'll tell you the kind of people who peddle violence on television. Most of the time they're terrified themselves – of the sponsor. One protesting letter about one of their shows throws them completely. Everybody panics. The show comes off. When I started the series one of these guys told me: 'Don't get any big ideas. All you have to remember

is that you're just a twenty-four-and-a-half-minute fill-in between commercials.' And the commercials. Oh, man, you should have seen the one they put out for us. The sponsor was a deodorant maker. He went for *Staccato* because it was a pretty rugged series and he wanted to sell to men. So in the commercial he has this gleaming white Greek statue against a black velvet background. The camera comes in real tight until all you can see is a huge close-up of the statue's armpit. And a voice says, 'The deodorant for the mature male.' After a while we start getting letters. People are squawking that this white marble statue of a young man looks a bit queer. So they put in a second statue – a Greek dame. And now the voice says, 'The deodorant for the mature male *and* the mature female.' Listen, when I got the show together I wanted to call it just *Staccato*. I'm called into this agency conference and here's all these guys sitting around the table, vice-presidents. The agency president says, 'We've decided to change the title to *Johnny Staccato*.' I blew my top and started to say, 'For God's sake –' All the vice-presidents looked round at me and frowned like one man. They said all together, 'Well, he's right, isn't he?' Violence. These are the scarest guys on earth.

Though Cassavetes' point about cowardice in high places stands, he conveniently omits the fact that the executives actually had the final word in this instance. The series was called *Staccato* only for the first ten episodes; on 26 November, the title was officially changed to *Johnny Staccato*. Cassavetes finally succeeded in wriggling out of his contract in early 1960. The series, originally scheduled to comprise thirty-nine episodes in its first season, was canceled after twenty-seven had been filmed. The final episode ('Wild Reed', the one pulled on Thanksgiving night) aired on NBC on 24 March 1960. *Johnny Staccato* was immediately picked up by ABC and re-run from 27 March through 25 September 1960.

The *Staccato* experience stayed with Cassavetes for the rest of his life. Though he continued to work in television, he was never again under any illusion that he could do artistically daring work there.

Our problem came from the fact that we had a complete difference of opinion as to what people would go for, what they would like. They would not do certain scripts that would say certain things that I felt we should say on the show. They felt that a show would have to be a detective show, strictly and absolutely with a hero. I felt that my style is a human style. I'm a human being and I want to make mistakes just as well as solve the crimes; I want to *not* solve some crimes too. It gets pretty

dull doing a show week after week that says the same thing. You know, man commits crime, man goes after man with crime, man solves crime and kisses a few girls on the way. Well, I wanted to do other things, and there was a certain amount of opposition to this. It came down to the fact they didn't know me and I didn't know them well enough.

I don't think you can do serious work in television. Too many obstacles – networks and sponsors and agencies. All looking over your shoulder. Listen, as bad as the major movie studios are – and they are as bad as they could possibly be – they are still infinitely more creative than television, much more receptive to ideas and experimentation. The time limits are terrible. They want to give you the best product in the world, one that is technically right. If something doesn't match there's a script coordinator to correct it. It's usually a girl and she usually says, 'He didn't say *the* man, he said the *man*.' And so they go back again, do it perfectly, and then they cut it that way. It's unfortunate.

Television has reached the state where people are already making money and they are very, very happy with making that much money and they ought to allow the artist the independence to do what he thinks is right. They hire me, they pay me an awful lot of money and they ought to let me say what I want to say. And they hire writers, they hire producers, they hire all these people, paying them a mammoth amount of money, and let them act like robots! You know: the button is pushed and then they say what is commanded. I don't feel the sponsor knows what's going on half the time. They just want their ratings to be up. The agencies are terrified to do anything that might displease the sponsor and the packager is very well aware of this and won't take a chance. Now very often if it was brought to the sponsor, the show that would cause some kind of discrepancy of feeling, the sponsor would gladly say 'yes' and 'it's a marvelous idea', but this is never done, and it's just an economic thing, done because of economic security within the agency and within the packager.

Working in television taught me never to confuse making money with what you really want to do. I never do anything for just money. I could go to jail for just money, but that's about all. The reason I did the series was because I always enter into anything that I'm going to do with full heart. If 9,000 people fail in a Hollywood television series, I want to go out there and do my very best. I don't see any reason for it not being a good series. I think that we did several shows that *were* good. Producers have to be *embarrassed* into doing something good! The answer you get from most of them is: 'If you guys want literature, then read a book.'

I feel very privileged to be in a business where I'm paid to communi-

cate and certainly I think that the public, the people that watch us or pay us our salary in essence, deserve to get the best of what we can give, not just, say, as I've heard so many times on a studio floor, 'What's the difference, it's television.' Well, it's not television to me and probably that's where I get a reputation of being kind of hot because I won't put up with it, and I don't work as much as I could [laughs], but I just feel it's a great responsibility.

Although Cassavetes presents the struggle between himself and Revue as purely a matter of principle, he was also motivated by less high-minded considerations. He had taken *Staccato* in order to pay off his debts on *Shadows* (and to accumulate a nest egg for a house in California), and now that he was feeling financially secure, he was no longer interested in keeping up his end of the bargain. It is also not accidental that the point at which he began trying to get out of *Staccato* was immediately following the Cinema 16 screenings of *Shadows*. Cassavetes fell victim to what might be called the Film Festival Fallacy: buoyed by the enthusiastic response to his film at a couple of screenings, he assumed his career as an independent director was launched and that his television work would only get in the way. What he had yet to learn was that it really didn't matter that *Shadows* was a *succès d'estime* with a few academics, artists and critics. Film is not an art but a business in America. When Cassavetes got out of *Staccato*, he waited for distribution offers to pour in. By the end of January 1961, when the hullabaloo about the two versions died down in the letters page of the *Voice* and the *Shadows* screenings were old news, Cassavetes was not one step closer to getting a distributor than he was before Vogel's screenings.

In January 1960 Cassavetes got the idea to arrange a private studio screening in the hopes of getting studio distribution. Things did not go well.

Max Youngstein was a guy who was at United Artists who was the first guy to give young independent filmmakers a break. 'Here, take the money, make your picture, and come back with your picture.' And they did that for a while until Max left. And he said, 'Gee, I'm dying to see this picture, *Shadows*.' So I took it up and it was the only West Coast studio screening we ever had. A couple of press agents were there and they said, 'We want to handle this picture.' They were guys who were just like off the street, they said, 'We're press agents, we charge twenty-five per cent.' So I said, 'Twenty-five per cent of what? Let's look at the picture.' So we all looked at the picture; the first ten feet came, it was all

shot in 16, it was three years old and it was brittle, and within two seconds, the film ripped, and it just ripped for the next twenty-five minutes. And we'd go back and patch it. So Max Youngstein left, and he called me after about four hours and he said, 'Look, I don't care what the picture is like. You're in such trouble with this movie that there's only one thing to do. I'll give you \$5,000 and get you off the hook, we'll bury the picture and forget about it. I can write it off for the company.' He said, 'Please, take it, that's all you'll ever get for it.' So we said, 'Aw, I don't know, Max. Jesus, it's nice of you to offer, but we have three years – if I started dividing \$5,000 amongst all of us, it's \$300 or \$400 and it really doesn't seem worth it to sell it for that. I'd rather keep it on the shelf.'

An issue Cassavetes does not go into was that he was also told by Youngstein that since the film was a non-union shoot no American studio would distribute it and no American theater would show it. In terms of getting *Shadows* distributed, Cassavetes was back to square one with no leads or prospects; in terms of his acting career, he was actually worse off than he had been a year or two before. Not having acted for more than a year except for the *Staccato* role, he was no longer thought of for important parts, not to mention that many Hollywood powerbrokers who had followed the *Staccato* brouhaha in the press were now determined to stay clear of the 'temperamental, difficult' actor. It's an indication of how low he had sunk that he accepted an offer to go to Dublin to act in a low-budget exploitation film on Sam Shaw's recommendation. Shaw was friends with the film's writer, Ted Allan.

I called my agent and said, 'Look, I think I'm dead in this town for a while. Can you get me a job in Europe?' I was given a part in *The Middle of Nowhere* [a.k.a. *The Webster Boy*], a movie being made in Ireland.

But if Cassavetes had learned anything from the *Staccato* debacle, it had not been to moderate his behavior. When he flew into Dublin in early March, Seymour Cassel accompanied him (since the production provided Cassavetes with a companion ticket he had no other use for), and Cassavetes was determined to do anything necessary to get his friend a part in the movie. When Allan and the director, Don Chaffey, met Cassavetes at the airport, he launched into a diatribe about the script being poorly constructed and needing a rewrite. Allan was not only outraged by being attacked in front of the director, but mystified by the critique since he couldn't pin Cassavetes down to a precise statement of what exactly was wrong with what he had done. Cassavetes then asked to speak to Allan

in private, at which point he confessed he had left the script in a bar in New York and had not actually read it, but 'knew Sam Shaw' and wanted Allan to write in a part for Cassel. Over the next few weeks, as Allan's resentment gradually gave way to admiration at Cassavetes' chutzpah, the two men became close friends. It was a friendship that would last for the rest of both men's lives, as Allan and Cassavetes would spend weeks at a time together during Cassavetes' frequent visits to England. (Allan lived in London from 1954 through 1977 and moved to Los Angeles in 1978, where the two men's friendship continued until Cassavetes' death.)

There was a second, even luckier and more unexpected outcome of the trip. Back in January, on Amos Vogel's recommendation, Cassavetes had invited Albert Johnson, a programmer for the San Francisco Film Festival, to attend the Youngstein screening. Johnson not only loved *Shadows* but, by sheerest chance, had been asked to write a piece on the contemporary film scene for *Film Quarterly*. In early April, after shooting on *The Middle of Nowhere* wrapped, Cassavetes took a trip to London, and by coincidence, Johnson's glowing review of *Shadows* had just appeared in print. Only a few months earlier, Jonas Mekas's 'New York Letter: Towards a Spontaneous Cinema' had been published in *Sight and Sound*. Both articles championed *Shadows* as one of the most important films of the era. It was a textbook lesson in how a couple of perceptive critics could actually change the history of film. In England, other than those two articles, *Shadows* was a completely unknown, unscreened film with no commercial backing or sponsorship. But on the basis of Mekas's and Johnson's words Cassavetes received an offer to screen the film that would directly lead to its first commercial booking and a distribution deal. In his absent-minded way, Cassavetes almost blew the whole thing before it started by forgetting to provide the print. Fortunately, a few days before the screening, Penelope Houston called Cassel to find out why it hadn't shown up.

After *The Middle of Nowhere* was finished, Seymour and I went to London for a few days. While we were there, one of the directors of England's National Film Theatre told me he'd heard of *Shadows* and he wanted to screen it. He was talking about *The Beat, Square, and Cool Festival*, a kind of underground film competition. We made a date and I promptly forgot about it and returned to New York. A few weeks later, I got a frantic call, collect, from Seymour, who had decided to stay on in London. 'Where's the film?' he screamed. 'My God, they're holding this thing the day after tomorrow, it's a big event, everybody's gonna be in tuxes.' It was in my garage. I sent the film over.

On 12–14 July 1960, *Shadows* played in a three-film program that included Stan Brakhage's *Reflections on Black* and Art Clokey's *Gumbasia*. Ed Bland's *Cry of Jazz* and Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* played on other programs. Cassel attended the screenings, and at the end of July, called Cassavetes long distance.

Months had gone by since I had even thought about the film and I was about to buy a house in California, settle down and work as an actor again; I had long since forgotten about being a director. Then the phone rings and it's Seymour calling collect again. 'Listen, John,' he says. '*Shadows* was a great success at the festival and the critics are still going crazy over it. You've got to come over here and we've got to sell the movie to a distributor – it's either now or never.' I couldn't figure out why people were still going crazy over the picture, since it wasn't being shown anywhere, but I didn't question it. I arrived in London at six the next morning and called Seymour from the airport. He didn't want to see me just then – he was in bed with a girl. Seeing that I had come millions of miles at his request, I called him a son of a bitch and told him I was on my way over. When I arrived, he was saying goodbye to his girl in the street, and when we went upstairs, I asked to see the reviews he'd told me about. Well, Seymour looked around until he found an old sock in a drawer and in the sock was a tattered little piece of paper. It was a London *Times* clipping which stated that *Shadows* deserved a West End booking. That was the great review. 'Are there any more?' I asked. Seymour couldn't remember any more, so, after calming down, I decided that since I was already in London I might as well see if anything could be done for *Shadows*.

The events that followed, which would eventually lead to the release of *Shadows*, were ultimately just a case of Cassavetes attempting not to waste the transatlantic trip. Cassavetes found the cheapest press agent he could and launched into a rapid-fire series of meetings with journalists and distributors in the first week of August. He pulled out all the stops in his interviews, working the fashionable 'improvised' angle for all it was worth (avoiding mentioning that the version being screened was largely *not* improvised), deceptively accounting for the length of time it took to finish it as due to his impoverished actors' need to interrupt the shooting to take other work, and convincing everyone he met that his film was in high demand and a deal was about to be struck for a London release. (Many subsequent accounts of how *Shadows* was made have been based on these interviews but without realizing that

Cassavetes said absolutely anything that he thought would generate interest in his film – like a now famous story about how a policeman interrupted the shooting of the fight scene and shot a gun in the air because he didn't know it was a movie. The shot, and most of the other equally amazing events with which Cassavetes regaled interviewers, never happened.)

So then the second hustling begins. I say, 'Look, I have all the house money and I came over here,' and I say, 'Do you know a press agent, do you know of any press agent who would take a little money to do this? We got to get it going.' This guy Jo Lustig came over, so I said, 'Will you take \$100 to do the whole job?' He said, 'I'll take ten dollars now,' and then we went on from there. Well, we turned it into something. We had more fun turning that into something because we took the biggest suite at the Dorchester Hotel that we could take, enormous suite; we had champagne and caviar. I said, 'Seymour, get all the girls you know, go down and call us all the time, interrupt the interviews, no matter what's happening, interrupt the interviews.' And we set this up. We had laughs and giggles, we became great friends with the press, and it just goes to show you that a good time is worth two good pictures.

Lustig was an expatriated New Yorker who would represent Cassavetes in London for the next two decades, working on the British publicity and distribution of *Shadows*, *Faces*, *Husbands*, *A Woman Under the Influence* and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. The result was increased interest and a few more articles to add to his clipping file, but still no deal. Cassavetes returned to Los Angeles a few days later, having arranged for Seymour to take *Shadows* to the Venice Film Festival (which Vogel had recommended as a desirable screening opportunity). The film was screened without subtitles out of competition in the Information Section on 25 August, and to Cassel's and Cassavetes' surprise, received an overwhelmingly positive response. The Venice screening was just what Cassavetes needed to push the film over the top. The next day, Lustig closed a British distribution deal with British Lion and a Scandinavian deal with Europa Films (both of whom had representatives in Venice). The \$28,000 guarantee and 70–30 split in favor of the producers allowed Cassavetes to recoup more than half of the film's cost from the English and European rights alone in the first few months of its screenings.

British Lion gave the film to the London Film Festival in early October for a few initial screenings and opened *Shadows* at the Academy

Cinema in the West End on 14 October 1960. It had taken three years and eight months from the start of filming to the first theatrical booking but, to Cassavetes' amazement and delight, he had a hit on his hands. The London reviews were enthusiastic and the screenings were successful beyond the filmmaker's wildest dreams. *Shadows* took in more money than any film in the Academy's twenty-five-year history, grossing \$11,000 in its first week and playing in London for more than six months. A large part of the film's success was attributable to the effect of British reviewers and critics. Many of the major London newspapers, from *The Times* and *Observer* to the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express*, featured laudatory reviews, and the most important British film magazine of the era, *Sight and Sound*, devoted parts of their Autumn 1960, Winter 1960–61 and Spring 1961 issues to discussions of the film and an interview with Cassavetes.

Our timing couldn't have been better. *Johnny Staccato* had just started out on the BBC and was a big hit, so I was interviewed a lot and all kinds of people suddenly wanted to see *Shadows*. There was a tremendous social and film revolution going on in England – the 'Angry Young Man' thing – and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was just about to be made. The people who were part of that revolution saw that if *Shadows* were to be a success, they would have an opportunity to make the films they wanted. So all kinds of people got behind us and *Shadows* got reviews that were way beyond expectations. We became enormously successful in London; one night Seymour and I stood embracing and crying when we saw lines around the block outside the Academy Theatre, where we'd opened. It was a thrilling experience, and the same thing happened when we played the Cinémathèque in Paris, and we also did well in Sweden.

With his characteristic flair for selling himself, Cassavetes squeezed every possible column inch out of the publicity opportunities. Lelia Goldoni tells the story of how, although she flew over for the gala Academy opening, Cassavetes insisted that she not attend the screening. He argued that his presence would get enough journalistic attention to float the film and that she should be held in reserve until the day after he left town, so that when she finally made her public debut, a new cycle of publicity about the 'star' could begin. Consequently, she came and left London without ever getting to see the movie she starred in.

At the same time, Cassavetes was not only surprised but embarrassed by much of the praise he received from European critics, since many of

the film's so-called 'revolutionary' aspects were, in his mind, mistakes or misunderstandings. For example, when Kurosawa was at an event the filmmaker attended and expressed a desire to congratulate him on his use of improvisation and location shooting, Cassavetes sheepishly avoided meeting him – at one point actually running in the other direction across a stage when he saw Kurosawa approaching, and at another point refusing to respond to a note Kurosawa had passed to him via a representative – since Cassavetes knew that many of the 'locations' (which, when interviewed, he had deceitfully bragged about shooting in) were sets built on the Variety Arts stage, and many of the 'improvised' scenes (misleadingly blazoned by the film's final title card) were actually scripted. Like the telephoto shots, the 'layered' soundtrack was the product of necessity.

The things we got praised for were the things we tried to cure. All those things were accidents, not strokes of genius. We didn't have any equipment, we didn't have a dolly. And we had all this movement so we used long lenses. And we were photographing in the street because we couldn't afford a studio or couldn't afford even to go *inside* some place, you know. And our sound – when we opened *Shadows* in England, they said, 'The truest sound that we've ever seen.' Well, at that time, almost all the pictures, certainly all the pictures at Twentieth Century Fox, were looped. You know, all the synch that the actors actually spoke on the stage was cleaned up and made to be absolutely sterile so that there was no sound behind anything. If you saw traffic, you wouldn't hear it. You'd just hear voices so that the dialogue would be clean. But we recorded most of *Shadows* in a dance studio with Bob Fosse and his group dancing above our heads, and we were shooting this movie. So I never considered the sound. We didn't even have enough money to *print* it, to hear how bad it was. So when we came out, we had Sinatra singing upstairs, and all kinds of *boom*, dancing feet above us. And that was the *sound* of the picture. So we spent hours, days, weeks, months, *years* trying to straighten out this sound. Finally, it was impossible and we just went with it. Well, when the picture opened in London, they said, 'This is an innovation!' You know? Innovation! We killed ourselves to try to ruin that innovation!

Hoping to cash in on the Venice screening, the British Lion deal and the London booking, Cassavetes spent September and October attempting to interest an American distributor in the film, but, in a pattern that would repeat throughout his career, notwithstanding the reception abroad, not one American distributor had any interest in the movie.

With no other prospects in sight, on 15 November, Cassavetes signed over US distribution rights to British Lion. He puts a positive spin on it in the following statement, but what really happened was that he couldn't get anything better.

British Lion bought the film; it was the first time a foreign company had ever acquired an American film and then released it in the US. But all that tremendous hoopla stayed on the other side of the Atlantic, I'm sorry to say. When Seymour Cassel came back there was no brass band waiting. In America, we had what we started out with – a 16mm black-and-white, grainy, rule-breaking, non-important film that got shown only when someone was willing to do us a favor.

The American release that had taken so long to happen was a disaster. The first problem was that British Lion knew nothing about American distribution channels and was almost completely unable to get the film into theaters. In six months, *Shadows* had only two significant bookings: on 21 March 1961, it played at New York's Embassy on 46th and Broadway; and four months later, in July, it played at the Sunset and Crest Theaters in Los Angeles. The distributor timed the release to cash in on the publicity surrounding Cassavetes' work on *Too Late Blues* for Paramount, but it didn't seem to make any difference. No one came. The second problem was that American reviewers were almost completely under the sway of Hollywood production values, so that all most of them focused on were the film's low-budget origins and technical deficiencies.

Cassavetes didn't help the situation and a small part of the blame for his film's failure must be laid at his feet. Since he distrusted 'intellectuals' and disliked being treated as a creator of 'art films', sincerely believing that 'ordinary people' were his real audience, he fatuously persuaded British Lion to squander part of their tiny advertising budget on ads in newspapers read by black and working-class readers. He also tried to talk them out of their initial 'art house' bookings, and proposed that they attempt to get a Radio City Music Hall booking (where he was convinced that *Shadows* would do better than it would at the Embassy).

Even as the film was doing little or no business, Cassavetes talked big in public, telling interviewers that he expected *Shadows* easily to make more than a million dollars. In reality, two years later, after the distribution cycle had run its course, he had barely recouped his \$40,000 investment. But the talk backfired on him. The cast and crew were convinced he was getting rich off their work.

When *Shadows* was just getting underway, Cassavetes had drawn up a formal contract in which shares of ten per cent each were apportioned among eight ‘major’ participants, and shares of one per cent each were given to twenty ‘minor’ participants. At that point, Cassavetes actually had to be persuaded by the cast and crew to accept one of the ten per cent shares for himself, since he insisted that if the film were ever released, the profits should be all theirs. Even as they forced him to accept a share, he protested that it was not *his* film but *theirs*, and that he wanted nothing beyond the experience of doing it. Two and a half years later, when the deal with British Lion materialized, Cassavetes asked everyone to sign a new contract. To their shock and dismay, when they read it they discovered that the terms had been completely changed. Ten per cent and one per cent shares were reduced to one per cent and one-twentieth of a per cent, leaving ninety per cent of the profits reserved for the director and the distributor. It was a classic bait-and-switch. Cassavetes had promised them the moon, told them he would fight anyone to the death to defend their ownership of the film – and, once he got what he wanted from them, made a deal that virtually cut them out. For three years he had regaled them with stories about how he had cursed out producers and agents and stormed out of meetings rather than compromise on a single point; but what they discovered was that he apparently fought only when it benefited him, not someone else. The division of profits was particularly hard to swallow for a group of young, unemployed actors and crew members in that it came from a wealthy, successful actor who had just starred in his own television series and didn’t even need the money. Led by David Pokotilow, more than twenty members of the production, including many of the principals, refused to sign the new agreement and filed a class-action lawsuit.

Cassavetes had moved to California by this point, and since New York state did not have ‘long-arm’ provisions, he was able to avoid the suit simply by staying out of the state for a while. However, he did retaliate. He cut everyone who refused to sign the new contract out of the payment schedule. It’s a fact that Pokotilow, Kollmar and most of the others in the lawsuit never received a penny for their work during his lifetime. The filmmaker put a more self-pitying spin on the situation in the only statement he ever made on the subject:

The only ones that sued were my best friends.

More than money was involved. Cassavetes was a classic ‘glad-hander’ throughout his career. He would say whatever he thought you needed to

hear, whatever would inspire you or enlist your cooperation. The current project was always just about to make everyone connected with it rich and famous. It was the big break you had been waiting for all of your life. It was a sure thing. He was certain of it, and he said it with terrific gusto and conviction. Perhaps he even believed it while he was saying it.

For two years he made dozens of unfulfilled and unfulfillable promises to everyone who worked on *Shadows*. He would help them get jobs in Hollywood, introduce them to producers or show their work to someone he knew. But aside from a small circle of close friends (Seymour Cassel, Maurice McEndree and a few others), all of the promises were forgotten as soon as *Shadows* was released. Erich Kollmar's treatment can stand for all. Kollmar had provided the camera equipment and lights, worked selflessly and without pay around the clock for months, and more or less created *Shadows'* entire visual experience. Cassavetes had not only vowed to help him get a studio directing job, but promised that he would receive cinematographer credit on a separate card on-screen. Once shooting was complete and Cassavetes had gotten everything he needed from him, he reneged on every last thing (even the title and size of the credit, which would have cost him nothing).

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The most succinct statement of the young filmmaker's beliefs from this period of his life is contained in an essay Jonas Mekas invited him to write for *Film Culture*.

Hollywood is not failing. It has failed. The desperation, the criticisms, the foolish solutions, the wholesale cutting of studio staffs and salaries, the various new technical improvements, the 'bigger picture' and the 'ultra-low-budget picture' have failed to put a stop to the decline. The fact is that filmmaking, although unquestionably predicated on profit and loss like any other industry, cannot survive without individual expression. Motion pictures cannot be made to please solely the producer's image of the public. For, as has been proved, this pleasure results neither in economic nor artistic success.

On the other hand, the audience itself, other-directed and mass-minded as it is, may condemn pictures that go beyond Hollywood 'formulas' and 'ingredients'. The mass audience will not accept a new idea, an unfamiliar emotion or a different point of view if it is presented in one or two films only, just as it will not immediately accept new ideas in life. However, the new thoughts must eventually lead to change.

In Hollywood the producer intimidates the artist's new thought with great sums of money and with his own ego that clings to past references of box-office triumphs and valueless experience. The average artist, therefore, is forced to compromise. And the cost of the compromise is the betrayal of his basic beliefs. And so the artist is thrown out of motion pictures, and the businessman makes his entrance.

However, in no other activity can a man express himself as fully as in art. And, in all times, the artist has been honored and paid for revealing his opinion of life. The artist is an irreplaceable figure in our society too: a man who can speak his own mind, who can reveal and educate, who can stimulate or appease, and in every sense communicate with fellow human beings. To have this privilege of worldwide communication in a world so incapable of understanding, and ignore its possibilities and accept a compromise – most certainly will and should lead the artist and his films to oblivion.

Without individual creative expression, we are left with a medium of irrelevant fantasies that can add nothing but slim diversion to an already diversified world. The answer cannot be left in the hands of the money men, for their desire to accumulate material success is probably the reason they entered into filmmaking in the first place. The answer must come from the artist himself. He must become aware that the fault is his own. He must, therefore, make the producer realize, by whatever means at his disposal, that only by allowing the artist full and free creative expression will the art and the business of motion pictures survive.

Cassavetes tells a typically Cassavetean story about his experience returning to the United States after the trip to England.

I came back from Europe after *Shadows* had played in New York, and there was a guy at customs, and he said, 'I hope you make another movie like *Shadows*.' And then when I got excited and tried to talk to him about it, he became rude! He said, 'Go on through!' And I thought, 'Jesus Christ!' And years later I thought about that guy, and he inspired me, because that guy, he was the most unlikely guy to like *Shadows*. *Shadows* will always be the film I love the best – simply because it was the first one and we were all young, and because it was impossible, and we were so ignorant, and for three years we survived each other and everything.

Too Late Blues and A Child Is Waiting (1960–62)

Cassavetes was a born talker and story-teller. Being around people stimulated him, which is why his preferred method of 'writing' was not to sit alone in a room with a pencil and paper, but to dictate his scripts to an assistant – a function performed from *Husbands* through *A Woman Under the Influence* by Elaine Goren, one of the best of Cassavetes' assistants when it came to turning his machine-gun patter into readable dialogue. (Carole Smith and Helen Caldwell would perform the same duties for Cassavetes later in his career.) Cassavetes would pace the room, playing all of the parts himself, doing the tones, gestures and facial expressions. (He was an exceptional mimic who told most of his stories by 'doing' the people he was describing – and often entertained friends by mimicking Presidents, movie stars, waiters, busboys and themselves at the drop of a hat. His 'Falk' was particularly diabolical.) Then, half the time, Cassavetes would run across the hall and grab a neighboring secretary or a roving mailman and have Goren read back the pages to the bewildered stranger, while Cassavetes watched the reaction. Writing, like every other aspect of life, was an intensely social activity.

In a similar vein, Cassavetes' favorite way to test out an idea for a movie was not to write it down, but to talk about it. Most of his screenplays originated as stories told and retold to anyone who would listen, changing in every retelling. It was one of the reasons that when he finally, actually began to write (or dictate) a script he could do it so quickly. Even before the first version of *Shadows* was completed, Cassavetes was already telling interviewers about ideas for five or six new films. He told the stories not only out of simple enthusiasm for them, but in the hopes that if he talked to enough people someone might express interest in producing them. At any one time, he would be just about ready to start this, that or the other project; he would have just finished script x, y or z; he would be making final plans to star one friend or another in his next film. Nine out of ten of these 'almost ready'

scripts were never written down. Most were never more than a lot of talk.

Cassavetes' introduction to screenwriting went back to late 1953 and the meeting with Sam Shaw in the Cort Theater that would forever change his life.

I was fooling around and Sam came up to me and said, 'Well, I'll produce a feature picture if you write it.' It was just like that. He said, 'Why don't you write a script?' So I said, 'What could I write about? I've never written anything.' And he said, 'I know a great writer living in Duxbury, Massachusetts. His name is Edward McSorley, who's the best novelist in the world. If you drive there and see him, he'll write it with you. But you've got to put an outline of your ideas on paper and write about what you know.' So I started writing and came back to Sam and he said, 'Wonderful! Go up and see McSorley.' I said, 'I can't. I don't know where he is.' He said, 'I'll give you his address. I already called him and told him you were coming.' I borrowed a friend's car. It was a rumble-seat car and I drove up in the snow and rain without enough gas to get there. I had to borrow money from a cop. Finally, I got to this rose-covered cottage in the middle of winter and I thought that was a good sign, that the roses were blooming in winter. I knocked on the door and a guy answered the door. He was a craggy-faced, fifty-five-year-old short prune who looked like a writer is supposed to look. Somebody who's lived a lot, you know. 'Hello,' he said. 'What do you want?' I said, 'I'm John Cassavetes. Sam Shaw told . . . You're *expecting* me, aren't you? I have this manuscript here.' He said, 'I haven't seen Sam in ten years.' Anyway, he invited me in and fed me. His wife was Italian and she fed me bean soup and onions and it was freezing cold and it was terrific.

McSorley gave Cassavetes a crash-course in screenwriting, and the two men worked together intermittently over the next five years on a variety of projects. Cassavetes later said that McSorley taught him the three most important things he knew: 1) that character was more important than plot, and that the most important thing of all was to present characters truthfully; 2) that the artist should not explain or define too much, or 'do too much thinking for the audience', but that the story should 'evolve, so that people could understand it only gradually as it went along'; 3) that 'style is truth' and all that really mattered was that every scene should be as true to life, truthful about the characters and their real feelings and behavior, as possible.

It's not accidental that all of the important scripts Cassavetes wrote during the 1950s were collaborations. Although he put up a pretty good front, Cassavetes' knowledge of spelling and grammar, and his writing skills in general, were quite shaky – and he knew it. (College-educated friends treated him as borderline illiterate when it came to writing a coherent paragraph.) Though he eventually taught himself how to write and went on to complete dozens of scripts on his own, at this point in his life he needed to work with someone who could turn his dictation into syntactically correct prose. Burt Lane, Edward McSorley, Robert Alan Aurthur and Richard Carr each performed that function for him at different times during the early years.

In 1955, McSorley and Cassavetes collaborated on a script titled *Intruder*. Two years later, in December 1957, Cassavetes optioned a play by McSorley about the life of St. Augustine (which Cassavetes planned to direct and star in). In both cases, with his characteristic flair for self-promotion, Cassavetes bragged to interviewers that the scripts were about to go into production, but it wasn't true. The announcement was simply an attempt to generate backing.

Between 1958 and 1962, Cassavetes also talked about making a multigenerational saga titled *The American Dream* about the struggles of an American family and their children and what he felt was the loss of idealism and the encroachment of business values in post-war American culture. It was another idea indebted to McSorley, who had written a similar novel about a multigenerational Irish-American family.

I've always wanted to do a story of the American dream, dealing with America directly after the war. And taking a family and letting it branch out all over America in different areas of life. And dealing with it, its disillusionment and its regaining of its dreams. Just dealing with this family to show what has happened between 1945 and now in our country. Nobody wants to do anything positive anymore. I mean like what Frank Capra used to do with *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. That will be my film on the American family. Maybe it will just be screened at another festival. I don't know and I don't care. There are always people who will come to see something new and different. I have to make it.

Between 1958 and 1961, Cassavetes announced plans to make a number of films in foreign locations – including Paris, Rome and the Virgin Islands (where, in early 1958, he announced that he was going to begin filming his own script, *The Hot Sun*, starring Sidney Poitier). He also talked about doing several different literary adaptations on location,

including *The Trial of Jesus* (alternate title: *Thirty Pieces of Silver*), a one-set film based on his father's unpublished novel about the Sanhedron (intending to collaborate with Carl Dreyer on it, whose *Passion of Joan of Arc* he was extremely fond of), and *Evil*, a film starring Lelia Goldoni, based on a story by Dalton Trumbo (whose work Cassavetes became familiar with when Rowlands acted in *Lonely Are the Brave*).

Evil will be shot entirely in Mexico, since it deals with a Mexican who defies his own corruption to rid a town of its evil and, when he does, finds the town is faced with economic ruin.

A theme that linked several of these projects was a focus on how people are trapped by social conventions or limited by their own points of view. Cassavetes describes two such projects below. (The first was loosely based on a *Johnny Staccato* episode titled 'A Piece of Paradise'.)

There's a story we'd like to do in Spain or Mexico about how people in incompatible classes can't communicate with each other. He's an itinerant worker and she's a dance-hall prostitute. There's another story – it's a comedy, though I suppose the idea's not necessarily funny at all – about how no one, no matter how hard he tries, can get out of his group or category. We take the wickedest man in the world, who determines to reform and succeeds in doing so completely, except that people won't accept him reformed. He has to return quietly to being wicked because that's what people expect of him.

Following the London success of *Shadows*, Cassavetes also told interviewers that he had a number of financial offers of between \$325,000 and \$500,000 to make films in Europe.

We have also discussed doing some films for British Lion, and have an offer to do one in Sweden. For instance, Europa in Stockholm said, 'Come on up and make a film, just look around and whatever you want to shoot – fine.' There seems to be an intense desire in people now to throw off all the disillusioning cores of reality and get into, even in a realistic way, a more poetic way of doing things.

What Cassavetes did not say was that these offers were merely in the talking stage, and that even if they had materialized as commitments of tangible financial backing he had no desire to pursue them. As much as he talked against Hollywood, he knew a Hollywood studio was the best place to make a movie, even his kind of movie; and he also knew that

the best way to get an offer to work there was to make it seem as if he had offers to work elsewhere. Several years later, he gave the following account of how he came to make *Too Late Blues*, the film that followed *Shadows*.

I got a call from Marty Racklin at Paramount after *Shadows* had success in Europe, and he said, 'Would you like to do another feature?' Now this is what, two or three years after we finished the picture. It was so incredible – I had gone back to being an actor. I didn't know anything about directing. 'Do you have any scripts?' And I said, 'Yes. Definitely.' I lied. So I called a friend of mine, Dick Carr, who had written some of the *Staccatos*, and got ahold of him and said, 'Dick, we have to write something over the weekend. This is money, this is real money.' We discussed the story for twenty minutes. He wrote half of it. I wrote half of it. I didn't read his half. He didn't read mine. We stayed up two days and two nights. We presented it to Racklin the morning after we finished it and that night Marty called to say that he loved it and that he wanted me to start on the film in two weeks. I said, 'Well, it needs a lot of work.' He said, 'Don't change a line.' Just like that, Paramount had made me a producer-director. Well, what I didn't know then about producing I still don't know, but I was happy to get the job.

It makes a good story. The only problem is that it didn't really happen that way. The script was not written in a 'drunken weekend' (a story Cassavetes invented after *Too Late Blues* failed, to excuse it) but months before as a serious, careful effort. It was the result of a plan Cassavetes had cooked up after he returned from the *Middle of Nowhere* shoot. He had met Carr while working on *Staccato* and approached him in the summer of 1960 about writing a few scripts together, which Cassavetes promised he would try to get made with himself as the director. Before Racklin had ever heard the name Cassavetes, the two men had completed three projects which they hoped to make together: the collaboration *Too Late Blues* (which Cassavetes did write most of the first half of and Carr most of the second half of); a script Carr did on his own, *The Iron Men*; and a script Cassavetes did on his own, *A Piece of Paradise*.

The second misrepresentation in Cassavetes' account is the impression that Racklin initiated the contact. The notion that the mountain came to Mohammed was flattering, but in fact Cassavetes had given Marty Baum instructions to sell the three projects to anyone he could. Baum had already failed at two other studios, when he met with Racklin in late October. What had changed was that *Shadows* had just opened in Lon-

don. Baum showed Racklin Albert Johnson's *Film Quarterly* and *Sight and Sound* reviews, some of the interviews where Cassavetes talked about those 'European offers', a *Variety* piece about the British Lion deal and a couple other *Variety* pieces listing *Shadows*' quite respectable London grosses. Racklin looked at the three scripts, concluded that *Too Late Blues* would be the cheapest to produce, and made a calculated business decision to try to cash in on the burgeoning 'art-house' market by hiring Cassavetes. What Racklin did by bringing in Cassavetes was actually not that unusual, since there were recent precedents for actor-director-created 'art' films, with Burt Lancaster's *The Kentuckian*, Edmond O'Brien's *Deadlock* and his (subsequently aborted) plans to make *Hell Is for Heroes* (also written by Richard Carr) – though Marlon Brando's recent direction of *One-Eyed Jacks* for Paramount might have given Racklin pause.

Cassavetes' contract was drawn up in November. With memories of *Staccato* still fresh in mind, he insisted on being producer as well as director and co-writer. His salary was set modestly at about \$80,000 and the production budgeted at around half a million dollars. Cassavetes was given an office at Paramount and allowed to revise the script up until approximately a month before shooting was scheduled to start. (Paramount's 'Final White Script' is dated 16 January 1961 but has inserted revisions, including a title change to *Dreams for Sale*, up to 8 February 1961.)

Aspects of *Too Late Blues*' narrative were indebted to a film Cassavetes was scheduled to act in in late 1957, *Paris Blues* (which Sam Shaw co-produced and let Cassavetes read the script of). *Paris Blues* was a story about struggling expatriate jazz musicians, in which Cassavetes was to have played the role eventually given to Paul Newman, opposite Sidney Poitier. But similarity of subject matter is about as deep as the relationship of the two films goes.

There is almost always an autobiographical dimension to Cassavetes' work, and the film's tale of artistic idealism followed by commercial compromise, disillusionment, self-hatred and a return to principles echoed Cassavetes' understanding of his own life in the preceding years. It's not hard to see the parallel: 'Ghost' Wakefield (whose Christian name is John) starts out as a free-spirited independent artist; then abandons his friends and goes commercial in order to be a star (as Cassavetes did by making *Johnny Staccato*); and in the end finds his way back to artistic independence (which is what Cassavetes thought he was doing by making this picture) – a little wearier but wiser from the experience.

It's not accidental that the subplot suggests that part of what saves the

artist is his love for a woman (a role Cassavetes originally intended to be played by Gena Rowlands). Even small details make reference to aspects of Cassavetes' personal life, like the fact that Ghost and his friends play baseball together, something Cassavetes and the crew of *Shadows* did in the afternoons in Central Park to take a break from the long months of editing on 63rd Street. Or the fact that Bill Stafford, Cassavetes' former roommate and the drummer in the film, actually had played drums with a jazz group. Or the fact that the man who 'sells' Ghost to the Countess, Benny Flowers, is played by the same man who 'sold' Cassavetes to Revue in the *Staccato* series, Everett Chambers. In the following synopsis, change a few of the names and reference points ('Ghost Wakefield' to 'John Cassavetes', 'jazz musician' to 'filmmaker', and 'Nick' the pool-hall proprietor to 'Nick Cassavetes' the travel agency proprietor) and the confessional resonances are almost too personal. It is clear that Cassavetes had done some hard thinking in the years between the re-edit of *Shadows* and the move to Hollywood, and that many of his friends' claims of feeling betrayed by his 'sell-out' had reached him, no matter how much he may have denied it in public.

Ghost Wakefield is a serious, dedicated jazz musician who plays only what he wants to play. He has imbued the others of his combo with the same ideals. The group, filling various charity and park dates, existing on the outer fringes of the jazz world, is nevertheless respected for its ethics by its contemporaries. Ghost and his gang hang out at Nick's pool hall, where the temperamental, hard-headed proprietor constantly harangues them for their unwillingness to face the realities of life. Ghost's music spins a dream world in which he lives. To his group he symbolizes a bulwark against compromise; the strength of art against the insidiousness of commercialism. When confronted by reality and rejection in love, he and his universe crumble. He sells himself and his talents to rank commercialism. Deep down he hates himself for his sell-out. His friends and fellow musicians, once admiring of his ability, have deserted him. He is the worst phony of all – talking big and loud about being an artist with freedom of expression and then sabotaging himself. He determines to find his way back to self-respect and creativeness – to return to his ideals.

As Ghost hopefully seeks reconciliation and forgiveness with his cronies, Jess accompanies him to watch his pleadings and the boys' icy resentment and disinterest. She steps forward to sing 'The Blues', Ghost's old song. It produces magical results. Ghost is soon at the piano and the unit is reunited in musical harmony, playing 'The Blues' with some of its

old verve. As Jess departs, Ghost looks after her questioningly. But it's evident that the boys need him even more. Thus Ghost accepts what is and what is not.

Dreams for Sale will show how people lose their way, their dreams, for almost inconsequential reasons, but finally find them again. At the end, optimism has replaced utter disillusionment. He is with his friends and fellow musicians once more and he's desperately fired to the task of re-spooling the threads of his lost dreams.

Beyond the autobiographical resonances, *Too Late Blues* expressed a personal 'point of view'. Cassavetes felt the problem with most of American film and television (especially television after 1955) was they didn't 'say anything'.

When Reggie Rose wrote *Twelve Angry Men* on television or *Tragedy in a Temporary Town* or *Thunder on Sycamore Street*, he had something to say. He had something to say that the actor could empathize with, that the director could empathize with, that would be a statement of the world today, of society today. I think that actors, artists, are conveyors of the times that they live in; people that express the times that they live in. They are people who express the times as they are, as they should be, or as they could be. Or as they *aren't* – as a lesson. There have been television shows – the *Twentieth Century* show, which is a documentary, all the film clips gathered through the ages and narrated wonderfully – with a *point of view*. There was a show called *Philco*, and every week they put on a creative show. Now, it may not have been a good show every week, but it was unusual, and it was a *point-of-view* show.

The spark is gone – the spark for *saying something*. The actor finds it impossible to latch on to something that has no opinion at all, because everybody has some kind of an opinion. That's why there's a sameness about everything now. The shows are very mundane, very uncomplex. The writers and directors know that if you can't have opinion, have action. The Western, now, has come to that.

Filmmaking was not merely story-telling. Scene after scene of *Too Late Blues* (like *Faces* later) communicates his own personal feelings and opinions – from the recording studio scenes, which display open contempt for the artistic cowardice of producers and executives, to the bar scenes, which tenderly capture the loneliness and desperation of the B-girls.

I see women in bars, crazy girls who don't want to be themselves and who don't want to admit what they are. They're difficult people.

They're hard to talk to. But to me they're like a mother; awkward, pretty young girls.

In post-release interviews, Cassavetes touched on another issue that runs throughout much of his later work – the way ‘the rules of society’ affect our opinions of ourselves.

I am trying to show the inability of people to recognize that society is ridiculous. Hardly anyone obeys the mores, but they respect them. If they are exposed breaking the mores their lives can collapse. Our hero is not a coward, but in covering up this failure he destroys everything else that is important to him. A silly search for mores reduces the great, wonderful hero of the story into a cheap individual with no morals and ethics and no place to go.

It's impossible to miss the personal references in many of the lines in Cassavetes' script:

In reply to Nick's advice that the boys should settle down and accept reality like everyone else does, Ghost's words reflect Cassavetes' own view of life and anticipate the drama of *Husbands*. (I quote from the script, which slightly differs from the film.)

GHOST: You want us to open a pool hall, get married and settle down and have kids and slave for fifty years – and then die? We'd lose our friendship, we'd lose our fun, our music, we'd miss the ship . . .

At the same time, Charlie's desire to ‘make it in this world’ expresses another side of Cassavetes' mind. The references to deaf mutes, to playing more than ‘festivals’ and to being thirty (the age Cassavetes was when he wrote these lines) clearly link the statements with Cassavetes' frustrations in attempting to get *Shadows* screened:

CHARLIE: Listen, Ghost – this thing is getting serious. All we get is festivals. Festivals in San Diego, in San Francisco, festivals, playing jazz for deaf mutes, for old ladies' homes, for the blind. When are we going to *make* it? That's what I want to know . . . I'm thirty years old. I want to make it in this world some day. I don't want to be a nothing all my life.

Cassavetes anticipated a long and mutually beneficial relationship with Paramount. He rented a house and began looking for one to buy (which he would find in Laurel Canyon and live in for the rest of his life), and moved his young family consisting of himself, Gena Rowlands and

three-year-old son Nicholas from New York to Los Angeles. Racklin told him that if *Too Late Blues* worked out he would be offered at least a five-picture contract. There were a number of minor disagreements with Racklin at the start, but nothing major. Cassavetes wanted Gena Rowlands and Montgomery Clift (whom he regarded as one of the greatest living actors) as the leads in his film, but Racklin insisted on Stella Stevens and Bobby Darin (who had briefly studied at the Lane Theater Workshop in mid-1959). Cassavetes also wanted to film on location in New York, but lost that battle as well. However, he won a few concessions in return. After acceding to Racklin's choices for the two leads, he was allowed to fill out almost the entire rest of the cast with friends. Virtually all of the supporting actors in *Too Late Blues* were friends from his AADA days (Bill Stafford, James Joyce, Vince Edwards – with whom he had also worked on *The Night Holds Terror*), members of the cast or crew of *Shadows* (Seymour Cassel, Cliff Carnell, Rupert Crosse, Marilyn Clark), or had worked with Cassavetes on *Staccato* (Val Avery and Everett Chambers).

Cassavetes brought a youthful optimism and trust to the project. There was an admirable naïveté to many of his statements from this era. He had a boyish innocence and faith that if he just sat down and talked to the 'money people' he and they could work out any conceivable differences they had between them.

You only have to make the money people understand that you're not trying to hurt them, that you will work within their budget – but you *must* be allowed to do something that is *truthful*, rather than something that is dishonest.

It seems to me that if you make a picture with unknowns you have the great advantage that nobody is really interested in what you are doing. The studio head just says, 'Well, go ahead, kid, make it the way you want to.' But the minute you get people on the level of Spencer Tracy and say five others, the price goes up and everybody's terrified that you're not going to do a good job. So the poor director working on those types of pictures has absolutely no freedom. Whereas if I can make a picture cheaply I can make it exactly the way I want. And I'm happy that they'll put up the money. In the meantime, what may happen is that they'll get used to our way of working and, seeing that it isn't rejected all the time, they may occasionally be able to give us somebody who is a great actor and who is well established.

Other things being equal, I will prefer in the future to work in a studio to working on location with real sets, especially as in the case of *Too*

Late Blues when ninety-eight per cent of the film is interiors. There is a certain excitement you get from location shooting that is sacrificed on the set, because although nothing cannot be built, it remains artificial. But the battling that location shooting involves I am happy to give up.

At the same time, he was under no illusions about what the studios saw in him. He knew that to them he was simply an attempt to buy shares in a fashionable new product: the ultra-low-budget 'art' film.

Hollywood is like when you walk in a hotel room that you think is yours and isn't, and someone says very kindly, 'Will you have a seat?' and you sit – but you're in the wrong room. Everyone here at the studio is behind me one hundred per cent. I'm going to direct a picture and no one has interfered with the script. I've cast the picture the way I want it. I have my own cameramen, the musicians are my choice to do the important music, but I still don't belong here.

Everybody here smiles and says, 'Go ahead.' But they don't understand and they don't care what I am *saying* in my picture. Paramount has me here because they think I'll make money, not because they think I'll create a worthwhile picture. It's just another picture to them. To me it is life. I think my movie will be important to the times we live in. I want to make pictures that express a viewpoint on the inability of people to live – not survive, but to live. The function of movies is to illuminate and clarify our emotions and ideas. It's important.

I think very hard and very long about things that evidently have nothing to do with the business I think I'm in. I don't care if I make a lot of money or success. I'm here because they have the money to enable me to do what I want to do. I want to believe for once that someone is doing something not just for gain, but rather because they feel strongly, deeply and devoutly about it. All I care about is making a movie I believe in. Everyone else in the room with me, they're concerned with figures rather than people and emotions. *They* only care about money. There are no artists in the room with me, only bankers. I'm all alone.

Cassavetes was clear-sighted about the compromises exacted by the bureaucracy.

If a man gets paid, say, \$300,000 for directing a picture, it is hard for him not to compromise. When you work in a major studio, when the studio owns the story, you have to be very clear in your own mind why you are there. If you are there primarily to make money, then compromise is all right, in fact it becomes obligatory. In my case, I have to know

when to draw the line, and I have to be prepared to quit at any time. If I am prepared to quit rather than give in to changes, then I am safe. It is only when you are not prepared to do this that you are in trouble.

I don't want to get into a thing about New York and Hollywood. Gena and I like it here, the swimming pools and all that, but it makes it harder to fight. A movie or TV producer calls you into his office and pleads with you not to do this or that. It is too controversial, not commercial. You think of the life out here, then wind up doing something he wants you to do. They have a wonderful way of just simply saying no and then inviting you to go out and play golf with them later on, or to dinner that same night. So, it becomes very, very difficult to fight with personal friends.

If I had to spend my life sitting down with people in corporations, I don't think I'd stay in the business. The people themselves individually are OK but when you go to present a film idea you're dealing with the corporate policy, which has nothing to do with the film or you or them. It has to do with some sort of corporate policy I don't want to devote my life to understanding. I'm not terribly fond of too many people in the film business, and they're not too fond of me. But I have to approach them. I consider them to be like a bank. I try to eliminate my personal view of their loneliness, their emptiness, when I talk to them. I try not to judge them too harshly by my own standard, which is never, never to lie and to stand up for what you believe.

He told a comical story to explain the Hollywood status game.

My first day in the studio everyone was very excited, a new face, a new person coming onto the stage. So they asked me, 'Do you want offices?' So I said, 'Yes, I want some offices.' I wanted my New York offices, you know? So I got four tiny little rooms – no paintings. White walls. So I get there and I pick up the phone, and I can't get *anybody* on the phone! *No one* will answer! I want a parking space. They can't! I have to park four miles away from the studio. And a friend of mine, Don Siegel, came to the offices and said, 'No wonder you're a failure here. You have small offices!' You know? So I was then smart enough to go out and I picked myself the biggest office that I could find, the grandest office, secret panels, fireplace, everything! Bathroom, kitchen, two secretaries, places for all my friends. And I was now the biggest director on the lot because I had the biggest office on the lot!

Cassavetes attempted to loosen up the veteran crew and involve them in the production.

The first two weeks that I was shooting *Too Late Blues*, it was very stiff and very uncomfortable. I wanted the people to be more comfortable. You cannot work under pressure. Art cannot be accomplished under pressure. It's a *free* feeling. So I bought some beer and kept putting it on the set. Everybody kept on saying, 'You can't do that.' And the first day, everybody got drunk. And the second day, half the people got drunk. And the third day, there was an occasional glass of beer taken. And the fourth day, everybody just knew it was there and was proud of it because they felt that they were entitled to some kind of reward for their effort and they weren't being just treated like children, like employees – that they were part of the effort. Pretty soon, people were standing around and watching the scenes and laughing at them and making comments, and coming to me and saying, 'Listen, I have a great idea for this scene.' [Laughs.] It makes you feel that you're *doing something*, rather than just coming in and going home at six o'clock.

Can I just tell you what I think creativity is? Creativity is being able to work with understanding and cooperation and enjoyment with your fellow workers, your director, your writers, your fellow actors – and technicians, if you're in film or television. That's simply what creativity is, in my opinion; it's that simple. So when people are very frightened by the words 'creative actors', that only means actors that would like to work with cooperation and dignity and understanding. Directors are the same. They want to work with actors that know their craft and enjoy it and make it worthwhile so that, when they finish, they have done the best work that they can; and when they see the product come out – when they see it on stage or television or film or radio – they know it's a good product that they can be proud of. Now, this makes everyone happy.

Even though Cassavetes got his way on ninety-five per cent of what he wanted, he felt that *Too Late Blues* was a disappointing artistic experience.

There are limitations, no matter what anyone says, in working with a major studio. There are limitations of ego, of facilities. There's an enormous amount of envy in people. They don't like any young director coming in and doing something that they may have wanted to do for twenty years. You find a lot of lack of cooperation; you're not one of the old guard. The business is not really creative unless you go out and work with people you know want the same things you want. Men are a tribe, and they love to go out and have adventures and take chances.

But the whole system that Hollywood is based on is to take no chances, except in terms of money. They take a lot of chances in terms of money.

I didn't know anything about directing at a major studio, so *Too Late Blues* never had a chance. I should have made the film my own way – in New York instead of California, and not on an impossibly tight schedule, working with people who didn't like me, didn't trust me and didn't care about the film. *Too Late Blues* was shot in exactly six weeks [from 13 March to 21 April 1961]. During filming, in response to my own feelings and the responses of the actors, I wanted to change certain aspects of the original script by getting rid of some things and adding others. But I couldn't because I had to follow the shooting schedule. So the film that you saw is incomplete and a wreck. In Hollywood, they don't like changes during filming. You have to have everything planned and prepared before you turn on the camera the first time. To do the film right, I needed six months. I couldn't believe that anybody would put up money and not care about their own product.

I was so naïve. I would walk into the office to see Racklin and he'd say, 'John, take off your director's hat, I want to talk to you as a producer.' I would actually put my hand on my head, looking for a hat – a perfect moron. I didn't even know which departments to go to for what and how to get things done. Not only that, but I did a disgusting thing. Halfway through, I knew I wasn't making a good movie, so I did the best I could without really exerting myself. And all because I didn't know how to fight. I didn't even know you were supposed to fight. You're supposed to be a man. If you want to shoot in New York because that's the best place to shoot it, then you fight for that, and if you lose, you don't make the movie. You're supposed to pick your own cast and how much you want to pay them, or else you quit. I'd learned all that by the end of *Too Late Blues*. If you are as inexperienced as I was and you ask for twenty extras, they tell you it is impossible. So you say you will do the best you can without the extras. But when you know the ropes, you tell them you cannot shoot without the extras. The inexperienced man consents to take second best all the time. The studio is always trying to save money on him that was wasted on the big-budget movies. It's crazy, but if you give in to them on anything – and it can be a minor thing like a more expensive prop – if you give in to them, they don't respect you.

Racklin only intervened in the edit of the film at two points. He asked Cassavetes to cut a ten-minute dream-like scene in which, following Ghost's humiliation in the pool hall and subsequent visit to Jess, he

wanders the city in a daze, watches Baby Jackson perform in a nightclub and picks up a B-girl with whom he spends the night. And Racklin asked Cassavetes to make the film's ending slightly more upbeat. (Cassavetes' original intention was to have Jess walk away from the group at the very end as the cost of Ghost's earlier decision to leave her. Racklin asked that Cassavetes end the film a few shots earlier, with an apparent reunion of the group's old and new members.) Cassavetes also had to abandon his original plan to include seventeen new jazz pieces (many of which were to have been part of the cut nightclub scenes). They were to have been recorded by some of the musicians he had worked with on *Staccato* – Shelly Mann, Red Mitchell, Benny Carter, Uan Rasey and Jimmie Rowles. In their place, David Raskin wrote a fairly routine Hollywood 'pseudo-jazz' film score.

I think that *Too Late Blues* was potentially a hell of a lot better picture than I made it. I'm not copping any pleas. I just didn't know how to work under that system at that time. But I learned a few things in the course of that film. For instance, there is no such thing as a low-budget picture at a major studio. At least not from a director's point of view. Once you say it's a low-budget picture it's like being a man with no credit in a rich neighborhood. In a huge studio like Paramount, a small-budget film means absolutely nothing. The film is always seen in terms of its immediate profit. As soon as you tell them you have any high ambitions for a low-budget picture, they look at you as if you were a complete fool.

It was my fault really, a matter of not knowing you're *not* in a room with people who are creative but with people who want to make money. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as *you're* not like that too. As long as you don't kid yourself that they want creative ventures, and I did. You cannot make a personal film under those conditions.

Too Late Blues was released in March 1962. The kindest reviewers found serious flaws in the picture; the less charitable ones (like the writer for *Time* magazine) savaged it. It did almost no business. Many of Cassavetes' former friends and collaborators from his *Shadows* days, as well as much of the New York avant-garde filmmaking community (which was still resentful that his work had gotten so much more attention than theirs a couple years earlier), were waiting to pounce on him as a Hollywood 'sell-out' and secretly rejoiced when the film was panned. One friend who remained loyal was Albert Johnson, who invited him to screen the film at the San Francisco Film Festival.

Cassavetes always felt that studios just didn't know how to distribute anything but blockbusters.

The scheme fell apart like most dreams. The major Hollywood studios are not geared to selling movies for art houses. They are used to selling for the big theaters and the double-feature houses. The sales department dictates the policy of the studio. The sales department is not interested in the quality of the movies. The sales department wants big names for the marquees of theaters with 3,000 seats. So-called creativity, high standards and truth don't enter into it.

To Cassavetes' surprise, he was not fired.

When *Too Late Blues* was over I thought I would be over too. And then Paramount asked me if I'd like to sign a long-term contract. At that point I realized that success and failure weren't necessarily success and failure. I had heard so much about people who fail and then get enormous contracts. I never could quite believe it, until it happened to me. Paramount upped my salary to \$125,000 a picture. I subsequently learned that Racklin had to go to his stockholders and tell them I was a bright guy. He'd built me up, taken a gamble on a guy who wasn't turning out very well, and he had no real option but to go with me and hope I was smart enough to learn. And I did learn. I learned all the tricks: to get a big office and to ask for anything and everything and insist on it. I told them I wouldn't do another film unless I wanted to do it and unless I could do it my own way.

In the first blush of excitement at being asked to stay at Paramount, Cassavetes dreamed of becoming a resident studio 'art filmmaker'.

Only in L.A. is 'artist' a dirty word. 'Arty' is about the worst thing you can say here. Too many people in Hollywood think an art picture is only for a certain set of people. I think the opposite. What people here think of as an art picture can have a wide appeal by clarifying emotions and ideas through the reality of people. The clichés have run their course. Why does 'art' have to mean lousy, dull, uninteresting? Why are we all afraid of words like 'art'? Me, I'm conscientiously trying to be an artist doing works of art – in acting, directing, in whatever I do. I want to be an artist – who's ashamed of it?

However, Cassavetes' conception of 'art film' was quite different from the foreign films that were being critically celebrated in the early 1960s.

He felt films like *Breathless*, *L'Avventura* and *The Virgin Spring* were too 'sordid' and 'negative', and envisioned making 'positive' and 'useful' films that would help ordinary people live their lives more sensitively and richly. Notwithstanding his subsequent reputation as a tough or even cynical artist, Cassavetes always saw his own work (including later films like *Faces* and *A Woman Under the Influence*) as essentially hopeful and affirmative.

The world is so downbeat, so cynical; people want something to believe in. At least, people do deep down, but they're afraid to admit to humanities out loud for fear their friends and neighbors will think they are 'square'. I get awfully sick of the mass flip attitude. I wish we weren't so hard-boiled. The human spirit is really at a dangerously low ebb. We need to pump adrenaline into our sentimental values, which have become so badly depleted. In this age of war fears, the destruction of everything and the fantastic progress of scientific wonders, we seem to have adopted only the rasping emotions of nerves for feelings – not emotions of the heart and soul that speak for faith and kindness and understanding. There is something important in people, something that's dying – the senses, a universal thing. We can't agree on politics, but maybe we can agree on senses. We are dying of sadness. The whole world is dying of sadness. *We* are the enemy.

People don't want to say, 'Yes, we are confused; we are nothing.' It destroys all kinds of entertainment. If you really observe and put within the framework of the story some more important facet of life, if you say something that is a positive statement rather than a negative one, you have confirmed somebody's belief. If you affirm somebody's emotion or ideas, they don't feel ashamed of feeling this belief. I want to stress the indomitable qualities of people, not the defeatism. *Too Late Blues* is a *compassionate* picture about people in combat with life.

As soon as shooting on *Too Late Blues* was complete, Cassavetes began making plans to film the script Carr had written a year before about an all-black World War II bomber squadron, *The Iron Men*. The final draft shows a revision date of 21 September 1961, and the production was tentatively scheduled to begin in Rome in the late autumn of 1961.

When we gave the script to the producer – I wasn't going to play producer again – he began going through it with a pencil and muttering, 'This is too long, far too long.' While he was having himself a good time, I went straight to Racklin and told him what was happening – and that I wouldn't have anything to do with the movie. Racklin said,

‘John, please, you’ve got to do it.’ So, like a jerk, I stumbled through, trying to make it. Sidney Poitier was cast to play the lead. Anyway, next thing I know I got a telephone call asking me if I want Burt Lancaster, who was set to play a blow-hard war correspondent in the film. We got to like each other a lot; we talked about the film – I was privately convinced it was going to be a botched-up picture – and also about the fact that Burt was scheduled to do a movie for United Artists called *A Child Is Waiting*. Then Stanley Kramer called me and asked if I could leave *The Iron Men* to direct *A Child Is Waiting*, which he was producing. I told him that our movie was coming along fine and that I couldn’t quit.

The Iron Men was budgeted at almost five million dollars. Claudia Cardinale was signed to co-star with Poitier, but the film stalled when Lancaster withdrew from the project to act in Kramer’s film and Paramount was unable to secure a replacement. Meanwhile, Kramer kept the pressure on Cassavetes to come to United Artists to direct *A Child Is Waiting*. (Kramer was tied up doing post-production on *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* and desperately needed someone to take over the already scheduled project.) Finally, in mid-October, with *The Iron Men* going nowhere, Cassavetes jumped at the bait. The deciding factor was the chance to work with Kramer and Lancaster, both of whom had reputations as maverick independent-minded artists. The events that followed would be fateful. They represented a turning point in his career.

A Child Is Waiting was based on an Abby Mann novel and script and a successful 1957 CBS television production. Planning was already underway when Cassavetes joined the project, but he tried to make it his own. For example, although the studio had already hired professional actors to play the retarded children (just as the earlier television production had), Cassavetes insisted on using twenty children (ten boys and ten girls) bused into the studio each day from the Pacific State Hospital in Pomona for everyone but the lead boy, Reuben. He named Seymour Cassel as his personal assistant during the shoot and gave him the job of taking care of the kids. Cassavetes himself spent hours with the children, talking to them and horsing around. Many scenes demonstrate his fondness for the children, who are not treated generically, but individualized and given almost as much on-camera time as the stars. Cassavetes told me that he found the experience of working with the children so interesting that for several years afterwards he flirted with the idea of becoming a documentary filmmaker.

I was very glad to have the chance to do *A Child Is Waiting*. I wanted to work with Lancaster and both of us really believed it would be a great film. It was about retarded children. What did I want to use actors for to play retarded kids? They didn't know anything about it, and neither did I. I spent three and a half months doing research on the subject with the writer, Abby Mann, visiting retarded children and their parents, talking to their teachers and learning about their lives. Getting to know those children was a moving and really beautiful experience. But not so the picture.

After a week of rehearsals, filming ran from 16 January through early March 1962. It was a difficult shoot for everyone concerned. With big names involved, and such a young and inexperienced director, a few problems were to be expected, but Cassavetes' youth and ego seem to have made things much worse than they might otherwise have been. Abby Mann was suspicious and hostile from the start. He had heard about Cassavetes' use of improvisation and hung around the set monitoring whether the director was changing the dialogue, quibbling if a single word was altered. Rather than reassuring him, Cassavetes baited him with a kind of 'catch me if you can' manner. Cassavetes also had trouble with his leads. The notoriously insecure Judy Garland threw fits of temperament and argued with him about his direction. The fights were serious enough that at least once Cassavetes and Garland actually had to be separated by crew members. Meanwhile, Lancaster took Garland's side against Cassavetes (expressing support for her in private and standing off-camera while her scenes were being filmed to encourage her to do things her way). Lancaster also had his own disagreements with Cassavetes about his direction. The result was a directorial nightmare: Cassavetes' two stars formed an alliance against him, consoling each other off-camera and openly defying Cassavetes' direction on the set, appealing to Kramer or an assistant director when they disagreed with Cassavetes' direction.

Cassavetes' response was either brilliant or despicable. Rather than coddling Garland and attempting to befriend Lancaster, he tried to turn their alliance against them – to pit them against each other, playing them off against each other – to increase Garland's insecurity, presumably to deepen her depiction of an insecure teacher, though possibly simply out of irritation with her. At one point Cassavetes asked Lancaster to verbally attack her in a scene they were playing together. He wanted Lancaster to explode at Garland, flying into a rage and criticizing her emotional immaturity. According to Lancaster, 'John really

wanted me to be angry, to rip into it, to tear her to pieces, to tell her she's a fucking idiot.' When Lancaster resisted, giving the reason that it would be out of character for Dr. Clark to behave this brutally to one of his teachers, Cassavetes forced him to play the scene his way anyway; but Kramer did not allow it to be included in the final edit. Cassavetes' treatment of his stars was a textbook lesson in how to alienate everyone possible. (Lancaster said he later talked to Cassavetes in private and told him that 'you can't do that . . . You cannot take an actor, even if you're right, when he is so against something and make him do it. You've got to find some other way of doing it that he can live with – and make it right.')

Up to this point, Cassavetes' agreement with Racklin was that he would be returning to Paramount as soon as he was done with Kramer's picture. But in March 1962, as shooting wrapped on the film, Cassavetes burned his bridges. Striding into the office of the man who had taken a chance on him by hiring, backing and promoting him, he told Racklin he wanted to break his Paramount contract to continue to work with Kramer. Ironically enough, within days, Kramer began intervening during the editing process and Cassavetes began having problems with him.

During the edit of *A Child Is Waiting*, Cassavetes was caught in a classic Hollywood squeeze-play: Kramer kept telling him that *he* supported him, but that the studio was putting pressure on him to make the film more commercial. Cassavetes always referred to it as a 'double cross'. Like the gangsters in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (who are a reflection of this part of Cassavetes' life), Kramer pleaded with Cassavetes to 'trust him' and compromise 'just a little'. Cassavetes' edit had included much more footage of the children, to the point that they became more important than the nominal 'stars' of the picture, and Kramer's main objections to Cassavetes' edit were that the children were too prominent in the narrative and that they came off as being 'silly' or 'comical'. When Cassavetes objected, Kramer told him that he had become too close to them emotionally and had lost perspective.

There are slightly different versions of what happened next. The most plausible reconstruction, based on several different accounts, goes as follows: Cassavetes worked on his edit with the studio editors for a few weeks, from early March until the middle of April, in preparation for an important screening of a proposed final cut in the big MGM screening room on Monday 23 April. It was finished and approved by Cassavetes on Friday 20 April. On Easter Sunday 22 April, the filmmaker received a phone call from a junior editor, who told him that Kramer's people

were working around the clock all weekend recutting the film, changing Cassavetes' edit. (As Cassavetes later told the story, with an exquisite sense of irony, the call came at the very moment Kramer was sitting at Cassavetes' table eating Easter dinner with the director and his wife.) On Monday morning, Cassavetes showed up braced for the worst. The first sign of something odd was that Kramer was not alone. He had invited eight or nine of his people to attend the screening (guaranteeing that, if there was a post-screening discussion, Cassavetes would be out-voted). The film was projected. Cassavetes sat quietly simmering. At the end of the screening, there was polite applause. When the lights came up, Cassavetes rose, walked quietly up to Kramer, put his hands around his throat and, in his most dramatic (looking-through-his-eyebrows) manner, declared, 'Take my name off the picture,' then strode for the exit. Cassavetes' own account continues:

I just walked out, and he came after me. In that one moment I thought, 'If I hit him I'll never work again. And if I don't hit him, I'll never breathe again.' So I gave him a good one. I really let him have it; I got into a tremendous fight with him – one that was really more violent than I had anticipated. I knew I didn't have to take it in that direction, but I finally chose to, because I didn't want to let him get away with what he had done to that film. I wanted him to feel the pain of my hatred for him. I tell you, when I have hassles with people, they know they've had hassles. Then I went across the street to a Chinese restaurant where I proceeded to puke my guts out for two hours straight. I knew I was finished in Hollywood. And I was. I knew that it would cost me; in Hollywood you don't go around publicly bad-mouthing colleagues, especially big producers like Stanley Kramer. Nobody said anything – but the next day I was out. I considered myself washed up, just finished, because Kramer was the first guy to say I was untalented – that really *got* me. After that I couldn't even get a job doing a voice-over for a commercial.

It was as if Kramer didn't understand his own film. *A Child Is Waiting* was about the very issue that split Cassavetes and Kramer: the Jean Hanson character (Judy Garland) pitied and patronized the retarded children. She had to be taught by Dr. Clark (Burt Lancaster) that the children should be treated as responsible, complex individuals. Cassavetes' edit endorsed Dr. Clark's vision of the children; Kramer's endorsed Jean Hanson's sentimental view.

I can't blame Kramer for taking the picture away, because it didn't fit his small, narrow viewpoint – and Stanley Kramer is a small, narrow man.

He doesn't understand that you can laugh at someone you love. I found the kids funny and human and sad. But mainly funny – and real. But his picture wasn't geared that way at all. I wanted to make the kids funny, to show that they were human and warm – not 'cases' but kids. The difference in the two versions is that Stanley's picture said that retarded children belong in institutions and the picture I shot said retarded children are better in their own way than supposedly healthy adults. The philosophy of his film was that retarded children are separate and alone and therefore should be in institutions with others of their kind. My film said that retarded children could be anywhere, any time, and that the problem is that we're a bunch of dopes, that it's our problem more than the kids'. The point of the original picture we made was that there was no fault, that there was nothing wrong with these children except that their mentality was lower.

Kramer had the footage re-edited to make it more sentimental. It was not an easy task since Cassavetes had not shot the kind of emotionally tendentious close-ups that Kramer was in favor of using, and beyond that, the playing of many of the scenes, as Cassavetes had directed them, resisted a sentimental reinterpretation. As a result, Kramer was forced to employ two fairly unusual techniques to change Cassavetes' footage: he used an optical printer to reprint some of Cassavetes' medium shots as close-ups, and he freeze-framed and slowed down some of the reaction shots to lengthen their duration. (Illustrations are the scenes in which Reuben pushes over the blocks in front of Jean Hanson; the shots of Reuben in Dr. Clark's office; and the shots of Reuben's and Ted Widcombe's faces in the scene in which Reuben is on stage.) Kramer's final step was to lay in a lot of mood music.

I didn't think Kramer's film – and that's what I consider *A Child Is Waiting* to be, *his* film – was so bad, just a lot more sentimental than mine. If you double-cut on close-ups you can make the thing seem a great deal more sentimental. In other words, if I look at you and you look at me and then I look back at you and you look back at me there's a feeling there of sentimentality. It's automatic, like pushing a button. I have nothing against it, when it's not based on an important idea. An editorial doesn't do anything. An editorial only makes you feel guilty. And I don't think that's what a film is about. I don't think there's any reason to bring any people into a theater to be told that retarded children are sad or whose fault it is. I didn't want to impose my ideas on their way of life.

It had a chance of being a very good film. But somehow it became a Hollywood film under the guidance of Hollywood people. This was especially painful because it was on a subject I cared about – retardation. *A Child Is Waiting* wasn't about a fictitious world: it's a reality for a lot of people. I had seen the great difficulty adults have in facing their children's retardation, but the kids' problems are different. Their difficulty is finding acceptance, acceptance to do the same things normal kids do. The picture as released seemed to me a betrayal of those kids and also of their parents, who let us use their kids. At first I wasn't going to make a scene about it, because I didn't want to hurt anybody. But then I realized that truth is important; I needed to know that if I made a film about a sensitive subject like mental retardation, the people I made the film about would know I had done it to the best of my ability, with no coping out.

The re-edit was completed by early fall. *A Child Is Waiting* was given a New York press screening in December 1962 and released in February 1963. The re-edited film is not as bad as Cassavetes makes it out to be; many Cassavetean touches still remain. For example, Kramer was unable to sentimentalize the scene in which the distraught father played by O. G. Dunn is shown crying, since Cassavetes simply had not filmed any tight shots of the character's face. Much of the dialogue could not be made sentimental because it was laced with deflationary comic moments – as in the flashback scene in which Ted Widdicombe talks to his wife in front of the crib or when the little boy at the end of the film objects to being called 'darling'. And scenes like the confrontation between Dr. Clark and the state auditors are played so complexly that they cannot be made melodramatic, no matter how they are re-edited.

Cassavetes was known throughout his life for his fits of temper and temperament. Over the course of the next twenty-five years, he would storm out of meetings halfway through a negotiation, hang up in the middle of many telephone conversations, laugh and shake hands over a deal in a restaurant, then call back the next day to cancel it – for no apparent reason. He admitted in private that he sometimes did it simply for the fun of seeing how people would react.

You know, I *love* the fights! Making a scene. Yelling. Hanging up on someone. How many times, when I just was getting started, I slammed the phone down, then played with my chess pieces, knowing it would ring in a few minutes. They *always* call back! Another time, I threw an important producer out of my apartment, ran out in the hall, tore up

the contract and tossed it at his feet. I went back inside. There was a group of people there. They thought I was absolutely crazy, but I said, 'You watch, he'll be back.' And an hour later he showed up with a new one!

Between the *Staccato* fiasco, the break with Racklin and the fights with Kramer, Cassavetes' reputation as temperamental, self-promoting and impossible to work with was well established. The period following his removal from *A Child Is Waiting* was a time of deep self-examination for Cassavetes. It was several years before he could bring himself to talk publicly about this period of his life; but when he did, it's telling that he was unrepentant.

Look, I admit it. I was difficult. I love to be liked, but I'll fight anybody who tries to stop me from doing what I want to do. I'm a bigmouth. A troublemaker. Temperamental. I only care about people who care about their work. Sure, Kramer and I are now enemies. But it was good for my self-respect to fight him every inch of the way. I lost, but he'll think twice before hiring a young director again. It's a question of manhood. When a director works for someone, he always feels as if he is bought. You say to yourself, 'I'm the director and I'm in charge,' but in most cases it just simply isn't true. So when a producer, a star, an executive steps on your toes, it's not so much that he is interfering with your artistic judgment, but that he is making you feel less of a man if you give in, let it go. So there are battles with studio heads and producers. The pleasure I get after a confrontation is to say to myself, 'Listen, I'm a man. I stood up for it. I can be fired. I can win or lose, but at least I said what I had to say at the right time.' I don't really hate Kramer anymore, though. If I'd been open enough with myself, I would have known he and I never could have dealt on the same level. I discovered something about myself, something I should have found earlier: I could no longer compromise. I wasn't about to make another film where we didn't say something real. If I had to describe his style of filmmaking in two words, it would be safe controversy. It didn't *say anything* about the people we were talking about.

It was many years before he could laugh about what had happened.

I was young. And I felt that everybody had talent. And that for some reason they were being arbitrary and not employing that talent. I thought, 'Well, these people are the giants of an industry, they must have a good brain and a good heart and ability, how come they don't

use it?’ And Gena said, ‘Look, a lot of people just don’t have the same drives, the same desires, the same gun that sparks them. You’re acting like these people all understand you; nobody understands you, *I* don’t understand you. How the hell can anybody understand you? You’re *nuts!*’ But I would think *she* was crazy. And I would go in and I would think, ‘Naw, this son of a bitch understands what I’m talking about – he just, for some reason, doesn’t want to do it, I don’t know what the hell it is with this guy.’ And I’d meet these people years later and we’d become friends, and they’d say, ‘I don’t know what the hell you were upset about!’

Cassavetes always saw fighting the Establishment as a losing proposition. To fight the system is only to enslave yourself to its values.

It’s the business bastards who make artists feel phony. It’s been like that since we’ve been children and we want them to approve of us even though we know they’re hypocrites and liars and have no principles or love. That’s why I’m a conniver. Because I can’t be angry with them. I’m not really angry with them. I don’t really hate them. I think it’s silly to hate anybody, anyway. I laugh at them because I know they’re doing what they don’t want to do. The bastards of the Establishment who are rich and who are running things really hate themselves. Of course, some of those bastards do love themselves. They’re the really dangerous ones. That’s why I hate leaders. We should all lead ourselves. The leaders tell us these are the facts and the facts are horseshit. They’re not facts. Whose facts? Whose truths? You have to use your own truth.

The artist ultimately has no one to blame but himself.

We are the whores – not them. *They* never sell out. I’ve been vengeful, but it’s a waste of time. I don’t have a quarrel with studio executives. They’re just there to make money. Thank God they are there. We need them. If you’re a writer, you want to be published. If you’re a laborer, you want to build a real building; you can’t just mix mortar. My quarrel is with the artists. What have we done in an effort to find out who we are? Art was not intended to be bought and sold. How much is your arm worth? A little kid does a painting – how much is that worth? I suppose you get something out of it if you realize what you are doing is crap. You make that concession to yourself, and yet I can’t really do that.

The censorship that matters comes from within.

You have to fight every day to stop censoring yourself. And you never have anyone else to blame when you do. What happens to artists is that it's not that somebody's standing in their way, it's that their own selves are standing in their way. There is a compromise made if you work on a commercial film and the compromise really isn't how or what you do, the techniques you use, or even the content, but really the compromise is beginning to feel a lack of confidence in your innermost thoughts. And if you don't put these innermost thoughts on the screen then you are looking down on not only your audience but the people you work with, and that's what makes so many people working out there unhappy. They say, 'Well, I'll make a lot of money and then I'll come back and do this later on,' and the truth of the matter is, of course, that they never do. These innermost thoughts become less and less a part of you and once you lose them then you don't have anything else. I don't think anyone does it purposely, it's just that a lot of people are not aware of losing these things. I found myself losing them too, and then suddenly I woke up and by accident, by sheer accident of not getting along with something, something inside, you know, you say, 'No, I must struggle with this thing,' without any knowledge of what it is making you do this. You fight and consequently you don't work and when you don't work you go back and reevaluate yourself, reevaluate your life, your relationship to the world or whatever it is that's important to you. In that period of time I gathered a great deal of food, not energy anymore out of my youth, not a feeling of wanting to conquer anything, not 'Yes, it can be done, let's do it, what's the problem?' but a feeling of saying that so many people have so much to say and there are so many really worthwhile things to say that it seems impossible that we could cut ourselves off from this whole avenue of enormous excitement.

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Just prior to embarking on *Faces* Cassavetes told an interviewer:

Making *A Child Is Waiting* was like drowning painlessly. It was a slow death. *Shadows* kept haunting me all the time I was trying to make like a big Hollywood director. You have to be absolutely dedicated to what you're doing. It has to be extremely personal to survive the method itself. I've since learned I'm just not temperamentally suited to that kind of ball game. I can't fake anything, see. I simply don't make it as a commercial director. I have a terrible temper. I was not easy to work with. I didn't choose to be independent, but I do like being my own boss. It's

hard to be on the outside, and yet that's where you really want to be. It's much harder to be on the inside and part of the Establishment.

I vowed then I would never again be involved with something I didn't care about. I won't direct another film unless I have complete control over it. I mean everything. The freedom we had with *Shadows* came because it was our film. And we could do with it as we pleased. Take our time and play with it. Hassle and argue over shots. *Try* things. Ideally, I guess the only happy way to make a film is to use your own money. Maybe *that's* what I'll do!

Faces (1963–8)

In the early sixties, Gena Rowlands' acting career flourished. She had film credits in *The Spiral Road* and *Lonely Are the Brave* in 1962 and *A Child Is Waiting* in 1963, and, when she wasn't busy with a movie, she did television work almost every month from 1961 to 1964 – including the role of the deaf-mute Teddy Carella in the *87th Precinct* series from September 1961 to September 1962, and parts in individual episodes of *The Tab Hunter Show*, *Islanders*, *Target Corrupters*, *Alfred Hitchcock Theater*, *Dick Powell Theater*, *The Lloyd Bridges Show*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *The Virginian*, *Grand Hotel*, *Breaking Point*, *Dr. Kildare*, *Bob Hope Presents the Chrysler Theater*, *Burke's Law* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*.

Meanwhile, Cassavetes sat at home, unemployed and unemployable.

After the noise I made I couldn't have gotten a job with Looney Tunes. It was very difficult for me. I had kind of ruined myself. I'm sort of my own Mafia, you know, breaking my own knees. I was really in trouble. It looked like I wasn't going to be able to work again. The phone didn't ring for a while. I'm not bitter about it. I needed time to think. I played with my kids and enjoyed myself and reevaluated my life, or at least examined the shit out of it. It was a period of introspection and reflection.

I'd had about ten careers, all of them rotten. There was a period of screwing around, a period of making money, of experimentation, of hustling jobs for myself and some friends. There was a house in California and a reputation for being difficult. Every time I thought I was down enough to do something good, some sucker came along and offered me more money. I looked back at my accomplishments and I could find only two that I considered worthwhile – *Shadows* and *Edge of the City*. All the rest of my time had been spent playing games – painful and stupid, falsely satisfying and economically rewarding.

I did a couple of novels I didn't really care for, so I threw them out. I did a few scripts. I sat for two years trying to learn how to write. I stayed home, looked at trees, at my family, and learned patience. Two years of waiting, writing, experimenting and *talking* artistry. Los Angeles is a very lonely place compared to New York; I really thought I'd go mad.

Cassavetes slightly exaggerates his situation. He did do a lot of writing and reflecting but wasn't entirely idle. Between 1962 and 1964, he acted in episodes of *Dr. Kildare*, *The Lloyd Bridges Show*, *Channing*, *Breaking Point*, *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* and *Burke's Law*. In 1962, he also directed two episodes of *The Lloyd Bridges Show*: 'My Daddy Can Lick Your Daddy' and 'A Pair of Boots' – the latter being one of his finest pieces of work for television. His old friend Everett Chambers was the producer of the series and was repaying Cassavetes for all that the filmmaker had done for him over the preceding few years. (Cassavetes in turn employed many of his own unemployed friends in both productions.) In November 1962, Cassavetes also optioned a play from the 1950s, *Ladies of the Corridor*, for a possible film production. Though it had flopped on the stage, he dearly loved the work and wrote a script based on it in early 1963, which he said he intended to cast with Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Tallulah Bankhead and Montgomery Clift in the leads. The production remained a pipe dream.

The most interesting acting Cassavetes did during this entire period (and arguably one of the two or three most interesting performances he ever turned in in anyone else's work) was in a now-forgotten piece: a one-act play by Charles Cohen titled *Flip Side*, taped in Toronto on 28 September 1963 by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Cassavetes played Jerry Jarvis, a disc jockey who goes to pieces as he spins records and manically interacts with his audience in between calls to his wife to try to keep their marriage from breaking up. One of the most interesting aspects of the piece is that it showcases Cassavetes' ability to do 'voices' – from Edward G. Robinson to Peter Lorre to Bela Lugosi to a Mexican pizza boy. (There was a scene in the shooting script of *Husbands* in which Cassavetes did a similar cascade of impersonations, but it was cut from the final film; and there is a moment at the beginning of the 'Etude in Black' episode he did for *Columbo* in which he briefly switches into a mock-British accent. He also does a little vocal mimicry in *Rosemary's Baby*, *Mikey and Nicky* and *Machine Gun McCain*.)

Cassavetes' single film appearance was by accident. Don Siegel's *The*

Killers was intended for television, but deemed too violent and released on film instead. Cassavetes played opposite Lee Marvin (who would become a friend) and secured bit parts for his own friends Robert Phillips, Kathleen O'Malley, Jimmy Joyce and Seymour Cassel. His assessment of his performance in the following passage is not falsely modest; with the exception of two or three small touches, it was eminently forgettable.

I was like an old fighter trying for a comeback, looking for the shot that would get me back in the big arena. I auditioned for parts I wouldn't spit at and didn't get them [a reference to a role in *The List of Adrian Messenger* for which he was briefly considered]. Finally, a director friend, Don Siegel, gave me the opportunity to work. I've always felt that Don didn't need a director's credit. You could feel he was the director. His pictures have his stamp. He put me in a decent part in *The Killers*, but I only managed an uninspired job. A couple more parts, and I was beginning to get the idea that I had no talent.

Cassavetes had met Siegel in 1956 when he directed the film version of *Crime in the Streets*. Siegel was one of the few people who made a real effort to help Cassavetes at this time, and in fact offered Cassavetes the role in *The Killers* because he knew the actor needed money and could not get other work. Shortly after they had finished the film, Siegel attempted to do a second favor for Cassavetes. Cassavetes expressed interest in doing a rewrite of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's 1934 *Crime without Passion*. Siegel agreed to pay Cassavetes \$30,000 and to consider it for possible production. When Cassavetes finished the script (retitled *Champion of the Damned*) in mid-May 1964, Siegel loved it and took it to Lew Wasserman, the head of Universal, to get approval to film it. Wasserman (who had more than likely heard about the Kramer imbroglio and would be Cassavetes' nemesis a few years later, during the release of *Minnie and Moskowitz*) not only rejected the script, but when Cassavetes asked to buy it back so he could take it elsewhere, named a deliberately outrageous price of \$330,000, eleven times what Cassavetes had sold it to Universal for only days earlier.

I grew to consider my somewhat enforced leisure a natural state until early 1964, when I was out walking in Beverly Hills and met Steve Blauner, who was working at Screen Gems. He said that he thought it was time I got off my ass and made some money. He asked me to come to work there. I went home and told Gena about it and she said that whatever I wanted to do would be OK with her as long as it was what

I wanted to do. Well, I told her it was time for me to venture back into the real world again so I went to work for Screen Gems.

Cassavetes brought in his good friend, Maurice McEndree – editor and producer of *Shadows* and an aspiring actor – to work with him in the ‘New Concepts’ department. Their task was to come up with ideas for new shows. Cassavetes began the job with a certain degree of optimism, but after his first twenty proposals were turned down it became apparent that Screen Gems and American television didn’t really want new ideas.

There are ways of making money in Hollywood even if you don’t work, and I found out how to manage them. All you have to do is make deals. So the pictures are never made. You get paid anyway. Moe McEndree and I formed a production company and we began creating some television shows, none of which got off the ground. I was in an office, shoved behind a desk with nothing to do, where when somebody takes away your pencil you’re dead, writing things that I didn’t care about. I stayed there for about six months and then decided to put it on the line.

You’re not an artist until you find out you are, you know? Until you can’t live any other way. You try everything else and then, if you can’t do anything else, you become an artist. It’s the last choice on everyone’s list. The *last resort*.

I sat down with Moe and said, ‘Listen, it’s about time we made another movie like *Shadows*. I don’t know about you, but there’s just no percentage in this surreal world for me.’ Moe agreed and we started thinking about what kind of picture we would make. During the preceding two years I must have written fifty half-scripts. I said, ‘Well, there’s a lot of things I’ve written at home and I’m sure we can find something that will be interesting to do.’ I had written something on a plane – it was about ten pages of some dialogue between two men who were talking about what it used to be like in the old days – about marriage, middle age and the society we live in. I sat down and wrote about three weeks’ worth of script. It came to 206 pages, and then it was only half completed. That was October 1964. I originally wanted to do it as a play but I couldn’t get a theater, so we decided to make a movie.

McEndree gives a slightly different account, saying that the origin of the film was a rhetorical question Cassavetes asked him on a flight from New York to Los Angeles: ‘After a few hours of gin rummy and conversation, John asked, “Did you ever think about what a guy would say to a hooker when he wakes up in her bed the next morning?” We began to

elaborate, as we had learned to do in fashioning scenes in *Shadows*, then John grabbed a pen and paper to make notes.’ The scene eventually became the ‘morning-after’ scene between Jeannie and Richard in *Faces*.

Cassavetes was about to attempt something unprecedented – a feature-length home-movie paid for out of his own pocket. As an indication of how bizarre the idea seemed to many people, when Cassavetes consulted a high-level entertainment lawyer about the legalities of the project with respect to contracts, unions and a future release of whatever was created, the lawyer heard him out, and rather than answering his questions, simply said, ‘What you have in mind to do, cannot be done. Forget it.’ You cannot build a rocket that will fly to the moon in your garage.

You start with nothing. That’s always fascinated me. There’s nothing. You start with only a few people around you. You can be drinking, talking, laughing, happy or unhappy and you think, ‘OK, let’s do that.’ And then something happens. You have another life for a year or two. The process is so hard. People don’t really like to work this way because their lives are important. Above all, you need to break away from your experience of the industry, from the idea of commercial filmmaking. What you discover is that any idea that you have – if it’s a relatively original idea – suddenly becomes courageous. It carries itself; there are always some people that have some hope. We had all grown a little older, a little more mature; but sometimes it’s necessary for your own sanity to go back to where you started from and find out whether you really have it or you don’t have it or whether there really is something to say or not. We put ourselves on the line for whatever it is we’ve said: ‘Here we are, this is the best we can do.’

I told my wife we were going to do another film, just the way we like it. I remember how happy she was with my new enthusiasm. Nobody had any faith in it but Gena, Maurice McEndree, Al Ruban and all the actors who donated their time. They had faith. No studio would back it and actually I really wasn’t interested in having that kind of backing. I wanted to make it my way. When I decided to write and shoot it, I came home and said to Gena, ‘Are you willing to go without all the luxuries for the next couple of years so we can put everything we’ve got into the picture?’ She said, ‘Yes – except for getting my hair done. I insist on that!’

I have no respect for people who ask for freedom but don’t want it. There isn’t anybody that wants to take a chance. Everyone says, ‘I want! I want! I want to do this!’ and they don’t! They have the opportunity,

but they don't. Because it's money. That means that they have to starve a little bit. Most filmmakers don't have very much guts, and I don't think they have anything really that important to say, most of them. Real artists in America have a high view of what they're trying to accomplish. Many people just live in a society and obey certain of the rules; some of the rules are that when you do a good job you're rewarded, but with a work of art you're not necessarily always rewarded. The reward can't be the financial success or failure of your work. The approach to making films has been so chicken because of the financial difficulty in raising the money so that you won't be in debt for the rest of your life. Making a film is extremely expensive. The only way you can make one is by having a basic disrespect for money. I think that's why there are not too many independent filmmakers: it is a real respect that people have for money. They have hatred for the people that possess it, but they have a respect for it.

Filmmaking was always personal. *Shadows* was a reflection on the uncertainties of his own youth; *Faces* and *Husbands* were ways of working through questions about middle age. Almost everything Richard and Freddie say and do is anchored in Cassavetes' real-life relationship with Fred Draper, whom he knew from his AADA days. But the overlap between life and art runs deeper than events. It is as if Cassavetes' personality (every part of it – from his crazy competitiveness and bravado to his petty jealousies and irrational rages to his feelings of doubt and insecurity) is divided among *Faces*' characters and given voice by them. They are versions of him. According to George O'Halloran, there was, in fact, an enchanted evening during the making of the film when, with the whole male cast and crew present in his living room eating and drinking late at night, Cassavetes sat down at the piano and improvised a succession of serenades to each of them one after another, telling each how he was a version of himself – someone he had wanted to be or had been at some other point in his life; someone who had done things he wanted to do; someone who figured a wish, a dream or a secret part of him that no one else knew about.

You start out extremely young and make an extremely young picture. As you get older, you make pictures about the way you feel at the time. You don't think logically. You think in terms of mysterious elements of your life. I'm interested in middle-aged people because I'm in that generation and share their concerns. I'd feel completely incapable of making a film like *Shadows* about young people now. It's not a question of

being indifferent towards young people's problems, but their experience of life and their goals and ambitions don't connect with my own personal preoccupations. I'm only interested in what I am interested in. That's what makes the film what it is. The minute it becomes a professional film, it is exploitative. It's trying to *sell* you something. It's trying to get you to *buy* it. A lot of bad movies are made because people are trying to make a living. The good ideas are the things that *mean* something to you. There's plenty to say without having to be dishonest and make a movie you don't care about.

***Faces* drew on Cassavetes' run-ins with high-powered studio executives a few years earlier (it's not accidental that it begins with a scene in a screening room) and studied the suburban lifestyles he saw around him in his newly adopted culture.**

Making films means having an idea that you have to talk about and not knowing what it is that's disturbing you, so that it's an adventure all the way. The best you can do is try to put down what happens in your own life, the things you can understand and comprehend, and then take a chance with it – say that 'this is what I'm feeling now – so let's get some people together who think and feel the same way, and we'll all take our best shot at it'. The whole idea to me and to the people that I work with is to find some kind of personal truth, some kind of revelation. That's why we work on a story that has some kind of a meaning that we don't quite understand. The subject was one which I knew absolutely nothing about, even though I'm married and live in a rich middle-class strata of society. It was something I've been aware of but at the same time didn't understand; so I was compelled to take people that I felt could add something and understand something of the subject that we were dealing with. It would be a mutual discovery, and from my point of view it was simply a question of stimulating an honest appraisal on each actor's part of what their life would be, and the minute we got that straightened out then the shooting became quite easy. I think basically we were trying to find out the answer to the story.

I was having a kind of early mid-life crisis. I was unhappy with the way things were going in life. Despite all my hysteria and the bitterness of all my mixed emotions at that time, writing *Faces* was a simple task. Setting it down on paper required only my attention and my recollections of people who had troubled my life. My ideas come from the people I know. Not their *opinions*, but what I *really see* in the person.

When I began *Faces* I was bugged about marriage. I've always been

against the institution of marriage. Not my marriage. Gena and I have always disagreed out in the open, we never hold back. But I was bugged about the millions of middle-class marriages in the United States that just sort of glide along. Couples married ten, fifteen years, husbands and wives who seem to have everything – big house, two cars, maid, teenage kids – but all these creature comforts have made them passive. Underneath, there's this feeling of desperateness because they can't connect. I would see married couples who were lying to one another, who had nothing to do with one another in their lives. If their tastes coincided they felt that they were quite remarkable in their marriage. And people would say, 'Oh, they're so wonderful together.' But they come home, they just look at each other and they say, 'How are you? How was the day? What happened?' and they have no love. The picture was a plea for returning to some kind of real communication. Most couples aren't even aware that they can't communicate. The whole point of *Faces* is to show how few people really talk to each other. These days, everybody is supposed to be so intelligent: 'Isn't it terrible about Nixon getting elected?' 'Did you hear about the earthquake in Peru?' And you're supposed to have all the answers. But when it gets down to the nitty-gritty, like, 'What is bugging you, mister? Why can't you make it with your wife? Why do you lie awake all night staring at the ceiling? Why, why, why do you refuse to recognize you have problems and deal with them?' The answer is that people have forgotten how to relate or respond. In this day of mass communications and instant communications, there is no communication between people. Instead it's long-winded stories or hostile bits, or laughter. But nobody's really laughing. It's more an hysterical, joyless kind of sound. Translation: 'I am here and I don't know why.'

Lynn Carlin claims credit for coming up with the title of the film after viewing an edit. *Faces* had a number of different working titles: *The Marriage*, *Inside-Out* and *The Dynosaurs*. The last title occurred to Cassavetes in July 1966, only after he edited some of the footage of the women's post-disco gathering (where they and Chettie make 'dinosaur' faces at each other). It was not merely an allusion to the ferocity, mechanicalness and brutality of the characters, but to Cassavetes' belief that they represented an evolutionary wrong turn somewhere in American history, a genetic mistake that would result in their own inevitable extinction.

In the last couple of decades or so, something has happened to the

American dream. I don't quite know what it is, and it's still not very clear in my mind. Confusion has replaced patriotism. The intellect has replaced love. America has changed. Look everywhere. It's all about money. If something doesn't make money, no one is interested. Everything is for sale. Emotions are sold. Sex is sold. Everything is sex. Cars, women, clothes, your face, your hands, your shoes! Look at the ads, at television. My emotions aren't for sale. My thoughts can't be bought. They're mine. I don't want movies that sell me something. I don't want to be told how to feel.

I wrote *Faces* out of a lot of anger and dismay with society. I was really angry at our age and especially at those adults who without thinking go to discotheques, without thinking join into anything that is fashionable and without any understanding. I wanted to show the inability of people to communicate; what small things will do to people; how people can't handle certain things that they hear and read in newspapers, see in films; and how, when they are not prepared to think with their own minds and to feel, how all this can become tragic circumstances. Old ladies trying to be young, shaking their fat asses. Men trying to be sexually attractive. All these old people acting like kids. People are afraid to be themselves, until they become other people, and they can never become themselves again. The change that overcomes all of us is so subtle it's frightening. There's where the frustration is: we never see where and how we started; how we got so mechanical; or what to do about it. You beat your brains out trying to find some way that you can encompass what people are feeling rather than what they are led to think.

The result was a barrage of attacks on contemporary middle-class America, an expression of horror at our society in general, focusing on a married couple – old-fashioned in nature, safe in their suburban home, narrow in their thinking. The script gives them new situations to cope with, takes them out of their house, releases them from the conformity of their existence, forces them into a different context when all barriers are down.

Cassavetes' understanding of life is a strongly gendered one, and *Faces* displays vestigial traces of its origin as a two-act play organized as a series of contrasts between the situation of a group of men performing for a woman (Act One) and a group of women performing for a man (Act Two). There are a number of suggestions that, even after the film was shot, Cassavetes continued to think of *Faces* in terms of its male-female structure. One is that, at the start of editing, Cassavetes

divided up the footage in the same way. Using two side-by-side Movieolas, he had Maurice McEndree edit what he referred to as ‘the men’s scenes’, while he himself edited ‘the women’s scenes’. Another indication is that when he showed the first assembly to the cast in January 1968, Cassavetes insisted that he have separate ‘men’s only’ and ‘women’s only’ screenings in which only one gender was allowed to attend. (Seymour Cassel jokingly complained that he had to go to a separate screening from the one his wife attended.) Finally, it’s a well-documented fact that at one of the Toronto preview screenings Cassavetes chose to show only ‘Act Two’ of the film when he saw that the audience was predominantly women, saying that he thought it would speak more specifically to them.

I try to deal with women differently than I would deal with men, so that I won’t be presenting some opinionated view – of a *man* viewing a woman. I don’t really know anything about women. So I deal with it on a line of activity. Of what they do. And then their character comes out in their activity. With men I don’t need to do that. Because I feel I know men. I know men very well. I know all their hypocrisies, and what a pregnant woman means to a man, and what sports or non-sports mean, or philosophy, or culture, or what happens, and when it’s interesting to talk about, when it brings tears to the eyes, and when it means nothing. The complexities of men are like the complexities of women, but they’re definitely *not* the same. I don’t care what the legislation says.

Men seem to be the real victims. Confusion keeps them going. Dashing around, the business lunch, a little hanky-panky with a prostitute, getting drunk with some buddies – adventurous, daring, eh? Empty, meaningless little actions that fill up a day. Their brutish existence holds no dreams and for a man who goes out into it every day there is no signal of reassurance. And so our characters are forced into playing power games, using what they know – business techniques – to verify their social acceptability. They make love with an eye toward respect and applause, which will signify to them that life is more than just the office, that their moral ills and boredom can be cured if women find them attractive. It is this need to prove – this bustling, bravura ego – that fatally wounds the people of the picture. It is this confusing dilemma in which men find themselves trying to relate to a difficult life and their responsibilities in it that *Faces* attempts to explore.

There is no ‘them’ in Cassavetes’ work; it is always ‘us’. His art is, ulti-

mately, an act of empathy; rather than standing outside and judging, he goes inside to understand.

Faces is a picture about the middle-aged, high-middle income bracket people that are made fun of in our society. This is the white American society that certain social groups talk about all the time. One day I woke up and realized that I'm part of that society and almost everyone I know is. There's no sense in pretending that I am back in New York in the early days looking for a job. I'm not. And I knew there was something to be said about these people and about their insular existence and about their place in a society that is frowned upon today. And we said it; we said it as honestly as we could, without malice, without anything but affection for these people.

I wrote about some people I knew. Part of it (the Richard Forst character) was me, and part (Chettie) a friend of mine who was ultimately in the picture (Seymour Cassel). In real life he keeps following other people's wives home and seducing them. I lived it. I saw it happening to people around me; I *know* it. I'm a part of these people. They do things I have done, or have thought of if I haven't done them myself.

For years businessmen have been depicted as the heavies in our lives, as the people who have absolutely nothing to offer. And the truth is they are in as big a quandary and as bad an emotional situation as everyone else is. Only they have committed themselves to certain responsibilities and they are stuck with a society that doesn't really work. Without taking sides, we just took people with money, with everything they could possibly have, and we tried to make a picture that has nothing to do with money or position, but has to do with the stupidity of life and how our society doesn't really accommodate people's emotions.

One of the reasons Cassavetes parted ways with sixties protest movements was their failure imaginatively to enter into the problems of the older generation.

I agree with a lot of what the kids are saying, but it really disgusts me that most white militants hate middle-class people – and are middle-class themselves. That really makes me ill, because those kids ought to understand why their parents are middle-class, know about their parents' fears; but instead of caring, they'd rather hate. Ideals must be achieved by caring.

Screen Gems unknowingly staffed and paid for most of the film's preparations. Cassavetes held rehearsal readings around a table in his office

and used his secretaries and those in neighboring offices to type script revisions.

I was desperately broke. To keep some kind of money coming in, I stayed on as long as I could at Screen Gems, and after they kicked me out, I went over to Universal – my bank – and acted in two lousy TV pilots, which bought me a movie camera – the first Eclair – and film. I then had enough to start the picture.

Cassavetes cast *Faces* entirely with friends and acquaintances. With the exception of Gena Rowlands, John Marley and Val Avery (all of whom had done a good bit of professional acting), the other actors were unemployed friends whose careers had stalled or never gotten started in the first place. Seymour Cassel's only important previous credits had been in Cassavetes' own work. Fred Draper (Freddie) knew Cassavetes from their days at the AADA. His sole previous acting credit was a television show in the early fifties, *Rocky King, Detective*. By the time *Faces* was being cast, he had quit acting. Gene Darfler (Jackson) had also gone to the American Academy, done a bit of acting on Broadway in Burgess Meredith's production of *Out West of Eight* and in Josh Logan's London company production of *Mr. Roberts*, but then had his career fizzle into a series of bit parts (including one in *Kiss Me, Stupid*). He was an Illinois cattle rancher at the point Cassavetes asked him to be in *Faces*. Dorothy Gulliver was a former silent film actress who hadn't done any film acting in more than twenty years. Joanne Moore Jordan (Louise) had done some summer stock and repertory work in Philadelphia years before, but had never been in a film. Darlene Conley's (Billy Mae) sole previous acting experience was with a Chicago theater group, the Helen Hayes Equity Players, and walk-ons in a few soap operas. The other *Faces* actors were complete amateurs. Cassavetes found Lynn Carlin (Maria) at Screen Gems, where she worked across the hall from Cassavetes as Robert Altman's secretary. He met her when she volunteered to type the script for him when Altman was out of town (and had been fired for doing it). She had done some amateur theatricals in La Jolla, but never appeared in a professional production before. Elizabeth Deering (Stella) was Seymour Cassel's wife and had also never acted professionally.

Cassavetes originally wanted Rowlands to play the Maria Forst role; but she thought playing a housewife was too frumpy and chose Jeannie instead, because she thought she would be more exotic and alluring. Given the choice, throughout her career, Rowlands always preferred playing larger, grander characters to more ordinary ones; and strong

women to weak or dependent ones. The choice between Jeannie and Maria fell into these categories. Fortunately, when Cassavetes subsequently asked Carlin to read the part, he felt that the vulnerability and innocence she brought to the reading was exactly right for Maria. As he always did, Cassavetes wrote the original script with most of these particular actors in mind (though he conceals this last fact in the following account, just as he concealed it from the actors at the time, letting them think they were freely picking the roles they played). In the cases of Rowlands and Carlin, he rewrote their parts to adapt them to the new actors.

I found every actor I could that was as frustrated as me, every actor that wanted to express something and felt that he was great and had been cheated, and people that just felt there would never be a chance in the world for them. Val Avery and John Marley read it and liked it and both asked to be in it. Seymour Cassel told me he wanted to play the beach bum.

As with all of Cassavetes' non-studio productions, everyone worked on a deferred salary basis. In other words, for free. In *Faces*, specifically, each of the principals was given a two per cent share in all future profits (which few of them actually expected to materialize). Lynn Carlin said the only contract she ever saw was written on a table napkin over dinner.

I put up the money to cover the film and the technical things. The actors worked for nothing. The crew worked for nothing. Everyone worked for a piece of the film, so it is owned mutually by all of us. They worked like hell, not for rewards like money or fame, but for the pleasure of creating. They did it because they believed in it and felt an integral part of the building of a movie. And when they don't want to be there anymore, they're gonna leave, you know? And the only way they're gonna leave is if they have no stake. Because the work is too hard unless you have a stake. I enjoyed that feeling of cooperation, of working with people that you could respect, of working with people that loved what they were doing. It meant that we could shoot over six months, rehearse some days, not shoot others.

The typical film-school undergraduate has more and better equipment than Cassavetes did when he made *Faces*. Al Ruban, whom Cassavetes had met around the time he was shooting the second version of *Shadows*, had parleyed his experience into a job working as a jack-of-all-trades helping to make low-budget exploitation pictures in New York City. Since he knew something about filmmaking, Cassavetes sent him

\$8,000 to buy used equipment and invited him to join the production. Ruban and George O'Halloran came back with a U-Haul loaded with a 16mm Arriflex and blimp, assorted heads and tripods, six lenses, a Perfectone recorder, two lavaliers, a shotgun mike and a few lights. Cassavetes acquired some additional equipment on his own, including the 16mm Eclair.

The locations were whatever was available for free and without a permit. The two main sets were Gena Rowlands' mother's house for Jeannie Rapp's apartment and Cassavetes' house for the Forst residence. (The mother had moved to the West Coast in the early sixties to be close to her daughter.) Lady Rowlands lived with her daughter while her place was being used; and Gena stayed with her mother during much of the filming of the scenes in the Cassavetes home. Cassavetes was never shy about using his own home as a set. Much of the second version of *Shadows* had been shot in his New York apartment, and five of the subsequent films would have scenes shot in his Hollywood Hills home.

David Wolper gave Cassavetes use of the projection room in his building for a weekend for the screening-room scene. The owners of the Loser's Club on LaCienega allowed Cassavetes to use the space for four weeks for the scenes there. (The shooting script had about forty minutes of scenes which were cut to just a few minutes in the final print.) The Whiskey a Go Go (which had only opened the year before and was one of the hottest L.A. nightspots) let Cassavetes shoot there for a day.

The film was a triumph of begging, borrowing, and on occasion, stealing whatever was necessary to make it. Never was Cassavetes the rug-merchant more resourceful. He cut hundreds of 'deals' to keep the shoot going from day to day – as, for example, when he got Lynn Carlin to talk a hairdresser into doing her hair for free in exchange for an on-screen credit (which was conveniently forgotten when the titles were done), or when Cassavetes couldn't pay his milk, eggs and cheese bill and sold the milkman a point in the picture to forgive the debt.

Once the shoot was underway, friends and strangers provided help and equipment. A week into the shoot, Haskell Wexler, a committed backer of indie work and a friend (Wexler would later offer Cassavetes the lead in *Medium Cool*), showed up to be an extra in the Loser's Club scenes and ended up loaning Cassavetes his own personal 16mm Eclair when he learned that the weight of the blimped Arriflex made it hard to hand-hold. (The rest of the film was shot with the two Eclairs.) At Cassavetes' request, Wexler also shot a sequence: a virtuoso five-minute hand-held shot that moved down the length of the Loser's Club bar and among the customers. (Though the shot was broken up into shorter cuts

when the film was edited, some of Wexler's work appears in the final edit.) When the Loser's Club proved difficult to light, Wexler also called up Lloyd Garnell (who had just returned from the *Hawaii* shoot), and two hours later an entire truckload of lights 'borrowed' from United Artists mysteriously appeared on the street. Garnell helped to rig them and Cassavetes used them for three weeks.

Cassavetes' only professional encounters with Steven Spielberg date from around this same period. For three days, an eighteen-year-old Spielberg worked as a PA on *Faces*, fetching coffee and cigarettes for members of the cast and crew, before he got tired of it and quit. Two years later, Spielberg was on a Hollywood soundstage watching Cassavetes act in a television show when the filmmaker, who couldn't possibly have remembered him from before, surprised him by coming up at a break and asking what Spielberg thought of the scene they were shooting. When Spielberg told him he himself wanted to be a director someday, Cassavetes proceeded to ask him how he would direct him in the scene he was playing and then took his advice in the next take. It was typical Cassavetes. No one was beneath his dignity to talk to and, just possibly, learn from – not even the twenty-year-old kid standing off to the side of a shoot. He would become known for treating the opinions of the lowliest members of the crews of all of his films with the same respect he accorded Spielberg in this case.

Many of *Faces*' scenes involve groups of people – passionately talking, arguing and interacting, and the *Faces* shoot itself was not unlike the film's scenes. Cassavetes had problems with the quietness and bureaucratization of a Hollywood studio shoot.

Everybody says, 'Hollywood's a terrible place.' Well, it isn't a terrible place. It's a wonderful place. It's a place where people go out and making pictures is their business. Technically they are superb, and they're the nicest people you ever want to meet, they never give you any trouble, they never tell you things you have to do that you don't need to do. The only thing is, the atmosphere is *so quiet*. It's like being in a church, in Hollywood, when you're working on a set. Everybody's so quiet, so patient, so nice, that if you want to discuss something and the director says, 'Let's do it this way' – he's *so nice*, everybody's *so nice*, you can't fight with them, argue with them, say, 'Wait a minute, I don't want to do it this way,' because you'd be completely out of keeping with the way things are going. The minute you say, 'Aw, come on, will ya?' – that much – you're a heavy. You're a heavy in your whole atmosphere. So it becomes very important that you remain an actor.

An actor mustn't be aware of his surroundings, he must only act according to what he wants to do rather than according to what he wants people to think of him. So it becomes important that the actor work against this studio atmosphere. It is completely uncreative, because it's like being in a church. You don't tell the priest, 'Wait a minute, I disagree with that.' You may disagree with it, but you can't tell the priest or the rabbi, 'Listen, I'm sorry, I don't believe what you just said about God, it's completely wrong and I can't do that because I don't agree with that at all.' So you don't say that. It's the same in Hollywood. If you want to work there again, you do things their way. In a way, that isn't so wrong. The thing to do is *not* to work in Hollywood if you can help it! But if you have to work in Hollywood, then you must abide by their code, and find a way to work their way and still work creatively. It's an impossibility for a small actor, though for an actor whom they respect, a star, they will give you some leeway.

The actor can't deliver in this situation. Hollywood directors create this situation. They make it possible for the actor to give nothing. They say to the actor, 'Now look, you stand over here, and you say this line to him. You ready? All right, let's roll.' See? Now, the small actor that has been talked to that way affects the other actors that're in the scene – even the star. The little guy can't give anything because he's terribly nervous, and the other actor can give little. The only thing he can do is feel a little more confident than this guy, because he knows what's been going on and has a little more experience. Now, this poor actor that's come in, the bit player – he's got to be the father, for instance – he can't possibly act, he can't. Because they're only nice to people that they feel are on their same level. When it comes to a smaller player, he's the slave, the one that hasn't been freed by Lincoln yet. He's nothing, absolutely nothing.

The atmosphere on *Faces* was closer to being a traveling, six-month house party than a church. And the director more like the host of a party than a priest or a rabbi. Or maybe the more accurate comparison for one of Cassavetes' shoots would be a slightly contentious family gathering – complete with cantankerous uncles and eccentric cousins. Everyone was allowed to be themselves. No one was told to stop being what they were. Cassavetes loved noise, crowds, arguments, tussles, and to a large extent his filmmaking was an attempt to recreate the noisy, boisterous extended family gatherings of his youth. He was a party-lover and a party-giver with an unlimited zest for life and appreciation of different personalities, moods and temperaments. He loved being surrounded with people, and loved them in all their individuality – not in

spite of, but because of their idiosyncrasy. He refused to judge them, no matter how different from himself they might be. All of that comes through in the experience of the films themselves.

The absence of judgments takes us to the very heart of Cassavetes' genius – and the reason his work confused (and still confuses) many critics and viewers. *Faces* is *not* satiric or ironic. It does not mock its characters. Cassavetes does not, in the Altman way, sit in judgment of them, separate from them, superior to them. Like *Husbands* after it, the film *loves* its main characters. It sees their problems, but *sympathizes* with their plights. To a large degree Cassavetes functioned – both in his life and his work – outside the confines of normal judgments of good and evil, better and worse, right and wrong that most of us live our lives within. One might say that, whatever the causes, from a young age Cassavetes freed himself from the 'censoring' part of the soul – the part that says not to do something because rules of society or ethics say so. He did not live by customary codes of conduct. That meant that he could be wildly original, iconoclastic and creative at times; but also petty, selfish, cruel and manipulative, apparently without compunction or regret, at other times. There is no reason to mince words about the negative side of Cassavetes' behavior, since the evidence is abundant in any random selection of Hollywood biographies. He shamelessly tricked, conned and used many of the people around him. He charmed and sweet-talked people when it served his purposes, and bullied or brazenly abused them if they got in his way. He fast-talked his way around problems. He flew into childish rages and threw temper tantrums when things went against him. He was a lot like Freddie, Richard and McCarthy (and like the character he plays in Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky*, which I take to be the closest depiction of what his personality was actually like, at least at times).

The same point applies to many of the people with whom Cassavetes worked. The filmmaker's friends and co-workers were not paragons of human sensitivity. Most of them were emotionally immature, difficult, demanding and self-centered. But just as Cassavetes didn't feel guilt or shame about his own behavioral immaturity or insensitivity, he didn't judge them for their lapses. He accepted them as he accepted himself.

The only reason to go into any of this is that it throws important light on the underpinnings of Cassavetes' art. The same acceptance of the moral and emotional untidiness of his own life (and the lives of his friends) made Cassavetes able to depict, without the filter of negative judgment, the moral and emotional messiness of his characters' lives. One might argue that if Cassavetes had had a more idealized view of his

own life or a more judgmental view of the lives of the people around him, he could not have created the radically unidealized works he did. He pioneered a new form of art – an art liberated from unearthly ideals of beauty, heroism, purity or virtue. He was the poet of imperfection and created an art of what is, not of what should be. Cassavetes' characters may be flawed, but they are sprung free from limiting judgments about their deficiencies. They are loved, flaws and all.

Just as Cassavetes accepted his own imperfections, and those of his friends, he accepted his characters'. He didn't ask them to clean up their acts. He respected their emotional disarray. He did not hold their failures of communication against them. He empathized with their struggles. The artistic importance of the result was that in these de-idealizations viewers saw the tortured chambers of their own souls revealed to themselves as if for the first time. Cassavetes' advice to young directors summed up the stunning originality – and enduring shock value – of both his life and his work:

Say what you *are*. Not what you *would like* to be. Not what you *have to be*. Just say what you are. And what you are is good enough.

The final important point is that the process of making the films was of a piece with the world depicted in the films. Cassavetes functioned in the same universe of rivalries, arguments, fights and difficult relations in his filmmaking life as he depicted in his films. Many of the people he worked with didn't get along with him or each other most of the time. One was constantly complaining about, or cheating off, another. But that was simply accepted as the way things were. Life consisted of difficult relations – both on and off screen. The point, whether in life or in art, was to find a way to continue to function within those limiting conditions. Cassavetes and his characters equally were given the task of making something of an imperfect world populated with imperfect figures.

Since most of *Faces'* unpaid actors needed to continue to hold day jobs, the film was shot mainly at night. It would also have been too difficult to cover the windows in Cassavetes' and Lady Rowlands' houses to simulate the nighttime setting of most of the scenes. Beyond that, Cassavetes was fundamentally a night person. It was more than a matter of his being an insomniac (which he was). He loved everything about the night – the lights, the bars, the empty streets, the private conversations, the lonely wandering. It's not accidental that many of his films – from *Shadows* to *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* – were shot almost entirely at night.

The crew gathered in Cassavetes' home around five, ate supper together – Rowlands serving hamburgers for the first month or so but switching to spaghetti (like the gathering of the construction workers in *A Woman Under the Influence*) when the money ran out – and discussed that evening's scenes. The actors would show up around six and rehearse until seven-thirty or eight. While they were rehearsing, Cassavetes would be moving around them with cameraman George Sims, planning camera angles and movements. Shooting would take place from then until approximately midnight, when the older actors were too tired to continue.

As with *Shadows*, after each night's shoot, it was not at all uncommon for the younger members of the cast and crew to sit around in the editing room in Cassavetes' garage and talk until the early hours of the morning. (As Lynn Carlin only half-facetiously put it: 'It would have been a shame to waste all the beer we had poured into those glasses while we were shooting.') As if it really were a party, there were more than a few drunken conversations that went on half of the night and got fairly rowdy – including one in which Cassavetes carried a camera outside and photographed the moon; and another in which Cassavetes and Cassel played a game of catch with George Sims' car keys that ripped up one of Rowlands' prize flowerbeds – incurring her wrath for days afterwards. (In this last case, though he himself had done most of the damage to the flowers, like the little boy he frequently acted like, Cassavetes lied to Rowlands the next day and told her Cassel had done it all.)

As had been the case with *Shadows*, a few members of the crew slept at Cassavetes' house during the shoot: Al Ruban and Maurice McEndree, who worked both as crew members and as editors and who were not Los Angeles residents, moved into Cassavetes' house for more than a year – eating, sleeping, talking and drinking the film day and night for months on end.

The group was deliberately kept small (only around seven crew members at any one time) and duties were not rigidly assigned. To start with, no one on the crew was a trained professional. The main cameraman, George Sims, was a fledgling actor who had never held a camera before. Actors (like Seymour Cassel) functioned as crew members when their scenes were not being shot. Crew members (like Sims) played small parts. Everybody did whatever was necessary at the moment – right down to spackling and painting rooms in Cassavetes' house before the shoot to clean them up and increase their brightness; and repainting them afterwards to cover up the marks they had left (though, according

to Rowlands, she later had to bring in professionals to do the job right). Cassavetes was so opposed to professionalism that his intention was to have everyone take a turn at being cameraman, so that there would be no designated cameraman at all. (It had worked in *Shadows* – where various individuals took turns shooting if for some reason Erich Kollmar could not make it – and as far as Cassavetes was concerned it would work here. The only reason *Faces* wasn't shot that way was that Ruban threatened to resign if Cassavetes didn't pick a single cameraman and stick with him.)

It should be clear from the preceding that *Faces* represented a critique of business values in its methods of production as much as in its subject. How it was made was Cassavetes' reply to the bureaucratic forms of interaction that he had clashed with in the previous years. The mutually supportive relationships of the family replaced the compartmentalization of the bureaucracy as the model for interaction. Cooperation replaced competitiveness. Responsiveness was more important than starring. Enjoying the process was far more important than being concerned with the financial viability of the product.

I like to make small films. I like the one-on-one relationship in a personal film. If you get too many people around you on the set, things get to be hysterical. What's basically wrong with Hollywood is that you cannot really have teamwork. I couldn't make a good film without it. Once you set up an employer-employee relationship, you divide people. It's only when there's nothing or everything to gain that each gives completely with faith in the film. In a sense most of the people on *Faces* were amateurs. I work best as an amateur, away from the conventional studio system. I think most of us look forward to an opportunity for working as amateurs – in the sense that 'professional' means you *have* to do a job and 'amateur' means you *like* to do it.

I can honestly say that the film would never have been completed if it wasn't for everyone's total interest in the human problem, not in the film problem. Film is, to me, just unimportant. But people are very important. In the end everyone can go with the knowledge that it can be done. Not so much that the film can be a great film or a bad film or a mediocre film. But the idea that it can happen, that people can go out with nothing and through their own will and through their determination make something out of nothing, out of nowhere, no technical know-how, no equipment. There wasn't one technician on the entire film. There wasn't anybody that knew how to run a camera. They walked in and started to read the directions of how to reload it, got a

Movieola and looked at it, did all the things in the world and we made eight million mistakes, but it was exciting and fun.

Cassavetes had no way of predicting how long it would take or what it would cost. He began with the idea that *Faces* could be shot in thirty-five days; but once he started, in January 1965, he didn't end until seven months later, in July, with an additional month of planning and two or three weeks of rehearsal in December 1964, and a few days of reshooting in 1967. (By contrast, the typical low-budget Hollywood film of the era was shot in approximately five to eight weeks.) Similarly with the budget: the costs escalated far beyond what Cassavetes had planned. His initial investment for equipment was around \$10,000, and when he began shooting, he imagined the total cost to have a screenable print would run between \$80,000 and \$100,000. By November 1967, with ten months left to go, he had already spent more than \$140,000. By the time *Faces* was finished, the film had cost \$225,000 (all of which came directly out of his pocket, since there were no financial backers).

Cassavetes refused to limit himself the way a studio production did – by locking himself into a fixed budget or a predetermined schedule. He gave the actors as much time as it took to get deeply truthful performances. That meant that filming might be stopped for a day or two if a scene needed rewriting or more rehearsal. There were also times it would stop while John Marley or another actor went on a paying shoot for a few days. In addition, although Cassavetes knew the general direction his narrative was heading, he deliberately didn't write the final section of the film until part-way through the shoot, so that he could learn from his actors' performances.

The first draft was 265 pages long – and that was about three quarters of the film! We wrote it from that point as we went along. I think the whole script, when it was done, was something like 320 pages. A normal script today runs about 140 pages. It was stupid of me to allow myself that kind of indulgence. But I believe that if somebody has a large part they work harder. And if their part is complete, they'll express a complete person. When they come to a small scene, they will do it much better.

We decided that if it ended up being ten hours, then that's the film that we're going to make. It became more than just a film; it became a way of life. It became a feeling against the authority that stood in the way of people expressing themselves as they wanted to express themselves and it became a thing that 'We can do that in America. We can do

that without money in America, we can.' How long have we been fighting the Vietnam war? If it takes that long to do something that destructive, why can't we be allowed to take four years to do something constructive? If they could waste all that time on Vietnam for a negative reason, I could do the same for a positive one.

Basically, the people I work with are all artists, in the sense that we want to do a good job at whatever it is we are doing. When there are too many other considerations it is no longer an art; it becomes, by necessity, just a series of compromises. As an amateur I don't have to compromise, and the people I work with don't have to bend either, and that makes us all happy and we feel that we can do better work. As a professional you care for two things: the rewards of the job and the job itself. As an amateur you only care for the thing you're trying to accomplish.

As would be the case in all of Cassavetes' fully independent productions, as much as possible scenes were shot in sequence for two reasons: it allowed the actors to develop their roles with a degree of emotional coherence and continuity; and it allowed Cassavetes to adjust the characters and events as he went along in the light of what the earlier scenes taught him.

Faces was shot in sequence. A film like this has to be. We didn't know exactly what was going to happen next, even with a script. It's not an intellectual picture; I think it's a picture about emotions, and these emotions had to develop, be worked out.

The only deviations from strictly sequential shooting were that the *Loser's Club* material was all shot at once at the start, and all of Rowlands' scenes were shot before Lynn Carlin's, due to the fact that Rowlands was pregnant with daughter Alexandra. (Though Carlin was also pregnant, she was less far along.) Cassavetes felt he was racing a deadline with Rowlands' pregnancy and a few moments of directorial self-consciousness surface in the film's dialogue – for example, when Cassavetes has John Marley tell Jeannie 'you're not fat; you're voluptuous'. (There is another self-conscious reference in the same scene to Rowlands' fondness for false eyelashes.)

It's not accidental that Cassavetes' films usually lack a cinematographer or director of photography credit. (In fact, the only times they would have it were either when he worked on a studio co-production or when Al Ruban was involved in a film and absolutely insisted on being given the credit.) Cassavetes simply did not believe in the position –

which always frustrated any 'real' cinematographer who happened to get involved in one of his shoots (like Caleb Deschanel on *A Woman Under the Influence*). A studio film adjusts its lighting set-up for every shot. Cassavetes functioned more like a documentary filmmaker. He would 'fill', in the case of this film, with photofloods in the lamps, and then shoot all night without changing the lighting. He didn't care if the focus went soft in a given shot or a character was not centered in the frame or lighted attractively. A movie was not about creating a pretty picture. Though it wasn't a premeditated strategy, his inattention to such considerations inadvertently pioneered an aesthetic of roughness and imperfection.

In his own career, Cassavetes had been frustrated at how the actor was treated as a second-class citizen, taking a back seat to the technicians. Actors were forced to perform scenes out of narrative order and in short takes. They were limited in their expressions and movements.

The actor has to conform to the camera positions and the lights, and it should be the other way around. It's always a question of how is the actor going to survive? The writer will talk about the script. The cameraman will talk about his technical problems. The focus-puller will make marks all over the place. And what does an actor do? He waits hours, fighting for his survival. By the time he gets up on the floor, he has to hit marks. He has to overcome the whispers, the lack of attention and maybe a very bad scene. You have a little slate stuck in front of the actor's face, and this thing clacks in front of his face, and twenty-five people are around him, and he has some words that he's supposed to turn into magic, and usually the words stink – in my thing as well as everybody else's. Now all the director is asking is that he be brilliant!

People who are making films today are too concerned with mechanics – technical things instead of feeling. Execution is about eight per cent to me. The technical quality of a film doesn't have much to do with whether it's a good film. I feel like vomiting when some director says to me, 'I got the most gorgeous shot today.' That is not what's important. We have to move beyond the current obsession with technique or angles. It's a waste of time. A movie is a lot more than a series of shots. You're doing a bad job if all you're paying attention to is camera angles: 'All right, how can we photograph it? We'll get the lab to do some special effects there. Say, let's use a hand-held camera for this shot.' You end up making a film that is all tricks, with no people in it, no knowledge of life. There is nothing left for the actor to bring to it, since there

is no sense, meaning or understanding of people. How you shoot a film is a diversion. I think anybody can shoot a film. Look at the most commercial things in the world – television commercials. They're magnificently photographed. What are we wasting our time doing that for? It has nothing to do with life. Now we're making that a value. Pretty photography is part of our culture. I wanted to do a film that would allow the actors the time and room to act.

On a professional film you're taken to one side, your face is powdered, your hair is arranged, you're dressed and then they place you on the set and you don't know where you are or what to do. You want to speak to the producer, but it's the assistant who comes up to you and says, 'Sit down, it's not your turn.' Then you're humiliated, your confidence disappears, you start to tremble, you're going to be abysmal, you're dead.

Cassavetes' photographic agenda went further than merely 'capturing reality'. Here and on other films his cameramen reported that he would deliberately 'mess up' beautiful shots by shoving an unrelated object in the foreground or by breaking up the symmetry of the frame space. Beauty and perfection were the enemies.

Everything I really want to do has to do with characters rather than the formation of visions. I leave that to others. This meant concentrating solely on *their reality* and rejecting any cinematic effects. We didn't allow ourselves to polish up the image, or to use expressive lighting and fancy camera angles. I don't want it to look like a movie. If it's too perfect, you don't believe it. I want it a little out of focus. I don't want you to admire the image. You never stop to look – so you *feel*.

Cassavetes understood that, despite the public nature of its expressions, acting is, in many respects, an intensely private activity. In asking his actors to explore themselves and their characters with such honesty, he had to be supremely respectful of their efforts, giving them as much time as it took and never rushing or pressuring them.

We would light up the whole set and leave the camera very available to the actors, using the whole set-up, all the decor, using the whole set. If you see something convincing, never mind *how* you see it. It's *what* you see that counts. If it's good, then the scene is good, even if the shot is not. Every director would shoot the same scene in a different way. What I try to do is anticipate the movement of the scene, let the actors be as free as possible in space. I cannot require that the actors obey predeter-

mined camera movements. I hate the idea of doing it for framing or for camera movements. I've never watched a good scene that wouldn't be good whatever the angle was. I've seen scenes shot with seven or eight different camera angles. They were always good if the scene was good, or bad if the scene was bad. If there is anything I prefer it is that some films get framed less elegantly, that they are less brilliant technically, but that what is happening in the scenes is more convincing.

I just think that you give somebody something that they can do, and allow them to be a person. I just try to remove the technical responsibilities for a person so that he doesn't realize that he is being photographed. For the first time that I have ever seen, actors weren't marked or told where to move. They weren't staged. They had their characters and they played them and we shot what they were doing rather than insisting that they make it easy for the camera. For example, we generally lit a room so we could shoot 360 degrees, which drove the light man wild. The idea was, 'How do we get to these people the fastest, quickest, most expedient way before that little feeling that they have disappears?' That's the important thing. So sometimes we'd shoot when the lights weren't ready. It wasn't a question of whether or not the operator *wanted* to use a hand-held camera. He just didn't have the time to set up. The actors were starting and he had to get rolling. We'd shoot whenever the actors were ready. We were slaves to them. The filming consisted only of recording what they did. We put ourselves completely at their disposal.

Cassavetes saw his function largely as creating a supportive atmosphere. The point was to make the actors feel safe so that they would take chances in their acting and be relaxed enough to do things that might seem embarrassing. Actors didn't have to protect themselves by attempting to look good, because Cassavetes protected them by not judging them for looking bad.

Acting is a serious craft. I think most actors are disciplined by themselves; if they feel good they're anxious to perform. I think it's all in the atmosphere. The director's function is to set up that atmosphere of being able to expose yourself without being criticized on a level of failure. I'm never aware of anyone being bad, I don't have that type of criticism in me. I believe everything until the actor stops and questions. My function was to set up a mood around the actors in which they could work, not to create the tension where they must be 'professional' and execute a job, and take no chances. In dealing with a movie that is as

close to their emotional life as we can make it, it is important that everyone be non-defensive of each other.

The simple problem we had in this film was to try to create a situation for people which allowed them to be themselves and to say things without feeling they were going to be electrocuted for saying them. I encourage actors to make fools of themselves, to put themselves in a position where they may make asses of themselves, without feeling they're revealing things that will eventually be used against them. If any actor works for me, he knows by this time that I'll be very careful with him and that he'll give a good performance. I know that. I can feel that. I have that confidence that I can take anybody and have them give a good performance. Because I don't think there's anything to acting except expressing, being able to converse. I don't think it's very difficult. Only when the lines go against you, it's impossible for you to say them. Or that the character's inconsistent. Or that it's an impossible circumstance where everyone's so hostile that you don't feel like acting. I just stand there and try to create an atmosphere where they're not embarrassed. It's a performing art. With all its technical things, it's still the performer that leaps at you.

The director has to be able to make a great many people feel that they're working on something important – constantly, no matter what the disappointments are. If, at the critical point, I show disappointment, they're going to be disappointed. What we're working on is not a house or anything tangible. It's just something that you see up on a screen. And it disappears in a second. And it's only an opinion if you think it's good or not. You must charge the atmosphere constantly, and you must do it honestly.

It was critical that the crew emotionally supported the actors' performances (which is why Cassavetes would have resisted the current trend of isolating the actors with a remote video hook-up).

Every single person on the picture, in the crew, was an actor. It makes a great difference. Actors really understand actors, and they're really rooting for them. If something is very difficult for a performer, and the technicians are there, there's pressure to get on with it; the technicians want to do their job. But if the technicians are actors, they're not so concerned with being proficient in their technical responsibilities and they watch the performance, and they like it when it's good. There were times when George Sims or somebody shooting a scene would be laughing so hard that the camera would shake. This didn't make the actors

feel bad; it made them feel good. It made them feel terrific. A man sometimes is humorous with a certain person only because that person thinks he is funny. The minute that person doesn't think he's funny, there's an edge taken off the humor. The same way a woman thinks a man is attractive, or a man thinks a woman is attractive. The minute that doesn't any longer exist, there is a certain area of their relationship that's cut off. The people that are watching the actual filming and participating in it from the outside are the third character, and they have a definite effect on these performers.

Cassavetes' actors always said that he was the best audience they could possibly have, more vocal and responsive than any theater audience could possibly be. The best description of his directing would be to say that Cassavetes 'danced' with his actors as they played their scenes. One of his techniques, both before and during a take, was to play all the parts himself – gesticulating, moving along with the actors, acting out their gestures and facial expressions – out of genuine excitement at what they were doing. Most of the time his input was more physical than verbal. He empathetically played along with them as they played their scenes before the camera – moving with them as they moved, crouching when they crouched, leaning and turning when they did, inspiring them, spurring them on with his smiles and laughter, entertaining them with his gestures. Gena Rowlands has described how Cassavetes would often laugh with glee after a scene, not because it was comic, but simply out of sheer delight at what the actors had done.

Cassavetes would talk with the actor about the film and his character in general – telling him a story or asking him questions about his character – but almost always refused to give specific instructions on how to play his part. Directing was about helping the actor feel something for his character, not about teaching him to be a mimic. Over and over again, throughout the years, once the shoot had begun Cassavetes told his actors, 'It's *your* character now, not mine. *You* know more than I ever will about that character.'

I'm going to tell you *how to behave*? How you should *sit*? That's what it really boils down to: where to put your feet, where to put your hands. The actor is going to go off-base. He's not real for himself, because you wouldn't have said anything that convinced him. I wouldn't give you instructions in that sense. I wouldn't show you myself what gestures to make. That's absurd, it's limiting. Anyone can sit down and have a

Imaginatively inhabiting all of the characters, playing all of the parts, having fun with the role. Cassavetes showing O. G. Dunn (in the foreground bottom left) how to dance with Rowlands in *A Woman Under the Influence*.
© Michael Ferris

drink in a natural way if you don't force them to do things that they don't really feel.

It just seems impractical to me to say, 'You're a husband, this is what you are and you're a simp, and you wear glasses and you sit down in a certain way.' All he really is doing is parodying what I want him to do. But I'd rather take a good actor and say, 'How do you feel about this? What do you feel?' An actor must not mimic someone else's feelings. What is needed between the actor and director is a mutual understanding of human problems. The best thing is to get yourself heavily involved *with the problems of the characters*, and make it easy for the actors to reveal those things, to create and generate that excitement. It is better if the actor has an overall understanding of what he's doing or what you are trying to do. You can talk to him as you talk to a writer, as you would talk to another person about a character. You sit down and you tell the actor a story of who that character is and what he is. Then you can say to him, 'Hey, listen. When you are the parking lot attendant, and you come up, don't be hostile there.' He understands it in the simplest terms. So, that's a direction, but it's not a direction.

I help stimulate the actors' emotions but don't tell them how to depict them. I simply cannot direct. Every time I try, the scene stinks. I try, in every way I can, to share with the performers their confusion or their certainty about certain facts within the script. The acting was all personal – which is the point actors try to get to, where they can genuinely react to what they're saying. I'd never give you twenty pages of script to read either. What would you do with it? At night you'd go mad trying to learn your lines. No, I'd say come back tomorrow to play a scene, but in the meantime I'd talk to you. I'd try and make friends, not so that you'd feel at ease, but so that I could communicate with you at the same level as I would with someone I knew.

As an actor himself, Cassavetes was extraordinarily sensitive to the ways the director could unconsciously intimidate the performer.

We all want to express ourselves, to do something important. But a movie actor is up against the same problem a businessman faces – he doesn't want to offend, he wants to keep working, he wants to be well thought of, well liked, and he wants to be able to earn a livelihood. An actor doesn't work with his hands, he doesn't have a job or a trade that is guaranteed. If, as a director, you want something, the actor will see that. He's interested and concerned with what you want, and he's a slave to what you want. You can't divorce yourself from what the

director wants. It's impossible. Even if you hate him, you can go home and say, 'Ahhhhh, I wanted it done the other way,' but you know the minute he suggests a way, then that's it. No matter what kind of jerk he is. The director could be an absolute imbecile. If he says it, we are so trained and oriented that we've got to do that. Otherwise, we fail. In directions I try to break that down in actors. I don't want the actor to listen to me, because I know if I say something wrong, they'll listen to it. I mean, if you were acting in a movie right now and I was your director and I sat there, I don't have to say anything; you'll always check with me. I know that. I know that you want to please me in some strange sense that every actor wants to please a director. That's what we're trained for. I mean, somehow it's just, it's the form of motion pictures or stage or whatever, the director is the only person that the actor can communicate with. It doesn't mean that they like the director or even have respect for him. So no matter how cool an actor is, you're always aware that they want your approval.

It was important to guard against abstract analysis of the characters or situations at any point – during discussions of the script, rehearsals or filming. To explain an actor's character, motivation or feelings to him would almost guarantee a clichéd or mechanical interpretation of the role.

The director, if we have to use the word, mustn't organize and systematize things before the filming starts. I'm not interested in answering questions about the development of dramatic structure and the evolution of the characters. I don't want to take all the dramatic and psychological ideas that I'd had when I was writing the script and stick them in front of the camera. I absolutely refuse to judge the characters in my films and it is imperative that the characters neither analyze themselves nor others during the course of the filming. I refrain from leading people by their noses by not imposing a stereotyped moral vision on my work. When we're filming, I actually give up all my own ideas and preconceptions, so that I can devote myself exclusively to what's unfolding in front of me.

It was also critical for the director to not inadvertently homogenize the actors' various perspectives by imposing his own viewpoint on them. Cassavetes would tell his actors:

Work from *your own* point of view, for the good of your *character*. Fight for your character. Be true to your character. It's no good until

you are personally committed to the story. The actors must commit themselves to the people that are in the film, the characters they've chosen. Don't worry about the picture. The picture will take care of itself. That's *my* worry! I believe this: there are *only individuals*. Each man's mind is unique. There's no general philosophy in the film; it's just the result of the individual characters' thinking that's on the film. So in that sense the film is made by each person being an individual rather than a team member working for the benefit of the movie. Filmmaking to me is an investigation of what is in someone's mind. I believe in the validity of a person's inner desires. And I think those inner desires, whether they're ugly or beautiful, are pertinent to each of us and are probably the only things worth a damn. I want to put those inner desires on the screen so we can all look and think and feel and marvel at them.

The experience of most other films is one of feeling that you are immersed in the director's point of view; one of the most remarkable aspects of Cassavetes' work is the impression that each actor is functioning out of his or her own point of view.

I try to see that the actors express themselves individually. This is very important. The characters in all my films express themselves as *they* want to, not how *I* want them to. I absolutely refuse to control the direction a scene takes. I'm not there to give orders about how it should progress, and I don't express my opinions. I want the actors to express themselves according to their own dreams and emotions. Why would you put someone in a picture and tell them to be exactly like you would want them to be? In a sense, they'd become you, and only you, and not exhibit any of what their personal nature is. What these people are trying to do is more important than what I think. I believe in my players having complete emotional rights – after all, they're the only ones around working from pure emotion. I just allow the actors to develop the point of view of the character, of what that person really felt at that particular time. I try to portray, and clarify, the absolute emotional truth of people as they are. Most people lose track of the obligation of what the actor has to do, which is to express what he or she has learned about life. Actors should follow their own instincts rather than be a slave. This is a religious thing with me. When I'm working on a film, I forbid myself to have any opinions, and what's more, I really don't have any. I just want to record what people say, film what they do, intervening as little as possible or, in any case, trying never to film inside them, so to speak.

I want the actor to do it for *himself*. *Not* for me. You see, we work *independently* of each other with a great respect for what we are trying to say. The point is to really allow some individual to express an individual idea, thought or emotion. And then I take another person and let him or her have an individual idea or emotion. And that makes the conflict. Any conflict that would arise would be two people feeling absolutely different about the same emotion. So that you build a world of individual characters rather than characters that look all the same and where the lines can be interchangeable. I can't have the cumulative experience of all those people on the screen; it would be impossible for me. So I chose people to act in the film who were willing to reveal something about themselves as people in front of the camera.

Truth was not absolute and impersonal, but perspectival. George O'Halloran reports that during the writing process, when someone asked Cassavetes about the *next* scene or dramatic moment, the reply he gave over and over again was to say, 'Well, we'll *flip* it' – meaning switch from the men to the women, switch from one character's point of view to another's, reverse the perspective in some way. 'Flipping', changing perspectives, alternating points of view is the essence of Cassavetes' dramatic vision.

To tell the truth as *you* see it, incidentally, is not necessarily the truth. To tell the truth as *someone else* sees it is, to me, much more important and enlightening. It's what *these people* are thinking, what *they're* feeling. That's the drama of the piece. Everybody just refers to *their own* experiences, and they call *that* truth. Within each person lives *an image of himself* and the idea is for the actor to bring that out without violating it. I am a moralist in that I believe the greatest morality is to acknowledge the freedom of others; to be oneself and not to be in judgment of others who are different from you. My trouble is that I always see the other fellow's point of view! Sometimes I want to hit him for it – but at least I see it.

Where drama is generated by differences in points of view, it does not have to be generated by acts of lying, deceit, scheming or secrecy. This was the source of Cassavetes' high regard for Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* and Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery*. He felt that to play a character as hypocritical or insincere was not only to take an easy way through a part, but to tell a lie about life.

Outside of Lionel Rogosin and Shirley Clarke you can have all the independent filmmakers. In *Portrait of Jason* Shirley Clarke is a goddamn

genius. I hope people compare me with her someday. Shirley and Rogosin are really interested in their *subjects*, in finding out about what *they* think and feel.

Contemporary films were about ‘pretend’ pain and confusion – not real.

People patrol certain streets, patrol their house, and they know their way home. You somehow, drunk or sober or any other way, always find your way back to where you live. And when you cease to know the way home, things go wrong. And then you get detoured. And when you *can’t* find your way home, that’s when I consider it’s worth it to make a film. Because *that’s* interesting. People are interested in people that are *really* in trouble. Not pretending to be.

The word Cassavetes used to describe the process of allowing actors to express their own personal interpretation of a role was ‘improvisation’. Critics interpreted him to mean that his actors made up their lines; Cassavetes emphasized, however, that although lines might change slightly in the course of playing a scene, the improvisations he was interested in were the actors’ *emotional* inventions and discoveries.

People talk about improvisation as if I say, ‘Everybody does what they want,’ and I take a camera and a movie comes out. It doesn’t work that way. Anybody who knows anything about film knows that’s crazy. Unless you’re shooting a war maybe, and even there you have to look for action. There are no accidents in this sense of the specific. A camera breaking down, a location not available, me being broke – *those* are accidents! You stay up all night long and worry a film to death. To make the assumption that things just happen like that is amazing to me. It doesn’t happen that way with actors.

After *Shadows* I realized that things work better when they’re written down beforehand. There are fewer problems. Once the script is written, people can act more freely. Otherwise there’s too much tension. It’s too hard to deal with. What happens is that the audience gets the impression of improvisation because the actors interpret their roles themselves.

The actor decided where the silences, laughs, smiles, looks occurred – what the feelings were.

The *emotion* was improvisation. The lines were written. The *attitudes* were improvised. I give somebody some lines, and the interpretation must be their own. There was no verbal improvisation in *Faces*, none at

all. Gena's not an improvisational actress. She won't work that way. Improvisation came into the film by permitting each actor to interpret his role, rather than me interpreting the role as a director. So, in one sense, I would never know how an actor's behavior was going to come out. The words were written, but the way those words were delivered was a moment-by-moment thing. And if that interpretation means those lines must change, as they want to express themselves, then I'd change the lines or let them improvise their own lines. But not as a technical device. As a technique, improvisation is useless. As a way to achieve an individuality in a characterization, it's very, very constructive.

Gena, Ben, Peter or Seymour are like authors because they create a character through their knowledge of people and understanding of people. Gena's idea of prostitution is beautiful red lights, beautiful furniture and silk gowns, so that's what it becomes. By doing that I feel I'm gaining for the picture. There are more points of view than I could express. I never instructed anybody to laugh in *Faces*, but I never said 'Cut it out' either. I was advised to cut it out by some very intelligent people.

Events may be predetermined by the script; the emotional meanings are not.

There are a million things that you think you are going to do if you walk in and find your wife in bed with another man. Some guys say, 'I'll kill that son of a gun' or maybe 'I'd shoot 'em both' or 'I'd walk out, I'd never see her again,' and so on. You can sit and discuss it, but I don't think anyone really knows until it happens how he will react. John Marley was so close to his character we almost all became neurotic with him worrying about *how* it was going to happen for him, *how* he'd react to the situation when he finally had to face it. And as a man it shocked me that Lynn Carlin's character, a woman who had been faithful to her husband all her married life, would suddenly have an affair *this way*.

As evidence that his actors actually did make unique emotional contributions based on their own understandings, Cassavetes stated that *Faces* was humanized and complicated in ways he could never have foreseen when he began it. As specific illustrations of how an actor can do this without changing a single line, notice the tenderness of John Marley's relationship to Jeannie in the scene with Jackson and McCarthy, and his surprising vulnerability after they leave. Listen to the

gentle and reflective tones Val Avery employs in the scene in Jeannie's bedroom. Note the affecting innocence of Dorothy Gulliver's presentation of Florence. Or the sweetness and sensitivity that Gena Rowlands brings to the call-girl part.

I wrote this very bitter piece, and the actors took it and couldn't make it bitter. That was their insight, their discovery, their feeling for people. Despite the power of confusion that I am sometimes capable of, particularly when I would like the actor to discover things for himself, I couldn't erase a certain gentle humanness from these actors, to make them as hard as the characters they played might have been. They were so much better than the original concept that they made the picture quite wonderful. And I fell in love with actors, because my own hostility and my own Greekness came out in the picture, and they softened it and they made it human.

The freshness of the performances was achieved by minimizing rehearsal and encouraging the actors to experiment with new ways of playing during the take.

We had the script, but still we didn't stick to the scenes. They weren't improvised, but they were changed on the spot and they were not rehearsed in a lot of instances. I believe in actors working by themselves. Working, coming in with it because it gives them the feeling that they've got to do it the first time, do you know? Each time, each take, is the first time because we haven't rehearsed it to death so that the actors are too comfortable and the words go over their head. So that you can be free to make the 'wrong' discoveries and some dumb director doesn't tell you which discoveries to make. And I think that gives it the feeling of an improvisational quality.

One of the most exciting aspects of Cassavetes' shoots was that the script wasn't cast in concrete. Members of the crew only half-facetiously used to say it was fun to come in every day, because you never really knew what was going to be in that day's scenes. Cassavetes rewrote parts of scenes as he went along, based on things that he discovered during the previous day's filming. He would also never hesitate to call a break and go off to a corner to rewrite something if a moment wasn't working.

Usually I find that if a scene doesn't play with very good actors, it means that there's something wrong with the writing. Because why else would

an actor be able to play one scene very, very well and then in another fall down? There might be something wrong with the directing, but there's very rarely anything wrong with the actors, if given half a chance. I like actors, and I depend on them a lot. I depend on them to think. And to be honest. And to say, 'That never would happen to me, I don't believe it.' And to try to decipher what is their own defense and what is a real irregularity in the character's behavioral pattern. The set is very, very disciplined. Preparation is everything. In a film, no one can be free. But once you begin, you free the actors to their own behavior. I depend on them to take away literary quality.

The truth of actors' feelings was used to test the truth of the work. John Marley and Seymour Cassel, in effect, helped to 'write' *Faces*' ending. As was usual, the final scenes were not worked out until the shoot was almost done. Cassavetes told Cassel he wanted him to 'squeeze by Marley' on the stairs as he came up to the bedroom. Cassel expressed shock and said, 'I'm not going past that guy. I'd be too afraid to. I'd rather take my chances running across the roof and jumping.' Cassavetes then turned to Marley. When he asked him how he would really respond if he had lived through this series of events, culminating with his wife telling him she hates her life and doesn't love him, Marley said he would leave, since 'I would not put up with that shit for more than a minute.' Cassavetes privately disagreed with the conclusion, but instead of rejecting it outright, said, 'OK. Let's try it. Let's see if it works. Let's do a rehearsal right now.' After Marley got slapped by Carlin, he headed down the stairs and out of the house but only got as far as the kitchen before he turned around. The rehearsal revealed an ending very close to the one Cassavetes finally used.

As in *Shadows*, and as would be the case in all of his subsequent films, *Faces*' actors were encouraged to draw on the deepest aspects of their personalities and attitudes in their playing. Cassavetes' secret to making this work was to operate in such a deep way that the actors didn't realize what was going on. Their performances became explorations of parts of themselves they didn't know were there, and which would only be discovered later, if ever. The characters Cassavetes created were sufficiently different from the actors in superficial respects that the actors didn't recognize the similarity to themselves, which meant that they played their roles unselfconsciously and unguardedly. But, at the same time, the roles tapped into deep structures of feeling and personality that enriched their performances and made them profoundly revealing.

As Cassavetes mentioned above, Seymour Cassel did follow women home and make love to them (and had gotten into a lot of trouble because of it). He was a kind of 'beach boy', and aspects of Cassel's personality and attitudes deeply informed the character of Chettie. Lynn Carlin played a housewife with problems and, at the point she made *Faces*, she herself had 'some severe personal problems' (in Al Ruban's words). Her marriage was falling apart; she had lost her job; and she had a lot of mixed feelings (both positive and negative) about her life and the men she knew, even as she still maintained a degree of innocence that contrasted with the externals of her situation. Cassavetes got her to draw on her pains, confusions and vulnerability in her portrayal of Maria. Similarly, Cassavetes drew on parts of Val Avery that Avery himself didn't understand to deepen his performance of McCarthy. Avery's characteristic bluster and swagger – and the vulnerability that the big-talk covered up – became his character. (Avery the person is the very definition of a lamb in wolf's clothing – hiding his genuine gentleness under a gruff exterior.) As a comic illustration of the overlap of life and art, at one point in the shoot Avery invited Cassavetes to 'go outside and fight' when he got upset with him, exactly the same way his character does with Richard Forst.

Cassavetes similarly drew on aspects of John Marley's personality. As a seasoned 'pro', Marley *did* have a high opinion of himself and felt superior to the less experienced actors – particularly the beginner, Carlin. He intimidated her, patronized her and criticized her acting. He was occasionally testy when Cassavetes asked for another take (feeling that *his* performance had been good enough). Cassavetes knew not to ignore this dynamic but to use it to enhance Marley's performance as a high-powered businessman and to energize his acted relationship with Carlin. (By way of contrast, Marley's very different feelings towards Gena Rowlands, his respect for her as an actress and a person, are drawn on in the altogether more responsive performance he gives when he is playing with her.)

Lynn had not acted before and when she came on she wasn't really a very good actress. She went home with her mother and her mother *cued* her on her lines. And I remember John Marley saying, '*Jesus, John! Christ!* We're going to put years of our life into this damn thing and this girl can't do this!' And she did read lines like this [saying in a stilted tone]: 'Oh, hel-lo! How *are* you?' And I remember looking at him and thinking, and I had never thought of the fact that she was *bad*. I never dreamed that she was bad, only that she would be better. Only that this

was just the first stage. And yet I realized that it was very difficult for him, so I had to fix him, not her. So I said, 'She's *great*. You're in trouble.' And he got furious with me, and that made it right because he had no ally there to lean on and then I went to Lynn and said, 'Lynn, he *hates* you! This man hates you. And there's only one way you can save yourself.' And she says, 'Tell me! Tell me!' [Laughs.] 'Hate him back!' [Laughs.] Maybe that's chicanery, but it was true. It was true for the moment. The minute they played a scene well together, they loved each other. The biggest hang-up was getting her over the idea of making a movie. After that, everything she did was her own.

When Carlin the rank amateur was allowed to vie for importance with an established actor like Marley, or the women in the later scenes were treated as being equal to Cassel in narrative importance, no single figure is allowed to dominate a scene visually or control it emotionally. Cassavetes cultivated a certain degree of 'competitiveness' among his actors in the service of a non-competitive and egalitarian vision of experience. There was no 'star'. Even the most minor characters were accorded at least a few big scenes and close-ups.

The reactions to leading performers were not modulated. In other words, if somebody had a smaller part he didn't have to bend to the film's superstar role and didn't have to listen to the hero's sad story. He could do what his character would really do, without fear of offending the main actor – who keeps a tight rein, in commercial filmmaking, on everything happening in his scenes. There becomes a code of helping each other, at the same time competing with each other, using that envy that is indigenous to all actors, you know, letting them compete out of feeling for the quality of the person they're portraying. A person in our picture is judged more as a person than as a performer – from the point of view that they have to add something as people.

Though Cassavetes never talked about it publicly, the use of amateurs frequently created problems, which is why some performances had to be cut out of the film. Ted Allan, Sam Shaw and Cassavetes' father had cameos in several of Cassavetes' films, but they were so bad that they couldn't be used. In *Minnie and Moskowitz*, Don Siegel's mother played a waitress part that Cassavetes was not able to use. In *Husbands*, Noelle Kao was difficult to work with. In *A Woman Under the Influence*, Christina Grisanti, who plays Maria, kept making faces, looking into the camera and spoiling scenes, or not paying attention and drifting off;

and Eddie Shaw irritated Cassavetes and everyone else on the crew with non-stop questions about how he should play his role. However, at other times, as in his mother's performances in other films and Lynn Carlin's performance here, the use of amateurs paid off.

The amateur has no preconceived notions of how it should be done; the professional has: he's gone to school, learned techniques, knows what will work – his choices, his selections, are usually better. The amateur has no selection: it's a very pure thing. So the professional gets a little jealous while the amateur begins to pick up a few things. Somewhere in the course of the film they come together and aid each other: the professional takes purity from the amateur, and the amateur takes on a certain amount of professionalism. The professionals set the pace for everyone else so that all actors function the same way on the set. That's why I like to mix professionals with amateurs in my films: amateurs work amazingly hard. What professionals can give amateurs in the way of help, amateurs can give professionals in the way of inspiration. I think every single person in the world can act. They may not be Garbo, but they can empathize with a character. They don't need any skill except for living. If he can make someone laugh, or feel emotion in life, he can do it on the screen.

While Hollywood was devoted to presenting 'smooth' or 'polished' performances, Cassavetes was convinced that mistakes and embarrassing moments contributed to the truth.

When a scene plays awkwardly or something goes wrong, I don't criticize it, change it or call 'cut'. I look at it and say, all right, it's not exactly the right reading, but life doesn't always have the right meaning. We stutter, we stammer through life. We sometimes say things we're sorry for later. We make fools of ourselves constantly. In life this is frowned upon, but in a movie this is revealing. The mistakes that you make in your own life, in your own personality, are assets on the film. So if I can just convince somebody not to clean themselves up, and not to be someone they're not and just be what they are in a given circumstance, that's all that acting is to me. It's like Wallace Beery with his tyrannical moods. I'm not sure we'd like him in person, but on screen we realize, 'That's the way I've always felt but I haven't had the courage to behave that way.' That's why there's no personal embarrassment to participating with people that behave out of keeping with society's rules and regulations.

Cassavetes provided minimal direction.

I would write it down and then I'd stay away from it so that the actor's intentions or additions could come clear. I allow the man, the actor, the actress, to be in touch with themselves and to draw on it. If the script is right, I don't think that they need any direction at all except their own. I very rarely tell an actor what to do. Being an actor I know well enough that it's presumptuous to tell a person how he or she should behave in a particular situation. I do like to place the actor in a controlled situation where the only way the person can react is in an emotional manner. So the characters only partake in what I consider emotional improvisation within the confines of a given situation. They don't create the situation but strive to realize the emotional complexities that create a rich and compelling character. The actor is left alone to handle the problem. I expect the actor to give me *his* interpretation. Obviously, if he is lazy or doesn't take his part seriously, then I get out my knife, my gun, my fist, and I kill him! I believe I have a gift as a director, being able to create an atmosphere in which people can act naturally in any given situation. I don't try and control the scene, which is often confused, anarchic, with the actors sometimes in league against me! If the actors feel that we need to try something that hasn't been thought of before they tell me, 'Go away, John.'

Though Cassavetes would almost never tell an actor what he wanted, he wouldn't hesitate to tell him what he *didn't* want. He gave the actor a lot of room, but didn't hesitate to intervene if he didn't like what he was seeing. The result was that he could be supportive and demanding at the same time.

I was brutal to the actors. Because I had to get it, to me it was really the most important thing. I insisted on the characters revealing themselves much more obviously than characters usually would reveal themselves in any other movie. I'm not the most articulate man in the world. Yet I had to say to my cast, 'Listen, we've got to go further and we've got to go underneath.' I was giving these absolutely amateurish directions. I would stand there like some tyrant shouting encouragement and orders. Everyone wanted to quit, yet waited with great faith and apprehension for this miracle to take place.

When he saw a problem, Cassavetes would typically ask the actor a question: 'Is that the way *you* would talk/ behave in that situation?' 'Do you *really* feel that way?' 'Is that an *honest* reaction?' 'Is that *you*?' He also had his moments of exasperation, when he spoke more forth-

rightly: 'That's bullshit!' 'It's not *real*!' 'Cut it out.' 'Be *yourself*!' Or, as Lynn Carlin says he once told her, 'You're acting like a robot.'

I suppose at times I trick actors, but it goes beyond that. I am prepared to kill any actor that won't reveal himself. Someone has to watch over the actors to make sure they express themselves completely and honestly. I try to understand what the actors are trying to express, and I watch over the clarity of their expression. I'm present to help them take full responsibility for what they really want to do and feel, and to force them to criticize themselves and evaluate the quality of their work. I think I work freely, but you have to define what freedom is in terms of the actors. If freedom is being an asshole and accepting it and just going on and saying words that don't mean anything to you, suiting the story and throwing away anything that you believe in, I won't allow him to do that. I can only stand for one thing – to be direct, to never lie and to let the actors put it on the screen as they feel it, as they want to do it. Where I'm brutal is when it gets away from that – I'd probably kill somebody for getting away from that. I'm tougher than a lot of directors are on actors because I expect them to care. I expect them to come there with some ideas. Not defensive ideas but ideas really for the character. If they don't, I don't really want them around. I'll cut them out of the film. It doesn't take a genius to recognize it when it's brilliant. It takes somebody who's stupid to compromise on something when it's not brilliant.

Any attempt to play in a stereotypical or formulaic way – whether positive or negative – was an avoidance of truth. Cuteness, charm, sweetness, mugging, showboating – all of the standard actorly 'tricks' – were forms of timidity.

Those actors were fantastic because they really put themselves up. They said I'm not going to be a 'hero' in any sense of the word, or choose one point of view or the other – the 'hero' or the 'anti-hero'. They just let things happen as they happened. At times it was extremely painful for the actors, because the process that we used was to allow yourself the humiliation of living, to reveal yourself, not to hold it in. In revealing yourself, you can't do this when you're told, 'Reveal yourself in this way only' – because there's no real revelation in that. So we let it go, and it was terribly exciting and thrilling every single day for everyone, from the smallest part to the largest part, because no one was condemned to playing a heavy or acting in any manner outside of the manner they wanted to behave in.

Most movies we see are so full of characters programmed to give limited responses. You can't trust those characters. They're not real people. You can *trust* my characters. Whatever else they are – and they're not always nice – at least they're upfront. They don't hide anything. They scream, laugh, cry, jump around and get drunk. But our society makes people into hidden people – stiff upper lip, keep quiet, don't show it. I suppose if there is any revolutionary aspect to my films it's that I want to say I don't approve of this.

'Acting' was something else to guard against. Seymour Cassel's first scene in the film was wrapped after only minutes three days in a row, because Cassel was 'acting' – doing flashy little moves. His performance was unresponsive and insensitive.

Seymour's first scene was with the ladies when they take him home from a go-go bar. He was very tight. He said a line and I said, 'It's a wrap, let's not shoot today.' He was going crazy. I wanted him to. He was a close friend and I didn't want him looking at me for his salvation. Seymour's a bright guy who can use his own mind. I knew what had happened. For three months, while Cassel worked on the crew, all he had done was think about how to play his part. He had gotten it down pat. It was all jukes and gestures. Fake. On the third day some funny incident happened and Seymour and the ladies started laughing and they went on completely without me, which was great. My best actors are not 'good actors' – that's a lot of bullshit. There's no such thing as a 'good actor'. What it is is an extension of life. How you're capable of performing in your life, that's how you're capable of performing on the screen. Everything else is just a failure to accomplish that.

Cassavetes was excellent at 'reading' actors. He played on their personalities and emotions, pushing their buttons to elicit something special from them. Val Avery is an example of an actor Cassavetes would deliberately argue with and upset on occasion to get an edge into his performance.

A director has to be an animal trainer. He can work with kindness or he can work without kindness; each situation demands a different approach. He must con, cajole, lie. That is the director's function. He is not an honest person and an actor knows it, but as long as they get the results together it doesn't matter. You need to play with spirits and souls and working conditions and finances and many other things to get there.

As an actor himself, Cassavetes was a master at ‘making a scene’ to change the mood or get emotions into the place he wanted them. He adapted his technique to the needs of the individual actor. Rowlands once said that ‘some actors need to be loved, others antagonized and others ignored’. Cassavetes would adapt his directing method to the particular emotional needs of the actor and the scene. It wasn’t always pretty. There were screams and fights, stares and enraged silences. Cassavetes did whatever it took: sometimes gentleness was the way to do it; at other times it might take harshness. He might make a scene by picking a fight with a crew member to take the pressure off an actor; he might unexpectedly call off the production for the day and try again the next day.

Lynn Carlin talks about feeling safe and protected, but also about being threatened, bewildered or frightened at other moments. To create a feeling of desolation, just seconds before the start of one take, Cassavetes suddenly slapped her face, then shouted: ‘Don’t cry! Don’t you *dare* cry!’ He also stepped in and personally slapped her around in the bedroom scene when he thought Cassel wasn’t hitting her hard enough. Similarly, in Marley’s final scene with Carlin, when Marley was being gentle with her because she was pregnant, Cassavetes stepped in and threw her up across the hallway himself (which is why you can’t see who is doing it in the final print). Another time, he chased her with a butcher’s knife. It was not a game and no one was laughing. The crew was shocked into silence at Cassavetes’ rage on several such occasions, and more than once one of them attempted to intervene and stop what was going on. McEndree talks about running in from another room, where he was monitoring the sound, to restrain Cassavetes at one point. Cassavetes later said that he would have gone even further some of these times; all that prevented him was that he felt the crew turning against him and was afraid they would refuse to go on with the shoot.

I took her once, I was going to kill her, had my hands around her throat. The crew had me like this. I said, ‘Where is the kitchen knife?’ I mean, there isn’t anything that you shouldn’t be able to do to get people to do the kind of work that they need to do. They know if it comes from kindness or sweetness. Lynn probably feels that I helped her a great deal. I really didn’t. I was very tough with her, but not about acting. I was tough because I knew she was dependent upon me. So I was tough not to give her a damn thing, so that she had to think for herself. She had to be a person who was almost tyrannical in her desire to express what *she* wanted. Only what she wanted. How could she do that by being a

polite lady? It was only when she started to do things herself that real things began to happen. That was the thrill; that's the game. That's what it is to express a person. Outside of that, what are you doing? Being a mimic.

Cassavetes was equally the master of the madcap. In the dinner-table scene with Carlin and Marley, Cassavetes sneaked under the table in a few of the takes while the camera was running and tickled Carlin. (Looking back on it years later, Carlin significantly observed, 'I wonder back then if I knew I had that laugh; I think we discovered it together.') Clowning around was not only deeply ingrained in Cassavetes' personality, but was a way of relaxing the actor or forcing him out of a stuck emotional place. As another illustration of the kind of fraternity-brother pranks that pervaded the shoot, in the 'getaway' scene Cassavetes tricked Seymour Cassel into running across the roof of his house, jumping a twelve-foot wall and running down his street, ten or twelve times in succession under the pretext of needing retakes, when he had in fact gotten the shot the first time. After Cassel almost passed out after the final take, Cassavetes and the cameraman broke up with laughter and revealed the ruse.

Over the years virtually all of Cassavetes' actors could tell stories about the nutty things he did to loosen them up. Peter Falk has described takes of certain scenes in *Husbands*, when in the middle of a shot, Cassavetes would suddenly jump out from behind the camera, run into the scene and say or do something crazy, then dart off-camera again; or would walk past the actors 'with a banana in his butt' while filming was going on to change the mood. In Falk's final scene in the rain, for example, Cassavetes ran ahead of him just off-camera, waving his hands, laughing and jumping up and down to keep up the drenched actor's spirits. Jon Voight describes a moment when, as he was feeling tense and uncomfortable during a rehearsal of the play version of *Love Streams*, Cassavetes suddenly climbed up on a table in front of him and lay down on his back and played a dead chicken. Voight said it changed how he played the scene forever.

Though Cassavetes would almost never give actors specific actions to perform, he would frequently give them general indications of moods or feelings. When Cassel and Carlin did an overly passionate take of their bedroom kiss the first time it was filmed, he took Carlin aside and told her, 'I said *kiss* him! You don't have to *swallow* him!' Then, playing on racial divisions of the era, he asked her, 'Have you ever kissed a Negro? Pretend he's a Negro. Smell him. *Look* at his skin. *Study* it.' Similarly,

immediately before filming the moment that follows where Seymour is getting undressed prior to making love with Maria, he said to Cassel, 'I don't want it to be too clichéd, too romantic. Is there a funny song you can sing?' Cassel himself came up with the song 'Put on the Red Meat, Baby' and the actions, but Cassavetes had set the comic tone and playful mood.

Cassavetes could also be sly. Carlin later speculated that some of Maria's lines about being childless and some of Forst's about his feelings of unhappiness and frustration (all cut from the final film) were in the script with no intention of ever being used. They were there for their benefit as actors. Falk has expressed similar sentiments about certain lines in *A Woman Under the Influence* (e.g. when it was shot, his conversation in the truck with Eddie referred to the day Mabel 'went out on the street naked to sell lottery tickets'). When he saw the final edit, Falk concluded that the line was there not for the audience but for *him*, to inflect his performance in the rest of the film.

Cassavetes could also sow the seeds of an interpretation of a scene without explicitly dictating it. In the scene in which Richard is telling jokes in bed with Maria, Cassavetes told Carlin, 'You don't have to laugh at his jokes you know' – hinting at the emotional distance between them without forcing it. (For the record, this laugh scene was one of a small number of scenes that Cassavetes brought his actors back to reshoot in 1967.) By not telling the actor what to do but putting him in a place to discover it for himself, Cassavetes, like any good teacher, allowed the actor emotional ownership of his discoveries.

The women in the film, most of whom were much less experienced theatrically than the men, were intimidated by the shoot and presented a special set of problems. Cassavetes played games to relax them, taking particular care to reassure Dorothy Gulliver (Florence), who was nervous because of her age and the fact that she hadn't acted in more than twenty years. At one point he photographed a whole magazine of Gulliver simply sitting in a chair, while the other women interacted, to put her at ease with the process of being filmed and to demonstrate to her how important she was.

I'd tell them you can chase me for thirty minutes, or two hours, or whatever you say, and if you catch me, darling, I'm yours! I had those four women in that house and I'd get them drunk and think, '*I'll drive these women so craaaazzzzzyyyy!*' Another time, I sat Dorothy Gulliver down and said, 'Can you do ten minutes with a chair? Just you and a chair?'

Gulliver's personality and experience were fairly close to those of the character she played: an older woman who had not realized her youthful dreams. As an illustration of how Cassavetes would draw on an actor's feelings to enrich a performance, in the scene in which Chettie has his intimate moment with Florence prior to driving her home, the script did not dictate Chettie's response to her request to be kissed, and Cassavetes took Cassel aside and whispered in his ear that it was up to him whether he kissed her or not. But he added that if Cassel did kiss her (which he does), he should 'be gentle'. Cassavetes empowered Cassel to feel that he was making his own independent decision and giving his own emotional coloration to the moment, even as he more or less steered things in that direction, and used the spontaneity of the kiss to release a deeply sincere response in Gulliver.

Another way Cassavetes kept the actors in the moment, really responding, looking and listening, was to call out slight changes in a scene as it was being played. Cassavetes talked to his actors as he filmed them – calling out redirections, suggestions or encouragement in mid-scene – sometimes to reassure them, at other times to force them out of a pattern, shake up their rhythms or introduce an odd or eccentric pacing. Sometimes his enthusiasm backfired.

In shooting parts of *Faces* I had this terrible habit of speaking over the soundtrack, almost like being in a movie audience. I had so much total faith in what John Marley was doing in that scene where he discovers he's been cuckolded. Marley sees his own youth running away when he makes this discovery. It struck everyone as funny. The sudden realization that you are a fool; it's terrible for yourself, but awfully amusing for other people. So John Marley was standing there and I kept saying, 'Don't look at her, don't look at her, don't look at her,' and finally Marley yells, 'For Chrissake, John, you blew the whole goddamn thing. I can't think when you're talking constantly in a stream!' And I hadn't been aware that I was speaking, and then everybody jumped on me and told me that I'd been talking all through the picture. [Laughs.] Later on I paid in the editing when I had to clean up the crap I'd put on the soundtrack!

Since Cassavetes worked with actors he knew personally, he had the luxury of being able to ask them to do personal 'bits' that they were fond of. The stripper's ditty that Gena Rowlands does near the start of the film was something she used to do in the fifties. The bit that Richard and Freddie say they 'used to do in college' was something that Cassavetes

and Fred Draper actually did when they were AADA roommates. The ‘mechanical man’ routine Seymour Cassel does, as well as most of the songs he sings, were things he and Cassavetes used to do when they went out drinking. (In typical Cassavetes fashion, the ‘mechanical man’ routine came into the film in the middle of a take when Cassavetes saw the scene getting too serious and abstract and unexpectedly yelled out to Cassel to do it while the camera was rolling.) For the record, the reason the film has so little outside music is that Cassavetes had intended to use the music of Jimmy Reid but got into an argument with him and had to rely on Cassel’s singing to fill in – making Cassel’s songs the only moments in the film that were ‘improvised’ in the ordinary sense of the word. One of Cassavetes’ most common directions to an actor in this and his other work would be something to the effect of, ‘Do that thing you did when I was over your house last weekend.’

Cassavetes was relentless in his quest for ‘true’ performances.

We did many, many takes on almost every scene – from the beginning of straight acting to where we arrived was a long time in between. *Shadows* dealt with youth, and there is no restriction on youth. But *Faces* deals with middle age, and in middle age there are restrictions. There is restriction in behavior. A totally free behavior would become an indulgence in a picture like this, it would become destructive. So that to reveal middle age in all its complexities and simplicity and frustration, it must be more rigid, even in the acting itself. At least the first time that we did it, it had to be rigid. And after a month of shooting we could really relax, much more than in the beginning. I would say that practically the whole first month of the filming was thrown out. The terrible part was that they were very good actors to begin with and their performances were very good. Then it became a self-imposed discipline. The actors disciplined themselves to stay close to their own intentions, without too much variance.

Cassavetes always said that film was the one aspect of a shoot that you should never economize on, and he was willing to shoot as much footage as it took to capture something special on film.

You get new areas of discovery. There is really no formula you can go with and by the very nature of that, doing it purely, certain things will be wonderful, certain things unbearable. Directors tend to say, ‘You can have absolute freedom,’ and then there reaches a point where nothing really works, and they’ll retract and say, ‘Well, I’ve given you ample opportunity.’ But if you have the courage to go further than that, and

further, everything suddenly starts to gel and you have more than just good separate performances; you have an ensemble. You couldn't possibly do this in a commercial set-up, simply because there reaches a point where a thing doesn't work, and from the crew to the people in the production to the front office, everyone becomes panicked that it's not working, and that simple expression of displeasure makes you give up. It makes the actors give up. A lot of directors say, 'Well, let's work freely.' And they get to a certain point where it's failing. That's a crisis. Because it may be a day or two away. Or it may not be close. The oil may not be right on the surface. But it's there. If you believe it's there, it'll always be there for you. It took enormous, one hundred per cent enthusiasm on the part of the crew and the producers and myself to really let it go, no matter what happened. To believe that it was going to happen and feel we could do this.

One interaction involving Freddie, Richard and Jeannie just after they arrive at Jeannie's apartment was shot fifty-two times in full eleven-minute takes with two cameras running simultaneously. Though Cassavetes puts a positive spin on the story when he tells it below, the fact is that after more than twenty hours of film had been shot he was still not satisfied with the result, and the scene was never used.

I spent two weeks on one scene and it just wouldn't go. I didn't know what was wrong. We had the same actors, the same situations, yet it didn't work. Finally, I went to the actors, who were having a lunch break, and I told them, 'I think this scene is really terrible.' They threw down their sandwiches and coffee cups and told me together, 'Finally, you've come to the same conclusion we did a week and a half ago!' [Laughs.] So we sat down and tried to figure out how to do it.

Ironically enough, Cassavetes' greatest struggles were with his own wife. Rowlands was tired and nauseous throughout most of the shoot (particularly the scenes in which she had to jump around or dance) due to her pregnancy and had an extremely difficult time adjusting to her husband being her director. She subsequently described the *Faces* shoot as the most difficult she ever acted in. Cassavetes said he couldn't understand why they fought so much.

I was confused about why we would get along so badly. I mean, I don't always see the right things, but I can't help but feel that I know Gena very well. So I'll goad her and push her and be brutal and scream at her, and she'll walk away angry and won't take it from me, and when we get

outside she'll say, 'Wait'll I get you at home. Wait'll I get you home. I'll take this shit here but not at home.' And we go home and it's really basically forgotten because we have other things that interest us: a crazy household and a totally different way of life that doesn't fit with the work. But this shoot was different. She was really upset.

George Sims operated the 'A' camera throughout the shoot, and Cassavetes and others took turns with the 'B'. The routine (which would be maintained in most of Cassavetes' subsequent work) would be that the principal cameraman would shoot the master shots and follow the main action, while the second cameraman would pick up the 'accents', that is to say, whatever sparked Cassavetes' interest – anything from a tight close-up on the main character's face to the activity of a character entirely outside the main action of a scene.

I rarely look through the camera, so the operator really has to get on with it. I say, 'This is what I'm after; what do you think?' So he has an opportunity to fulfill himself creatively and have total responsibility. We try to anticipate everything, but it always turns out different than we planned. We'd say to the cameraman, 'Do this.' But the actors play so freely there's no way we can do what we planned. The operator would go crazy. So he might as well relax and follow the pace of the actors instead of what we planned on. All I can say in advance is, 'This is what will probably happen. Here's where the camera should go. Use this lens and make sure you're in the light. Then go ahead and do the best you can.' And the camera *is* able to follow.

George Sims ended up being the main operator because he could handle the Eclair and the conditions that prevailed better than anyone else. Almost everyone on *Faces* shot, but it was overwhelmingly Sims' camera head. George has such a tremendous contained energy and physical strength and great sensitivity to what he's shooting.

Al Ruban, who did lighting, came up with the idea of changing the film stock to suit the mood and Cassavetes went along with it.

We were using different stock on every scene. For instance, where they all come into Jeannie's apartment, the lighting man said, 'Look, it's five o'clock in the afternoon and it's always grainy to me. Do you mind if I shoot it that way?' So he lit it purposely that way to get the grainy feeling of that time in the afternoon, when you've got a few drinks in you. The morning after should be crisp and kind of light and beautiful, so he used a different stock, Plus-X Reversal. We shot on Tri-X Reversal for

the nightclub scenes. And on the final sequences in the house we had to get a very natural feeling, so we used Double-X and available light. At night in the living room we had to use Four-X because, well, I'm a maniac: I shoot for the actors and not the technicians.

Faces was just as much a home-movie during post-production as during filming. It was edited on two vertical Movicolas in Cassavetes' converted carport (which would become his home office in later years). Just as he would change things during the shoot depending on how a scene was playing, Cassavetes used the editing process as an opportunity to learn from his footage and discover things as he went along – even during the shoot itself. While *Faces* was being shot in the evenings, during the days McEndree did a rough edit of the rushes from the previous day's work. Cassavetes would study it before that night's shooting and frequently take a scene in an entirely different direction because of something he saw in the footage. Cassavetes made a film the way a sculptor cuts stone or a writer writes a novel – responding to the previous day's work, discovering new directions and possibilities, allowing his material to teach him. The way Cassavetes put it was to say that the more he worked on the film, the more possibilities he saw in it.

When we started this film none of us really had very much to say. And now, here, it took us over three years to make *Faces*, and at the end of the film we have many things to say! It only shows that creativity, that solid creativity, no matter what it is, creates more things, more ideas. It doesn't dissipate itself in one.

In the end, Cassavetes printed more than 250,000 feet – or 115 hours – of 16mm film. Since the final movie is approximately 5,000 feet or two hours and ten minutes in length, that means he had a shooting ratio of fifty to one – an astonishing ratio, since a typical Hollywood film generally runs around eight or ten to one, or less; and even the most 'over-shot' documentary only runs twenty or thirty to one at most.

His strategy of massive overshooting (which would be the rule on every one of his non-studio productions) was one of the things that allowed him enormous room for the creative reorganization of his own footage. He was able to reshape the film in the editing room, making wholesale changes in every aspect of it in the light of what the film itself revealed to him as he worked on it.

The editing room becomes *my* improvisation! It's my job to retain all the individual characteristics they put into the thing – which is a total

impossibility, of course, and explains why I've spent ten years of my life in editing rooms – and also to make the film work as a whole. It's a much more difficult way to work than a movie where you have decided in advance how everyone is going to play their parts, though, and one more prone to failure, but the results can be terrifyingly great.

Though in hindsight it's easy to romanticize Cassavetes' 'outlaw' home-movie making, a number of conflicts, disagreements and problems cropped up along the way. Some of those involving the actors have already been touched on. There were others that involved the crew. Since everyone worked on a volunteer basis, many of the individuals involved underwent serious personal hardships, to the point of being forced to leave the project at various points. Maurice McEndree and Al Ruban were the two men who, beside Cassavetes, worked longest on the film. (McEndree did sound and Ruban did lights during the shoot, and both men took turns editing.) Both had to leave their wives and children and give up paying jobs for more than a year at a time. Both also had to interrupt their work on the film to go off and do other jobs from time to time to earn enough money to continue.

The result of Cassavetes' volunteer system (with a lot of the editing being farmed out to anyone who happened to be available in any given month) was that post-production not only took three or four times as long as it normally would have, but it had to be scrapped and redone several times. Cassavetes would go off to act in a film while one person would edit; then that person would leave and someone else would edit in a different style or rhythm; then Cassavetes would return (perhaps after being away for weeks on location), object to what had been done and force the edit to be redone, perhaps by a third or a fourth person – or would re-do it himself. The result was a hodgepodge so confused that at one point Larry Shaw was asked to take photographs of the Movieola images of various scenes so that Cassavetes could assemble a storyboard to try to organize the footage and match shots; and at another point, more than a year and a half into the edit, the entire assembly was broken down and started again from scratch. Given the circumstances, it is not surprising that post-production took three years.

There were also many personal fights and rivalries – some involving Cassavetes and others between crew members who didn't get along. Cassavetes fueled many of them by playing favorites or pitting people against each other. Some took place during the shoot, others during the post-production process. In the spring of 1967, when McEndree and

Cassavetes were on location acting in *Devil's Angels*, Cassavetes had a falling out with him. Although at that point McEndree had devoted more than two years of his life to *Faces*, leaving his own family on a farm in Kansas while he worked on the film day and night, first in Los Angeles and subsequently in London (while Cassavetes acted in *Rosemary's Baby*), Cassavetes summarily informed him that he was off the film. (As an insight into the way Cassavetes' mind worked, when his problems with McEndree surfaced during the shoot, he told him that they should 'use' their disagreement to deepen their acting in *Devil's Angels*.)

Once the *Devil's Angels* shoot was concluded, Cassavetes made McEndree get his own replacement, asking him to call up Ruban and talk him into coming out to finish the edit. When Ruban arrived on the scene, he proceeded to attempt to turn Cassavetes against McEndree even more in order to solidify his own position as editor and producer. A year later, when the credits were being assigned, there were additional struggles over how they would be apportioned between Ruban and McEndree, and Cassavetes was threatened with a lawsuit by one of the men.

The use of 16mm in itself created an editing nightmare.

I used 16 because it was much cheaper. But much more difficult to edit. One of the reasons I wouldn't do any more films that way is because I can't think of 16mm over a long, extended period of time again. The film breaks, tears, gets old. And the sprockets tear and you spend half of your cutting time repairing sprockets. You have to be almost like in the Army, where you have no mentality of your own. You have to just divorce yourself from all that and think, 'Sprockets. All right, I've got eight thousand sprockets to repair.'

Cassavetes didn't have enough space to store the amount of footage he had. Some was in bins. But much of it was in an upstairs bedroom (which seven-year-old Nick slept in) or strewn in spaghetti heaps on the floor of the carport. At a particularly low point, more than a year into the edit, Lady Rowlands' pet poodle defecated on a pile of film when no one was around, stripping off the emulsion and turning it into clear leader. Cassavetes reportedly carried armloads into the bathroom to wash it off, giggling 'Even dogs are film critics.'

Cassavetes did not have enough money to transfer the sound until after the shoot was complete, and in the late summer of 1965, to his shock, he discovered that the soundtrack was unusable. The minor problem was that a lot of the film was poorly miked. (Cassavetes used a

combination of booms and lavaliers in concealed locations. For reference, a lavalier is visible on the headboard behind Chet and Maria in the post-suicide conversation.) Even more disconcertingly, he discovered that the second-hand Perfectone that had been employed throughout the shoot was defective. It slowed down and gradually lost synch in the course of a reel. Cassavetes went to every sound lab in Los Angeles to ask for advice on how to resynch the sound. Everyone advised him that there was nothing to be done except throw the footage out and shoot it all again. So he went home and he and his volunteers spent the next two months hand-trimming tiny sections out of the soundtrack to bring it back into synch frame by frame, syllable by syllable (occasionally looping new sound where necessary).

Cassavetes ran out of money several times and had to use a variety of methods to keep going, mortgaging his house during the shoot to buy film stock.

I borrowed the money. I put the money in, myself. The main difficulty for me in all the films was *telling Gena* that I was taking the money to make the films – and surviving that! And convincing her that it's the right thing to do – since she was both my marital partner and my financial partner.

At the end of 1965, after only six months of editing (and thirty months of post-production still ahead of him), he noted:

The lab bill is already \$17,000 and the stock cost \$15,000. Pathé Labs threatened to take the film away when we couldn't pay. That night I literally dreamed, 'Bank of America, vice-president, Beverly Hills Branch.' I had nothing to hock, not the first collateral. We called him up the next morning, and the guy gave us the money! I still don't believe it. I had to beg, borrow and steal. I can be a killer when I believe in something! I conned my friends. I got bank loans without collateral.

Cassavetes also had another mouth to feed at home. Gena Rowlands had had the couple's second child, daughter Alexandra (Xan), shortly after shooting on *Faces* was completed. (Rowlands took six months off but went back to work in the spring of 1966, flying to Miami to act in *Tony Rome*, which led to the role of Adrienne Van Leyden on the *Peyton Place* television series in 1967 and early 1968.)

Cassavetes was desperate for money and spent half of 1966, much of 1967 and most of the spring and summer of 1968 acting in other directors' films to obtain the funds he needed to complete *Faces*. Robert

Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen*, in the second half of 1966, was the first and most important project. It was followed in early 1967 by a quickie job in *Devil's Angels*, an utterly forgettable low-budget exploitation picture produced by Roger Corman; an aborted appearance in *Sol Madrid* in May and June 1967; and a starring role in Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* in late 1967. Between mid-April and August 1968, he went to Rome for back-to-back acting assignments in two gangster movies: *Bandits in Rome (Roma come Chicago)* and *Machine Gun McCain/At Any Price (Gli Intoccabili)*.

Machine Gun McCain is the most interesting of the six works. Cassavetes' acting does a decent job of rescuing it from genre-film triviality. For most of the movie, he plays his character as emotionally withdrawn and afraid of intimacy, then stunningly opens the emotional floodgates near the end in an encounter with a former lover and yet again in a final scene with a newer lover. The movie also has several moments that probably gave Cassavetes the idea for *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie's* warehouse scene.

The goal in each case was simply to go in, do the best job possible, get paid and use the money to pay the bills on his own movie, but a few of these acting experiences turned out to be not exactly what Cassavetes had bargained for. After Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty and Robert Redford had all either turned down the part of Guy Woodhouse or failed Polanski's screen test, Cassavetes connived his way into the *Rosemary's Baby* role but lived to regret it. Cassavetes the actor was identical to Cassavetes the director. As a director, he would show up on the set each day full of new ideas, willing to throw out everything that had been written or planned the day before, ready to try anything new and different. As an actor, he would similarly come in each morning bubbling over with an endless stream of ideas for new and better ways to stage or play his role. Some directors (though not many) appreciated the flow of suggestions, but Polanski was obsessed with micromanaging the smallest details on his shoots, and every time Cassavetes made a suggestion for a change, Polanski told him to shut up and do it the way he had been told to. Their shouting matches became the stuff of Hollywood legend. They clashed on everything (and particularly the scene in which Guy and Rosemary make love on the floor, which Cassavetes objected to because of its nudity). Cassavetes baited Polanski in a series of interviews with journalists, including one where he told the reporter for *Look* magazine: 'You just try to keep alive with Roman or you go under. Ask him why he's so obsessed by the bloody and the gruesome, behaving like a kid in a candy store.' Of course, the feud helped the film's pub-

licity. Polanski was adulated by the critics for being ‘uncompromising’; Cassavetes cemented his reputation for being ‘difficult’.

If truth be told, it wasn’t entirely Polanski’s problem. Cassavetes *was* extremely difficult to direct. Everyone who worked with him testified to the fact, even directors who personally liked him and enjoyed his performances. Don Siegel, who was the closest of personal friends and almost always responsive to Cassavetes’ suggestions on the set, was regularly exasperated by his antics. In Siegel’s view, Cassavetes seemed to treat every encounter as a test of his manhood. He seemed to have a chip on his shoulder and a hair-trigger for perceived insults or slights. He positively enjoyed arguing, and treated the most politely framed request as a putative challenge or threat. In short, in his interactions with other men he was, at least at moments, not very different from some of the male characters in *Faces*.

As always, wherever possible Cassavetes secured small parts for unemployed actor friends: Ben Carruthers is in *The Dirty Dozen*; Maurice McEndree and George Sims are in *Devil’s Angels*; Dennis Sallas, Jack Ackerman and Val Avery are in *Machine Gun McCain*. He also did a good bit of television acting in the same period, including appearing in *Combat*, *The Virginian*, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *The Legend of Jesse James* and *Bob Hope–Chrysler Theater*. One of his frequently employed money-raising tactics was to agree to act in a television pilot that he was convinced didn’t stand a chance of being picked up commercially. He would be paid for his appearance in the pilot but would not have to tie himself down to a series. He told friends at the time that he did one pilot about the Lafayette Escadrille, supposedly directed by Sydney Pollack, because he was sure the airplane footage would be too expensive for a regular series; and another about a jazz-musician detective because he was sure no one would ever approve him as the star of a *Johnny Staccato* knock-off! He earned a quick \$100,000 in 1967 and 1968 this way. But not everything was done strictly for the money. In late 1966, Cassavetes acted in S. Lee Pogostin’s *Face of Change* for scale because he believed so much in the importance of the story, which was about a jazz musician who, in a *John Doe*-like vein, tries to awaken people from their state of cynicism to the joy of life. (Although Cassavetes and Ben Gazzara were both on this project, the two men didn’t know each other at the time and had almost no contact.)

Directing is really a full-time hobby with me. I consider myself an amateur filmmaker and a professional actor. I’m a professional actor out of

defense. I'd prefer to be an amateur actor. But I've got to have money to make films. Unfortunately, it's an extremely expensive hobby. I paid for *Faces* out of my own pocket. I worked in films to pay for it.

Cassavetes makes it sound like he freely chose each of these projects; however, not all of them were his idea. Cassavetes did *Bandits in Rome* only because Charles Bluhdorn, the head of Paramount, asked him to do the picture as a personal favor. To help out Bluhdorn, Cassavetes committed to it without even having read the script. In the case of *The Dirty Dozen*, he fought tooth and nail to get out of the picture, since it represented, in his view, the wrong movie in the wrong country at the wrong time. Cassavetes had a deep antipathy to violence and found the script offensive. Even more importantly, since it was scheduled to be shot on location in England, it meant he would have to interrupt the editing on *Faces* for as long as six months. Cassavetes did everything he could to get out of it. In the passage that follows, Cassavetes changes the facts considerably: he *was* contractually obligated to do the picture, since, in January 1966, to raise money to pay some of the processing costs of *Faces*, he had signed a year-long contract with Universal, and Universal had legitimately 'lent' him to MGM. His contract had *not* expired; the trade to MGM *was* routine; and Universal was well within its rights to ask him to do something for the money they had paid him. They threatened to take him to court for breach of contract if he didn't show up, and Cassavetes knew there was no getting out of it. (It may be said in Cassavetes' defense that, first, he technically did *not* get paid for his performance – since he had already been paid and had spent the money on *Faces*; second, he *did* have to spend his own money to keep this commitment; third, the assignment could not have come at a worse time.)

I was under a year's contract to Universal in 1966 but didn't do a picture for them. Yet they paid me all along and I put the money into *Faces*. When Aldrich asked me to do *Dozen*, my contract had expired and I didn't have to. But I felt obligated to the studio, and I wanted to work with him. Nobody, except Aldrich, ever thought the picture would amount to beans at the box-office. It would have been my first picture in six years, and I hesitated. The assignment meant suspending *Faces* for months and taking my family to England, which would probably cost me \$20,000. But I decided to take the chance.

As it developed, Cassavetes took the *Faces* footage and two editors with him to England. While he acted during the days, Jimmy Acker and Mau-

rice McEndree edited *Faces* at a Tottenham Court Road editing room, and, in his workaholic fashion, Cassavetes came by most nights to check their edit, and work on the film himself on weekends.

To Cassavetes' surprise, *The Dirty Dozen*, the film he had tried to get out of, turned out to be one of the most satisfying acting assignments of his life, and one of the most important in his career. Everything about the shoot seemed charmed: he hit it off personally with Aldrich and the two men became friends; the movie was a financial smash (earning \$45 million at the box-office); and Cassavetes received an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor. For the rest of his life, Cassavetes was personally grateful to Aldrich for relaunching his dormant acting career.

In June 1967, while working on the low-budget *Sol Madrid* in Acapulco, Cassavetes was stricken with infectious hepatitis (the disease that would eventually lead to his death). It was extremely serious. He was rushed to Beverly Hills Doctor's Hospital and placed in solitary confinement for more than two weeks, followed by three more weeks of recuperation at home. He was replaced in *Sol Madrid* by Rip Torn and all of his scenes were reshot. In mid-July 1967 he wrote to Lily May Caldwell:

I'm feeling terrific – my infection's gone and I can just about do anything that causes trouble.

Faces went through a number of different edits. The first assembly ran more than eight hours. At one point, Cassavetes wanted to release the movie in this length.

Other people may think it's ridiculous to make an eight-hour film. I don't. I think it's ridiculous to make an hour war. I think films are more like novels. They should be. It's an insult to tell someone's life story in two hours. I mean, to try to move people in capsule form, how can people become involved? How can you change anybody's life in a two-hour span? What people usually do is trim a long film. But we discussed what would happen if we did make certain trims. And we came to the conclusion that each cut we made hurt the film. We looked at each other and thought, 'Jesus, are we getting so close to it that we're becoming punchy?' The timings of the people were real. And so, in altering their timings, we were altering the truth. So we were forced to make extremely large block trims. Every sequence was shortened and the McCarthy scene was cut considerably; it was originally an hour and twenty minutes long, and that's a movie in itself.

He was able to cut an hour here and a half-hour there because *Faces* wasn't about events but emotions. Another of the block cuts was at the beginning of the film, where three scenes totaling forty minutes showed Richard at work, Maria socializing with some of her women friends at home, and Richard and Freddie flirting with Jeannie and a number of other women at the Loser's Club prior to going home with Jeannie. (In this section of the film, unlike the later scenes, Jeannie Rapp looked extremely glamorous, in line with the 'silk gowns and red lights' notion of prostitution Cassavetes describes above; years later, when an interviewer asked Cassavetes if any of this footage remained, he said that Rowlands had not liked it and had asked that it be destroyed.) One of the purposes of the Loser's Club sequence was to showcase fifteen songs by Cassavetes' close friend, Jack Ackerman (whose songs are featured in *Shadows*, *Too Late Blues* and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*). Another block cut involved a long scene where Maria's friends commiserate with her before the disco scene.

There was a sequence where the women come to this woman's house after her husband leaves her. And they find her talking on the phone with her mother, arguing with her mother in her husband's defense. The idea of the scene was: here was a wife whose husband left her and, for once, instead of getting sentimental or crying or carrying on, she was furious with the son of a bitch for leaving her. But here were a bunch of women trying to calm this woman down. And all their personalities were working on her to make her more bugged. By the time the scene was through, her only alternative was to become silly and happy and cover up her emotions. I loved that scene and the interference of those women. But we found that the whole half-hour scene wasn't really necessary. It just wasn't necessary to explain why all of a sudden we find this woman going out with a bunch of broads we've never seen before. We were able to shorten the film and at the same time make the audience do a little work, make the jump, the connection, themselves. We realized that originally we had been talking down to the audience.

The next rough assembly, completed shortly after Cassavetes got out of the hospital in August 1967, pared the film to six and a half hours. By January 1968, *Faces* had been assembled in a rough cut running 220 minutes. (This was the edit shown to the cast and crew, in separate male and female private screenings, with Cassavetes listening to their responses to help him make further cuts.) The film was shown at this same length in its first public screenings in March at the Beverly Hills

Music Hall. Even with audiences of invited guests, these screenings were nightmares.

We had our share of disasters – disasters very similar to the ones we went through with *Shadows*. We had a couple of midnight screenings in California and the picture bombed. People just didn't respond to it. The whole cast came to the first screening and I didn't want to let down in front of them. Afterwards you're supposed to shake hands with all the people who've come to the screening and who are going to say insincere things like, 'My, that's such an interesting movie.' So what I did was sort of hide when the lights went on. I went to the john. But there was no escape. It was loaded with friends of mine saying things like, 'Jesus, John wasted four years of his life on that piece of shit.' For some reason, that gave me strength to go downstairs and pump hands.

Cassavetes told me he remembered an experience he had had immediately prior to starting *Faces*. In 1964, he had attended the world premiere of Carl Dreyer's masterpiece, *Gertrud*, in Paris. As the film rolled, he watched most of the audience filter out the exits until only a minority were left at the end, who then booed Dreyer when he came on stage. I have no idea if what follows actually happened, but Cassavetes told me with obvious relish that he delighted to see Dreyer 'give the finger' to the audience.

It would be impossible to overstate how busy Cassavetes was at this period or what energy he had drawn on to keep going. He was undergoing his baptism by fire into the world of do-it-yourself independent filmmaking and distribution – juggling a staggering number of commitments and struggling against multiple conflicting deadlines in six cities in four different countries on both sides of the Atlantic.

Over the course of the next few months, Cassavetes attended a series of Academy Awards-related events connected with *The Dirty Dozen*; held preview screenings of *Faces* in three different cities to fine-tune his edit; supervised the cutting of the film's negative; conducted a series of distributors' screenings for the trade in an unsuccessful attempt to get someone to pick up the film; showed *Faces* at a festival in London; flew to Venice twice to wiggle his movie into the Venice Film Festival at the last minute; flew to New York twice to conduct a distributors' screening and get the film into the New York Film Festival; and acted in two movies in Rome.

At the end of March, he got *Faces* down to a 183-minute running time, and on 6 April 1968, held a midnight screening in Toronto's New Yorker Theater. The leading Toronto newspapers had done interviews

with him earlier in the week, and so many people were turned away from the first screening that Cassavetes held a second one at 4 a.m.

I wanted to show it in Toronto because I felt we would get a better overall and unsolicited reaction. I've worked here before and was terribly impressed with the people. It reminded me of the old days of live TV – everyone so excited, easy and loose to work with. I figured the audiences would be fresher, more spontaneous, than they are in L.A.

The Canadian response was the opposite of the Hollywood reception. They adored *Faces*, but Cassavetes thought that, at three hours, it was too long. He made some cuts and on 14 June tested a 110-minute edit at a midnight screening back in the Beverly Hills Music Hall. This time viewers said they 'liked' it, but that kind of response always left Cassavetes dissatisfied.

You can see a film with an audience and half of them may like it and the rest walk out. You make some cuts, and the second screening you have fifteen per cent of your audience walk out. The next one only ten per cent of them get up and leave. And finally you make all the adjustments and none of the audience walks out. Everybody 'likes it'. And all of a sudden you find yourself hating the film. That can happen. I said to a woman who came up and told me she 'loved *Faces*', 'How can you "love" that picture? You can't "love" it!' I don't want people to say, 'It's a good film.' I'd hate that. For if you really enjoy something, it's a personal thing. The best compliment is complete silence. I hate entertainment. I'm not an entertainer.

Cassavetes restored nineteen minutes of cut material to arrive at the 129-minute final version of the film. The negative was cut and the 16mm print reprinted in 35mm by Adrian Mosher. Since much of the footage was scratched and fairly beat up, and different film stock had been used for different scenes, each scene and sometimes each section of a scene had to be custom processed. Cassavetes later commented that, 'Mosher did the blow-up with as much love as we put into making the film. He was an artist; he cared about each frame.'

Of course, finishing the film was only half the battle; getting it distributed would be a whole new war. Before he left, Cassavetes had made arrangements for a series of late June screenings in Los Angeles and New York for exhibitors, distributors and a few invited guests. The results were not promising. Excerpts from the 26 June 1968 *Variety* review of the 21 June distributors' midnight screening at New York's

DeMille Theater sum up the industry response: 'At least an hour too long . . . [*Faces*] is an overblown opus that never comes to life . . . Entire film apparently was done with hand-held cameras, which means endless trips up and down hallways, up and down stairs, and forever zooming in for unattractive close-ups . . . All the technical aspects are bad . . . Much of the dialogue is garbled.' Cassavetes would spend all summer and part of the fall attempting to get American distribution for his film, without success.

In the final week of June, Cassavetes also showed *Faces* in London. Eight years earlier, the National Film Theatre screenings of *Shadows* had been instrumental in bringing the film to the attention of reviewers, and Cassavetes had a good feeling about the theater (just as he always did about the Venice and San Francisco Film Festivals). On the basis of *Shadows*, he already had the makings of a cult following. He was offered two screenings and personally attended both (with Lynn Carlin, Seymour Cassel and Gena Rowlands in tow), not only in hope of snaring British distribution, but out of his sheer love of seeing his work with an audience. Cassavetes' need to press the flesh and interact with viewers – listening to their responses in the theater, arguing with them in the lobby, frequently going out to have drinks with them after the movie was over – often overwhelmed the people around him. Lynn Carlin tells the story of how, at this particular event, to her amazement, Cassavetes dragged her into the theater to watch the entire film with him. (Rowlands, knowing her husband's proclivities, had enough foresight to ease herself out before the screening began and waited for both of them in a restaurant down the street.)

The London screenings were triumphant. According to Meade Roberts, who was present, 'At the fade-out, the applause is thunderous. The audience is wrecked, wasted, exhilarated.' Cassavetes gave a grand party at his suite in the Savoy. The next day's reviews were as magnificent as the response at the screening. He was heralded as a great new cinematic artist.

But he had little time to bask in the praise. He had to get back to Rome. From the middle of April on, he was busy acting in his two low-budget Italian pictures (squeezing in all the preceding events either on weekends or during the three-week break in June that separated the two Italian shoots).

While he was on location in Italy, Cassavetes took the opportunity to visit Luigi Chiarini, the director of the Venice Film Festival, and screen *Faces* for him (showing him an unfinished version of the film in May and a final edit in July). Though Cassavetes had missed the submission

deadline, Chiarini was so impressed that he waived the technicalities. It was the first time Cassavetes would have the pleasure of personally accompanying one of his own movies to the Festival. (Cassel had taken *Shadows* eight years before.) The film was screened without subtitles at the end of August; John Marley was awarded the Volpi Cup *in absentia* for 'Best Actor' (which, since the announcement was made in Italian, Seymour Cassel came up to the stage to accept, thinking he himself had won it). *Faces* won the 'Best Foreign Film' award and three other smaller awards.

The London and Venice screenings were both stunning successes. *Faces* could not have received a more enthusiastic reception – from both viewers and reviewers – at either event. However, in a pattern that repeated what had happened with *Shadows*, Cassavetes could not translate his European successes into an American distribution deal. Following the National Film Theatre screenings in London (and a crucial London *Times* review by John Russell Taylor championing the film), Walter Reade picked up *Faces* for British distribution. In September, the film had a resoundingly successful commercial première at the Academy Theatre, the same theater *Shadows* had triumphed at eight years before. After the Venice screenings, Cassavetes had distribution offers to screen *Faces* in France and other European countries. But there was still not a shred of interest in America. In a long-shot gamble, on 9 September, immediately after he returned to the United States, Cassavetes gave an interview to *Variety* in which he announced he was willing to sell the film outright to any American distributor for a flat \$1.5 million. He had no takers.

Cassavetes was still extremely busy throughout the fall of 1968. He had to complete additional location shooting on *Machine Gun McCain* in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and New York. At the same time, he had to prepare to shoot *Husbands*, which was scheduled to start principal photography in December. And, far from least important, he still had to get an American distributor for *Faces*. In a last-ditch effort, he submitted the film to the 6th New York Film Festival (which at that point was directed by visionary programmer and old friend Amos Vogel) and launched himself on a round of media appearances to generate interest. *Faces* had its American festival première on Sunday evening, 22 September 1968, with Cassavetes in attendance. The film was received enthusiastically by viewers and critics alike (allowing for the usual demurrers from the usual suspects). Yet, to Cassavetes' surprise, there was still no interest from American distributors. After four more weeks went by, in an almost exact rerun of his experience with *Shadows*, Cas-

savetes sold the American rights to the British distributor Walter Reade, who then distributed *Faces* under their Continental logo. (By this point, Cassavetes had come down from his dreams of a \$1.5 million outright sale. He agreed to a \$250,000 advance and a percentage of the gate.)

Cassavetes and Rowlands rented a triplex brownstone on East 82nd Street, which they used as a combination office, home and general purpose headquarters from late November 1968 through March 1969. Moving to New York allowed Cassavetes to location scout and hold meetings in preparation for *Husbands*; to spend a little time with his family on weekends and holidays; and, most important of all at that moment, to launch a full-scale assault on the media to promote *Faces*.

The film opened at New York's Little Carnegie on 24 November. (The Los Angeles opening was three weeks later, on 11 December, at the Granada.) It gave Cassavetes satisfaction that the film played at the theater where Gena Rowlands had ushered seventeen years earlier and he and she had gone to many movies together. (In a few post-release interviews, Cassavetes milked the Carnegie booking for publicity purposes by telling reporters that he had turned down much better theaters because of the sentimental associations he and Rowlands had with the theater; however, the Carnegie was in fact one of the premier art houses in New York and was chosen strictly as a smart booking decision.)

Faces was the hot ticket in Manhattan that December. From the first night of the film's opening there were lines around the block to get tickets and many of the evening screenings were sold out. Cassavetes was beside himself with joy. On the film's opening night, he stood outside the Carnegie, watching viewers queue up and both evening screenings sell out – in the words of a contemporary newspaper account, 'hopping deliriously up and down, and pounding his associates on the back, [and roaring with glee:] "They love it! They love it! We're in! We've finally made it!"'

Surprise of surprises: I had an artistic and financial hit on my hands – this time in my own country. Proving to me that it was worth all the nonsense I went through. Proving to me that moviemakers don't have to spend their time doing garbage they hate.

Faces broke a house record, grossing \$32,204 in its first seven days in the relatively small (520-seat) theater. By the end of 1969, the 16mm home-movie that had taken four full years to go from script to screen had grossed approximately \$6 million at the box-office – small by studio standards, but unprecedented for a genuinely independent feature.

(Of Cassavetes' work, only *A Woman Under the Influence* would surpass this amount.) Throughout the month of December, Cassavetes could frequently be seen hanging around the theater lobby talking to viewers and pacing the sidewalk outside the theater asking people what they thought as they left. One reason was simply his bottomless desire to talk about the film and hear people's reactions to it, but another was his conviction, which he had with every movie he ever made, that he was being cheated by the theater-owners and distributors. Many Friday and Saturday evenings he would drop in unannounced at the box-office during the final screening and demand to see that night's attendance figures.

Faces grossed more than \$400,000 in its first eighteen weeks at the Little Carnegie, and I've gotten exactly \$2,400 of it.

In the burst of interest that *Faces* generated, Cassavetes was offered the opportunity to publish the screenplay with New American Library (though he was so busy working on *Husbands* that the book did not appear until October 1970). He was also approached by Columbia Records to release the film's soundtrack on an LP. He was not about to let the fact that there was less than five minutes of music in the entire movie stand in his way. He and long-time musical collaborator Jack Ackerman went into a studio and created sixty minutes of music 'inspired by the film', some of which Cassavetes – never lacking in confidence – personally performed by noodling on the piano, though he didn't play the piano and had no musical knowledge whatsoever. (In the liner notes, Cassavetes covered up the degree to which the record was close to being a one-man show by crediting some of the arrangements to an *alter ego* named 'Jay Cee'.)

From the first days of the film's release, a number of critics had said that the performances in the film were Academy Award caliber. But when award time came around, Cassavetes had less than \$30,000 to spend on ads in the trades (while other pictures were spending hundreds of thousands) and had to rely entirely on the non-professional layouts of Sam Shaw's daughter, Edie. Despite these handicaps, *Faces* snared three nominations (Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Lynn Carlin, Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Seymour Cassel and Best Screenplay for Cassavetes). To Cassavetes' surprise, however, the day after the nominations were announced, Charlton Heston, president of the Screen Actors Guild, called him, and rather than congratulating him, threatened him with a lawsuit, expulsion from SAG, and the withdrawal of *Faces* from award consideration. Heston was only following up on an

old threat. During the filming, he had issued formal warnings to Cassavetes, Cassel and Marley for not abiding by SAG salary guidelines and not using Guild contracts and players. When Cassavetes pleaded poverty at that point, Heston said that the Guild dues could be paid retroactively out of any profits the film made. In both cases Cassavetes utterly refused to give in to Heston's demands – according to Seymour Cassel, telling Heston 'Sue me, but leave my actors alone.'

During filming, Chuck Heston called me and said, 'Are you SAG?' 'Yes,' I said. He said, 'You're making a non-union picture. Some of the members are a little upset.' So we met at the Harvard Club and I said to the lawyer, 'OK, fine me.' They didn't. It would have been an embarrassment for them. But now that *Faces* is a hit and has been nominated for awards, they're coming back at us again.

Cassavetes was still steaming over Heston's threats at the time of the Academy Awards ceremony and refused to attend, though he insisted that Lynn Carlin and Seymour Cassel go without him so that they would not be denied their moments of glory.

Cassavetes was one of the first American filmmakers to take his films on tours to colleges and film festivals as a way of building support for his work. His movies had almost always done better in those situations than among the general public, which is why he previewed so many of them at festivals (especially the San Francisco Film Festival, which had been so good to him) and donated his own personal prints to museums and archives around the world. As early as *Too Late Blues*, he had plans to precede the main release of the film with a series of festival and campus screenings, and in the spring of 1969, Seymour Cassel (who enjoyed interacting with viewers as much as Cassavetes did) toured *Faces* to Stanford, Vanderbilt, the University of Tennessee, and a number of other universities.

As would be the case with all of Cassavetes' films, his abrogation of Hollywood values confused most influential American film critics, almost all of whom were appalled by what they regarded as the amateurishness and actorly indulgences of the film. Pauline Kael's jeering response can stand for all: 'Dumb . . . crudely conceived, [and] badly performed . . .' Among the important New York film critics, only *Life Magazine's* Richard Schickel and the *New York Times's* Renata Adler stood out from the crowd. (Adler called *Faces* 'Far away the strongest, bluntest, most important American movie of the year . . . a movie so good that one can hardly believe it.') The New York Film Critics Circle

gave its Best Picture Award to Anthony Harvey's costume-drama, *The Lion in Winter*.

American viewers were divided in their opinion. Though many appreciated *Faces*, at least as many had major problems with it. One frequently voiced objection was that Cassavetes failed to explain his characters' motives and the causes of their behavior. As early as *Too Late Blues* he had argued that he didn't want to explain too much because the work the viewer had to do was an important part of the experience. *Faces* went even further in this direction – confounding viewers' expectations, placing them in a problem-solving stance and forcing them to stay in the flow of experience.

The first part of the script was structured very carefully to set up a whole new pattern of thinking so that the audience could not get ahead of the film. Most people think, 'Oh yes, this is what's going to happen in the next moment.' What happens with *Faces*, though, is that the first half of the film really bugs people because it doesn't fit an easy pattern of behavior. Well, I don't know anyone who has an easy pattern of behavior. I know people who are just sensational one minute and absolute bastards the next. Terribly funny one minute and morose the next. And these moods come from specific things that I can't put my finger on because I don't know their whole life. And we can't put their whole life on the screen. So I've got to depend on the actor to identify with his role enough that he can express those things. And to get it on the screen is something miraculous.

It's antagonism. With *Faces* you're getting so many vibrations from people and you're seeing people behave so honestly, when they stop you get irritated. You identify with a character and then he does something you don't want him to do, it becomes personal. You can't stand for it not to have the answers every moment. You don't want to waste your time going through their self-exploration. You want them to get right down to it and give you the answers. Other movies make me bored. I want them to go faster, you know. Hurry up. I want it to go faster because I'm not interested in it. I like things that evolve.

Although at the end of the following statement Cassavetes confuses the 183-minute version of his film with the final edit, his point is still valid.

People prefer that you condense; they find it quite natural for life to be condensed in films. And then you discover that people prefer that because they've already caught on to what you wanted to say and are ahead of you. So that there's a sort of competition between them and

you, and you try to shake them up rather than please them: you show them that you know what they're going to say so as to be more honest than they can imagine. For example, when *Faces* opens, the couple are lying in bed, laughing. The audience wants to join them but they're not included yet. The characters dictate the terms to the audience.

Other viewers were frustrated by Cassavetes' unwillingness to explain his characters' problems in psychological terms – holding the viewer on the outside of opaque, impenetrable surfaces. Cassavetes felt that tracing behavior back to psychological causes was to simplify it.

I'm a very literal man. I never look for anything underneath. I don't know why people always want to understand, work out hidden meaning and motivations. Surely the only reason for trying to work out someone's motivation is if you're scared of them. Otherwise you just feel for people, don't you? You love them or you hate them. This is a film about people's surfaces, isn't it?

Another issue for many viewers was what they felt to be Cassavetes' toughness or cynicism, at least in part because of his avoidance of the stock-in-trade of Hollywood filmmaking: swoony, romantic relationships between characters and between the viewer and a character. Cassavetes readily acknowledged this aspect of his style.

The movie hates 'sensitivity'. Sensitivity is hypocrisy in the self-pitying way. True sensitivity should be truly honest. That's what we strove for: brutal, un sentimental honesty.

A related issue was that Cassavetes' characters almost never verbally expressed love or affection for one another. (Later in life, Cassavetes said he actually went through the scripts of both *A Woman Under the Influence* and *Gloria* and deleted lines of dialogue where a character used the word 'love'.)

I really resent being liked openly. I don't find any challenge in being liked. It's a form of agreement and very often agreement doesn't really get anywhere. I always feel that when someone says 'I love you', they really mean 'I hate you'. It seems to me something's wrong when someone has to express that or wants to hear it. It expresses some fear or doubt.

In a parallel vein, the highest compliment Cassavetes could pay his characters was to say that they weren't 'sentimental' – meaning that they

didn't feel sorry for themselves, or stop and bemoan their situation, but gamely 'went on', doing the best they could with the hand they were dealt. (He would later argue that that is what made the central character in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* admirable.)

In *Faces* there's this scene with Florence, the middle-aged lady, and the hippie. I get a lump in my throat every time I see it. Gets me every time. Here's this beat-up broad out to seduce a young guy she picked up at a discotheque and she tries everything and doesn't care how ridiculous or pathetic she looks. She wants this guy and she wants to get him in the sack. I think she might have succeeded if that younger chick hadn't been there too, all cool and available. The point is the middle-aged lady tried. She fought; she struggled; she wouldn't give up. Isn't it better to fight to see your fantasies realized – fight and lose, rather than suffer and dream away in silence? What I love about all of the characters in *Faces* is that they don't quit. They will make jackasses of themselves but they try to keep going. It doesn't matter if you're wrong if you try.

There were many walk-outs.

Some people feel that they shouldn't leave the film – that they're really looking in at life and at problems that really concern them. And some other people don't want to face those problems. They get up and walk out. No one has had a chance to face normalcy on screen, to know something more about that mysterious element of American society that hasn't really been depicted in any human way. There's something wrong, basically wrong, with our society that doesn't make room for people's emotions. It makes room for people's thoughts. There's a great territory that's been opened up through the communication media and through TV, and through radio, and through the newspapers. But there's no room any longer for truthful emotion. We question our emotions. We question them with guilt. We question every move we make. That's why in *Faces* when you see these emotions wide open, you don't know whether you like it or you don't like it. It's a rather embarrassing experience. Totally, I find. It's a really painful experience.

Cassavetes acknowledged that even for him the experience of watching *Faces* was fundamentally different from the experience of watching other films.

People have said that my films are very difficult to watch, that they're experiences you are put through rather than ones you enjoy, and it's

true. I find that the film is not seen as a film. It gets too close to home. The film is seen as something that relates very personally to people. Even I myself really can't just see it as a film. It's not theatrical, and therefore it's real. And if it's real, people become transported in that way, and like in life when a scene becomes embarrassing to you, some people get up and leave. Or others stay and carry on that experience. Others feel terribly uncomfortable. People prefer distance and in movies today there is a reluctance to show really deep feelings. There are certain people in this business – and it really *is* a business – who don't like my work because it's not done in the conventional, cool, cynical way. They don't like vulnerability.

Hollywood films rely on a distancing strategy that is absent from *Faces*. They comment on experience; they judge it; they tell us what to think about it; they offer interpretations. Cassavetes doesn't provide any of these abstract ways of understanding. This is what makes all of his films so emotionally and intellectually demanding (and drives some viewers out of the theater). A viewer is not given a short-cut around unedited, raw experience. He is not given an interpretation that allows him to stand above, beyond or outside of the characters and experiences; he must muddle through them, be involved with them, be actively engaged with them, make sense of them and change his mind about them as he goes along. *Faces* captures the extent to which Cassavetes honestly *enjoyed* his characters and *appreciated* the performances of the actors who played them, without making distancing judgments about them. The result is a movie that takes away the characteristic interpretive 'aboutness' of other films and plunges a viewer into an intellectually un glossed, unsimplified, uninterpreted experience. Cassavetes himself felt the difference when he watched *Faces*.

The excitement of watching *Faces* is to see a different point of view, not a romanticized point of view like a Hollywood movie would make it or a self-justifying point of view as some other filmmakers might make it, but to see totally unedited behavior, to look at a life experience without any point of view outside of the people themselves. I think that is something different from other movies. It's fascinating to me. And painful too. I sit there not as the maker of the film. I'm looking at the film as an outsider. Not as a film. I'm relating to certain characters in the thing that are part of me. Some of them behave as I behave. And some don't. But I like or dislike them not on the basis of my writing, but on the basis of their acting, on the basis of what they mean to me. I don't think the

director creates anything. I liken it to a reporter's function – if it happens, something's going to come out, and if it's dull, nothing in the world is going to save it.

Even at the peak of *Faces*' success, Cassavetes understood that popularity was a trap.

My films are about personal things – marriages breaking up, love transformed by mutual treachery, the difficulty that two people have in communicating even though they live together. These are the problems which I have tackled and which concern me and concern others. Sometimes people find this painful to accept or they think that my ideas are wrong or simply they're not interested in the difficulties which exist in communicating with others. But I am very interested in this. With my actors I try to explore it and try and relate it to their daily lives. I can't ask people who are comfortable with their lives, with no problems, to be spectacularly interested in my work. It's not made to please people. Many press agents told me, 'For God's sake, don't sell the movie on middle age.' But I'm sure there are some middle-aged people around. I always feel left out of most other movies. They have nothing to do with me.

I don't care if people like our films or not. As long as I can make these films and say what I want and work with people I love and who are not afraid to express themselves, whether it's popular or not. If we want to give *Faces* away to universities, we will do that. If we want to bury the film and never let anyone see it, we can do that. In other words, it's *ours*. So that if it plays in a festival, fine. If it doesn't play in a festival, fine. If people love it, fine. If they don't, OK too.

But even viewers who liked *Faces* found it depressing, which was something Cassavetes could never understand. He argued that the film was meant to point a way out of the problems it defined.

It isn't a desperate situation like *A Child Is Waiting*. These people aren't trapped, they are always conscious of having a choice. My films strip characters of some of their illusions. Bring them to a little bit of understanding. The people come to some small awareness.

The main problem is finding an area where conflict is real and tangible. Contemporary filmmakers must find new areas of conflict, new kinds of problems. The traditional conflicts of poverty versus riches, of good versus evil, no longer reflect our situation. We've reached a state in which we have what we want: enough to eat, a wife, a roof over our

heads and acceptance in society. The problem has become, 'What's the problem?' In this country, people die at twenty-one. They die emotionally at twenty-one. Maybe even younger, now. For those of us who are lucky not to die at twenty, we keep on going, and my responsibility as an artist is to help people get over twenty-one. The films are expressive of a culture that has had the possibility of attaining material fulfillment while at the same time finding itself unable to accomplish the simple business of conducting human lives. We have been sold a bill of goods as a substitute for life. What is needed is a reassurance in human emotions; a reevaluation of our emotional capacities.

Cassavetes was, in fact, less critical of characters like Richard and Maria than of the society they live in that forces them to behave as they do. In this respect, he thought *Faces* was a hopeful picture.

The story is basically about a middle-aged couple terribly in love with each other. But they can't communicate. The underlying theme is that love is there – but how to express it? The characters in *Faces* are in a society they can't function in. The picture only says that there is no room for people's emotions in this society when they do care. That husband and wife do have a mutual regard for each other. I would like to say that insanity isn't the only way of resistance. There must be another way.

Cassavetes was embraced as an art film-maker in the tradition of Bergman, Godard and Antonioni by certain critics; but, as always, he felt uncomfortable being grouped with these filmmakers, since he disliked the intellectualism of their work.

Faces is really an anti-intellectual picture; it's against all people that *know* and for people that just *feel*.

Cassavetes was always opposed to the notion of independent film as a stepping stone to a career in Hollywood. In a culture of salesmanship, the emotions and experiences he cared about were not for sale.

It's hard to explain what 'independence' means – but to those who have it, film is still a mystery, not a way out. There are other independents, of course, but they haven't really hit the limelight yet, so not enough is at stake. To still do what you want after ten years, twenty years, is something. I've known a lot of filmmakers who started out with enormous talents and lost momentum. I don't say they're selling out, but somehow

if you fight the system you're going to lose to it. That is basically the point. I don't care whether you're a painter or an architect, you can't fight the system. In my mind, if you fight the system it only means you want to join it. So it is very important that you do something you like, that you're involved in enough to hold your interest no matter how long it takes. If the film doesn't involve you, it's what we call a 'stepping-stone' picture, you know, a stepping-stone to art, and that's all right too. Take a guy like Polanski who did pictures in Poland, *Knife in the Water* and later *Repulsion*. You could see in those works a pulse that was meaningful and creative and intense. You can't dispute the fact that he's an artist, but yet you have to say that *Rosemary's Baby* is not art. It is a dictated design – boom, boom, boom, boom. People are used within that design to make a commercial product to sell to people. I'm not saying that is bad. I was in it. I'm fine. I'm happy. But it isn't art. I think *Dirty Dozen* in its way is more artistic because it's compulsively going forward, trying to make something out of the moment without pre-ordaining the way the outcome is going to be.

The real tragedy is that other poor young filmmakers are coming along who will go out and conform before they've even opened their mouths. This whole culture – there is only one art in America, and that's money. Raising money, and business. That's what everyone is interested in: screwing somebody and making profit. We went to the Pratt Institute the other night and one of the kids said, '16mm is not for me.' You know? 'It's not for me! We want to get out of this student stuff! We want to get into the real thing!!!' I make films for the big studios, but I've never told them the truth. I've never been nice to them, and the understanding is there that I go my way and they go their way. If I can't do what I want with them, I'll go 16mm, and if I can't do it there, I'll go to 8mm.

Los Angeles is a movie town. Most of the people who work there are connected in one way or another with the entertainment industry. All of them are filled with ambition and ideas. To be an individual in Los Angeles is like being an individual in the Army. To retain a personality that comes out of a lifetime of hard work is a virtual impossibility. It is not because there is no talent and that people don't come with the same vitality to Hollywood, but rather because the rules stress low-profile, subdued voices, mellowness, polite fear and vicious hypocrisy. The expression 'to fit in' is used in Hollywood. 'To fit in' is to give up your mind in favor of your position. Occasionally a character escapes. A single-minded fanatic, obsessed with separate visions of family, pain, driving the straight ones crazy while trying to transfer those feelings into a

slick medium – a medium so regulated, so intoxicated with profits, so violently and quietly competitive that its boundaries make the Berlin Wall seem like something out of Disney.

I work with a group of people who tell me to go screw myself all the time and who disagree and say, ‘I don’t like the picture,’ and who are *honest*, and who work *hard*, and who are disciplined *by themselves*. And that keeps me alive. It’s staying with people that you’re comfortable with. Not that *agree* with you, but are *comfortable* with and not assuming a posture of being *somebody*, because you’re never going to be *anybody*! You just enjoy the work. It’s like somebody says, ‘When we have some money we’re going to *really* be happy,’ or ‘When we get this car, then things are going to *change*.’ They never change. The only time they ever change is when you have good times. So if you can work with people and enjoy yourself and talk only about what’s at hand, only about your movie and going into your movie and getting deeper into it and getting laughs out of it and abusing it, and treating it like a person. Because listen, that love affair’s going to last, what – a couple of months or a year? – and then you’re going to leave that movie and that’s the end of it. I haven’t seen *Shadows* since the day we finished it. It’s really a brutal thing, but I have no further interest once a picture has been finalized. I don’t think I will ever see *Faces* again. It’s like a love affair that’s gone.

We always try to think about what was the very best time of our lives. Usually it’s college or something like that. Making *Faces* was the very best time of my life – because of the people. I’d never met people like that, and I’m talking about every single member of that company and cast, people who made my life really worth living. I never thought once during the whole time we were making that film that there was anything else in the world except those people; they were that devoted and pure. There is a certain desire to making a film, when you really put it in and put it up and you know no limit and you’re really willing to die for the film you’re making. Now that sounds crazy. If you die for your country, it’s not so good, but in film if it’s the last thing you ever do, you want your picture to be done. With that attitude, making it that way, a man moves through life really using himself, really making something of his life.

Husbands (1969–70)

The idea for *Husbands* can be traced back to Cassavetes' need for cash to pay *Faces*' lab bills in late 1966.

I needed money in order to complete *Faces* and I couldn't afford to spend the time working at it, so I asked my agent if he had any thoughts on the matter; he told me that I had to work for my money just like everyone else. I really can credit Jack Gilardi, now a CMA agent, for giving me the ammunition to begin this craziest, most painful project that I've ever been involved in. I don't dig rejection – not even when it's practical. It's my button – push it and I go for two or three years. Which is just about the time I take to make a picture. There's an American answer to everything – it's called 'Oh yeah?' and then it's followed by something like 'How about this?' and then a series of cheap, ostensibly commercial ideas pop out uncontrollably, and that afternoon on the Paramount lot *Husbands* was born. It was told first to Gilardi and then to a Paramount producer who offered me \$25,000 cold cash for it on the spot. That was everything I needed at the moment, but the perverseness had started and somehow *Faces* would have to struggle through without me selling crappy ideas to greedy men.

Shortly after that, Cassavetes approached two friends, Lee Marvin and Anthony Quinn, with the proposal that the three of them, in Marvin's words, 'Travel around the country, stop in all those honky-tonk bars, and then [Cassavetes would] write a story based on all that, and we'd go shoot it.' Quinn and Marvin turned him down (chiefly because they didn't get along with each other, as they discovered during a meeting at Cassavetes' house in which he tried to sell them on the idea). The idea resurfaced a few months later, in mid-1967, after a chance meeting with Peter Falk at a Lakers game. (Cassavetes bet heavily on many different sports events and was a courtside regular at Lakers games.)

Two people I had always wanted to work with were Gazzara and Falk. Actors have mutual respect for each other, and the combination of three impossible people verging on lunacy appealed to me. I bumped into Falk at a basketball game. We said a quick hello and he asked me if I wanted to do a picture with him. We met on the Paramount lot again, in the commissary, and had lunch. He described *Mikey and Nicky*. It sounded good but I couldn't wait to spill my guts. It was tough communicating with Falk and when I told him the outline of *Husbands* I think he was starting to change his mind about *Mikey and Nicky*.

That's Cassavetes' version of the story. Falk characterized the commissary meeting as being zanier and more embarrassing. He said that when he started to talk about *Mikey and Nicky*, Cassavetes agreed to do it so fast that Falk thought he wasn't taking it seriously. When Falk told him he wanted to tell him the plot and give him a copy of the script, Cassavetes began gesturing wildly and talking ever louder, until he was standing up and shouting at Falk in the middle of the dining room, with everyone in the commissary staring at him as if he were a lunatic. In Falk's paraphrase:

What do you think? I don't know Elaine May can write? I don't know you can act? You think you need to pitch it to me? You think I'm one of *these businessmen*! You think I am like you and have to have everything figured out before I begin something? That I have to have all the details in place? That I'm afraid to take a chance? That I have to play it safe? Elaine's making it; you're in it; that's all I need to know.

It was the sort of performance that outraged half of the people Cassavetes interacted with and amazed and inspired the other half. It was also Falk's first insight into the crazy man behind *Husbands*.

The way Gazzara got involved was that Cassavetes was pulling out of Universal in his car and spotted Gazzara across the parking lot.

Two days later I was at Universal, on the lot, and I waved a fast hello to Gazzara, who had the same agent, Marty Baum, and shouted to him, 'You want to do a picture with Falk and me? Call Marty.' Ben's voice echoed back across the lot. His voice is so loud that I couldn't understand what he said but I knew it was positive, which in Hollywood terms means maybe.

As Gazzara tells it, the totality of his contact with Cassavetes was two casual encounters, neither of which Gazzara took seriously. The first

was the one Cassavetes describes above – an indistinguishable shout in a parking lot in March or April 1968. The second was four days later. Cassavetes invited Gazzara to lunch at Hamburger Hamlet and told him the story of *Husbands*. But when Cassavetes concluded by saying that he didn't actually have any backing for the film – no money, producer or studio interest – and had not even written the script yet, Gazzara wrote off the encounter as typical Hollywood glad-handing, the sort of 'we must work together someday' thing someone said to him at least once a week at a party.

The only other contact either man had with Cassavetes for months after that was invitations to preview screenings of *Faces* in the spring of 1968. Cassavetes was working on them, though neither of them knew it at the time. He knew that once they saw *Faces*, they would not be able to resist working with him. And he was right.

Meanwhile, he was simultaneously hatching a plan to get financial backing for the picture. Flash ahead a month or so after the last conversation with Gazzara. It's now mid-April 1968. Cassavetes has just arrived in Rome to begin acting in *Bandits in Rome*, which will be shooting for the next six weeks until the end of May. Gena Rowlands is already there when he arrives. She is scheduled to act with her husband in *Machine Gun McCain*, which doesn't start until the beginning of July, but has decided to take a spring vacation before the summer shoot. As a condition of her employment, she has asked for and been given a villa outside Rome to live in from March through August. Cassavetes is too busy to spend much time there, since almost every weekend when he is not acting he is flying back and forth from Rome to the United States, finishing up the editing on *Faces* and beginning the cycle of preview screenings intended to persuade a distributor into releasing the film.

But on one particular night the stars are aligned. Rowlands and Cassavetes are in Rome together at dinner with the producer of *Machine Gun McCain* – Count Ascanio Bino Cicogna, a young Italian millionaire who doesn't know very much about the movies but loves the romance of dabbling in them. Cassavetes sits next to him and subtly eases into his pitch. It is the kind of moment that he was an acknowledged master of. He was a born charmer, and as an improvising actor, exceptional at telling a story. He knew how to relate just enough of it to spark your imagination but leave you hungry to know more. When he dipped his head, looked at you through his eyebrows and dropped into the hush-hush whisper he used at times, he could make the prospect of filming the telephone book seem exciting. Cicogna was putty in his hands.

I was in Rome making a picture, *Bandits in Rome*, for De Laurentiis – picking up that money for *Faces*. Bino Cicogna, a new mogul on the motion picture scene [who headed his own production company, Euro International, and would subsequently be producing *Machine Gun McCain*], wanted me to do a picture for him. We had dinner. The conversations are always the same:

‘What are your plans?’

‘I have two pictures I want to make – one’s about Mexican migratory workers but I’ll tell you up front the price is five million.’

‘Who’s in it?’

‘Can’t make it without Tony Quinn.’

‘Has he read it?’

‘No, but he’ll do it.’

‘What’s the other picture?’

‘It’s called *Husbands*.’

‘Who’s in that one?’

‘Gazzara, Falk and me.’ (I knew I should have said Gazzara, Falk and I, but I can’t stand to talk like that.) I stared at the steely eyes of Count Ascanio Bino Cicogna. There was a long pause. Then some unpleasant interruptions just as I was about to close. There was a big party at the table including my wife, Gena Rowlands, and another very interesting person, Professor Fred Hoyle, and my very dear friends the Shaws. The place was dark and the tables were very low so I was sitting high and I didn’t care. Actually, San Andrews is a very fine place to make deals.

‘Gazzara, Falk, eh? And you’re in it too? Who directs?’

‘Well, it’s my story and I thought I’d direct it and star in it too. If that’s OK with you.’

‘Let’s make a two-picture deal.’

‘The Mexican story has a great deal of violence – it’s a good story and it has a great deal of violence.’ Cicogna loves the Mexican story. I try to tell Cicogna that I don’t think the Mexican story would ever recoup its money.

‘Can you get Tony Quinn? Who plays the girl?’

‘I wrote it for Gena.’

Cicogna’s eyes flash across the table and case my wife. It was a fast businessman’s study and the light was right.

‘Gena would be very good. When can I read it?’

‘The script is in L.A.’

So it’s a two-picture deal for *A Piece of Paradise* and *Husbands*, contingent upon Quinn in the first one and Gazzara and Falk in the second one.

I spent the next few days trying to nail Tony to read the script. He was in Rome making *The Secret of Santa Vittoria*, and Sam Shaw, who introduced me to Tony, was to produce the film, Sam being my best friend and I believe Tony's best friend at the same time. Getting the money from Cicogna was easy – breaking through the dinner parties at Tony Quinn's house was something else. His house is some forty to fifty miles from Rome and I hate cars. But as soon as the script arrived from L.A. I was on that road. Tony is still a friend and still the only man that could play the part. But it's like being in love with a woman who isn't in love with you – there's nothing you can do about it. When the Mexican film blew, Cicogna never batted an eye:

'Let's do *Husbands*.'

'You want to do *Husbands*?'

Now this is amazing considering he made Quinn a handsome proposition and that a director never looks good when he promises something and can't deliver. Thank God I have ego and still counted on Gazzara and Falk.

Though it's impossible to know if it figured in Cassavetes' calculations, it was probably not a bad idea to have pitched *Husbands* to a foreigner, since the story was not that new. An American producer would have remembered Delbert Mann's 1957 *The Bachelor Party* or Sidney Lumet's *Bye, Bye, Braverman*, which was filmed six months before Cassavetes made his pitch in Rome.

A Piece of Paradise was the old script Cassavetes had written back in 1960, prior to *Too Late Blues*. Cassavetes had been peddling it at this point for almost ten years. He no longer had any particular passion for it; it was merely something to sell Cicogna if he could. As to its \$5 million production cost, Cassavetes simply made up the amount on the spot. A few years later, in June 1974, he unsuccessfully tried to sell the same script to Sam Peckinpah.

Cicogna asked to see the script of *Husbands* as soon as possible. What he didn't know was that it didn't exist. Cassavetes talked a good line but hadn't yet written anything. But, as he once said, 'plunging in and just doing something is the best way to make it happen'. He went back to his Rome villa and dictated the screenplay over the next two weekends. It uncharacteristically provided lengthy stage directions and shot indications to make the project seem more real to Cicogna. Cassavetes sent it to the financier as soon as he was done, telling him that he had had it flown in from Los Angeles. Largely on the strength of the two other stars Cassavetes assured him he had lined up, Cicogna drew

up a memorandum of agreement committing financing for the project. (It's worth noting that although all of the surviving screenplay drafts are titled 'The Husbands', Cassavetes' preferred title was actually *Harry, Archie, and Gus* because of the film's focus on friendship – though the title change was vetoed by Columbia.)

That left only two more problems to cope with. Falk and Gazzara didn't know they were going to be in the movie Cassavetes had pledged them to star in. Cassavetes would now have to produce his two co-stars. Time was running out, since it was now June 1968 and part of Cassavetes' pitch to Cicogna was that shooting would begin in New York in December. (He mistakenly counted on a quick sale and distribution of *Faces* and saw no reason to sit around doing nothing.) Cassavetes had Cicogna's office wire Cicogna's memo to Falk, who was in Belgrade working on *Castle Keep*. Falk was baffled when he received it, since he had forgotten all about the picture. But, as Cassavetes had realized when he made the pitch to Cicogna, Falk was scheduled to come to Rome in July to act in *Machine Gun McCain* with Cassavetes, and Cassavetes was sure he could talk him into it.

It takes Peter about a year to make up his mind about almost any point that has to do with acting – when he understands something clearly he asks you to tell him again. I know one day we will all be partners, Falk, Gazzara and me, and we've already decided and appointed Falk the decision-maker. Anyway, Peter agreed.

The final step was to get Gazzara on board. Cassavetes' strategy of inviting him to a preview screening of *Faces* paid off. Gazzara was bowled over by the film and ready to take Cassavetes' proposal seriously. At that moment, Gazzara was in Prague acting in *The Bridge at Remagen*. It was the summer of Prague Spring, with Russian troops and tanks all around him. He says Cassavetes called his hotel and began, 'Ben, don't get killed. I got money for our picture.' Though Gazzara didn't know what 'our picture' was until Cassavetes reminded him, he was interested enough to fly to Rome to meet with Cassavetes and Falk on weekends to discuss the script. When Russian troops took over most of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, Gazzara's shoot was fortuitously moved to Rome, and the three men were finally together for a few weeks.

Thus began a series of catch-as-catch-can meetings between the three men that would extend through the rest of 1968. For the next six months, while Cassavetes was completing his acting obligations in *Machine Gun McCain*, arranging various festival screenings of *Faces*,

flying between England and the United States to give interviews and attend events to promote the release of the film, and holding production planning meetings with the producers and senior members of the crew of *Husbands*, he spent every spare minute rewriting the screenplay – passing at least five different drafts on to Falk and Gazzara, responding to their comments and criticisms and writing the next draft. It's no wonder Cassavetes bristled at the post-release calumny that he and his co-stars had 'winged' the movie.

Before *Husbands* was a screenplay, I must have done about 400 pages of notes. I thought about it for several years. Then there was a screenplay. My first draft was abominable – all the pitfalls of that first-told tale – a slick farce predicated on men running away from their wives to the lure of the will. There are certain catchphrases that people are attracted to made famous by *Time* magazine, such as 'Swinging London' – and there's always someone standing around behind you who says, 'That sounds funny,' but when you look into the eyes of two artists who want the best for themselves and want to be associated with something that has some meaning that's not good enough. The characters were empty. During the second half of 1968, Ben, Peter and I passed dozens of revisions of the script around everywhere we went. From Rome [where most of the interiors of *Machine Gun McCain* were filmed] we had been to Las Vegas, New York, San Francisco [where the exteriors for *Machine Gun McCain* were filmed], Los Angeles and back to New York [where Gazzara lived and Cassavetes was supervising the release of *Faces*]. We had followed each other around using every spare moment we could find to assess the values of three men – three New Yorkers with jobs, who had passed the plateau of youth, who were married and happy and living in Port Washington, Long Island, the commuters' paradise. That's as far as we got in one year. Long conversations until five o'clock in the morning. Back and forth the story went.

Cassavetes' method was to discover what a film was about in the process of writing, rehearsing and filming it and to follow those discoveries wherever they led.

The characters in *Husbands* are quite different from those in *Faces*. I mean *Faces* was about people who were just getting by. These guys don't want to just get by in life. They want to live. I don't really know what *Husbands* is about at this point. You could say it's about three married guys who want something for themselves. They don't know what they want, but they get scared when their best friend dies. Or you

could say it is about three men that are in search of love and don't know how to attain it. Or you could say it is about a person of sentiment. Every scene in the picture will be our opinions about sentiment. I try to talk to the actors and try to find out what I really think about sentiment. It may turn harsh or bitter; but I can allow anything as long as I know we are honest. We worked with no story, basically no story except what I mentioned, and worked for a year to try to solve it and to gain, to get something out of it.

When you make a film whose interest is to take an extremely difficult subject, deal with it in depth and see if you can find something in yourself, and if other people can find other things within themselves that they will be able to develop in their personal life, it's great. After being an actor for a few years you really don't care about money, fame or glory anymore; those things are good, but you need something more.

Cassavetes' elusiveness about the subject of his film was neither modesty nor coyness. He believed that to lock himself into a predetermined story or a preconceived conception of his characters' identities was too limiting. To play a 'character' in a 'narrative' was to reduce the sliding, shifting complexity of life to cartoon clichés.

Each moment was found as we went along – not off the cuff, not without reason – but without a preconceived notion that forbids people from behaving like people and tells a 'story' that is predictable – and untrue. I *hate* knowing my theme and my story before I really start. I like to discover it as I work. In *Husbands* the off-the-set relationship between Gazzara, Falk and myself determined a lot of the scenes we created as we went along. It was a process of discovering the story and the theme. When you know in advance what the story is going to be, it gets boring really fast. At one point we decided that we weren't even going to shoot in London; Peter broke into laughter and so did I. What a terrific thrill to tell the truth – to not protect some stupid idea that doesn't work. From then on, it didn't matter if it was London, Paris, Hamburg – or Duluth!

I believe that if an actor creates a character out of his emotions and experiences, he should do with that character what he wants. If what he is doing comes out of that, then it has to be meaningful. If Peter and Ben and I have three characters, why should a director come in and impose a fourth will? If the feelings are true and the relationship is pure, the story will come out of that. If you don't have a script, you don't have a commitment to just saying lines. If you don't have a script, then you take the

essence of what you really feel and say that. You can behave more as yourself than you would ordinarily with someone else's lines. Most directors make a big mystery of their work; they tell you about your character and your responsibility to the overall thing. Bullshit. With people like Ben and Peter you don't give directions. You give freedom and ideas.

Cassavetes and his actors couldn't say where they were going to come out in advance because the actors were on a voyage of exploration. Acting was not about *pretending* to be something but about discovering what you *really* were. The feelings in the film were not poses but states of real emotional exposure. You were really to listen, think and react.

An actor can't suddenly deny or reject a part of himself under the pretext of playing a particular character, even if that's what he would like to do. You can't ask someone to forget themselves and become another person. If you were asked to play Napoleon in a picture, for example, you can't really have his emotions and thoughts, only yours. You could never actually be Napoleon, only *yourself* playing him. I've *never* wanted to play a *role*. Honestly, I never have! That indicates to me that you want to step forward and show someone something, and that terrifies me, really. What you want to do is be invisible as that character, so that there's no pressure on you worrying about the outside world.

You made a role yours not by 'acting', but by believing in it, by adding something of yourself to it, by playing it personally.

I get bored seeing two people that are supposed to be in love, who kiss, screw or whatever they do. I get bored by that because they're only supposed to do those things. I don't really believe that they're doing that, and I couldn't care less. It always struck me when I used to go see pictures as a kid at Times Square that when it came to the love scenes everybody used to boo. But once in a while you'd see a picture like *Red Shoes*, and no matter how tough the audience was, they would root for the love story because these people didn't pretend to be in love with each other – they *were* in love with each other.

In a similar vein, *Husbands* was deeply anchored in Cassavetes' own personal experiences, attitudes and emotions. Though the film is closer to being a spiritual autobiography than a literal depiction of actual events in Cassavetes' life, there are dozens of overlaps and allusions to aspects of his life. It is as if he were trying to understand the world he had spent his teenage years in. The Port Washington scenes are a dream

vision of the life Cassavetes would have led if he had not rebelled and left home to become an actor. (And they represent the life his father did live, riding the commuter train between Long Island and New York every morning and evening.)

The story Gus tells on the subway about his love for basketball reflects Cassavetes' own teenage dreams and aspirations. The singing contest in the bar echoes many similar events Cassavetes participated in. He loved to sing after he had had a few drinks. (It was the only time he wasn't self-conscious about his voice.) 'Red' Cullers' performance of 'Brother Can You Spare a Dime?' was based on an actual event from back when Cassavetes was a stage manager on Gregory Ratoff's *The Fifth Season*, and Cassavetes, Ratoff and Cullers (who was in the play) were out drinking when Cullers began singing the song and talking about the Depression and the music of his youth. Cassavetes thought it was one of the most poetic moments he had ever experienced in his entire life. Harry's fight with his wife echoes similar spats between Rowlands and Cassavetes: it was not at all uncommon for one or the other to temporarily 'move out' or run off to a hotel. The three men's impulsive flight to London mirrors trips Cassavetes and Cassel many times only half-jokingly talked about (leaving the wives and children behind, taking a big paycheck and flying off to Brazil) and something Cassel actually once did: when Cassavetes flew to Ireland to act in *The Middle of Nowhere*, Cassel accompanied him on the spur of the moment. And when it came time to return home, like Harry in the film, Cassel equally impulsively decided he didn't want to go back and stayed in Europe for another four months while Cassavetes went home without him. The gambling spree in the movie was something Cassavetes had often indulged in and was in fact the way Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara spent many of their London evenings while they were making the movie.

All the people I meet make up my films. I make movies not about somebody else's, but *my* life!

But the deepest connection between the actor and the character is their shared sense that it is critical to seize the moment and not let life pass you by.

Some people can't wait. That's the only reason I'm attracted to people. Because we don't want to let the moments go by. Those are the ones I am attracted to. We might not be here tomorrow. I make every picture like it's the last day of my life. You got anything to say, you put it in there now. Don't hold back. What are you waiting for?

The filmmaker's personal exposure to mortality – from the premature death of his older brother (who left a wife and child behind) to his own life-threatening case of hepatitis while he was editing *Faces* – contributed to his awareness of how easy it is to miss your own life.

I make my films out of my problems. You know, I have problems, you have problems. *You* won't admit it. *I* will admit it because I'm an artist. My job is to put emotions out on the surface. Not to report on other people's emotions, but to put *your own* emotions out on the surface. My brother had died at thirty and I loved him and my life changed. That's all. Simple as that. It was over so quickly, and I just had no room in my life. When someone dies that young there is no time to say goodbye. I was young and working and everything else and I couldn't do anything except stagger around for a while, then try to reevaluate where I was. So I made a picture. I didn't make a picture *about* my dead brother; I made a picture that was affected by the death of a best friend and these three men. I dedicated *Husbands* to him. You ask me *why* I do these things? I don't know why I do them. I hope it means something to certain people that have suffered loss and don't know how to express it.

Though he began *Husbands* at one of the highest points he would ever attain in his career, showered with praise and commercial success for *Faces*, Cassavetes was far from smug and satisfied. He was acutely aware of the brevity of life and of all that he had not yet done.

At thirty-eight I'm no wunderkind. Somehow the ideas don't come as fast and the energy is less than ample to perform the twenty-four-hour-a-day services required for the artist. One day you wake up and all your ideas are old-fashioned, but they're the only ideas you have. Changes have to be made. A drive that was once compulsive has to be fed. The power-mad ambition is gone – and thoughts creep in of settling down. A lot of time is spent on thinking how much longer you have left to make films.

The characters in *Husbands* were equally anchored in Falk's and Gazzara's personalities. It's not accidental that when Cassavetes gave interviews about this film and others, he almost invariably referred to the character with the name of the actor. The character and actor were, with the fewest of exceptions, interchangeable. The posturing, self-dramatizing Harry in the final party scene has a lot in common with Ben Gazzara in real life. Archie's timidity, conservatism and fears are drawn from Peter Falk's off-screen personality. The overlap doesn't mean that *Husbands* is

self-satisfied and smug, since the film explores and understands the emotional consequences of these modes of being.

Cassavetes' intention in *Husbands* was to have himself, Falk and Gazzara use their actual names in the film (which is, in fact, the way the characters are identified in the screenplay). It was only because Gazzara and Falk objected that the three men were given other names at the last minute – Falk picking his character's name and Gazzara picking his and Cassavetes'.

Because off-camera identities and feelings were not kept separate from on-camera identities and feelings, it was critical that the three men develop a real friendship as well as a cinematic one.

Ben and Peter were strangers to me at that point and it was a long conditioning process getting to know and trust and like each other. When we first got together to talk about the film we were very wary of each other. We were all terrified that the three of us would get into a boring conversation and cease to like each other, which would make it impossible as actors to assume the friendship we needed as a background for our characters. By the end of the picture we became friends on a level that's unqualified by duty or loyalty; those things don't count. The only thing that counts is that you're all doing the same thing, you're testing each other, testing yourself. In that situation each actor is thinking, 'How far up can I reach?' That's selfish – and honest. I don't think Peter and Benny were too concerned about how far I could go as a director; they were thinking about how far they could go as actors. And, in a realistic sense, Benny couldn't go any place unless Peter was good and unless I was good. So we knew we had to work on that level, and in order to do that we had to get tight with each other.

The time devoted to making a film is just an extension of the life of everyone involved. It's a time that the actor must strip himself naked and empty himself, drawing on his inner emotional energy. Many times in the picture I called Benny 'Ben'. Certain parts of Peter and Benny are close to Archie and Harry. Gazzara's character was continually frozen out by me and Falk – and Benny was really getting personally paranoid about it. In a three-person relationship there's always one guy on the outside, and during the picture, Benny was usually it. It was amazing to watch the turmoil, to encourage it, to feed the battle that was raging between Archie and Peter.

Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara flew to London in November 1968 and held a week of auditions at the Savoy Hotel to select the three girls the

husbands pick up on their London fling. They had the choice of almost any actress in England, since many of the top agents sent their biggest talent, but Cassavetes actually preferred the awkwardness and freshness of non-professionals. None of the girls he chose had ever appeared in a film before, and two of them had never acted at all. (Jenny Runacre had been an airline stewardess for a number of years and was the only actress of the group, having done a tiny bit of regional theater work the previous year; Noelle Kao was in medical school; Jenny Lee Wright was a former dancer.)

I'm a firm believer that you can overtrain actors, to the point where they can't move in any area except the area that's been written down. Training is what we try to avoid. I think it's important that all actors keep open a feeling of innocence, a feeling that they don't know everything yet. I don't like professional groups that take this away from an actor, preventing him from being responsive, fresh.

Though he had the candidates read scenes as part of the audition process, he put far more weight on his impression of them as people. Most of the auditions Cassavetes conducted consisted of him simply talking with you for an hour or two. If he thought you were interesting, that was enough.

Casting is really embarrassing. I couldn't stand to make somebody read, because I was the worst reader. I have auditioned as an actor and find it to be a put down. It's like asking someone to smile for you. I don't think you can tell anything by that – [mimicking] 'Here, smile for me. If you smile real good you'll get the job.' Or 'Cry for me.' I like to see someone desire to do something and, God knows, I don't mean enthusiasm – that should be left backstage. I sit and talk with them. You just look to see if they are serious about their work and are willing to reveal themselves in some way. Every actor is different like every person is different.

Cassavetes' impressions of the three young women illustrate the extent to which he rewrote their roles to conform with his understanding of their personalities. Just as he had when he cast the three husbands, for their dates he picked personalities as different from one another as possible.

Jenny Runacre: she's tall – perhaps six foot in her heels. She's thin, with big blue eyes, jutting cheekbones, fair hair, wavy like a Millais Madonna. She's nervous and high-strung – she rears and bridles like a

racehorse when I interview her; but she has the emotional impact of a bomb. She listens attentively having already made up her mind. ‘What have you done?’ I ask. ‘To whom?’ she retorts aggressively. ‘I mean what experience do you have?’ (I am on the defensive already.) She rips through the part like a ferocious wild animal, cuts you to ribbons, grabs your sympathy and attention. Her stark beauty vanishes, then breathtakingly returns. The emotional power never swerves. I begin mentally reorganizing the part to fit her.

Noelle Kao: she is 2,000 years old, yet as contemporary as the King’s Road. A face like a twelfth-century Chinese brush drawing on silk above a mad outfit by Ossie Clark. Fine, delicate boning around a personality of high-tension steel. She is the spirit of China today. She has never acted before – she was a medical student studying in London – but in the inexorable build-up of her big emotional scene where she stands in a torrent of London rain and lets loose a matching verbal tirade in Chinese, addressed to all the ignorant white men who look alike, we all began to realize the mettle of the young people educated in modern China. The professionals were spellbound.

Jenny Lee Wright: she’s the kind of girl who makes every man feel a dandy; a cream cake of a girl; a girl you want to hug. She purrs, she dimples, she twinkles; a mouth-watering beauty made excitingly accessible by her natural warmth. In minutes of meeting her she has found your funny bone – and she isn’t even trying. It’s just that she is completely and utterly her own delicious self. She expands to fill the space available, defying every casting custom. She has a way of smiling that makes you feel is just for you. No one could resist this woman. No one would want to. Every man alive will want to devour her.

The six months in which the three principals passed the text from hand to hand, with Cassavetes responding to Gazzara’s and Falk’s comments by rewriting the script, was followed by approximately a month of workshopping in which the six principals (the three men and women) sat around a table in the Windsor Room of the Hotel Piccadilly in New York and worked through the script. Cassavetes used this time to study the interactional styles of the actors in order to do another set of rewrites incorporating their specific speech rhythms, tones and personalities into the script.

There was about four weeks of rehearsal in which we rewrote the screenplay. The way we worked was to improvise an entire scene, then I would write it, then we’d play it again, improvise some more, rewrite

it, work on that, rewrite and rewrite and finally Ben would say, 'This is good,' and Peter would say, 'This makes me feel better.' I worked very hard on one sequence; we wrote the same scene maybe 200 times. Then we'd start shooting and throw the whole thing out!

But the background work would be very important. I found that by writing scenes that we might never use, and writing them again and again and again, that everything that we had written and improvised was, therefore, in our minds, used and usable. We had investigated, studied it. We knew what we were capable of saying to each other and doing with each other, so we got to the point where we could just give any kind of improvisation.

This way of proceeding put an unusual burden on Cassavetes' own willingness to remain open to new ideas and possibilities as they arose. He knew that most writers were too attached to their own work to revise it this way.

I don't think a lot of writers would want to collaborate with me. It's a very difficult thing to say a writer is not important. Somebody can write a good screenplay, but it's different from doing the kind of pictures that I do, where the actor is more important than anyone else. I wouldn't be concerned with what a writer felt. I would only be concerned that the actor, who was portraying the writer's character, was comfortable, was happy and was good. It's a very tough bargain to make with somebody that has an ego and who has been trained in a business where status is everything to suddenly have a new level of work with new values that say the script doesn't mean a damn thing – rewrite it, do it again, rewrite it. OK, let's improvise it. After improvisation, let's rewrite it again, then let's improvise it. And maybe we won't use anything. Maybe it will be background. I know that I'm willing to do that. I don't know anyone else that is. People say they are, but it's a hell of a lot of work. That's why I wouldn't do a picture unless I could write the script. I just don't trust anyone else to do what I do. Not because I'm better than anyone else, but because I know that I'll put every last drop of blood I have into it – and not be concerned with the writing. Scripts lock you in and subject you to your own thinking. They take away freedom and make less out of what could be more. You know as a director what you want, but the film is smarter than you; the film says no, the film says there's something more here. I mean you improvise all the time when you're editing. Right? You just change everything. So that's all it is.

Cassavetes' references to the use of 'improvisation' during the workshop and the filming process created misunderstandings about his working methods. Beyond a small number of lines of dialogue here and there, only a few moments in *Husbands* were actually 'improvised' in the common import of the word – ad-libbed on the set while filming was going on: the singing scene in the bar; parts of Gus and Mary's sex scene; parts of Falk's 'take your hand off my hand' scene with the 'Countess'; and parts of the men's farewell scene in Harry's hotel room. In general (and including large sections of the above moments), the film was played exactly as it was scripted, from the first page to the last. During the workshop phase, 'improvisation' was Cassavetes' term for the use of discussion and rehearsal to suggest revisions to the text that he would then write into it so that the characters became richer and more alive. During the shoot, when Cassavetes used the word to describe what went on, he generally meant that the actor was encouraged to put his own emotional 'spin' on his lines.

I think you have to define what improvisation does – not what it is. Improvisation to me means that there is a characteristic spontaneity in the work which makes it appear not to have been planned. I write a very tight script, and from there on in I allow the actors to interpret it the way they wish. But once they choose their way, then I'm extremely disciplined – and they must also be extremely disciplined about their own interpretations. There's a difference between ad-libbing and improvising, and there's a difference between not knowing what to do and just saying something. I believe in improvising on the basis of the written work and not on undisciplined creativity. When you have an important scene, you want it written; but there are still times when you want things just to happen.

Improvisation in the emotionally exploratory sense was employed throughout the film. The point was to capture some of the complexity of actual human expression. Cassavetes was fond of saying that he could never understand why the emotions and behavior in films were so simple and monotonic, since people's behavior in life was infinitely varied and complex and so subtly marbled with mixed emotional colorings (anger mixed with fear or foolishness; bragging mixed with nostalgia or uncertainty; pride mixed with regret and sadness; etc.). After watching a Hollywood movie, he occasionally would ask rhetorically, 'Where's the *behavior*?' Hollywood films were too general, too much about abstract states of mind and not enough about the ways people really

expressed themselves in life. (In this context, it is interesting to note that Gazzara reported that throughout the entire rehearsal and shooting of *Husbands*, Cassavetes never once made reference to the three men's feelings or states of mind. He never talked about 'grief' or 'sadness' or 'having missed out on their youth', etc., but only about what they did or did not specifically do or say.)

To get the complexity of 'behavior' that he was seeking, Cassavetes would not hesitate to shoot a scene five, ten or fifteen times, with the actors exploring different mixtures of emotional coloration in each take (though never analytically discussed). Then Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara would watch the rushes the next day and possibly notice something they hadn't realized up to that point, with the result that Cassavetes would rewrite the scene that night and shoot it again the following morning. Viewing the daily rushes was an essential part of the revisionary process. Given Cassavetes' commitment to filming and printing so many uninterrupted ten-minute takes, it was not unusual for rushes to run as long as two hours (rather than the more typical thirty minutes in a studio situation).

Each night at rushes we would sit and watch and laugh or moan, and concoct ways to make it better, to make our performances tell the story.

'How do you call your wife and tell her you're going to London?'

We improvised a thousand times; ran through reams of paper typing out speeches; simple things like saying goodbye could no longer be simple. And here they were – the three unseen wives, being cared for and being considered. When three men decide to pack it in and go away, we all decided, they would go away and not lay it on their wives:

'Maybe it's ignorance. Maybe they're ignorant. Let's go back to ignorance.'

Anyway, it's in the picture. And the feelings are there. The constant rain, the girls and the attitude towards relationships with other people, with women other than their wives. The point was to get it like a night – like any other night, one night and one morning in London that could tell a story of three men. The danger, as we all realized, was that it could become cheap; it was an ideal situation for a situation comedy. So we talked some more:

'How can three men fall in love with three women that they've never seen before, all in the same night?'

'They can't.'

'Then they don't.'

The problem was the affair – an affair for each of these men – now

how do you make an affair that isn't of the heart an uncheap thing?

'You have to be dead on – just dead on.'

'Let's go back to the death of our friend – go back to Stuart's death.'

What a thing for someone to die – a kind of pain that catches at your throat.

'The hell with the modern thinking that says, "Let's forget it and go back to work – put it out of our minds – let the dead lie." Death is a painful experience to those that are living.'

'We've got to fight it.'

'Who knows anything about death?'

'We've got to care.'

'We can't give in.'

'What do we do when we get home?'

'Let's worry about that when we get home.'

'Let's go back to the beginning.'

All this was part of the protest of returning too early, going back to normalcy too early.

'I think it stinks not to see the wives.'

'Who says we don't see our wives?'

'Let's see our wives, if we have to see our wives.'

'Anyone wants to see his wife, let him see his wife.'

Back to the city again – more aware now of responsibility.

'I can't face it now. I'm not going back to work.'

'I got to go back to work.'

It was exciting to put everything up for grabs, but it didn't make for smooth sailing. Cassavetes' methods caused confusion and met with resistance, particularly from Falk. Though he subsequently described the film as the most creative and stimulating experience he had ever had as an actor, he initially fought Cassavetes' method – coming close to quitting at one point early in the shoot. He begged Cassavetes just to tell him what to do. Cassavetes refused and threw the creative problem completely into Falk's lap, causing him enormous uncertainty and anxiety (which, in the end, undoubtedly contributed to the depth of his performance).

The improvisation began with Ben's character. He had the most clear-cut problems and motivations. Peter's was more difficult. He didn't really find his character until he got to London. He was upset at first because he needs the kind of professionalism where at least you have a few beats. I prefer to work with no beats at all. He had a great number

The overlap of actor and character — Falk's doubts, questions and uncertainties in the scene in the Roundhouse in which Archie is given five minutes to pick up a girl by his exasperated companions (later cut from the film). Ben Gazzara is visible in the left side of the top photo. © *Sam Shaw*

of problems integrating my ideas with his ideas. We really disagreed, not on what the character was or wasn't, but in the way of the work, how the work was working. Should you stand there until something happens? Or should you have something and then determine yourself how that should happen? I am strong-minded and say, 'No, it's got to be the other way. It's got to be: stand there until something happens.' It was murder. Because he's a good actor who always worked conventionally. Learn the lines, go in, do it. And all of a sudden, I take away the lines and just let him stand there, and Peter was going nuts, he went crazy. He said, 'John, explain it to me again.'

Cassavetes had to adapt his direction to the personalities of his actors. Falk and Gazzara required almost diametrically opposite treatment as actors: Falk constantly desired answers, explanations, discussions of the scene and psychological situation of a character (which Cassavetes provided in hour after hour of talks with him); Gazzara wanted to be left alone to solve his own problems (which Cassavetes honored). There was no right or wrong way to direct; Cassavetes did whatever was necessary to put the actor into the comfortable (or occasionally uncomfortable) place that would result in the most creative performance.

An additional source of confusion was Cassavetes' rejection of Hollywood concepts of 'stars', 'star turns' and 'big moments'.

It was more difficult dealing with three guys and what three guys wanted than it was dealing with one guy and what he wanted. I was constantly aware of the structural problems. One of us had a turn, and then another, and then another. Somehow the picture had to start taking over so that nobody had any more turns. I hate 'stars' where that means an actor is so involved with a character that he says, 'Take the scene. Make it mine and make it good. Move the audience and make them laugh. Once you get them going, don't let them off the hook.' Peter was looking to grab that audience and make them sit up so they were going with him. But I set up things so that he couldn't take them and push them anywhere. He couldn't take the audience and grab them and tie them into a knot because that would just be leaving them there. The next time he appeared, they would say, 'What happened to him?' It wouldn't be part of a structure made up of three guys. The whole thing was working with three guys. The three of us really like to grab a scene and do something with it. But we had to work more like amateurs. We had to be really involved with each moment, without ever allowing anybody to grab onto that moment and make it their own.

Cassavetes shunned Hollywood notions of romance, glamour and charm. Ben Gazzara reported that over and over during the filming Cassavetes kept repeating: ‘No “cute”! *Nothing* “cute”.’ Cassavetes was particularly hard on Falk throughout the shoot, since he knew that it would have been the easiest thing in the world for him to slouch, shrug and shuffle his way through scene after scene and turn *Husbands* into a comedy. Cassavetes gave himself, Falk and Gazzara permission to be bad in the service of being truthful.

The job that has to be done here is for three men to investigate themselves – honestly, without suppression. It’s very difficult for someone to reveal themselves. It’s very difficult to say what you really mean, because what you really mean is painful. I can’t help being like most everybody else sometimes, pushing down what I feel so far that even when I hear my own feelings described, it sounds alien, foreign, unconnected. The most terrifying thing for me is to face myself utterly and truthfully.

While working on *Husbands*, I was forced to ask myself questions I never asked myself before. Ben and Peter had to do the same thing. We had to open ourselves up and look at ourselves, and we all have hang-ups. Is it really better to be a man-child or to be a man? I don’t know. The minute you settle down and say, ‘That’s it. I’m closing shop. I know what I am,’ then you’re a man, no longer a man-child. And none of us are really all that open, and we’re a little defensive. So the three of us would sit down and talk and improvise and give ourselves a problem by putting ourselves in a real situation and trying to find out the honest answers. And I’d write the scene, and rewrite, and we’d improvise again. Every actor – every good actor – does this or tries to do this with every part he plays. What we have given to the film as actors has been what we are. Where we have failed is when we couldn’t reach ourselves and the essence of what we really feel, or we were too shy or inhibited to let it out. *Husbands* is about feelings and sentiment, and sentiment is selfish. We try to prove that selfishness is important, a way to stay sensitive.

Cassavetes knew that it was critical to break the characters free from simplistic, media-promoted ideals of attractiveness. The point was never to soften or sentimentalize the emotional realities, no matter how ugly, embarrassing, painful or clumsy the result might seem. In the singing scene, for example, Cassavetes characterized the three men as acting like ‘bastards’, but insisted that showing them that way was essential in depicting their feelings.

Husbands depicts the American man without any camouflage. It's very difficult for some people to feel or to see themselves in a bad form. I think that people in films are expected to be heroes, even with the anti-hero situation going on for years and years in literature. People expect too much from themselves, they want to look great. You know what actors are? They're 'professional people'. They get paid for being people. If you don't have any weaknesses, you'd be a superhero! I try to have the actors try not to be better than they are. The strange thing is that in this way they reveal themselves as human beings. It's critical that my actors don't censor themselves or clean up their act – don't try to give an overly sympathetic image of themselves to the audience. You have to have the courage to be bad and really express what you want to say. Did you ever notice how in Hollywood movies even the villains are charming? But we all are crazy. I mean it! We're never nutty on film. That's the trouble. On the screen everyone is perfect. They're a perfect heavy, they're a perfect good guy. That's boring.

Cassavetes felt that conventional social values and moral judgments only got in the way of the pursuit of the truth.

We made the picture as a feeling about men and what men do and how they won't give in to the world they live in. We'd like to take people on our trip with us, to break all the conventions that bug us without being moralists about anything. We rejected the idea of delivering any kind of 'message'. From the very beginning we made a pact that we would try to find whatever truth was left in ourselves and talk about that. Sometimes the scenes would reflect things that we didn't like to find out: how idiotic we were or how little we had to do with ourselves, how uptight we were. We felt that it was important to find a way to have the courage to put that out on the line for whatever it was, even if the picture itself would not be exciting. One of the reasons we did that is because, I think, all three of us felt one thing, and one thing very strongly. That was the idea that there wasn't enough individual expression, bad or good. We wanted to break down every convention that had restricted us in the past.

Reviewers frequently commented on the inarticulateness of Cassavetes' characters. It bothered Falk as well. At one point during the workshop process, he asked Cassavetes why he couldn't simply write a speech in which Archie said what was bothering him. Cassavetes rejected the idea. He didn't think emotional problems were reducible to verbal explanations.

The studios take a formulaic approach to what will sell, which is why most writers and directors are faced with doing a story that they don't really want. *Husbands* has a less conventional approach toward intellectual explanations than a studio picture. I have to find a language for these three men that is not articulate. If I were to sit down and write it out so that it's literate and so that it says exactly what it means, then there would be no point, we could have a narration over it. It's a discovery of what's inside and what we're talking about rather than having it be explicitly stated.

Though many viewers were puzzled by the emphasis placed on drinking scenes, and the prominence of the 'singing scene' in particular, Cassavetes felt that the world of a bar was a special one.

In barrooms, when people talk about their life – and they're not worrying about paying a psychiatrist or worrying about the guy next to them – I think it's a given with men, or has been, that that's not just conversation, it's stating something else. So whatever somebody was talking about, they were talking about it for a reason. People in barrooms know that. Like being in a war, being in a bar – being on the streets.

Shooting was scheduled to begin in early December 1968 in New York; but Cicogna and Cassavetes had been sparring over the deal from the start. Cicogna's original agreement back in Rome, which Cassavetes had in writing, was that he would put up a firm \$2.4 million. But the day before shooting was supposed to begin, he flew from Rome to New York, met with Cassavetes in person and told him the deal was off. As Cassavetes put it: 'He changed his mind. He didn't like the story.'

Even if it came from a Roman, it was a classic Los Angeles move. Cicogna's sudden visit had nothing to do with liking or disliking the story. What was really going on was that Cassavetes' tall tales about how much money the film would make had convinced Cicogna that he deserved a bigger share in the profits and more creative involvement in the production (which Cassavetes had carefully kept Cicogna from getting when the original contract was drawn up). From the start of the negotiations in Rome, the two men had struggled over control, and Cicogna's problems with 'the story' were his way of regaining a little control over a project he would be paying so much for. By pulling out his money he was sure he could renegotiate the deal and make it a little more favorable for himself. It was not an accident that his problem with the story had arisen at the worst possible moment for Cassavetes' shoot.

Cassavetes was beside himself with rage and feelings of betrayal. He absolutely refused to talk about a new deal or to compromise in any way. The production stopped dead in its tracks before it had started. As soon as the news got out, everyone from Falk and Gazzara on down was convinced the film was finished – everyone except Cassavetes. At least in public, he talked confident. He insisted he was still going to make *Husbands*, no matter what Cicogna did or did not contribute financially. The crew sat around playing cards, waiting to see what would happen. The problem was that, without Cicogna's backing, Cassavetes didn't have a dollar of support. Gazzara offered to put up some of his own money. Cassavetes thought he could raise a little himself. But it just wasn't enough. Cassavetes went to several studios and secretly pitched the film to them in hopes they would pick up the picture. He couldn't believe their response.

I took the script to the majors. Guess what they said? 'We don't like it. It's a bad idea. All three of you have the same color hair.' How can you accept *that* as criticism!

Every time Cicogna tried to get Cassavetes to negotiate, Cassavetes made a scene – as only he could. He went absolutely wild. He screamed and yelled at Cicogna when he tried to visit him. He threatened a series of lawsuits (and in fact was legally in the right since Cicogna had signed a contract) – but what Cicogna knew was that any court settlement would come too late. A week into the impasse, when a meeting between the two sides had finally been arranged, Cassavetes dramatically strode into the conference room just as the group was getting seated and told all of his representatives to immediately leave; there would be no budget renegotiation. When Cicogna's representatives called, Cassavetes hung up on them. He lied and told them he had three studio offers waiting in the wings and they better make up their minds fast. Even as he was throwing fits, there was a part of him that treated it as a game. He later said he loved every minute of it.

It's thrilling. Isn't life exciting and strange? Now I realize that people need to be pushed. For a while I was pushed, for the wrong reasons, and I didn't like it. But now I'm doing the pushing – for the right reasons, I think – and I like it, I like it a lot. I think I've gotten tougher. There was a time in my life when I believed in everyone. I used to like people a lot more than I like people now. But at the same time I didn't want to do as much as I want to do now. Now if I have a friend, I don't want to waste time, I want to use him. I want to use him for everything he is worth. I think there's a misunderstanding about using people. It has such a bad

connotation now, but I think people like to be used. If you feel fulfilled, then you're used. I'm more impatient with people now and I don't care about what I say. I think people can see how they are used badly. I don't think people mind being used. I always say I'm using you. I hope I use you well. If you don't want to be used, you have that option. You see, if I want to use you and I tell you I want to use you, that's a compliment. But if I sneak using you, it is the sneakiness you don't like, not the being used you don't like. It's the feeling that someone is really not being straight with you.

Finally, on Friday 17 January, Cicogna blinked in the staring contest. He became afraid he might lose the whole picture and (since he was legally bound to honor the contract otherwise) agreed to buy back Cassavetes' part of the contract for \$900,000, on the sole condition that he be repaid the buyback cost out of the film's eventual profits. It was only a little more than a third of the money Cassavetes originally counted on for the budget, but he announced that shooting would begin the following Monday, even if he could only make half of the movie. Cassavetes began filming knowing that he would run out of money part-way through the shoot but confident he could get whatever was necessary to complete it from Cicogna during the London phase.

As it turned out, Cassavetes spent the entire \$900,000 on the New York sequences (which were scheduled to last five weeks but took twice that long due to Cassavetes changing the script and reshooting scenes he wasn't happy with). And that was strictly for production costs. To save money and get the film made at all, Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara had agreed to work for nothing for the entire project (deferring their salaries against a share in a future sale and a percentage of the profits).

Cassavetes was faced with the reality that he had no money for the London part of the shoot (where an entirely new crew with the exception of a few key members was supposed to be hired). Cassavetes spent hours with United Artists representatives trying to work out a \$1.4 million completion money deal to be able to continue the shoot, but the arrangement fell through at a last-minute lunch when the studio asked Cassavetes to sign a contract containing fifty pages of fine print on the spot (which as far as he could make out secretly turned over the entire picture and most of its profits to them).

Cassavetes got back in touch with Cicogna and informed him that it looked like there would be no film and he would not be getting any of his money back. The one thing Cassavetes understood that apparently hadn't dawned on Cicogna when he put up the initial investment was

Preparing some of the 400 extras in the Roundhouse scene (not included in the final edit). Note the expression on Falk's face. © *Sam Shaw*

how hard it would be for the financier to walk away from the picture at this point and never see even his initial investment repaid. Cicogna anted up \$500,000 more and got a small amount of profit participation and partial ownership of the film in return.

Cassavetes headed to London with only half as much money as he had had for the New York part of the shoot and the simultaneous awareness that the London scenes would probably be even more expensive than the New York ones. In the first place, although Cassavetes used actual locations as much as possible in both sections of the film, the London scenes involved building several enormous sets and hiring hundreds of extras. As an illustration, 400 extras had to be brought in for a single circus-like nightclub scene staged on a gargantuan set built at the Roundhouse in Camden – a scene which was later cut from the film. (Built sets in the New York section of the film were only used for the men's room and one of the bar scenes, which were both shot on tiny sets built on the ground floor of Cassavetes' New York production offices.) Even beyond the Roundhouse part of the shoot, the London scenes involved much more travel and set-up time than New York, and more different locations – a hotel, a ballroom, an underground station, several nightclubs and a casino (although many of these scenes never made it into the final film).

On top of the ten weeks he had already shot in New York, Cassavetes spent thirteen additional weeks in London, making the total shooting schedule an unprecedented twenty-three weeks – approximately three times as long as a normal studio production. The result was a financial nightmare. Even with the deferred salaries and the boost from Cicogna, the production ran out of money for a second time five weeks before the completion of shooting and Cassavetes had to borrow to finish it. (Sam Shaw got the money from a Canadian investor.)

It is significant, however, that as dicey as the budget was, Cassavetes insisted on meals at four-star gourmet restaurants for all of the principals in New York and London. For a director so passionately in love with life and the people he worked with, it was an essential part of making a film that you enjoyed yourself to the hilt while you were doing it. Cassavetes might cut corners in other ways, but he never economized when it came to having fun. He, Falk and Gazzara went gambling, drinking and partying many evenings after shooting and every weekend. As a result of an unexpected winning streak at a casino, everyone lived a little higher than usual for a few days, and one morning Cassavetes zanyly showed up with Vicuna coats he bought everyone – the producers and the principal actors – to celebrate the previous night’s winning spree. Another weekend, in an unconscious imitation of the husbands in the film, Cassavetes and Sam Shaw impulsively hopped on a flight to Paris to catch a show at the Louvre devoted to Delacroix (whom Cassavetes loved because of ‘his emotional violence’), and the director and producer spent so much money carousing that they couldn’t pay their hotel bill when it came time to return and had to sneak out.

A number of scenes illustrate how the script was altered as a result of Cassavetes suddenly seizing an opportunity that presented itself on the set. The origin of the scene featuring the ‘Countess’ was that Cassavetes suddenly spotted an elegant, elderly, former ballerina who was an extra in the casino scene. (The actress, Delores Delmar, had appeared in dozens of British films over the years but never before in a speaking part.) Cassavetes’ comments also illustrate his willingness to make an actor a little ‘uncomfortable’ if it helped to elicit a better performance.

You see that woman sitting there and you’ve *got* to have her in the scene! It’s right that he would pick her up, because she is the safest woman in the place. It was very easy for him to talk to her. Peter was more comfortable in that scene than in a lot of other scenes because the situation was right. He *would* go over and talk to that woman.

So I took that lady and Peter, and I wrote a scene on the spot and gave

it to him. The secretary wrote it out and gave it to Peter and to the lady, and she looked at it. Peter was all right, but how could she catch up? She was just sitting there. She was out of place. She didn't know what to expect. All the camera crew and everybody else was looking at this woman. What was going to happen? She had a few lines, and she had to, in a sense, be romantic. Sometimes it's utter and total cruelty to elicit something pretty out of somebody. You have to be cruel to somebody sometimes, but it is only cruel in some kind of a social bullshit way. I mean, we're all there to get something good. The woman was tight. She didn't know what was expected of her, and it was too late for her to find out in the course of the filming. I would say terrible things to her, just awful things. She would fight them off like a lady. She reached a point where she could do everything by herself. She was grateful for that attitude of not giving a shit of what anybody else thought, because everything bad had already happened. From there on in, she just started to play. When she had to be romantic, I couldn't direct it. I would just say things like, 'Look at that face.' She was herself, which she had to be. Peter played the scene with her. It was very good, and she was very good.

The 'singing contest' was another scene which originated in Cassavetes' decision suddenly to throw away what he had written and create a new scene on the spot. According to the script, Archie, Peter and Gus were supposed to sit together at a table in the barroom, talking about the meaning of life and singing a few songs. The extras were strictly for background. Since the scene appears in the script immediately after the Port Washington funeral (which was filmed two months later at the conclusion of the American phase of the shoot), it was the first one shot. When Cassavetes saw it in the first day of rushes, he broke out giggling and told Gazzara and Falk that it was 'the most terrible piece of material I've seen in my life – just atrocious'. He decided it would have to be reshot. A few days later, when the three actors returned to the bar to refilm it, Cassavetes unexpectedly threw out the script and created a new scene.

When you go out and make a film and you see your first day's dailies, they'll be so disappointing that you will want to commit suicide. And you will be so happy that somebody puts his hand on your shoulder and says, 'It's not as bad as you think.' When the dailies come in and they're lousy, you fall into a depression that's unbelievable. That's the truth.

The singing scene was the longest actual improvisation in the entire

film. We had a scene written, but it wasn't very good. It wasn't very clear. These people were there, the extras that had been hired to cover the set, so I just said, 'Let's improvise this scene here. Put beer on the table and whiskey on the table.' I didn't know what we would do. We started and I knew that Peter and Ben would catch on and that the rest of the people would pick it up, because they weren't going to break the reality. It was done four different ways, four different takes, two cameras. I gave each actor a song. I said, 'What song do you know?' I said, 'This is the spirit of the scene. It's a scene of singing songs. I don't want anybody not to take these songs seriously. If you put yourself up and really sing the songs, I think that we'll have a good scene.'

Now, with Peter and Ben *we* know what it's about, because we've gone through and shared this, so now we start to work. But the extras didn't know. So a few times I had to stop and say, 'Look, that's bullshit! Forget it. Don't you dare make fun of this! If not – then get the hell out of here.' Now, obviously, I might do that in the take, so that there's actually a fourth character who's the director in the scene. And then as the people sing the songs, something happened – because we know why we're there. We know what we want out of those people, and they respond in kind – once they put in revealing themselves and exposing themselves in terms of *really* singing a song.

Cassavetes' comments about his criticisms of the actors' performances illustrate the conflation of life and art that runs through his work. When Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara criticized or praised various singers, it was impossible for them to know if the comments were being made by the three men as actors or as characters. When Cassavetes told Leola Harlow she was being 'too cute', she didn't know whether the remark was addressed to her as a character or an actress. The beauty of the method was that the distinction between playing and really feeling something breaks down – which is what gives the performances their authenticity.

When Harlow admitted she was confused about what was going on and asked Cassavetes for advice, he told her, 'All you have to do is not pretend.' Jenny Lee Wright similarly reported that when she was uncertain how to play some of her scenes, Cassavetes' advice to her was, 'Just do what you would really do in life.'

Falk later said that taking off his clothes near the end of the singing scene was something that just occurred to him at that moment. Prior to one of the takes, when he asked Cassavetes about his motivation in the newly created scene, Cassavetes gave him one of his trademark directions, which suggested a feeling without actually dictating any

particular action: ‘You just don’t want to be left out.’ Taking off his pants was his expression of that.

I’m a great believer in spontaneity, because I think planning is the most destructive thing in the world. Because it kills the human spirit. So does too much discipline, because then you can’t get caught up in the moment, and if you can’t get caught up in the moment, life has no magic. Without the magic, we might as well all give up and admit we’re going to be dead in a few years. We need magic in our lives to take us away from those realities. The hope is that people stay crazy. It’s really no fun to work with sane people, people who have a set way of doing things. On the other hand, we never drank on *Husbands*. I mean, we never did *anything* on *Husbands*! We were the soberest crew in the world and it was a very rowdy picture and people thought we were drinking and drugging or whatever we were doing. You know, they thought we were going crazy but we weren’t.

Even in a completely scripted moment, Cassavetes often put his performers in situations where they were forced to react spontaneously because they were thrust into slightly unpredictable events. The result was an extraordinary freshness to the performances. Prior to filming his sex scene with Jenny Runacre, Cassavetes simply told her to keep playing the scene to the end no matter what happened. He deliberately made it her first scene.

It was the most embarrassing scene for her because that was her first day of shooting. Ben, Peter and I had said, ‘Look, let’s not talk to the girls and ruin everything. I mean, if we speak to them and form our relationships, we’ll have a nice polite relationship that will be very unexciting by the time we get there.’ So when they came in the morning, we said, ‘Good morning,’ politely, and they really hated us. Couldn’t get a tumble; couldn’t get a lunch; nothing happened.

So we went into this scene with this kind of impossible man-oriented movie, where these poor girls had to come in expecting some kind of kindness, some kind of finesse, just something. But we felt that it would be better that we attack them when the time came. So that scene, when I grabbed Jenny Runacre, the crew didn’t know what to do because they didn’t know what was going to happen, only I knew what was going to happen. I said, ‘Jenny, be prepared for anything, please.’ She said, ‘Oh, I *will*.’ So I threw her on the bed and started to brutalize her and she was fantastic. She *was* fantastic, because we did it I think twelve times!

Cassavetes' rehearsal instructions to Runacre for the argument at the table in the Grosvenor Ballroom scene (which was subsequently cut from the film) illustrate once more that, in his view of it, acting was not mimicking but genuinely listening and responding. The point was not merely to play a role but actually to feel the experience you are having.

I want you to really *think about* this situation. I don't want you to just say it because the lines are written. I want you to *think* – as *a person*, not as *an actress*. I'm not concerned that you get the lines right. I don't care if one line is correct! I want you to be thinking what the situation is. There's *no way* that you can play this scene wrong. That you, Jenny Runacre, can play this scene wrong, except by rushing it and *not* listening, and *not* feeling the pressure that surrounds you. And the minute you do that then the scene is terrible and I can't help you. I'll tell you in advance, you don't even have to worry about it, it will be terrible if you rush. So all you ever do is just find a friend, just like in life. Forget about the scene as a scene and just realize what it is.

The other critical point was never to censor or second-guess yourself. The actor must throw himself completely into the role. Any doubt, any gap, any indecision, any hesitation would be fatal. (It was not only his advice for acting; it was the way he lived his life.)

You must go all the way all the time, and don't give up at all. I mean, don't pull back at all. If you pull back one second you'll start to disappoint yourself. So, just hit it hard, better or worse, every single time you play it. I don't want you to go through any more times when you just walk through it, OK?

The direction Runacre recalls Cassavetes giving her immediately before the final scene in the coffee shop demonstrates Cassavetes' capacity to complexly summarize the feeling of a scene without dictating a specific action. According to Runacre, Cassavetes told her:

Remember, she has spent the night with him and she's feeling very vulnerable. She's happy and she wants to touch him, but she feels embarrassed. But she doesn't want to be, because he's not giving her anything.

Cassavetes was not above trickery to get an effect. He had the property man pour oil on the sidewalk next to the pole where Jenny Runacre was supposed to run following the coffee-shop scene. Without telling her what he had done, he simply told her to be very careful that she didn't

Locking in the camera position for the scene in which Archie and his date say goodbye in the rain. © *Sam Shaw*

slip when she went around the pole. The suggestion was part of the plan to make sure she did. The proof of Cassavetes' method is in the performance. Cassavetes scheduled it as the final scene Runacre played, and she later said that playing it and running off in the rain that way felt as devastatingly real as if the events in the film had actually happened to her. It was all over, and she felt hollowed out and empty. She said at the moment she left the restaurant, she could really have thrown herself under a bus.

Cassavetes' comments to Noelle Kao about the scene in which Archie puts her in a cab (a scene which was later cut from the film) the morning after their horrific fight, demonstrate how hard Cassavetes worked to resist cinematic clichés. As the scene was originally planned, Archie and Julie stand side by side in the rain waiting for the cab to come. Kao relayed what Cassavetes said to her just prior to filming it:

This is not love or a relationship that men and women have in a movie – but in real life. This is not *a movie!* In a movie, you would go into hysterics. Then he would say he's sorry and do something. But he *doesn't* do that. It is like in real life. After the anguish is gone, you just stand there as two individuals, with no communication between you whatsoever. You are looking one way and Peter is looking the other way. In movies you never see two people standing together and yet so far apart,

but as if *nothing has happened*. You come to a point where you think it's no use trying to think about the relationship you had with Peter, and the scene, and everything that happened. It's just something that's completely finished and you don't want to think about it and he doesn't want to think about it, and you are just two individuals standing together.

A scene which used a combination of scripting and ad-libbing is the one in which the three men are leaving the bar in the New York section of the film. The scene was completely scripted, rehearsed and shot eight or nine times, but the emotional high points – the 'fairy Harry' line, the 'you're amazing' line and the kiss on the lips – just happened in the process of filming various takes.

Something similar took place in the scene in which Archie and Gus say farewell to Harry. Since Cassavetes had saved the scene for the final three days of the London shoot, Gazzara's real-life sadness about the end of the film blended into his character's sadness at saying goodbye to his friends. (Cassavetes' description of Harry's crying reflects the long version of the scene, which was significantly cut in the final print.)

The scene was scripted, but what we actually did was almost one hundred per cent improvised. We got there to shoot it, we had plenty of time – days, but Ben was all ready. He was broken up about us leaving and the end of the film, and he did this fantastic stuff, crying, throwing Kleenexes in the air, and we were just sitting there. And then Peter did that thing where he starts talking about the wallaby. It's so funny. It was right in the middle of Ben's big singing scene. Ben was singing 'Dancing in the Dark'. Ben had a fit when he saw Peter. 'What's he doing? What's he doing?' he said, because he knew I'd like it and keep it in. Over and over again I was shocked by Peter's choices. I mean it really surprised me that he would go off in a certain direction.

Though he wasn't able to film in strict chronological order, as much as possible Cassavetes scheduled scenes to draw on an actor's real-life emotions in order to enrich his or her performance. As another illustration, Cassavetes deliberately filmed the scenes with the three men and the girls in the hotel room at the start of the London shoot. In particular, the scene in which Archie berates Julie on the bed was filmed on Noelle Kao's first day. Kao broke down under Falk's verbal abuse and sobbed almost continuously for four hours (so touchingly that the crew protested and Cassavetes called off the rest of the shoot at noon).

Though the tactic may seem brutal, Cassavetes was using Kao's first-day jitters, desire to please and beginner's awe at working with Falk to elicit a much more powerful emotional reaction than she would probably have been able to give if he had filmed the scene in sequence after she had been with the production for a month or two.

Cassavetes was back to working with a professional crew again for the first time since *Too Late Blues* and *A Child Is Waiting*. And, as in those films, he regarded the crew as being the natural enemy of the actor.

If you go to a commercial venture the thing that you have to overcome is the fact that no one cares about anything that you're doing. They care about if it's in focus. They care about if their job is done. 'CAN YOU HEAR THEM?' 'MAKE 'EM SPEAK LOUDER!' No invention can be accomplished. No chance can be taken. They don't really care what they make or say. *I care.*

The most boring thing in the world is to direct a film, set the camera here, mark the actors, get your focus and light it. The sound should be clear and the shot should be good – but professional accuracy seems to me to have nothing to do with content, and since the only people in the film that are truly interested in what the film has to say are the actors, it seemed to me the best choice to make an alliance with them rather than the usual alliance with the crew. The director of a film has a tremendous advantage over the actors and there is no way that he won't use that advantage. He is usually the friend of some fifty-odd technicians on the floor, and when there is a disagreement between actor and director, the actor is not arguing with one man but with fifty-one. In front of a crew, I'm always in the position of being in the right and it's easy to blame the actor and to look hurt. But then I'm only destroying him, turning him into an enemy, destroying his dreams and ours too. If I defend myself I'm only destroying myself and I've never liked directors because this is the attitude they take.

Everything is strength. How much strength do you have? Before you get to improvise on any kind of level, we would have to know that no matter what we did, we would be OK. We had to know the material that well. We could improvise the rehearsal and come out great. We all have the instinct that if we got in front of the camera that that kind of delicate improvisation without any theatricality would lose some of its ease. All of a sudden there would be cameras, cables, guys around, people saying, 'We can't move this thing over there,' and suddenly the actors would receive very little importance. And you start to fight to

preserve what you have, and you start pushing, and all of a sudden it's gone. What had been terribly concentrated in rehearsals would dissipate. The only strength that we had was in the three of us.

The problem for me, therefore, was the same problem that most actors face: they are outnumbered – they are pressed into conformity by the schedule, by accepted sociability, by heart-warming good mornings and pleasant goodnights, platitudes that take up valuable time, being invited to dinner, cliques of crew that say, 'I like him or I don't like him'; insipid arguments over the content when the scene is good and deathly silence when it's bad; that feeling that one gets when someone is being shrewd with you and does not want to offend you enough to lose his next job; that getting-behind-you-for-the-moment dialogue revolts the person talking and the person listening at once. It's amazing the hate I can feel to people who pretend they're doing it and are not, that are lying and know they are lying. They're the ones who insist on behaving in a manner which says, 'Please don't reveal or expose me, because I have to live. I'm a person!' Those are the ones I always feel like saying to, 'Why don't you live someplace else, because I don't want you around!' I hate people who become stagnant and just go through life and retreat from any kind of creating or loving. For them life is a vacuum and even when they get ideas they are afraid to do anything about it. I don't really feel sorry for those people. I just hate them. For that reason, the choice of the crew becomes extremely important. They have to understand that what they're doing – no matter how hard they're working – is only to help what's going on in front of the camera. Audiences are not watching the technical processes as hard as they're watching the actors. If the actors are good, the picture looks good – I mean, the actual photography looks better when the actors are better.

***Husbands* involved characters' attempts to break free from social conventions and actors' attempts to break free from conventions of acting. During the shooting process, Cassavetes similarly attempted to get his crew to break free from conventions about how films are made. It was hard to do.**

I will never make another commercial film. People cannot be paid to care. It is unsanitary, it is unhealthy. If I can, I will make films with non-professionals, people who can afford to dream of a much bigger reward, people who crave to take part in something creative and who don't know exactly what that is. What I want from a crew is as much love for the film, the story, the actors and as much daring and invention

that they are capable of. These are the things that are lacking in the 'commercial' type of film where trade union divisions bank a clock, think of the next job that is coming up and accept the pigeonhole existence that organized society has placed them in. Making a film is a one-man operation, then possibly two, three, four, five, and you can maybe get the real solid interest of six people. If you do, then you can make a good film. A *professional* crew takes advantage of you. It marks you. It puts you in a spot. Too many technicians around. On a professional shoot I walk in as a director and meet my cameraman. He's got his crew and that is *his* army. The guy in the sound department has *his* army, and the painter has to check with the cameraman to see whether to put shiny walls over there. At what point can I have some kind of a rapport with the operator? The guy is so conditioned that he has to look to his boss to find out if what he is doing is OK, or he has to look to the studio to find out if it is OK. I've got to go by *his* protocols. And the protocol says I can't talk to the operator really without making sure that the lighting man is not offended because it's *his* crew. I don't want it to be *my* crew; I don't want it to be *anyone's* crew. I just want to make the movie. And I want to be able to talk to a guy that I see by a light and say, 'Can we do anything here to help this thing?' The question with any cameraman is how much they want their next job and how much they want this job they're on. I mean, how much are they willing to give up of themselves to take that gamble, to put themselves up and say, 'This is what I am. This is what I did, and I love it.' You see the question? When I compare that to the performers who go up every time and say, 'This is what I am and this is what I can do.' They don't really put themselves up as much as I do, as Ben does, as Peter does.

The crew used to drive us crazy. We'd be improvising and they'd run over and put chalk marks where we were standing. Benny says, 'The minute you take a breath, they cut. They cut! The breath is the most important part.' Everything is really being done for money and time. I don't want some sucker saying, 'Who's that? Get back. This is a long scene, now quiet.' Because it's impossible to function if you're sitting in front of the camera. 'Now, shush. All right.' [Claps hands for slate.] Where are you? I mean, you got to be dead. There's a feeling that you're not really alone, and that's a feeling that an actor wants to have. That's why I like to use long lenses to keep wherever possible, to keep the camera away from the actors so that they feel better about it. You just generally light, and it really doesn't take a lot of time to fill in. So you encompass all of it. I mean, you couldn't possibly work with the lights that are surrounding somebody and say, 'Now improvise! Oh, jeez,

you're in the shadow!' You couldn't possibly do that – so the lighting would have to be much more general. The soft lighting seems to work very well for improvisation.

It's an excruciating experience to see a day-player go up, but it's really because unnecessary pressure has been put on the actor by people who are not really professionals; people who have no business on the set. Sometimes you find some lummoX who will walk over to you and say, 'Oh, you were wonderful in that scene the other day, there was only one thing I didn't like – your make-up!' The untold damage that idiot can do! The most difficult part of working on a film like this is that the opinions of the crew really affect the people in front of the screen, and sometimes they don't see what is really happening. They get despondent. You can feel them loosen up. You can feel you're losing the thing.

In his own films Peter has tried to do what we did. He goes and rewrites all the scripts. He tries, but it is like quicksand. The minute he rewrites it, they rewrite it again because it's 'too long'. They have a 'time schedule'! And it isn't done by saying, 'Look, Peter, do you think you could take this and shorten it down because we have to do it in this amount of time?' No, they cut it. They put him over in a corner and say, 'Stand over there, Peter. It's going to be beautiful. Don't worry.' It's also a matter of economics. That's everything.

Cassavetes struggled with the crew throughout the film, since the very way they thought they had to do things were methods he was opposed to. For example, he positively disliked the look of standard studio lighting, indoors and out, because he felt it made colors too garish and faces too bright and too separated from the background. He was so frustrated that for some of the exterior scenes he deliberately sent the lighting men and electricians to the wrong location so that he, Falk, Gazzara and a small group of hand-picked technicians could work in natural light.

He also saved money in a variety of ways. For example, a scene (cut from the final print) early in *Husbands* involved the three men coming out of Grand Central Station during the morning commuter rush hour. Cassavetes knew that if he got permits, cordoned off the sidewalk and sent the whole crew there it would take days of crowd control and tens of thousands of dollars of paying extras to get the two-minute scene. So, instead, the call sheet for that day's shooting deliberately misdirected the entire crew to go to 34th Street and Second Avenue, while Cassavetes, Falk, Gazzara and three technicians went to the real location. The camera was positioned by prearrangement on the second-story terrace of a bank across the street from Grand Central; the three actors came out of

the station during the rush hour, mingled in with a thousand 'extras' who cost nothing, and in an hour Cassavetes got a shot that would have taken three days on a studio shoot.

As an illustration of another ingenious economy, following the rushes and supper, Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara would frequently rehearse a scene at night in their hotel suite so that they could show up on the set the next morning and immediately proceed to shoot the first take without having the crew stand around idle for a minute. The result was that, even with his compulsive overshooting and retakes, Cassavetes was still able to send the crew home by 4 p.m. most days to avoid overtime payments. Rather than being impressed, the crew was extremely upset by this kind of behavior. They absolutely counted on deadtime and overtime, and felt that Cassavetes was cheating them out of wages that were due to them.

Somehow you've just got to set up an atmosphere where you can work. The best thing that could happen is that everyone be highly involved. Once they're highly involved my job gets easier and easier. It takes a certain amount of time out of your life to be highly involved, and most people are not willing to give that. Now, that's nothing against them. It's just that it doesn't work if they're not willing to give everything they have over a long period of time. I feel they are capable of doing so much more than they do, and their own union laws hang them. I never feel that they *care* enough. As far as a technical director, I'm a very difficult director because I have no truck with anyone that doesn't watch the scene. I have no regard for anyone that isn't with it and isn't trying to make it the best that they can. Now, as far as their eye is concerned, I want them to be as creative with their own eye, not with my eye, as the actors are being on the floor.

It took roughly ten weeks for the crew to catch on, because it's all right to be a salaried employee as long as you don't act like one, and not everybody can love what they are doing. From that point on it was really exciting at the evening dailies screening, because suddenly, when the crew contributes heavily, they all come there and they watch in a different way. They watch noisily, it's their movie. And so this particular operator said, 'Whoa, mother! Ha-cha-cha-cha!' – and it makes the actors feel better and everyone's sitting there saying, 'What a great guy! What a great movie we've got!' It allows you to shoot the next day.

It took even longer than usual for the crew to feel comfortable with Cassavetes because he fired the *de facto* head of the crew, Aldo Tonti,

the cinematographer, only a few days into the shoot. Though Cassavetes gave several different official reasons for his dismissal (telling one interviewer that the 'language barrier' was the problem and another, punningly, that Tonti had 'injured' himself), the filmmaker was retaliating for Cicogna's last-minute cut-back on the film's finances and protecting himself in case Tonti was reporting back to the producer about the progress of the shoot. (Tonti had shot *Bandits in Rome* and frequently worked for Cicogna.) Over the years, Cassavetes fired many cinematographers. Sometimes it was because he thought that they were spies for the producer, but most of the time it was merely his ego and his short fuse with anyone he perceived as a potential threat. John McSweeney asked an innocent question during the first week of shooting *Gloria*, and was fired on the spot. The starting cameraman on *Minnie and Moskowitz* was dismissed in a similar, unexpected shoot-out. In Tonti's place, Cassavetes promoted to DP a young back-up cameraman who had never shot a feature film before.

I've often fired cameramen. Not for any reason, except that I couldn't work in an atmosphere that was less than friendly. The operator, the second-unit cameraman who became the cameraman, was Vic Kemper. Vic happened to be a terrifically inventive cameraman. I like him personally; he's really good. When I saw his first work, I could just feel by the way he was moving the camera and the confidence that he had that I wouldn't have to tell him anything. I don't usually plot shots, except to say put that camera over there and put a 600 on.

I didn't have to tell him anything on the close-ups in the bar. He just shot everything by himself. The only thing I said to him was, 'Feeling.' He's the only cameraman I know who hand-holds with an Elemack: he just walks around with it, and had a terrific focus-puller that he had worked with for a long time, and they talked to each other, back and forth. And he sets up his moves. You could watch the camera moving and you knew that it was going to be very good because he just has great feeling. So I would never worry about him and I don't worry about the other guy, because he'll stick to that composition too. For example, the camera movement during the long take in the bedroom was just the cameraman's feeling. If you noticed, I won't shoot many angles going back and forth. Almost everything is shot from the same place, from the same perspective, so that it will take a cameraman – it's very important to me that he has feeling and can move with the figures as he feels it, rather than saying, 'Oh, we missed that.' And the film shows it.

Kemper summarized the challenges of Cassavetes' method by saying that on his first day as DP he had to light and shoot black-garbed actors performing on a black-painted bathroom set – with a mirror on the wall to boot. When he asked Cassavetes how in the world he was supposed to pull it off so that the figures would not blend into the background, Cassavetes said, 'Why are you asking me? You're the cinematographer.'

On *Faces* I was very much a martinet, not once they got started but before. But on a film like *Husbands*, where you have people with a lot of experience, who've been through the mill and have retained their idealism and some sense of who they are, you don't have to push and pray, because this sense of who they are is very strong within them. I never had to expose Ben or Peter by telling them they weren't good. Peter realizes that if he does a bad scene I'm not going to say anything. I don't have to say anything. He already knows it. And I know he already knows it. So he has the option of saying, 'Can I do it again?' Peter will never tell you what he really wants out of life. He'll tell you about external things, but he'll never get down to the nitty-gritty. What I try to get from people is what *they* really want. I'm only critical of people when they don't give me what they want.

Gazzara and Falk ate their way through the film, sparking to this undisciplined, chaotic form of shooting – where no one knew where the camera was going to be until I shouted 'Roll!' and actors were reading lines and improvising at the same time. We did take after take in the most impossible conditions, and like three blind mice who were totally unaware – the only important thing was to do it right – to express the feeling of those three men; not the ideas, not the jokes, but the feelings. The idea was to burst out of ourselves. Shooting without light at night, shooting at exposures nobody could believe, taking takes for ten-minute durations, shooting 285,000 feet of film [more than fifty hours] in ten weeks in New York with twelve more weeks to go in London; constantly working and changing and seeking magic moments in the midst of a crowded city when people are on their way to do other things.

The shoot ran almost as long as *Faces* had. Cassavetes wasn't done until mid-July, more than three months over schedule. In the end, more than a million and a half feet of 35mm, almost 280 hours of film, was shot.

By early October 1969, Peter Tanner and Tom Cornwell had created an assembly that was, by all accounts, hilarious. (Tanner, the editor of *The Lavender Hill Mob*, was known for his ability with light comedy.)

The next step was to sell the film to recoup the costs. Columbia expressed interest and Cassavetes arranged for *Husbands* to be shown to 1,000 Columbia employees and guests assembled in two theaters at Universal in screenings staggered a half hour apart with reels bicycled from one to the other. Things could not have gone better. The invited audience roared with laughter; the studio executives were ecstatic.

Columbia offered Cassavetes and Cicogna slightly more than \$3 million, plus profit participation once the film had recouped the initial investment. Cassavetes agreed, with the stipulation that he be allowed to continue to work on the edit until he was happy with it. Though the paperwork details weren't worked out until early November, the deal was orally sealed on the spot. In Columbia's judgment, the film was close to being finished. It was almost releasable. There was talk about how Gazzara's lightly comic performance was perceived as Academy Award material.

It seemed like the happiest of outcomes. Everyone involved stood to make money – potentially a lot of it. Columbia was sure they had a hit on their hands. Because they had deferred their salaries, Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara got a lump-sum payment of \$975,000 – which even after being divided three ways was the largest single paycheck any of them had ever received. (Cassavetes generously refused to take a director's, writer's or editor's salary and split the check equally with his two co-stars.) Even Cicogna, notwithstanding the financial obstacles he had put in the way, made a handsome profit on his investment.

What the Columbia executives didn't know was that Cassavetes had no intention of giving them the picture they had just seen. Even as he was smiling and shaking hands, accepting congratulations after the screening, Cassavetes turned to Falk and whispered, 'Remember that version, because you're never going to see it again.'

The two English editors that we had, they're in a business where they look at something and then they cut it. They are so expert that they can make it look good. But that isn't going to work on a picture like *Husbands*. It's not that they're wrong and I'm right – it's just not going to work. It's a question of their finding that out through a long, hard process. *Husbands* is not a comedy. I can't tell you what *Faces* is, and I can't tell you what this will be. The film is too soft. It's not tough enough. You've got to really feel these three men's pain. They have to pay a greater price. It *can't be* too hard.

Cassavetes dismissed his two editors, went off to an editing suite at Uni-

versal (his offices during this period were in the old converted motel across the street from the studio) and spent the next twelve months re-editing the film. Tanner's edit had faithfully followed the shooting script (which was really quite funny) page for page; Cassavetes threw the script away. He tore the film apart shot by shot and rebuilt it from the ground up. Studying the footage, rearranging it and experimenting with the effect of different shot selections, Cassavetes created at least five separate, entirely different edits of the film. One of the reasons he overshot so massively in all of his work was precisely so that he could do this – so that he could change the narrative, the relationships, the emotional through-line and the tones of scenes during the editing process to reflect what he learned in the course of shooting the film or realized as he studied the material in the editing room. Ben Gazzara said he was impatient with Cassavetes and got as angry as he ever got with him over what was wrong with Tanner's edit, but, though it took him a long time to see it, in the end he realized that, 'In editing, he went on a voyage of finding the film. You thought you knew what the film was already, but he saw things in it all the time, new and different things, and took the time to explore them.'

Cassavetes cut lengthy sequences out of the film (a scene where the three men sleep in a subway station; a long scene in a Schraft's soda fountain, where Falk and Cassavetes harass an elderly woman; a long scene in Gus's dentist's office; two extended nightclub scenes in London; a lovely laughing bedroom scene between Harry and Pearl; and two parting scenes – one between Archie and Julie in the rain and another between Harry and Pearl in a subway station). He moved scenes to entirely different places from where they had been in the script (for example, the men's-room scene is on page 12B of the shooting script but appears almost an hour into the final film). And he devoted a lot of running time to scenes like the singing contest and the scene with the Countess that had not been in the script at all. At one point, he decided that the film might be more powerful if it focused more on only one of the three men, so he created an 'Archie print', a 'Harry print' and a 'Gus print'.

He manipulated the sound and dialogue, altering the meaning of old scenes and building entirely new ones through looping. For example, the conversation between Falk and Noelle Kao on the bed was created by dubbing in new dialogue and using outtakes. Cassavetes cut most of the original dialogue out of the men's-room scene and added sounds of vomiting and farting (which were not in the original mix) to completely change its meaning.

The release date kept slipping further and further behind. At the point

the Columbia screening had occurred, a late 1969 release seemed possible. When Cassavetes announced that he would not make that date, Columbia changed the release date to May 1970. Cassavetes missed that one as well. He was only part-way through the edit when his third and last child, daughter Zoe, was born on 29 June. The release date slipped to September. He missed that date as well. In October 1970, he was still making changes in the edit.

Even Cassavetes never dreamed it would take him that long. At one optimistic moment in late 1969, he thought he was almost done and announced plans to direct a play by his friend Everett Chambers for the Theater Guild in the spring of 1970. (With Cassavetes' encouragement, Chambers had written and directed his own independent film in 1965, the now forgotten and unavailable *The Lollipop Cover*.) *The 40-Year-Old Man* was to star Peter Falk, in a story that clearly was an extension of *Husbands*. In the words of the press release, it was about the conflicts and dissatisfactions of a middle-aged man who 'realizes that it is all behind him and wonders where it all went'. Cassavetes interrupted his editing chores and spent weeks in New York workshopping the production, but it never made it to a theater.

He resumed work on *Husbands*, at every point attempting to make the film tougher, harder, more emotionally grueling. There were colossal fights with many of the people around him, all of whom had loved the Columbia screening and couldn't understand why he would want to tamper with it. Al Ruban, one of the senior producers who had personally supervised the Tanner edit, argued heatedly with Cassavetes day after day, telling him the vomiting in the men's-room scene in particular was 'just too much', then resigned in protest when Cassavetes refused to change his edit. The debate was not merely a matter of aesthetics. Ruban clearly saw his dreams of financial success and professional acclaim going down the toilet. (Though Ruban was involved with many of the films, he was never really a convert to Cassavetes' cinematic methods. He disagreed daily with Cassavetes' decisions and in private frequently expressed the view that the director would have done better to have filmed other people's scripts rather than his own.) Even Sam Shaw, who produced this film and many of the others, went to his grave saying that he didn't understand why Cassavetes hadn't simply gone with the 'hilarious' Tanner edit. Cassavetes, for his part, was accustomed to being misunderstood even by his closest associates and refused to compromise no matter how vehemently they argued with him.

The length presented a major problem for him – contractually and emotionally. At one point, his preferred final edit actually ran 225 min-

utes. Falk and Gazzara were unhappy with that length for obvious reasons – though in hindsight both admit that it was probably the best version of the film. The insuperable obstacle was that the contract with Columbia stipulated a maximum 140-minute running time. To achieve it, Cassavetes ultimately had to make enormous block cuts. It was extremely hard for him to make them. At the time, he said ‘the cuts caused me real physical pain, because I loved the scenes so much’. (The reason he compressed the credits onto two title cards in the release print was in a desperate attempt to save every possible second of actual film.) Years later, Cassavetes expressed regret that he had not torn up the contract and gone with the long version.

I personally liked the film longer. When Don Siegel saw *Husbands* it was in the three hour and twenty-five minute print. He said, ‘John, I don’t think you can help the picture by cutting it. It will never get any better and it might get worse. You’ve made a specific kind of picture and that’s it. People won’t like it any better if it’s a little shorter. What will happen is that *you* won’t like it better.’ He really tried to convince me, but I went ahead and cut it anyway. When he said it, though, I felt he was right and now I *know* he was.

There was more going on than issues of length and shot selection. A story Cassavetes told about how his friend Tim Carey had spent eight years editing a film describes his own feelings as well.

He probably doesn’t want to stop, because when he stops then he really is going to stop. When he stops he’ll face the bills that he has to pay. When he stops he’ll have to become a father again of seven children. When he stops he’ll have to pay attention to his wife. When he stops he’ll have to be a human being and to be an artist really is to be a freak, in the greatest sense of the word. You’re not interested in living but you’re interested in a substitute life, which is what it means to be an artist.

As the release date kept getting pushed back, throughout the fall and winter of 1969 and the spring, summer and fall of 1970, Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara gave a stream of interviews to magazines, newspapers and television talk shows (*The Mike Douglas Show*, *The Joey Bishop Show*, *The David Frost Show* and *The Dick Cavett Show*, among others). Cassavetes was a natural street-hustler and a born salesman, but he also saw, with painful clarity, the shallowness of this side of his personality and of the whole motion picture publicity machine.

When *Husbands* was finished, Peter, Ben and I all had a terribly empty feeling. The main reason we did so much press stuff together afterward – talk shows and interviews – was that we didn't want to give it up. I really enjoy selling something. I think that basically I have a lot of inbred salesman in me. Once when I was in England helping to promote *Dirty Dozen*, I sold a glass of milk to a person on the street to prove to a press agent that you could sell anything. It's the shallow part of me that I sometimes indulge in. I never feel phony when I'm working. On *Faces* I never for one moment felt I was a phony. But when I started promoting *Faces*, by God, was I a phony. When I got it into a theater I felt, 'Ha ha. We've done it.' There wasn't a minute, a second during the making of *Husbands* when I felt like a charlatan or phony but there isn't a minute during the selling of *Husbands* that I don't feel like a charlatan or a phony. Here you are, hating the Establishment, attacking the commercial bastards, the men who only dream of making money. You're fighting all the hypocrisy and all the emptiness of the money-grubbing society, and suddenly you're trying to sell what you've done, and the minute you're successful you become a part of that goddamned Establishment whether you like it or not. The only honest thing to do at such a time is to admit that you're a phony.

Cassavetes' love-hate relationship with salesmanship came out in a now infamous appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show* taped on Friday 18 September 1970. Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara ignored Cavett throughout the entire show, cavorting on-camera, rolling around on the floor, talking to each other, interrupting each other and making irrelevant remarks. Cavett was not amused and is visibly upset at several points in the hour. The three men, in effect, came onto his show, mocked him and undermined what he was attempting to do. Some viewers regarded it as a performance piece and said that Cassavetes was critiquing the stupidity of talk-show conventions (and at one point Cassavetes does launch into a parody of a talk-show guest). But most simply thought of him as rude, self-centered, insulting – and possibly inebriated. The hour would be cited for many years by his cinematic detractors as proof of his immaturity. His behavior came in for criticism even from relatives and close friends, who thought he had squandered an important publicity opportunity.

Cassavetes staged many similar performances over the years – both at question-and-answer sessions following film screenings and, occasionally, on television (the most notable example of which was an all-nighter on a live telethon which Cassavetes hosted, in which he, Falk and Gazzara clowned around for more than six hours).

These events highlight a side of Cassavetes that can't be glossed over. Gena Rowlands has told dozens of stories about his outrageous behavior during film shoots, and Hollywood memoirs contain many more. Cassavetes frequently behaved in childish, petty, perverse or self-defeating ways with reporters, interviewers, other film directors, studio executives – and friends. He would argue just to argue, make ridiculously indefensible statements and generally push people's buttons every chance he got.

It wasn't merely a kind of playfulness. Cassavetes was an extremely proud individual. The teenager who felt superior to everyone in Port Washington was the father of the man. (One might say that pride was all the boy had – since while his classmates went off to attend Harvard and Yale, all he got was the title of class clown.) One manifestation of his pride was his fierce competitiveness. He saw potential humiliation in any interaction he couldn't dominate or control. He couldn't stand to lose – in an argument, a negotiation or a card game – and would do almost anything to avoid it even if it meant cheating, changing the rules in mid-game or bumping the table. Another manifestation of Cassavetes' pride was his contempt for anyone who questioned his judgment – whether it was Stanley Kramer, Roman Polanski, Joey Bishop or Pauline Kael. He saw condescension, snideness and patronization everywhere, and would be deliberately perverse to regain control of any situation in which he thought someone was secretly attempting to 'horn in', 'humiliate' or 'double-cross' him (to use terms that were often on his lips). It is not surprising that so many scenes in the films focus on moments in which characters feel that they are embarrassed or humiliated in front of others: Hugh's feelings of being insulted in the rehearsal hall and humiliated in the nightclub; Ghost's embarrassment when he can't defend his girlfriend; Maria's, Richard's, Jeannie's, Louise's and McCarthy's real and imagined romantic humiliations; Archie's sexual embarrassments and attempts to defend his pride against Julie's supposed affront of his manhood; Minnie's embarrassment with Zelmo and Zelmo's sense of having to defend his manhood against her; Nick's feelings of being embarrassed by Mabel; Cosmo's and Mr. Sophistication's fears of being embarrassed; and the fear of public humiliation that motivates virtually every one of the main characters in *Opening Night*.

He could be stunningly rude or abusive to anyone who threatened his fairly exalted sense of who he was. There are too many examples of his responses to imagined (or actual) insults to provide more than an illustrative smattering:

There was the infamous dinner/interview with the *New Yorker's* Lillian Ross, in which Cassavetes shouted at her and berated her until he forced her to get up and leave the restaurant they were eating in. The meeting was far worse than the account she printed in her subsequent 'Talk of the Town' piece or the sanitized version of the event Cassavetes later gave a reporter.

I wasn't very nice to her. She asked me about money, and I said, 'I don't want to talk about money. I invited you to dinner – *have dinner*, don't conduct an interview!' Then she asked me about the car we sent for her, and I said, 'Shut up! *No interviews* while eating!'

Then there was the time a polite young woman from *Life* magazine came up to him and congratulated him on having been selected as one of only six directors to be featured in a new *Time, Inc.*, publication. Rather than thanking her for telling him, Cassavetes launched into a withering tirade on the stupidity of magazines, beginning with, 'Directors don't mean a goddamn thing . . .'

Or the time a *Cue* interviewer praised the realistic roughness of *Shadows* and *Faces*, and Cassavetes' reply began, 'You stupid bastard! Don't talk to me . . . I couldn't *afford* a dolly! I couldn't *afford* good sound . . .'

And then there were, of course, the legendary clashes with Pauline Kael. Cassavetes first met her at a college film-society event in the late sixties, where he, Haskell Wexler and Kael were guests of honor.

Well, here we were at dinner, and I don't know who this woman is, but she keeps telling everybody that she didn't like *Shadows*. Then we go to speak and she gets up and for twenty minutes she's talking about how much she hated *Shadows*, and that's not even what she was supposed to be talking about. So I leaned over to Haskell and said, 'Who is this woman?' And he said, 'That's Pauline Kael.' And I said, 'Yeah? Who's Pauline Kael?' He told me she was one of the foremost film writers in the country. Great. Why didn't she tell *me* she didn't like the movie?

Anyhow, we go riding back in the car after the speech, and I decide to steal her coat. She's got this little cloth coat on the seat next to her. So the next day she rides up the driveway and she gets out and goes to the door, knocks on the door. Nobody's home but me – I was *so happy*! And I'm not going to answer the door. No way. Then she goes around back. And while she's back there, I run out to the car. Right? So she comes around to the front again and sees me in the window. And then she goes over to the car and – well, there's the coat, right in her car. So she runs back over to the window where I am. She looks at me, looks at the car.

I'm laughing, and she's mad. She just starts shaking her fist at me. You know, just shaking her fist.

Seymour Cassel describes another interaction with Kael in which he, Kael and Cassavetes were sharing a cab on the way to a reception and Cassavetes became exasperated by what he called 'Kael's pomposity and idiotic questioning' (which focused more on financing and behind-the-scenes events in his work than on the films themselves). In the middle of a sentence, Cassavetes reached down, grabbed Kael's shoes and threw them out of the window into midtown traffic. When she shouted at the driver to stop, he refused to let him. Kael went to the reception barefooted.

He was no different with Rowlands. He would frequently taunt or tease her, seemingly merely for the pleasure of doing it. When he acted with her, he would deliberately spoil takes and play tricks on her that weren't entirely funny. In front of interviewers, he would on occasion argue with her, cut off her responses or mock them (which is one of the reasons she adopted a policy in the early 1970s of being interviewed separately from him). Their fights on shoots were famous.

In short, Cassavetes' detractors were not entirely wrong: there was a lot of Gus in Cassavetes and a lot of Cassavetes in Gus. Cassavetes could be as irresponsible, immature and boorish as Gus is in the singing scene; he could use his charm, his smirk, his non-stop patter to hold people at a distance, the way Gus does with his London girlfriend. Only rarely did Cassavetes admit to feeling pain or embarrassment about this aspect of his behavior.

I am who I am and I don't know why. It's a disappointment to me sometimes when I see myself behave in a way I'm not proud of. You think that when you're going to do a talk show, how exciting that would be, and then you get there and five minutes before you go on you say, 'What am I doing here?' And then you go on the air and you play it by ear. I guess you get to the point where you think, 'Oh, I don't want to do the same old thing and talk about the same old subjects that everybody does.' And sometimes you make a fool of yourself, make an ass of yourself.

Cassavetes was acutely aware that (at least in many people's opinion) he 'made an ass of himself' almost every day of his life. But he felt that letting what others think of you change your behavior was one of the main ways that society controls people and limits what they can be. Being afraid of being embarrassed is always judged negatively in his films.

I've got the right to behave any goddamned way I want. I'M FREE! If to be free is to be like everyone else, to think exactly like everyone else, then I don't have anything to say. It's the stupidity of life that people do these things out of the rules of society. Whatever society you're in at the time, they must follow the rules. Whether it's a man or a girl, or a woman or a grandmother; it doesn't make any difference, that's the rules of the society. We live in a kind of Nazi-state, which people don't recognize because we're Americans. But I see it. I see Brotherhoods and Sisterhoods and Nation Republic and how you must join groups.

The world is very chicken. And by 'chicken' I mean that the world is too *tight* and people get all upset over things that really don't matter, like politics and religion and things like that. They take offense at things to such a great degree that they miss the good times. There's entirely too much formality. People are very stiff. Money makes people stiff and we want it and we have to pay the penalty. I never agreed with the stiffness. I feel that people don't really do what they *want* to do. And I think it's much more important that you do what *you want* to even if it's wrong. In *Husbands* we don't care, really, what you think of us, except that we want to express ourselves the way we want to.

Many of those who knew Cassavetes well, particularly women, found his spouting off and clowning around off-putting. Lelia Goldoni and Lynn Carlin observed that there was a part of Cassavetes that was frustratingly distant and emotionally inaccessible. To many he was a trickster playing mind-games, someone who needed to be the center of attention, to be in control, and who would do or say almost anything to get a response. You couldn't tell if he was joking or serious at any one moment; if he was playing dumb or really didn't understand something; if he was sincere or putting you on. Paul Mazursky tells the story of how Cassavetes kept calling Mazursky's wife (who plays a bit part in *Tempest* but was not an actress), asking her to act in a play he wrote and telling her that she was one of the greatest actresses he had ever worked with. It was utterly preposterous, but vintage Cassavetes. Did he believe it? Did he expect her to believe it? Did he expect her husband to believe it? Neither she nor her husband could ever figure out what was going on. If he agreed with you, was he just humoring you? When he disagreed with you, did he mean what he said – or was he just talking for victory, trying to shock you and provoke a reaction? Gena Rowlands had little patience with this aspect of Cassavetes' behavior.

She said to me, 'My God, don't say that. People will misunderstand

you. People really want to think everything is magic and mystery. They've seen you in a film. They've identified with you. They may think you're a great director, or they've read you're a great director, so they want you to be great.' Gena felt that I shouldn't disappoint people or disillusion them. She said, 'You walk around half the time like an idiot! You make statements like you hate philosophy or you hate knowledge, statements you really don't believe in. You argue for the sake of arguing. And sometimes you just don't sound very serious. I think it's terrible to make people believe something that isn't true.' The truth of the matter is, I don't want anybody to think I'm supersonic or that everything was difficult to accomplish. Things are *not* difficult to accomplish. They're fun to accomplish.

At the same time, many other friends and co-workers revered Cassavetes for breaking through stifling proprieties. Bo Harwood said that Cassavetes showed him how much a prisoner of conventions everyone was, simply by doing everything in his own way. Elaine May said she thought, 'Cassavetes ought to have been paid for living. He gave you such courage just by being who he was.' She saw his shock tactics as an attempt 'to get you to see things another way'. How someone feels about Cassavetes' conduct probably comes down to how they feel about the characters in *Husbands*. His stance embodied the same impatience with social formulas and customs that drives the husbands. *Husbands* was an extension of – and a self-examination of – Cassavetes' personal value system.

The social part of life has become an irritant to me; I always feel that there is not enough time. Truth is the moment for you. Truth is the moment. Don't let that moment go by. It must be painful for a woman to have a husband like me. And I suppose it gets painful for the children when they grow up and realize that their father's work is as important, and sometimes more important, than they are. This isn't something I can lie about. I couldn't live one day knowing I would have to stop being whatever that crazy thing is that I am.

After getting into a fairly acrimonious argument with an interviewer, defending *Faces* against her accusation that it was boring, disagreeing with virtually everything she said about it and making her really uncomfortable by insinuating that she was stupid and imperceptive, Cassavetes told her that at least they hadn't just played the same silly game as every other interview. Polite conventions were a waste of time – in art or life.

(Note the verbal echoes of *A Woman Under the Influence*'s final family gathering in Cassavetes' mockery of social ceremonies.)

It could have been an interview in which all the proper questions were asked and all the proper answers given, and afterwards there would have been nothing. This way something was accomplished because there was no pretending. You have to get beyond, 'Hello. How are you? Time of day. Oh God, I had a terrible night last night.' And if you can get beyond that with people and get beyond their defensiveness, then you can finally get somewhere.

I mean, I can't sit in a situation where I'm with a bunch of polite people talking bullshit. I just can't. It's not a question of wanting to or not wanting to. It makes me terribly uncomfortable, and I just can't do it. I hate being nice. I'm not nice. It's better to start out crude. It's so much simpler.

Another side of the explanation of Cassavetes' provocative behavior is that he relished the underdog position so much that he put himself in it even when he didn't have to. He was always more comfortable being an outsider than an insider.

I can't stand adulation because that's the way dictators are born. When you're a film actor and you've appeared in hits like *The Dirty Dozen* and *Rosemary's Baby*, you're always bound to get a certain amount of adulation. Sometimes I don't mind it because I understand it, but other times it bugs me. It is gratifying when audiences respond positively to your work. But you've got to put that out of your head. It's a terrible thing. I mean, I hate power. I hate it. I often act very idiotic really because I don't want people to start hanging on to everything that I say because it's a pain in the ass. But it's impossible. I'll end up not liking that person and that person will end up not liking me. It's inevitable. The minute that the person gets disillusioned because I don't behave in the way that they want me to behave, they're going to hate me. Their feelings are hurt. But I just react hostilely to that person.

I find myself getting perverse, playing games with people's innocence, being amused by the hysteria of others and *their* need to do it now. I feel like I'm one step ahead of the crowd, but I'd like to be two steps behind – I'd like to be the underdog again. Not a big fat Buddha sitting on his throne sucking up the wine.

On Saturday 24 October 1970, Cassavetes finally had a rough print of *Husbands* he was willing to show. It was 154 minutes, fourteen minutes

too long, but he wanted to test it in front of an audience before he made the final cuts. It differed from the final release print in that it included four minutes more of the 'vomiting contest' at the beginning to the men's-room scene; seven minutes more of the men's parting scene in London, in which Harry's loneliness and the chasm separating the men from the women is much wider and more frightening (as Harry at one point breaks down and cries and talks about how intensely he misses his children, and Gus is cruelly abusive to one of the women); and a slightly longer conversation between Gus and his kids on the driveway.

Since Cassavetes had kept his edit under wraps up to this point, a number of Columbia executives were in attendance. It was the first public screening of the edit and a chance to test it in front of an unbiased audience. The response stunned Cassavetes.

We all took it to the San Francisco Film Festival. Everything was supposed to be terrific. But after the film came on, everyone yelled, 'Fascist.' They were booing and they were going crazy. Here is this whole row of Columbia executives and their wives, and the wives turn to the executives and say, 'What is wrong, dear, why are they booing?' The audience got worse. They got hostile, eighteen hundred people really booing. It was particularly bad during the singing and the men's-room scenes. It was getting terrific. The only friends we had were Gena and Seymour, who were in the audience, in the back. Anytime anybody said something, Gena would shout, 'Sit down.' A guy would get up and yell and Seymour would say, 'Bullshit.'

The terrible part is that you have to get up after the film ends. There are chairs there. The microphone is there. And the people yell, 'Fascist.' I had a suit on. I felt like ripping it off. You don't know what to say, so you say, 'How did you like the film?' Absolute silence. Finally, one guy said, 'If you guys were making a satire about the middle class and how piggish they are, that is one thing. But if those guys depicted on the screen are really like you, that's another.' And I said, 'It is us. It's *us*. Yeah, these people are me. That's the way it is, yeah – middle-class, mundane, not very well thought out, living in the past and in childhood, in the times when things were happy. Yes, that's exactly what *Husbands* was about.' At that time, to be middle class or to make a film about the middle class was so abhorrent to people. I was looking down at the faces of these college students and they were all middle class, which made me laugh.

Well, we thought we were going to be killed. When Peter Falk has that scene with the Chinese girl and he treats her so badly, people booed. Afterward they accused me of being a racist. Of course, I tell

them that I am. The whole point with Peter Falk's character is sex and the inhibitions of people.

After an internal review of the new edit, Columbia gave Cassavetes a list of changes. As far as they were concerned, Cassavetes had knowingly tricked and deceived them. The film bore no relation to the Tanner edit they had bought. They further insisted that the running time be cut to under two hours, which meant lopping off more than thirty minutes from the San Francisco Film Festival print. Cassavetes stood his ground. The papers said he had final edit, and he was legally in the right. But, at the same time, he did some serious thinking. The catcalls and jeers at the festival screening during some of the scenes had reached him in a way his friends' arguments hadn't, since it meant that rather than deepening the emotional effect of the film as he had thought they would, some of the scenes allowed the audience not to take it seriously. He made a number of small cuts, including a few minutes of the vomiting scene and a good bit of the farewell scene where Gazzara cried. But even after that, Cassavetes' final, revised edit still ran 140 minutes and included material (like the singing scene and what remained of the vomiting scene) that Columbia absolutely balked at.

When he stood his ground, they played their trump card. Cassavetes had legally beaten them on the edit, but they would beat him legally in another way. They refused to name a release date. The threat was unmistakable. They would rather never release *Husbands* than release it in his edit. It was not vindictiveness but a simple business decision. It would be cheaper to bury the film and write it off as a loss than put more money into publicizing and releasing the print he had assembled.

If he had made the movie for the money, it wouldn't really have mattered. He had been paid; who cared what happened to the film? But it was Cassavetes' worst nightmare. He wrote a stream of angry letters to Columbia, then launched his own independent publicity campaign to mobilize the press in favor of the release. In early November, he began plastering Sam Shaw-designed posters up and down Manhattan announcing *Husbands'* imminent release. He did more interviews with Falk and Gazzara. Since he had his own prints, he held his own independent press screenings – at one of which, comically enough, he and his co-stars had a final *Husbands*-like encounter with Kael. Cassavetes left explicit instructions that she was not to be admitted, but she forced her way into the screening after the lights went down and crashed into Cassavetes in the dark.

What was the sense? I know she's going to hate the thing, and I told Benny, why should we invite her? After the screening, Benny went over to Pauline and said loudly, 'Well, Pauline, didn't you *love it*? Wasn't it a *great movie*?' And when she says she didn't like it, he starts screaming at her, 'Didn't *like* it? You're not a *human* being! Not a human being!'

Cassavetes' publicity blitz succeeded. Spurred by the media interest, Columbia held a single preview screening to test the waters in mid-November. When the entire theater sold out two hours before curtain time, Columbia reluctantly decided that the film might merit release. *Husbands* opened in New York on 8 December 1970 and in Los Angeles a few days later.

Unfortunately, although people might have gone to see *Husbands* when they thought it was being suppressed by the studio, once it was released most of them read the reviews to decide if it was worth bothering with. *Husbands* was almost universally panned by critics and jeered at by viewers. (Most vocally by Kael, who was not known for keeping her private likes and dislikes separate from her critical pronouncements.) The film was an unmitigated disaster – critically *and* commercially. Columbia couldn't pay people to attend.

In December 1970 and January 1971, more media coverage was devoted to the demands for refunds *Husbands* provoked than to the film itself.

Many people walked out on *Husbands*. Columbia would call me up to report that fifty-two people had stormed out of one theater in one day. I got a wire the other day and a letter from Columbia saying, 'Would you please cut *Husbands* because we are really losing the audience, especially in the singing scene. They can't take that and the vomiting scene. Thirty to fifty people a night go up and ask for their money back during that sequence.' We were under a lot of pressure to make it shorter than 139 minutes, which the studio felt would result in bigger audiences. They may have been right. I could see Benny's and Peter's anxiety about that, but I could feel my own stubbornness, and I still say that our bargain was with purity and not with success.

The conglomerates would rather have a film that makes money than a good film. They're so bent on making money that nothing else concerns them. So we are at odds with each other. So if some old lady walks out and says, 'It was awfully rough and harsh,' they'll say, 'Gosh, can't you take some of the roughness and harshness out of it,' because they

don't want to offend their audiences. Entirely too much emphasis is placed on the audiences. When audiences see a unique film, and they don't like it, all right, they don't like it. They don't have to go and see your work anymore. But that's it. I shouldn't have to change it. I'm not Michelangelo, but you couldn't take Michelangelo and say 'Can you redo the hand?' When somebody makes suggestions about what you're doing on an artistic basis, on a sincere basis, you would never mind that. But they're just interested in the money. You feel like saying, 'The hell with you.'

It's worth noting that Columbia ultimately got their way about some of the cuts by editing the picture without consulting Cassavetes. A few weeks into the film's release Columbia simply eliminated the eleven minutes that they objected to (the last nine minutes of the singing contest and the first two minutes of the scene in the men's room) from most of the distribution prints. It was a clear violation of his contract, and he discovered what they were doing almost immediately, but he didn't have the time or money to take the studio to court. The situation persists right down to the present, insofar as the 1999 video release and all post-1997 35mm prints have the same eleven minutes cut from them. (In a particularly unfortunate turn of events, Gena Rowlands has lent support to Columbia's cuts by saying that she herself prefers the cut print over the one her husband fought so long and hard to defend.)

A lot of people got uptight about the scene in which Peter and I vomit in the men's room of a bar. The characters weren't vomiting just because they happened to be drunk; they got drunk so they could vomit – vomit for their dead friend. Some people may find that disgusting, but that's their problem. When somebody dies, I want to feel something. I want to be so upset that I could cry, throw up, feel the loss deeply. If that offends some people, then let them be offended. I was watching television one night and the news came on and it said 500 people in Cleveland got up and left the theater *en masse*, and the name of the picture was *Husbands*. [Laughs.] I could only laugh at that because I thought, 'Jesus, what did that contain that could affect them so?!' I'm such an optimist. I think, isn't that marvelous that you could make a picture that can scare 500 people out of the theater without having a moment of violence, a moment of anything that would be any way near controversial. Just the idea that people behaving in a way that is not acceptable can take 500 people and throw them out of the theater! Now, I've been bored with pictures, so if it's a boring picture I just sit there and at a cer-

tain point I say, 'Let's go,' but I won't get up and leave with 500 other people because it's boring, so it must be doing something else to an audience.

Cassavetes saw the walk-outs as the kind of 'group thinking' that all of his work was pitched against.

I look around and see people checking, 'Did you like that movie?', and I want to punch them all. Never mind did *they* like the movie? Did *you* like the movie? You can say *you* liked the movie or *you* hated the movie. If you make a movie, you will really want to know whether *each individual* liked the movie. You won't care if a mass like the movie because that's all horseshit.

He rationalized that viewers' resistance was evidence that the film was reaching them in a deep place.

When people were walking out of *Husbands* and *Faces en masse* I never felt bad about that because I thought that it was pain that was taking them out of the theater and I thought that it wasn't the fact that the film was bad. It was that they couldn't take it without changing their own lifestyles, which made both those films very successful to me. I thought at the time that *Husbands* was anti the lifestyle of almost everyone in America. We presented a lifestyle that went against their lifestyle. People walked out because they didn't want to accept the fact that there could be anything wrong with the way they lived their lives.

It doesn't matter whether audiences *like* it; it matters whether they *feel* something. I feel I've succeeded if I make them feel *something* – anything. The hope is that you don't make it so easy for an audience that when they go to your movie they have nothing to think about except, 'That was wonderful. Good. Next! What else are you going to entertain my great appetite with?' I *want* to make you mad. Yeah, that's going to take longer. And yeah, when we have it we'll let you know, I mean. And we'll put it there.

He recalled his own experience with *A Place in the Sun* in the early fifties. It was one of the formative experiences in his life. It showed him that the things that reach us most deeply may repel us at first. Montgomery Clift's character was a portrait of his own situation at the time he saw the film. Like George Eastman, he was an outsider, an impostor trying to 'pass' in a society he was not comfortable within and did not feel himself to be part of. But rather than appreciating the depth of

Clift's performance, he hated it. It drove him out of the theater because it told more truth than he wanted to hear.

I was in the Army and I went to see a movie directed by George Stevens with Montgomery Clift and Liz Taylor and a lot of very good people. I went to see this long, drawn-out picture. It made me very angry. I walked out. I said, 'That's the worst picture I've ever seen in my life. What kind of a piece of crap is this?! I mean, how dare they?! What is this?! Some guy goes, walks into a house, you know, of a rich man and he's all upright about it. What is that?', and then I went to see the picture again the following night. And I saw it eleven times or twelve times, twenty times, I don't know. I just kept going back. And every time I saw it, I said, 'This is the worst picture I've ever seen in my life.' And then some guy said, 'Why do you go to see it so many times?' – very angrily, very straight, not kidding around. About three times later, I realized I liked the picture enormously, and it had something *to do* with something.

He absolutely refused to admit defeat. The poorer the film did, the more he threw himself into promoting it. In the heady days of the Tanner edit, he had made Columbia commit to a publicity budget roughly equivalent at the time to that for a \$10 million picture, as well as to grant him rights to approve how every dollar was spent. After the reviews came in, the studio wanted to cut their losses and cut back on the promotion; but Cassavetes insisted on spending every penny of the budget. He pulled out all the stops: he had *Husbands* bumper stickers printed up, continued to give round-the-clock interviews to journalists and took out full-page ads in trade papers for Academy Award consideration. Even as he increasingly exasperated Columbia and its executives, he didn't mince words about his low opinion of them.

Columbia's paying for it all – the publicity campaign, that is – although it's not happy about it. It was in my contract that I'd get \$250,000 to promote the film, but they didn't say we could use it *this* way! I could care less. They're just a bunch of petty, narrow people around that studio. They've got a lot of old young men around there. I don't mind, though. I like crabby people.

It was an indomitability bordering on perversity that passed all financial logic or reason. Rather than withdrawing into sullen or wounded silence, the filmmaker joked about how much people hated his movie. I personally remember seeing him imitating an imaginary viewer, slouching down in a chair and flailing his arms wildly in front of his face as if

he were shielding his eyes from the fury of an atomic blast, all the while chortling, 'A new experience? Oh, no! Save me. Anything but that!' At other times, he admitted that the reception hurt.

All my life people have been saying, 'Give us a different kind of movie.' Damn it, when they see it, they want the same kind. It hurts to hear somebody say that your life does not interest them. It's not a compliment! But I can't change what I think or do to please them.

Cassavetes spent much of the next year pondering why *Husbands* was received so poorly. He acknowledged the obvious: that the pacing of scenes was different from a mainstream work.

I've often been criticized for the unnecessary length of some of the scenes in both *Faces* and *Husbands*. In some ways the length of the scenes and duration of the shots are accidents in that they weren't planned before we actually shot them. But they are important to the effect. I want to give the actors enough time to allow them to express what they are feeling in a scene – I don't want them to have to keep down their energy or curtail their performances. The length of the scenes allows us to capture reactions and behaviors that might never take place if it didn't go on and on. The pacing conforms to the time real emotions take to happen. The scenes find their own form in the emotional rhythms of the actors because they give them that freedom. We don't call cut and do the next shot until the first shot gets to its natural emotional resolution, its logical outcome. The bar scene takes more real time than usual. But if you were really in a bar, it would be a hell of a lot longer than that. So in a sense it was tightened up. The way people think about scenes or criticize that scene – they feel it's too long, or too irritable, or too this or too that. But it's a scene you remember.

Other films are really a shorthand the way they have been done. They're a shorthand for living and people understand that shorthand. You have certain labels like a home run, a double, a single, a triple – baseball jargon – which you use to describe a very powerful scene. Different kinds of things stir the emotional things in you. Films are still predicated on incidents. Incidents are exciting. They set off one thing. You recognize certain incidents, and you go with them. *Husbands* is an extremely entertaining film in spots, just as I think life is entertaining in spots. Like life, it's also very slow and depressing in areas. The one thing it's not is a shorthand film. I won't make shorthand films, because I don't want to manipulate audiences into assuming quick, manufactured truths. If I had my way, *Husbands* would be twice as long as it is and

everyone could walk out if they wanted to. Maybe I'll get better, but I can't change a movie merely to pacify people.

The characters did not facilitate viewer 'identification' because they were not charming.

If you have a film where the people are likable, whether they're tough or whether they're mean, in the sense that Jimmy Cagney was likable enough though he was a murderer, you'll have a successful film. That is the way I think audiences look on film. However, as a filmmaker I feel differently; I want to say something more, and I do in my films. And it's not always going to be successful. I couldn't care less if the people in *Husbands* are like people you know, or if you identify with the heroes. If the men are not exciting, there's nothing for people to identify with, because we all want to be excited. I think the picture is about people just being what they are, and that's good enough.

He felt that many viewers were confused by the lack of 'artificial excitement' or hyped-up 'drama' (with clear-cut problems, conflicts and resolutions) that most other films provided.

I didn't want it to be 'dramatic' like a 'movie' – life isn't really dramatic that way. There is a thin line of feeling in the film. You take the script, if you ever read the script, or you see the movie, and if you don't want to be connected with the fact that something is going on with these guys, then the movie is long and involved and maybe boring. It was difficult to know how much to lead an audience, because we didn't want to lead them at all. We didn't want to justify these guys' behavior in terms of the story that we were trying to tell. We wanted to just let it go, saying that the feeling would carry the story, the feeling underlying the fact that I knew these guys and cared about the guy that died. I knew they cared about each other, and I knew that they cared about their wives. We in the film were always putting ourselves up, discovering some things about us that we wouldn't ordinarily know. That's something that you wouldn't ordinarily see in a film. No one in an audience seemed to have time or interest in it, but that was our interest.

The avoidance of traditional forms of dramatic organization presented problems for most viewers.

Husbands throws people. Basically it's not an entertainment film – but it has entertaining things in it. It's not structured in the normal way. It

doesn't want to go where you want it to. I can understand the feeling that certain people would like a picture to have a more conventional form so they can borrow it, much like the gangster movie – it's an art form in America. So everything is understood within a gangster form. You know, you can read into it because you accept that as something that you know. But if you deal with people on a level that isn't theatrical, except in its own terms, then it's very hard to get with the film because of your expectations. Once it gets going, people say, 'OK, now let's get going.' It may be going, however, in some area you're not aware of, which can get you angry. If American audiences can't fit a film into what they expected, it's hard for them to believe that there is something that they don't know about.

He also believed that *Husbands* asked for a level of personal involvement that made many viewers uncomfortable (all the more in that the seriousness was frequently mixed with comedy – Cassavetes himself alternately invoked the Marx Brothers and Jerry Lewis in his descriptions of scenes).

I think probably I got to be a very serious man somewhere along the line. And no matter what it looks like on the outside, you get to be more serious.

No one is willing to be laughed at. Nobody wants to be laughed at. It's gotten so that the only acceptable kind of laughter is really vicious. If you get a laugh in a film it's from saying 'fuck' or 'cunt', or seeing someone stand up against society. That's what gives people a thrill. But please don't do it too often and don't get too deeply involved, otherwise it'll get sad, because you'll lose. It's healthy to laugh at somebody. *Husbands* shows men are stupid. So what? Let's laugh. I spilled stuff on my tie tonight. Why should you guys not laugh at me because I look like a dope? Why should I take offense at that? The only reason I would was if I don't like you and you don't like me. Now that's a crazy assumption to make – that no one likes anybody – and we sometimes live under that assumption. Do you know why people don't laugh at people? Because they are too high and mighty to laugh. They don't like them enough to invest their time to laugh, because if you laugh at somebody, you know you're going to have to be connected with them. You are going to have to put some time in with them. You know that you are going to have to truly like those people. The truth of the matter is that nobody can afford to laugh at anybody. That's why some fucking psychologist comes along and says, 'Don't laugh at him.' When friends get together,

they laugh at each other. When enemies get together, no chance, baby. No laughter. Comedy is more interesting to me than serious drama, because there is more life, more possibility in it. More different feelings.

He felt the non-political nature of the film made it hard for people to understand it.

They didn't like *Husbands* because it didn't coincide with what they expected an independent filmmaker to be making at the time. They needed someone to be making a picture that would go along and fight a cause for them. We wanted to show three middle-class American men – what they would feel toward their wives, what they would feel toward their work and what they would feel toward themselves, in a very personal way that wouldn't relate to society at large.

He pondered why women seemed to dislike the movie even more than men.

Women hated the picture, absolutely loathed the picture, with such a passion that it was unbelievable, simply because here were three men going off to London and not only having a sexual affair, but they were really out to fall in love with someone, and that was the ultimate disloyalty to the American housewife and to the American woman, so they could never like this picture. It's shocking in the sense that the characters display a simplicity which is so crude, so innocent, that when they're given a chance to do what they *really* want, their main interest is in gambling and women. They're not interested in the intelligence of a woman but rather that the woman fall in love with them. That's why women are shocked by this film. The relationship between the men was such a separate thing. A lot of women see the drinking scene and they're bored the first second they see it. They're bored the first second there's a drunk there. They don't like the idea of people revealing themselves.

What life, including marriage, is all about is women versus men. There is a constant and, I think, a lovely war going on. Men and women are basically different. Women are the protectors – men can't have children and don't have the instinct for motherhood – and men protect the protectors. Men are built for adventure. It makes for unhappiness in a marriage when women don't understand the basic differences between them and that men do need adventure. In *Husbands* the story is about three men who are seeking the adventure they need, not only an extra-marital thing. While sex is marvelous, it's not related to the rest of what marriage is. Sex is an animal thing. Indiscretions are a small part of all

life. If it's an indiscretion, it's not really important. On the other hand, if the affair is serious, the wife has to find out why it's serious and why her partner isn't fulfilled within the marriage. I say that if you're a married man you have the right to get drunk, screw around and go to the whorehouse, but not fall in love. These three men are searching for immortality and they want to relive a love that they dreamt of when they were younger. These feelings are then displaced onto women who just can't deal with it. This is absolutely a man's story. I think that the interest a woman could have in a picture like this would be in seeing the relationship between men done on a real level.

He also felt that the film was seen as being more depressing than it actually was because it didn't idealize or soften experience in the Hollywood way.

I've talked to people who've liked *Husbands* and some who think it's the saddest movie they've ever seen. I find that hard to understand. In the last scene in the movie, for instance, a lot of people think that when I return home and my two kids come out to see me – those were my own children, Nick and Xan – I'm kind of resigned to my lousy life and my lousy marriage. But that wasn't the case at all. The fact that Gus was about to get some heat from his wife because he'd gone off for a weekend in London isn't unpleasant to me. It's kind of flattering, really, when a man goes home to his wife and gets some static that way. You don't want too much of it, but you actually need a little bit – it's an indication that there's something there, that we're living, that people care, that our silly endeavors have some meaning. I can't see that scene as sad.

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Cassavetes occasionally expressed anger at the stupidity of viewers and reviewers.

I hate audiences. They're full of shit, for Christ's sake. They just sit there and *judge* a film. I don't think audiences are very sophisticated. The only thing that all audiences like is a simplistic journal of a very simple story, that is easy to follow, that has an emotional meaning not cluttered with any complexities. And once that happens your film is extremely successful. The only sadness I have is that some sucker in Podunk doesn't see the picture, because basically what you're making pictures for is people that are not really interested in film but are really interested in living and are having some difficulty with living. You're not going to

do somebody some good or any good at all in what you make if you're making it for a group of people at the Screen Directors Guild.

As difficult as the commercial struggle was, he maintained his belief that he would not have done anything different to please a viewer.

The idea of knowing or trying to find out what an audience wants is way off. I can't conceive of someone saying to a painter, 'This pen, this color, this brush, need to get used this way because the audience likes it that way.' A painter makes the painting he likes. It's not so important that people like your films, it's not really important, it's only important that you make something that you like. A filmmaker has to trust himself and his actors. You have to trust your own feelings and the belief that audiences want what you want, that you're no different. We all have to come to the realization that we can't be cynical. That's the only way I know that you can really put yourself up and speak for other people – to preserve that innocence so that you're not aware that you have no *right* to speak for other people. Because once you start having that awareness, then it's really time to walk away.

At the same time, he was undeluded about the ramifications of his non-commercial stance.

Many directors today, many actors, many writers, worry more about what critics will say about them than the job at hand. I used to hate censorship. I hate one thing more than censorship and that's commercialism. When somebody does something for a buck, I think they're not artists. I just loathe them and I hate them and I think they're cocksuckers. There doesn't seem to be any solution within that framework whereby people could say, 'I am going into the distribution movie business for money,' and we approach it behind the scenes as an art. We can't make movies to please them. Soon you are not expressing what you want to say and that becomes a lie. You are making an entertainment that will suit the people that are producing the film: the studio itself. They say that they know what people like. They are full of shit. They don't know any more than I do. I don't even know what I like. You only know what you like. Some guy that is introverted, who has a chauffeured limousine pick him up and drive him to a projection room, he's going to tell me what people like? Jesus, he was never in Times Square. He's the head only as long as he can convince everyone there's a mystique and a mystery about what he does. I won't kiss the behind of public opinion. I won't listen to nineteen guys in a front office telling

me what kids will like, or what blacks will like, or what women will like. I figure most people are like me – they don't know what they like until they see it.

I suppose when you have millions invested in something you have every right to be nervous about it. But you don't want to do that to the exclusion of originality. And when things are original, obviously they're a little more difficult. Columbia thought *Husbands* was the worst picture financially that was ever made. To me it's a beautiful movie. I don't give a damn whether anyone likes it or not.

Cassavetes couldn't get the film out of his system. He wrote several screenplays pursuing various strands of the story (for example, one involving Gus's romantic relationship with his dental assistant, and another about Harry's life a few years later). He also dictated an 800-page novel based on the film to Elaine Goren during lunch breaks while he was engaged in the editing, doing the voices of each of the film's characters as he dictated it. (He told me that he gave the novel to Irving Lazar, but when he was asked to make revisions, he started but got busy with *Minnie and Moskowitz*, shoved it into a drawer and left it there.)

I wrote a novel about it after the picture was finished. I love it. I just can sit and read it because I love it, I enjoy it. Maybe because it's my life and it's my expression. I don't know.

Peter Falk said that when he read the novel, to his surprise it explained most of the things about his character that had confused him during the shoot, but that Cassavetes had refused to clarify for fear that Falk would only be mimicking the filmmaker's ideas. Cassavetes' goal, as always, was to keep his actors a little off-balance and uncertain, to force them out of their places of comfort, beyond the tried and untrue routines and clichés that pass for acting in most movies. Cassavetes' description of Gazzara's performance (which he said deserved an Academy Award) makes clear his deep-seated distrust of standard actorly tricks:

Gazzara changes the face of acting history. Gazzara's performance is not acting as we know it. He has found the key to a certain side of his personality, like some treasure discovered. He burst onto the screen like a misfused bomb. He explodes when you least expect it. He laughs too loudly, he cries at ideas, he kisses men on their mouths, he has a theory on everything, and his failures are multiple. Harry is Ben, and Ben is Harry. An oddly irritating, alternately heart-breaking man, a throw-back – a personality as yet undiscovered.

Cassavetes spent a lot of time reflecting on the meaning of the negative response the film elicited.

I know that every single person in the audience has a story. And it bores me stiff to see all ignorant, leering, worse than decadent Roman mythology of gladiators, and people sitting there, watering at the mouth. You see I think these people are human, and it offends me to constantly see people depicted as nothing. Not even wrong or right, not even evil or not. And eventually people begin to take one huge pill, too big to fit down their throats, and they begin to believe this enormous, hilarious lie – that everything is horseshit. I don't believe it. I don't believe that the ages have changed any differently than from when I was a kid. I don't believe that kids have changed. I don't believe that anything has changed. There's only the disillusionment that the people are fed through the medium. I think people are capable of being used in a wonderful way, and that is to accept themselves. You don't need a psychiatrist.

Husbands is a statement of one man's point of view in life. I just have another view of life, and if I didn't, what the hell am I doing in the business? What am I doing in an art of expression? This is something that is *your view*. When you go up to bat, why should you be nervous? You're expressing your life. If it's not good enough, you want to know it; but you don't want to have a stacked deck saying, 'No, no, no, he's not going with the crowd!' I never shot through a glass or made kooky things that people can't understand. They're all straight out. There's nothing there that a ten-year-old kid can't understand, because it's all emotional. Now, maybe the emotion doesn't hit you or maybe the emotion makes you feel that you're turned off because you don't feel that emotion. That's fine, then it's not a good film or whatever. But don't tell me how to make it and don't tell me I have to do ten rapes, seventy-five eyes coming out, blood pouring out of your intestines to make a movie, because I think that's bullshit. And I don't mind saying it. And I loathe the artists that do that without even realizing that they're doing it.

After you've made a few films you start to realize that it's not enough just to be a success, to get good reviews, or just to make more movies. You need to do something important to yourself, you need to study life and develop your own personal way to express what troubles us, or what we love, or anything you want to explore. I don't deal with the life of others but with *my own* life. That's all I know.

I go through life living every single day and I have a good time and try to fulfill myself. I think what makes a person tick is the way he uses his own dynamics and what he comes to feel. Sometimes I think I'm the

'It's not enough to be a success, to get good reviews, or to make more movies. You need to do something important to yourself. You need to study life. I don't deal with the life of others but with *my own* life. That's all I know.' © *Michael Ferris*

dullest, most inconsequential man in the world, and other times I wish to hell I could contain my own ego. I'm a manic depressive, although lately, when I'm working on something I love, I stay more manic than depressive. So you've really got me in a manic state. When I'm depressed I like to be left alone. The minute I start to do something, I'm no longer depressed. I'm blessed with energy which I inherited from both my parents. I long for the time when I can get working with people, to share with them the excitement of being alive and creating. It is difficult to reveal the inner defenses and expose the inner core of what makes you tick. This is where all my sympathy lies. How do you make a film I'll never know: all those feelings and thoughts that come together in a two-hour piece of celluloid.

For years afterwards, Cassavetes talked about *Husbands* as, at one and the same time, the greatest acting experience of his life and the biggest commercial debacle.

I believe in miracles. In 1951, 'The Miracle of Coogan's Bluff' was a phrase sportswriters used to describe the incredible way the New York Giants caught up with the Brooklyn Dodgers to win the National League pennant. When Bobby Thomson hit that home run to beat the Dodgers, that was a miracle. It might not have been my miracle, but at the time I thought it was. That's how I've lived. Films have been miracles in my life; Gena has been a miracle; my children have been miracles. Finding tears coming into my eyes during stupid conversations is a miracle. And after so much of my life has been difficult, repellent and a turn-off, I find that still being able to love is a miracle. I was in love with that picture, in love with Benny and Peter and New York and London and hotel rooms and beautiful women and the whole adventure, behind the camera and in front of it, and it was one of the most romantic things that ever happened in my life.

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He was still apparently thinking of *Husbands* when he told a journalist while he was making *Love Streams*:

This is fascinating! I love this picture! [Laughs.] So I know it's going to be a bomb. It's always a disaster when you love something.

Minnie and Moskowitz (1971)

As *Husbands* was being critically and commercially savaged, Cassavetes made a series of statements about Hollywood movies of the late sixties and early seventies. He articulates a vision of film as a means of addressing the emotional needs of 'the common man'.

The dilemma of our country is the dilemma of the common man. His house, with his television set, and his credit card standing, his sexual confusion and his nagging business obligations have taken up too much of his time for him to realize the importance of his human needs. Films reflect better than anything else the systems that we live under, the feelings of the people. *All* the feelings of the people, the bad and the good, and only with films do you really have a chance to see where you are.

There's too little trust between people. Our children disappear – popping pills, sucking smoke and pushing needles – in some far-off reaches of the country where clean air and soft water still can be found. Our children are dying for lack of guidance and, more importantly, ideals. They don't believe in hope, but only in the present. Our industry refers to this group as the 'youth market'! It continues prognosticating what will be successful and forcing down the tortured throats of its audience pop-art solutions for politics and freedom in preview houses where a cross-section of the classes go to have their emotions tested, their laughs counted and their intelligence translated into box-office potential.

The people who make films have gone crazy. There's a responsibility *not* to express the worst part of your panic. They need to express life. In my whole life I've never known anyone who's been murdered. There was a time when *life* was important. Not this weird stuff but the way people really live. As a boy I worried about going to a party and talking to people. I worried about how to get my cowlick down. Other things that worry people are how to stay married, how to make kids proud but not so proud they lose their identity. I hate to see this business about the

world being tougher than it is. There's such a continual series of put-downs. We just dehumanize ourselves to such a great extent that nothing really counts, nothing really matters.

The cause of motion pictures should not be a dehumanizing one. Major companies are making pictures that are disgusting. They make anti-war movies but exploit it by making money on those anti-war pictures, by publicizing and selling them. People on screen are stripped naked and left there to die. The thinking is supposedly committed to a revolutionary spirit but lacks the depth of intentions necessary for such discussions. Audiences begin to accept this exploitation as part of their lives. They find themselves laughing at what isn't funny, angered by what they don't care about, and influenced and contaminated by hours of unfelt, unmotivated propaganda.

Motion pictures, whether art or not, should reflect in human terms the needs of their audience. If relating to one another only ends in cheap momentary revelations, communication of the spirit, of the heart, will be distrusted and unwanted too. There isn't anyone making any films that relate to anyone as far as I'm concerned – the *human* part of anyone. If your characters can communicate with other people, and not put them down by being heroes or anti-heroes, then you succeed. How simple it is for people to care on their own level, and how lovely it is and how much confidence it can give people to see that – characters revealing themselves in the smallest form.

There is no real art in America other than business, and anyone who thinks that there is is crazy. People who are artistic and who are working for big companies are dead, are dead men. You can't work for a big company and have any respect for yourself unless you're out to make money. People plunge their careers and their lives headlong into making money – and when they get it, they don't like it, they don't need it and they don't know what to do with it. Money is the last refuge of people who've been scared by life, whose only way to survive is to acquire as much money and power as they can – to protect themselves. But from what? We've got to realize that money is useless beyond whatever it takes to feed, clothe and house yourself. As a matter of fact, the more you have beyond that – whatever it takes to free you from those basic concerns – the more difficult it is to find out what really matters and to get it for yourself.

Before the war, America was a country of great innocence and idealism. Since then, it's been completely undermined by its people's hunger for profits. And that hunger is not limited to any ethnic group. I see it in everyone: Italian-, English- and German-American, Irish Catholics and,

yes, even Greeks. Everybody's been going for the money and saying the hell with society. I see people just throwing away their values, all the things that their ancestors and fathers always treasured. They've put money up as the goal of life, but money is no measure of the value of a man – any man. I know a lot of millionaires who do nothing but sit alone in their houses and wish they could have a friend to drink with or a woman they could truly love. All they have is their money. But they're really not greedy for money; they're interested in the zeros – in the game of making two dollars into \$20 into \$2,000,000 into \$20,000,000; nothing is enough.

In retrospect the old Hollywood glamour wasn't that bad. There was nothing wrong with Lubitsch. It comes to mind that maybe there really wasn't an America – that maybe it was only Frank Capra. In talking with my friends, with my peers, fellow workers, I find that nothing has changed with them. They are willing to work. They are willing to steep themselves in ideas of human interest, in things that make sense humanly. Audiences care about people that they admire, people who will fight the odds of conformity with innocent weapons, people who fall in love and are crushed, who fight the enemy and die, who sacrifice, who sweat, who burp and work hard to make life more satisfactory. This, believe it or not, is what many good actors, directors and writers would be willing to substitute reviews and financial rewards for. Give the audience the vaguest permission or cause to feel real emotions, and they will take the challenge.

In the early 1970s, following the success of works like *Easy Rider* and *Midnight Cowboy*, there was a boom in low-budget independent film-making. One might have thought that Cassavetes would be extremely receptive to this trend. However, in his opinion, most of the 'youth' films of the period were not any better than the movies they replaced and young directors not any more exempt from the worship of status and power than more established directors.

I make films so that other people can make films too. But there are not enough people that have such a tremendous desire to do away with the old guard, the old system. Young people *say* it – until the money's there, until they get a job with Universal or Paramount or Fox. They get really excited about being independent, but up to the point that they are actually dealing with producers, it's all make-believe. In reality, until they go into those big buildings with those sealed-off, currying-favor, hypocritical people, they're not happy. Today young people hide behind their

youth to say, 'That doesn't happen to me,' and criticize older people. It's really bullshit. The status level is followed by young people as well as by older people. Film is as much a business for the young as for the old. They're criticizing older people because they're wanting it and they're not getting it – the haves and the have-nots.

There really has to be a feeling of wanting to learn that's more important than wanting to succeed. It seems that young people today don't want to learn as much as they want to succeed. I don't mean that they have to learn from anyone else, but learn from themselves and learn from their experiences. We're *all* the Establishment. We condemn older people when they go for mass appeal, but we let it go with younger people. You give any young guy \$50,000 for directing a film and put him in, *make* him make an exploitation picture – and I guarantee you that there's so many 'revolutionaries' that would do it that it would curl your hair. They're selling everything they feel and everything they know for horseshit.

Cassavetes always tried to get his next project in motion before the last one was done – not only to move from one film to the next with as little dead time as possible and to exploit whatever publicity momentum he had temporarily accrued (since he knew that he might be hotter *before* his box-office returns came in than *after*), but, equally importantly, to obtain an office in which to work. In early 1969, while he was still shooting *Husbands*, he pitched the general idea of *Minnie and Moskowitz* to Ned Tannen, who supervised a series of low-budget pictures at Universal. Tannen told him to come back when he had a script in hand, but in the meantime gave Cassavetes a 'development office' that he would use as his headquarters for the next three years.

Eighteen months later, in November 1970, just prior to the release of *Husbands*, Cassavetes was on a flight with Seymour Cassel and asked him if he would like to star in a movie with Gena Rowlands. When Cassel expressed enthusiasm, Cassavetes told him he should start letting his hair and mustache grow. Cassavetes wrote all of his films fairly rapidly – in this instance, in approximately three weeks, all the more remarkable in that he did it in between conducting interviews to publicize *Husbands*.

I got the company, cast and script together within a couple of weeks. I write quickly. I love it. It's one of the most exciting parts. Once you have the idea, it's a matter of sitting down and concentrating on what you're doing and getting a kick out of it. Just after New Year's 1971, I called

Seymour up, after I'd written about twenty pages, and he came over to my office and read it out loud. He says, 'Finish, finish, when're you going to finish?' I like including people in, and people like being included.

The writing was as much a social experience as every other aspect of Cassavetes' filmmaking. Cassavetes would dictate a few scenes to Elaine Goren each day and then invite Cassel or Rowlands or anyone else he could round up (sometimes a visiting reporter like the *Playboy* interviewer who came in while Cassavetes was working on Minnie's meeting with Zelmo) to come by to read the current installment out loud as a means of feedback. By the end of January, he had finished the script. Cassavetes had Goren read it aloud to Tannen and Daniel Selznick. Once it was approved, the production was put together in record time. *Minnie and Moskowitz* was budgeted at \$678,000 and assigned a starting date less than two months off. Cassavetes was thrilled but ambivalent about working for a studio again.

If you have to make a film, you have to make a film. I don't know how, but you'll find a way to make it if you have to. If you have to be a director, it means taking on a lot of problems. But the wrong way to go about it is to go to a great deal of trouble to do one little simple thing that you should go directly to. I found myself in the position of forming a distribution company. In my mind I have raised \$118 million in one day. But what I want to do is just make one film for \$50,000. I don't think any of us really have the answer to that. I don't have the answer. I've got a film that I'd like to do, and I'm in the position of having to determine what is important in making that film: *making* it, *selling* it or having people *view* it? I have got to deal with Universal. It kills me to have to make that deal. But it is more important to make my picture. Let them bury it. Let them sink it. I don't care what they do with it. I have got to say that to myself. I earned the right to at least have my cut. I can get my own print so I'll always have my film. I'm in a commercial project again – big budget, color – so the pressure is on, no getting away from it. It won't be as personal or free-wheeling as *Faces*; it just can't be the same. If I'm making a film for someone else I have to automatically concede up front that certain things can't be. I have to make the film in a normal length of time, in color, in Panavision or 1:85, and there have to be union crews, we have to abide by union regulations, we have to talk to lawyers, we have to keep accountants, we have to do all the same things that anyone else would have to do which has nothing to do with

making a film. I know I am saying I've given up, but I am still thrilled at the idea of being able to make a film. My thrill is something out of nothing, some little idea that pleases me or stirs me, or some place that I can put myself up or other people can put themselves up to make something good.

When asked about how he felt about dealing with the business side of studio production – the agents, the lawyers, the producers – he replied:

It's like saying how do you go into a volcano or mud. How do you walk into mud and not get your shoes dirty? I don't know. I really don't. I find that if you can just be what you feel at the moment, that's good enough. It's the hardest thing to do. Making a film is a fight. I talk with executives of major studios every day who say, 'I agree with you, John, but my hands are tied. I have to go through the other people in my corporate structure.' Sometimes I just want to tell these guys, 'Oh, grow up, will you?' I mean that if there's even only one person I have to consult with, I would want it to be myself.

Even though Cassavetes pitched *Minnie and Moskowitz* as a low-budget 'youth film' project, he bristled when interviewers referred to his audience as the 'youth market'.

Mankind has finally found the lowest common denominator, you know it? Which is money. It's the lowest, most base, silly excursion into loneliness I've ever seen. Seven, eight years ago, the kids of America started rebelling against that. Then, somehow, that was taken over and commercialized and used as a way to make money too: *The Youth Market*. Ha! Reporters ask me, 'Who're you directing to – *The Youth Market*?' Well, sure. Why not? You make pictures for the young because they're the people who can still feel. You have to be part of youth, and you make pictures to be part of youth. But I don't think of youth being the *market* – I think of youth being life.

Though it was customary for Cassavetes to rewrite throughout a shoot, he was more constrained in this case than he would be on a non-studio production. The rehearsal period in February and early March became his last opportunity to make significant changes.

We got all the actors that were available and sat around in a room and read the script, then started rewriting and rehearsing and deepening it where it needed deepening and finding scenes that the actors liked to

play and getting their opinions, seeing how much continuity you have. I think it's important for the actors to get to know what the story's about. You can bring somebody on like Val Avery as a day-player; he came in for just one day to do that restaurant scene – a five- or six-minute scene. But you want the other actors to feel really comfortable within the framework of the story; to know that other people are good. For them, it would be just terrible to walk in and start to construct a character without first being able to feel it and think about it and have an opportunity to make changes, to express themselves, to stop and talk without the pressures of money being involved.

You know, everyone conducts rehearsals differently. I like to read it and say very little. It's really an acquainting time with the character so that the actor can go off by himself and do the preparation – I can do mine; the production manager can do his; the prop people can do theirs. When I write a script, I don't make it so refined and so detailed in all the descriptive passages that it can't be changed. Mainly, the rehearsal is for the actors, for their confidence and feeling that there is a script that isn't just on paper, that they hear it and relate to the other people and know what they're going to do and whom they have to contend with and communicate with.

Cassavetes did one final rewrite of the first half of the script in the week before he began shooting. He then made a few minor revisions to the second half after the first week of shooting. (The final revision date is 1 April.) Shooting began in New York on 23 March and was completed in Los Angeles on 17 June (with one week off to set the new crew when the production moved from the East Coast to the West). Because he didn't entirely trust the studio, Cassavetes insisted on naming his own producers to protect him: close friend Paul Donnelly (whom he thought could get things done because he was a former head of production at Universal) and business manager Al Ruban (which was Cassavetes' way of mending fences after their falling out over the edit of *Husbands*).

Al Ruban sat down with Paul Donnelly, the associate producer, and they worked it out with the Universal production department, the budget, the schedule – I think we shot about twelve weeks – got the crew together, hired the cameramen and editors, set up the operation. It was done quickly, because they're good at their jobs. Then we started shooting. We made two separate productions so we could have time off and it wouldn't become too costly. That made it easy, and the crews were wonderful.

Rather than doing things in the standard, impersonal, studio-issue, businesslike way, Cassavetes personalized every aspect of the filmmaking process. To start with, he cast the entire film not with 'professionals' but family and friends. The list is almost too long to itemize: in addition to Cassavetes and his wife, parts are played by their mothers, all three of the Cassavetes' children (who are present in the 'green world' coda) and Rowlands' brother. Seymour Cassel's wife, Elizabeth Deering, his mother-in-law, Elsie Ames, and two of his children are in the film. Close friend Jimmy Joyce worked as an assistant and his son, who was Cassavetes' godson, played Ned. Five of producer Paul Donnelly's family members round out the group of friends and relatives. One of Donnelly's sons was Assistant Director, and the other played the parking valet; Donnelly's sister-in-law, Kathleen O'Malley, played the waitress in the Morgan Morgan scene; and her two children play Jim's children. (Finally, as in all of Cassavetes' work, Cassavetes also asked several crew members to play parts: Jack Danskin, a boom-man who had never acted before, plays Dick Henderson; and Arthur Ornitz, the film's cinematographer, plays the 'sugar daddy' in the bar Seymour visits.) He used his own home and the homes of friends as the sets (as well as other places he simply loved, like Pink's hot-dogs or C. C. Brown's ice-cream parlor, two favorite hangouts). Jim's kitchen is the kitchen in Cassavetes' own home; Minnie's bedroom is their bedroom; and Florence's apartment is Seymour Cassel's apartment. Making a film was not businesslike because film was not a business for Cassavetes; the point was to be comfortable and relaxed and surrounded with friends, and the art would be better for it.

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The similarities between *Minnie and Moskowitz* and *The Rose Tattoo* are not accidental. Cassavetes' close friend Meade Roberts (who would go on to play Mr. Sophistication in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and Nancy Stein's father in *Opening Night*) introduced him to the work of Tennessee Williams in the late sixties, and Cassavetes loved Williams' plays and eventually got to know Williams personally. Both works tell the story of romantically battle-scarred females opening themselves to relationships with comically mismatched partners. Yet it would be hard to imagine two more different sensibilities. While Williams is romantically evocative, Cassavetes is rough and edgy. While Williams' characters luxuriate in poetic reveries, Cassavetes' function in such a torture chamber of coercions that even a brief lyrical release is out of the ques-

tion. An Alma, Laura or Blanche DuBois would be boiled alive in the pressure cooker of *Faces*, *Minnie and Moskowitz*, *A Woman Under the Influence* or *Opening Night*.

Minnie and Moskowitz is also a veiled self-portrait of Cassavetes' own tumultuous relationship with Gena Rowlands and many aspects of his relationship to his mother at the time he courted Rowlands. The overlap of real and reel life is woven deeply into the film (with Minnie resembling Rowlands; Seymour and Jim having traits in common with Cassavetes; and Sheba Moskowitz's relation to her son having many similarities to Katherine Cassavetes' relation to Cassavetes before he made it as an actor). The difference of Minnie's and Seymour's personalities and backgrounds mirrors the difference of Cassavetes' and Rowlands' actual temperaments and their situations when they met. Rowlands was sensitive, ladylike and subdued; Cassavetes was loud, zany and impulsive to a fault. Rowlands wanted to make a good impression on others and cared about what they thought of her; social values and opinions just didn't matter to Cassavetes. Minnie's romantic stand-offishness and sense of being socially superior to Seymour was played out in Rowlands' and Cassavetes' own courtship. Rowlands *was* from a 'better' family and background than Cassavetes and resisted his advances. She *was* very attached to her mother. And, at least initially, the mothers on both sides thought their children were mismatched. Jim's irrational jealousy echoes Cassavetes' own during his courtship of Rowlands. Cassavetes' mother did think of him in his youth as a bit of a 'bum' and as being 'without ambition'. Even apparently unimportant details are autobiographical: Seymour's off-key singing is a wry self-portrait of Cassavetes' self-consciousness about his singing voice; Minnie's embarrassment about Seymour's clothing echoes a few similar moments Rowlands had with Cassavetes during their early years, when Cassavetes was known for his habitually sloppy appearance; Minnie's sunglasses-wearing (like Myrtle's in *Opening Night*) echoes Rowlands' own fondness for wearing sunglasses everywhere, even at night; the Shirley Temple story Minnie's mother tells was a real story Rowlands' mother had told; and the minister in Cassavetes' and Rowlands' actual wedding ceremony bungled his lines just as Rowlands' brother does as the minister in the film.

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Minnie and Moskowitz also represented Cassavetes' response to aspects of American culture that deeply troubled him. He saw America

as a system of cultural programming in which individuals have given up their individuality.

What's wrong with society is that people become such slaves to their lifestyles, such slaves to their politics, to their friends, that they don't have anything personal left. It's as if individuals have become invisible, and nobody can see or reach their real selves any longer. Nobody can be themselves. They are doing what they *think* they should do and not what makes them happy. It's a struggle. It's a struggle for *you* to be what *you are*. It's a struggle for *other people* to be what *they are*. I think it's a matter of being in touch with yourself and being able to think for yourself. There comes a time in people's lives when they just get so panicked and uptight that they can't really think logically and they can't think with their own mind. They begin to think then with other people's minds. The things that are the most important part of your life are your inner feelings. Your mind's eye view of yourself. If that isn't broken, you'd be a fantastic person all your life.

He believed that emotions were the path back to reality.

People keep what they really feel, their private thoughts, to themselves. They don't have time for their private thoughts. They have the capacity to love, but it's too much time and trouble, so they just ignore it. It's all bottled up. We're in a society that hates emotions. They are rejected as being anti-intellectual, anti-political, anti-everything. We're animals with brains. People all over the world have inherited the disease, firstly of feeling that money is the answer to their lives' problems and then secondly that intellectualism is an answer to their problems. We need to stop intellectualizing so much and rely on what you feel. If you feel something, it's true. The only truth you can really know is something emotional that you feel. When we lose our instincts for truth, we have nothing. To understand the story of *Minnie and Moskowitz* and the relationship of the title characters through their fights, arguments, pounding on doors, the torture, the pain, the screaming and the eventual marriage, it is essential for the audience to first take itself back to when it cared. The romance takes place in a time before intellect.

His descriptions of the characters focus on how they have lost track of their true emotional needs.

A Minnie Moore with all the values in the world but no place to put

them. An empty bed, a fixed-up apartment, a job, a boyfriend who is married and who comes once in a while. Minnie, in my mind, searching her mirror, continually looking at the past so much so that there can be no future. The movies have conditioned her to expect a handsome, charming knight errant. For a young girl to be disillusioned and to be cheated out of true love, out of her heart beating because she's in love with someone, to be already defensive, that nothing can exist, to accept the fact that no man will marry her when that's what she wants, is insanity, because she wants that absolute devotion to her, that one man, that Prince Charming. I don't think that's fairy-tale stuff, I think that's what women want. That's as innate as having a child.

Zelmo Swift has been driven crazy by business – dating girls for lunch and hurling blind emotions, crudely colored by his inability to forget himself, what he is, what he's done, the vast chambers of experience that he has gone through. In the end Zelmo Swift is an insane mechanic of credit cards, a manipulator of momentary emotions, constantly blackmailing, pressuring anyone he indiscriminately comes into contact with.

Influences are always incalculable, but it is a fact that Cassavetes attended a retrospective of Jean Renoir's work in the fall of 1969. It seems likely that aspects of *Minnie and Moskowitz* are indebted to Renoir's *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (just as the spaghetti breakfast in *A Woman Under the Influence* is probably distantly related to the servants' meal in *The Rules of the Game*). The borrowing is deeper than Cassel's mustache and the use of Strauss's *Blue Danube* waltz on the soundtrack. The vision at the heart of Renoir's and Cassavetes' films is extremely similar – and similarly radical. Moskowitz embodied the hippie dreams of the sixties. He was *Faces'* Chettie brought into everyday life. He offered an explicit stylistic alternative to bourgeois values and established forms of interaction in male-dominated culture (figured in the film by Bogart, Beery, Zelmo, Jim and Dick).

A lover of life and a student of mankind, Seymour Moskowitz is the new symbol of hope in America. His symbols are not success, sipping wine, television, *Playboy*, *Screw* or the *Village Voice*. He's not interested in puffing smoke or getting caught up on a street corner standing around talking and all. When life achieves sameness he gets bored and moves on. He's a footloose, practical, uncomplicated American dreamer who sees romance in a cup of coffee and pretty eyes. He has his own style.

A related issue in the film is the need to overcome the fear of change and vulnerability. To achieve anything creative in their lives and relationships, characters must conquer their fear of taking chances. Zelmo is afraid in one way; Minnie is afraid in another.

We all get so chicken that we're afraid of our jobs, we're afraid of our wives, we're afraid of our children, we're afraid to go out in the street. I really think it's because we're too worried about the way we would appear. Fear is the basis of everything terrible. Fear is what causes all the horror in the world. No man achieves anything through fear. Fear isn't constructive. So the only thing that can save people in a spiritual or religious or in any way is to say I'm not afraid anymore. The minute they say they are not afraid they cannot commit a wrong act. There will be no such thing as a wrong act.

Cassavetes felt that walls of misunderstanding and suspicion separated generations, genders and families in 1970s America. The result was a frightening state of rootlessness and disconnection at the heart of early seventies culture.

Gena and I started talking one night about how terribly difficult it would be for people to get married today with Women's Liberation, the Vietnam war and the threat of nuclear annihilation. The idea came up that a good movie could be made about the possibilities of two people getting married, believing in life again. Young people, people that are lonely, that are not family oriented, maybe they could believe that it is possible for there to be trust between a man and a woman again. There's nothing you can believe in in this society, because there's no trust between one person and another. Nobody can feel the other person likes them, and that's a terrible feeling to go through life with. There is a great need in people to want to trust, to want to love, to want to feel that there isn't great hostility.

Minnie and Moskowitz is recognizably from the same artist who created *Faces*. The film is a vision of a world of pervasive loneliness and isolation. Each and every character is walled off from human connection and relationship in one way or another and is, in response, flailing out in a desperate attempt at re-establishing contact, no matter how superficially or evanescently. For Cassavetes, there could be no more nightmarish scenario. The narrative project of the film is to take the states of estrangement that the film frighteningly documents and to suggest the possibility of re-establishing connections. Seymour is a battering-ram to

break down the walls of alienation and distrust that separate each of the other characters in the film. He fails with some, like Morgan, but eventually succeeds with Minnie. Seymour Cassel was, in fact, a lot like this in life. He frequently launched into personal conversations with complete strangers, treating them like long-lost friends, baring his soul to them. Everyone who knew the two men felt that both Cassel and the characters he played were emotional *alter egos* for Cassavetes.

I began the movie by saying, 'Here's some sadness, some sadness that we all live in. Here's some loneliness that we all feel.' The film takes people who are the center of that unhappiness and loneliness – they're like you and me, they're like everyone else, and they are seeking that trust and that one person they can talk with to begin with. And they find it. Minnie's been buffeted about without becoming bitter. She still has a sense of the marvelous in life. And Seymour bubbles over with life, he almost explodes. The situation of being totally in love with someone – aggressively in love with someone, willing to throw away anything for a woman – just doesn't happen anymore. Part of it is that people just get too uptight to really put themselves out as far as Seymour did.

He *makes* her beautiful because he loves this girl so much, from the way she looks, the way she behaves, from what he senses is in her that is right for him. He makes her beautiful. I think she's one of the most lovely women on the screen, and it's not always true about Gena. But in this particular part, because of the affection and the constant drive by Seymour, you forget the fact that she was a girl who was beaten up by a guy and is really basically a stupid girl without too much in society's eyes to give, except that she's sweet. And she'd probably be a loser and go under, but because of his attention, she becomes someone very special, very appealing, very attractive.

In Cassavetes' view, no matter how much Minnie has been hurt, she must retain her innocence and vulnerability.

It's true that the women in my films are continuously being double-crossed by men. They really are, and they recognize it. And my point of view in presenting it is, 'All right. So what are you going to do about it? Are you going to put up a wall around you, or are you going to fight to protect some of your innocence?' No matter what the current trends are, a woman must fight to keep her own responsiveness alive.

Cassavetes' work is not merely descriptive, but *functional*. His films put the viewer through experiences that perform the same function as the

experiences of the characters in the film. Just as the characters are forced to open themselves to the experience of others, Cassavetes forces viewers to open themselves up to different kinds of characters and ways of being.

I think it's time for people to begin to trust one another, and I think it's a tremendous obligation for the artist to bring trust to people. Not to bring comedy, not entertainment, not more escapism, not to fantasize particularly, but to allow two people to like each other, three people to like each other, for people to have time for human beings. *Minnie and Moskowitz* is peopled with characters always invisible to naked business eyes. People who are meaningless unless you need them: an old hobo whose wife is dead; a tough barmaid; an Irish girl with blue eyes and pink skin; a Puerto Rican fruit-stand peddler; a housewife and her small daughter on an airplane going to L.A.; characters on the street, the landlord, your mother, her mother – the old and the young coming together as they do in life, away from all the formulas, away from all the mass-audience dictums. I say, Jesus, I like this person even though I know he is an s.o.b., you know, I love him, and I can't help it, it's his personality and his style that I like.

Just as Moskowitz breaks himself free from cultural systems of expression, Cassavetes breaks his narrative free from received cinematic systems of expression.

You start thinking about life and you realize that everything is a movie. Everything you see is a movie – only when it gets to the screen it never is. No one'll pay the price of being wrong. No one'll pay the price of being an individual. Very few movies are interesting to me anymore. Most of them are just fluff.

I'm so tired of films being romantic by setting a mood with a camera. It's what a filmmaker or a script tells you to do; it's their idea of what an audience will feel is romantic. They become so conditioned that when the music comes on and it's soft and romantic, it conditions people to be one way or the other. You can't just use that to make your picture.

I have a different way of thinking, which doesn't necessarily conform to lifestyles. We all know how to make a movie that's a little more romantic, but frankly I get bored with that because it has nothing to do with anything I'm seeing. Every Hollywood picture tells you *how* to film it. In *their* kind of story, it has to be one thing or another – a comedy or a drama, a romance or an action picture. They want to know before they make it and want you to stay within that. It's a baby men-

tality – beneath fourteen-year-olds – hell, beneath ten-, eight-, five-year-olds! It's for babies. How can something be *a certain kind of scene* or picture? We should do what is really in our minds and hearts.

If the characters are asked to free themselves from programmed behaviors, Cassavetes' actors are also asked to free themselves from programmed behaviors.

I just stand there and try to create an atmosphere where they're not embarrassed. And talk about it. If what they're doing is clear, they perform very well. I talk to Seymour and it's up to him really to find some kind of truth and honesty in himself, away from all the programmed behavior. A lot of actors don't really like to work with me because I don't pay any attention to the standard, normal things that allow the actors to protect themselves, to be movie heroes or anti-heroes. You can't get your feet on the ground when you are working in one of our pictures because people aren't able to get their feet on the ground in real life.

As he frequently did, Cassavetes drew on off-camera personal frictions to generate on-camera drama. The decision to cast Cassel and Rowlands as a couple (here and in *Love Streams*) was part of the process of exploiting an off-camera imbalance. As I mentioned in the *Faces* chapter, Cassel had a lot of Chettie in him in real life, and with respect to this film, Cassel's off-screen personality was extremely similar to Moskowitz's. The result was that going into the film Rowlands genuinely felt about Cassel the same way Minnie does about Moskowitz for most of the movie. The subdued, conservative Rowlands found Cassel's sexual promiscuity, irresponsibility and general loudness and boisterousness appalling and embarrassing. (To add fuel to the fire, she had been convinced for years that Cassel was personally responsible for the trouble her husband frequently got into on their boys' nights out.) At the same time, Cassel – never the most perceptive individual – was oblivious to the impression he made on Rowlands and was genuinely infatuated with her, as 'the beautiful blonde wife of my best friend'. Cassavetes' casting decision was a deliberate attempt to get sparks to fly between the two – which is also why, diabolical as it may sound, he fomented disagreements between Cassel and Rowlands during the shoot.

I made Gena and Seymour hate each other during the picture and kept them off-balance with each other. Any comfort they had to get out of themselves.

He used many different techniques to try to exasperate Rowlands with Cassel during the shoot. For example, Gena Rowlands took a 'beauty nap' most afternoons whenever she was not working and was absolutely adamant about not wanting to be disturbed; on the afternoon of the filming of the Palomino dancing scene (which was done in the evening), Cassavetes dragged Cassel upstairs into Rowlands' bedroom and woke her up, saying, 'Seymour wants to rehearse right now. He insists on doing it now.' It wasn't true; Cassavetes was staging the whole event. Cassel stood there mortified that he was in her bedroom and that he had, in effect, awakened her from a sound sleep. Cassavetes forced Rowlands to read the scene with Cassel then and there on the bed, and when that didn't seem to get to her enough, he started criticizing her reading of her lines, telling her that she wasn't showing enough emotion. When she finally became genuinely irritated (and it came through in her line readings), he told her to remember the feeling. He wanted those emotions in the scene.

Cassavetes also played on Rowlands' feelings in other ways – for example, by deliberately concealing the fact that he himself would be playing the Jim character until the day the scene was shot. Rowlands had asked him a number of times who would be playing the part – later saying, 'As time went on, I became more and more upset. I like to know who I'm working with.' She was floored when he told her just before the scene was about to be filmed that it would be him.

An example of Cassavetes playing a mind-game with another actor involved his treatment of Val Avery. To start with, Avery almost didn't agree to appear in *Minnie and Moskowitz*, because he was angry at Cassavetes for having cut so much of his performance in *Faces* (almost an hour – which might have gotten him, rather than Cassel, Best Supporting Actor nomination). Cassavetes had to talk him into doing the restaurant scene. Even after he agreed to play the part, Avery didn't trust Cassavetes and tried to get him to promise that he wouldn't cut any of his lines (which Cassavetes would not do). Then he insisted on a private rehearsal with Rowlands several days before the scene was scheduled to be filmed, so that any cuts or changes would be made then and not after the scene was shot. Then, when Avery showed up at Panza's Lazy Susan, he wanted to deliver his lines more longingly and romantically than Cassavetes had in mind. Avery's delivery made Zelmo's loneliness touching, while Cassavetes wanted it to be more raw. To get the performance he needed, Cassavetes first attempted to wear Avery down by forcing him to do the scene over and over again dozens of times; when that didn't disrupt his delivery sufficiently, Cassavetes took the actor outside

and provoked an argument with him, deliberately shaking Avery's composure. In the next take the tones were where Cassavetes wanted them to be. The effect in the final film is quite extraordinary: the viewer sees a character who is *trying* to be smooth, suave and confident but is unsuccessful at it. Cassavetes turned Avery into Zelmo: a man attempting to keep to his own mental script, whose weariness and insecurity emerge between the lines. The way the scene was created becomes its subject: it is about the character's inability to play the role he wants to play.

It is important to emphasize that these sorts of struggles were not negative events for Cassavetes. They were the warp and weave of all truly creative interaction. Cassavetes absolutely adored Avery as an actor, at one point thinking he might ask him to play the Nick character in *A Woman Under the Influence*. At another point, he wrote a script that featured Avery in the lead (playing a Turkish rug merchant trying to marry off his two daughters).

Cassavetes' conferences with actors were almost always in private. If an actor had a question or a problem, Cassavetes would generally invite him to take a walk with him or take him off to one side and speak to him in a whisper. It was more than a matter of tact or politeness; it was a reflection of Cassavetes' commitment to honoring individual differences in his art. To speak to more than one actor at a time would be to risk homogenizing their responses. Cassavetes reversed the conventional wisdom that an actor should put his own and his characters' needs aside and work for the good of the movie. You were to defend your character.

The mind-games were not always so serious. The goal was often simply to relax the actor by bringing a little playfulness into the shoot. A relaxed actor was a daring actor, an actor not afraid to experiment with a new effect. In the soda-fountain scene, Cassavetes made Seymour Cassel eat six dishes of ice cream under the pretext that something had gone wrong the previous five times, to the point that Cassel would have done almost anything with the next bowl. In the scene in the Palomino parking lot, Cassavetes teased Cassel into walking on his hands for Minnie (in a scene that probably echoes Cassavetes' flirtatious backflips at the Cort Theater). The point was to take the pressure off the actors, by joking, playing or teasing – so that they would let down their hair and do something different in their performances. Since everyone was apparently just clowning around and having fun, they didn't feel that they had to protect themselves so much. If the actor still resisted, he might say something like the following: 'Try it. What's the difference? If it doesn't work, we'll try something else. Don't worry. If it's terrible, I won't use it.'

Taking an actor off to the side to have a private conference behind a door
in a side room. © *Michael Ferris*

Only in such an environment can an actor feel relaxed enough to stop acting and let behavior take over.

The 'stand on your hands' anecdote makes a larger point which contradicts Cassavetes' claims that he never gave direction to actors. He exerted a lot of control over how scenes were played. As an illustration, limiting myself to the Palomino scene, I've already mentioned how Cassavetes massaged Rowlands' and Cassel's emotions by bringing Cassel into Rowlands' bedroom a few hours before the scene was supposed to be shot. In addition, once his two actors were in the parking lot, Cassavetes told Cassel how to play the scene in great detail: about dancing with Rowlands he said, 'Make it real slow and romantic and dip her low at the end.' He told Cassel to then put his coat on her shoulders. And, as I just described, he then asked him to walk on his hands. It was not exactly *laissez-faire* and was why Rowlands always objected to Cassavetes' statements to interviewers about how he didn't direct by commenting: 'He *thinks* he doesn't give directions, but he's constantly telling you what to do.'

However, direction or no direction, the most important moments during a shoot were the unexpected, unpredictable turns of feeling when he or his actors discovered something new.

The greatest thing in the world is you are in a film, you do a part and you come off, you shock yourself, you surprise yourself, you reveal a lot of things, and the audience responds to you, they laugh in the right places and they like you, and you can *feel* that. It's amazing for an actor to be able to do like when Seymour pounds on the door in the film. It is something that everyone else has done out of frustration. If you are over five years old you had to have been frustrated in love in some way. To see him do it: he butts his head against the door, he punches it and butts his head against the door, and then he came out of it in such a quick way, because he never lost sight of the fact that no matter how frustrated he was, he still wants Minnie. I might have done that scene and not been able to make the transition because I couldn't have been in it as much as he was. So I have a great admiration for Seymour not protecting himself and being able to work in the fine line of being that person, not *acting* that person, but really *being* that person. When that is achieved, the actor is terrific. Really good. Amazing!

Cassavetes used several different kinds of camera set-ups in his films. One was a set-up in which a single camera with a telephoto lens was used to follow a character through an extended space. Seymour's

entrance into the diner where the Morgan Morgan scene takes place, and his stroll down the bar in the 'Smoky Joe' scene, illustrate that way of photographing a scene.

At other times Cassavetes used a two-camera set-up, which could take various forms. Sometimes he himself would hand-hold a second 'wild' camera to pick up details of interest and move around in the scene, while the main operator stayed on the principals and main events. At other times, the two cameras would be positioned on fixed tripods side by side: one in a medium-distance master shot, panning to follow the main action; the other shooting tighter, panning from face to face, registering the reactions of a secondary character not engaged in the main action of the scene. (When Cassavetes wasn't personally manning a camera, he would stand behind the operator and whisper ideas to him or suggest possible areas to pay attention to before the scene began.) The restaurant scene near the end of *Minnie and Moskowitz* with the mothers illustrates the two-camera set-up.

Cassavetes' other practice was to shoot scenes in their entirety – from beginning to end with all of the actors present. He would not call cut until the scene was over, even when there were mistakes or muffed lines, since the 'glitches' occasionally created the most interesting moments.

Since I don't like to interrupt the action, I usually refilm the whole scene. We did that often, six or seven takes, in most scenes. I shoot for five or ten minutes at a time because it is important to let the situations take the time they need to run their course. The drama of the scenes comes naturally from the real passage of time lived by the actors. If you watch *Husbands* and *Minnie and Moskowitz* carefully, you'll see that they are cut into long, long sequences – something I never planned. Moreover, during filming, the camera isn't content to just follow the characters' words and actions. I focus in on specific gestures and mannerisms. It's from focusing on these little things – the moods, silences, pauses or anxious movements – that the form arises. It's as simple as that.

Cassavetes downplayed blocking and rehearsal because he wanted to capture pauses, uncertainties and surprises on camera that would be ironed out by too much preparation. The following moment is an illustration of the freshness that could result.

We shot the scene when Seymour shows up at Minnie's place five times. Seymour and Gena were always truthful and convincing, but each time

I felt that they could go further than the previous take and get more deeply involved in the moment. Seymour found a very personal way of dealing with his inability to express his surprise, confusion and joy: he picked Gena up and walked with her around the room, without knowing where to put her down. If we hadn't reshot the scene we would have had something less interesting.

During the final weeks of filming, Cassavetes helped out a young, out-of-work director named Martin Scorsese. Jay Cocks had introduced the two men nine months earlier in New York at a screening of *Husbands* (where they watched actor-friends leaving during the vomiting scene, because it was 'too real'). The following summer Scorsese was in Los Angeles hanging around Cassavetes' production offices, asking if he could do anything to help him, and Cassavetes put him on the payroll of *Minnie and Moskowitz* at \$500 a week for a few weeks as 'Assistant Sound Editor'. Since Scorsese also needed a place to stay, Cassavetes made arrangements for him to sleep at the location used for Minnie's apartment (at the Elaine Apartments on Highland Avenue), telling the studio that he had hired Scorsese 'to guard the set at night'. Scorsese didn't actually do anything on the film except sit behind Cassavetes a few times while he was editing, and when Cassavetes needed sound effects for one of the film's fight scenes Scorsese held him while someone else punched him. Scorsese has said that, during the editing sessions, he would joke with Cassavetes about the willful sprawl of his narrative presentation by saying, 'Come on, John, get to the point of the scene and get it over with.' And Cassavetes would reply, 'Never! Never! When I get to the point, I want to undo it and do it again.' Scorsese was only there briefly, since the offer to make *Boxcar Bertha* for Roger Corman came during that time. The next year he invited Cassavetes to screen a rough cut. After the screening, Cassavetes took him back to his office and had a heart-to-heart talk that would encourage Scorsese to embark on *Mean Streets*.

Marty, you've just spent a year of your life making a piece of shit. You're better than the people who make this kind of movie. Don't get hooked into exploitation pictures. Make something personal. Isn't there anything you really *want* to make? Why don't you make a movie about something you really *care* about?

The editing on *Minnie and Moskowitz* took place in the summer of 1971 and was basically complete by September. Cassavetes felt that the

editing process inevitably betrayed the film, because it turned interactional longhand into epigrammatic shorthand. It transformed what was eccentric and loose into something tight and concise.

As soon as shooting was complete the editors brought it together and we looked at it. The Universal people came over and viewed it in its long form, and they were enthusiastic about what, I don't know, because it lasted forever, without any close shots. It was this sprawling, episodic picture. You do this in order to get the form of the picture and see what is important, based upon what the film originally set out to be. Anything we wanted to improve would be based on this seeing it in its rawest form. We don't pull anything out at first. My feeling is that if a scene will work in master, in long shot, the chances are it's a good scene. If it doesn't work in long shot, chances are it won't work when you break it up, because it basically won't play on its own. So we attack the film from that point of view, just working on the scenes we felt might play better if they were broken up. It's pretty much a solitary time. Your closest friends are the editors, and you sit up there and work with the film, touch it, hold it, try different things. Everyone gets excited on that level of manipulation of what's there. If I don't like their work, and they don't like my work, then it becomes discussion, and we become as involved as the people that were shooting on the floor, putting the film initially into form.

What people don't realize is that film, a scene, can be manipulated. I loathe editing. There's a terrible fear that overcomes me, because you see the rushes and you see the people's performances, you know the story is there, even in that long first try you make where you just assemble the film, scene to scene, and suddenly the film looks slicker, looks better, it plays with a better pace, but there's a lot of feeling gone, the feeling of taking your time and enjoying people. I mean, film, when it's cut short, has a tendency to grate and irritate. Where people are going and doing things and putting their whole hearts into it, when you start trimming out moments, suddenly you see harsher people on the screen. It's not a question of their abilities or my ability or the editors' abilities, but it's that these people suddenly are not as sweet as they used to be, and that destroys you. You don't know how to do it within the confines of the time limit on a film. An actor can be destroyed or made. The sloppiness can be taken out. But sometimes the sloppiness is beautiful. After working on a scene for a week, maybe two weeks, we often find we've made no progress except to destroy the scene and the action of the actors.

It's quite specific. The film can change with five frames taken off a shot. I work a lot in close-ups, and close-ups are very difficult. A lot of directors don't use them often, except for dramatic effect. I use them to get inside of people, but when you have two people you want to look at at the same time and you're using close-ups, the obvious thing to do, the intelligent thing to do, is to see them *both* at the same time – to use a shot that sees them both. And yet there's so much going on in these people that you don't want to be far away from them. You're dealing with people, their loves and their desires and their needs, and you really want to look at them and see they're truthful. So that affects the cutting, and it's a question of retiming what an actor has already timed beautifully. So you're going into it and saying, 'God Almighty, she was wonderful when I'm on Seymour, now I'm going to have a heart attack because I have to be on one or the other.' It's a question of working out the timing, which is very much like a chess game, an emotional chess game, and sometimes you're just not capable of doing it, because it's too hard to destroy a good moment of someone to be on someone else.

Because of the time limits and confines under which we must work, I know as an actor you're going to be disappointed because I'm going to have to shorten that very thing that's now your life's blood. Knowing that is a terrible burden, an awful emotional burden, because I can understand how you would want it to be exactly the way you performed it. And you will remember that, those high moments – and they have to go, some of them have to go. As a director you have to be extremely tough, and others then keep you honest. We discuss it, we care about it, and we're all looking for the same thing – for those performers to come off the best they possibly can. When you fail doing that, when you have to compromise for the story points, then it really is difficult to cut, and I don't like it. It's something I don't look forward to. I'd prefer to show dailies to an audience, to exhibit the talents and feelings of these people. They're really much better than any finished film. If you have a good film, the combined total of what you shot, shown rawly as you shot it without being put together in any particular sequence, is much better, is much more easily viewable, much more rewarding than the finished story.

Even when he had professional editors at his disposal, as in this instance, Cassavetes loved to tinker with the edit on his own, especially late at night, experimenting with shot selection or the timing of scenes. According to Seymour Cassel, during the editing of *Minnie and*

Clowning around with Rowlands between takes to relax her and make her laugh. © *Sam Shaw*

Moskowitz, Cassavetes would frequently call him up at one or two in the morning and ask him to come over and look at something. The two men would talk and work until dawn, then eat breakfast together. Cassavetes turned even editing into a social event.

We'd go in at night, and there's a fellow that cleans up the office building we work in at Universal. He comes in, and he's an ex-fighter, and he's really a fine writer. He loves to entertain us, so before we start cutting every night, this man will come in and do ten minutes of an act. He'll do a vaudeville act for us for ten minutes. We did this, we said, 'Al, we can't go on all night with you, but you have ten minutes every single night.' Al does his ten minutes, makes us feel good, we laugh, we talk for a few minutes, then we get to it. There's a whole nighttime life experience in working on a film that's nice.

It was characteristic of Cassavetes to continue to play with the edit of all of his films up until the last possible minute. Prints more than once arrived at a press or studio screening still wet from the lab. In the case of *Minnie and Moskowitz*, Paul Donnelly joked that Cassavetes enjoyed

playing with the edit so much that he didn't ever want to release the film. Prior to the studio preview, Cassavetes worked continuously for four days and nights, living on cigarettes and whiskey, taking catnaps in his office, recutting scenes and rebalancing sections of the sound mix over and over again. He finished only hours before the screening was scheduled to begin. Then, as if to prove that he really was Moskowitz, he showed up at the gala event absentmindedly wearing the same wrinkled work shirt and chinos he had lived in for the past four days, looking like a bum standing next to the evening gown-clad Rowlands and her mother. (He had forgotten to pick them up for the big event, but the two women were used to his ways and had known enough to get there on their own.)

Cassavetes' contract gave him the right to approve the final cut (although *Husbands* proved how easily such agreements could be breached). Universal honored Cassavetes' edit to a surprising extent. The only change they made without telling him was to cut a single four-minute scene. After getting bounced from the final bar he goes into, Moskowitz spends the night with 'Irish' (played by folksinger Holly Near). Cassavetes skipped the sex and presented a tender early-morning conversation in a rose-colored basement apartment. Though the scene was in Cassavetes' edit and the original release prints, Universal cut it from the later prints to shorten the running time so that the movie could more easily fit into a two-hour screening schedule. (It is unfortunate that all current film and video releases of the film are based on Universal's cut print and not Cassavetes' release print.)

Cassavetes' problems with *Minnie and Moskowitz* were not with the filming or the post-production process but with Universal's publicity campaign and release plan. The filmmaker intensely disliked the 'head over heels/hourglass' poster the studio planned to use in theaters and newspaper ads, which he felt trivialized his movie, and fired off a series of angry letters and phone calls demanding they use an alternate poster in its place – a three-shot of John Finnegan, Cassel and Rowlands standing side by side at Minnie's wedding ceremony.

Beyond that, there was bad blood between the head of the studio, Lew Wasserman, and Cassavetes. The two men had clashed several times in the past, and in the case of this film, Wasserman hated the fact that Cassavetes had been allowed to cast family and friends as leads, rather than using 'names'. With an exquisite sense of timing, Wasserman walked up to Cassavetes following the San José preview screening and said, in front of Cassel and Rowlands, 'Terrific picture. Too bad you didn't make it with any *stars!*'

On top of that, there was the *Playboy* interview fiasco. Cassavetes had given an interview to the magazine back in January in which he not only called studio executives stupid in general but attacked several of them by name. Unfortunately, they were friends of Wasserman, who consequently took the attack personally. By a colossal stroke of bad luck, the *Playboy* interview appeared in the July issue, just as Wasserman was making final decisions about how the film would be publicized and distributed.

The final blow was the critical *Variety* review, which was the single most important factor that would affect the film's bookings. The first two sentences provide a fair summary of the entire piece: 'Gena Rowlands and Seymour Cassel play the title roles in . . . an oppressive and irritating film in which a shrill and numbing hysteria of acting and direction soon kills any empathy for the loneliness of the characters. John Cassavetes wrote and directed in his now-familiar home-movie improvisational and indulgent style.'

Cassavetes and Cassel set up camp on the seventeenth floor of the St. Regis and played host to a string of interviewers for a week prior to the opening at New York's Cinema II on 22 December. Between interviews, Cassavetes commandeered the chauffeured limousine Universal provided him, and went up and down Fifth Avenue plastering *his* posters on phone booths and construction sites to counteract Universal's publicity campaign.

Audiences generally seemed to like the film (though many viewers were put off by the mixture of romance and physical violence), but Wasserman may have been right. Bland good feelings didn't translate into box-office receipts the way a star actor or name director did. *Minnie and Moskowitz* did poorly from its opening weekend and the *Variety* review (on top of the reputation Cassavetes had already earned with *Husbands*) meant that many distributors steered clear of it so that future bookings were weak. Cassavetes' personal view was that Universal deliberately 'dumped' the film – booking it into the fewest number of theaters, in the worst locations, with the least amount of advertising possible. A few weeks later, when Academy Award nomination time came around, he was upset further by the studio's refusal to promote it or Rowlands' performance for consideration even in a small way (since they didn't want to take votes away from their own *Mary, Queen of Scots*).

But what upset Cassavetes most of all was that Universal reneged on a verbal commitment they had made to him before he began that, if the shoot went well, he would be offered a long-term contract to direct four

to six more 'low-budget indie' films. It was Cassavetes' old dream of being a resident studio 'art filmmaker' once more. As far as he was concerned, he fulfilled his end of the deal in every detail. He had finished shooting three days ahead of schedule and \$100,000 under budget. He had created a narratively tight, crowd-pleasing comedy. Whether it was because of the *Playboy* interview, the arguments over the publicity campaign, a personal vendetta by Lew Wasserman, or simply a hard-nosed business decision that Cassavetes' films would not put fannies in seats, Universal told him they had changed their mind. Wasserman shook Cassavetes' hand and wished him success somewhere else. In a blind rage, Cassavetes immediately cashed-in the five profit-points he had negotiated as part of his contract and persuaded Rowlands and Cassel to cash-in their points. It was not a shrewd financial decision but an act of sheer revenge. If he couldn't persuade Universal to back *Minnie and Moskowitz* or any future projects of his, at least he could make their decision as expensive as possible.

At the start of the New Year, the New York Film Critics Circle (including Andrew Sarris, John Simon and Pauline Kael), whose opinions counted for so much, nationally bestowed their Best Actress honors on Jane Fonda for *Klute* and their Best Picture/Director Award to Stanley Kubrick for *A Clockwork Orange*.

There's too big a concession made toward success. It's reflected in critics and in audiences. People will go to see films for which there are lines around the block, they feel more at home when they see a film that everyone else likes, that they can talk about and share.

During his attempts to rally support for his orphaned film, Cassavetes responded to a range of criticisms of *Minnie and Moskowitz*.

The amount of fighting and arguing was a problem for many viewers. Cassavetes defended it. He viewed the honest expression of deep feelings – positive or negative – as fundamentally healthy.

If Seymour loves somebody, he expresses it. I find that attitude directly juxtaposed to people that retreat. And there's been so much retreat from people, from all people. If someone disagrees with you, the problem is that they *don't* express their opinion. It's a violation of society's rules to argue, to express yourself. If somebody says to me, I don't want you around anymore, and if I like that person I say, why? Now, I may be a fool to say why. But I say, 'No, I like you. What is it about me you don't like?' How many people have ever said that since you were a child? If you don't express anything your feelings can't be hurt

because you don't have any feelings that are allowed to be expressed anymore.

You see, basically I was trained in an age when fighting was the keynote, where everyone had to argue and fight, and if disagreement came along that didn't mean hatred. On the contrary: you thought – Jeez, what a terrific guy! What a great argument I had with that guy! I don't consider you an enemy. I consider that you like things that I like. Ten, fifteen years ago people could disagree without killing each other. They could disagree and still like the person with whom they disagreed, on a different level, on a human level – no matter how different their lives were. Right now, there's not enough caring for one another. There's no time for disagreement. You're either with somebody or you hate them. You know? There's no room for anyone to behave except in a very conforming manner and it's a dehumanized age. You might as well take everyone that isn't perfect and shoot them. And that was done once.

At college screenings, the film was subjected to a variety of criticisms related to its alleged artistic and social 'conservatism'. The charges took several different forms.

Cassavetes' explanation of the absence of sex scenes in his work:

I'm concerned about the depiction of women on the screen. It has gotten worse than ever. It's related to their being either high- or low-class concubines, and the only question is when or where they will go to bed and with whom or how many. There's nothing to do with the dreams of women, or of women as the dream, nothing to do with the quirky part of her, the wonder of her. The idea of love as a mysterious, undiscovered world has come to have no place in our innermost imagination.

As for showing the sexual act in film, I think that's a lot of balls, phony, exploitative and commercial. It's cheap voyeurism and I think there's too damned much of it now anyway. It makes me very angry. If that makes me a prude, so be it. I think some things are private, and just as I wouldn't show a person dying – I mean the death rattle, the actual last private agony of death – I wouldn't show that intense private joy of intercourse. *Playboy* magazine, tit films and cocktail-party diatribes have not only affected our society but have shaped it with such discontent regarding men and women that sex is no longer in itself sufficient without violence, death or neurosis as stimulants.

I don't think there's anything morally wrong with seeing a nude body on the screen, but it offends me to watch people kiss without genuine

love or passion. Sex on the screen bores me. What difference would it make if Gena and Seymour made love or if they didn't? I think it would have ruined the picture. I really do. If Seymour became so familiar with Gena, there wouldn't have been any story.

He argued that if sex were understood less as a physical act than an emotional need, *Minnie and Moskowitz* did grapple with important sexual issues.

The real sexuality in woman comes in her ability to retain her own desire to be loved. I think the greatest problem for a woman, in terms of sexuality, is her continuing appeal. Every woman has times when her feelings tend to make her more attractive. Every woman has a personality that can be stimulated by the clothing she wears, by the way a light will fall upon her and by the rightness of her mood. All women have experiences where they can feel that they are truly sexually attractive. But the continuity of this feeling is usually short-lived. Sex can be provoked by a momentary madness, flattery and need. But for satisfaction on a continuing basis, a woman must find a mate to share her fantasies with, to feel secure and safe, to feel protected and loved. It's only at that point that she can stop closing her eyes while she pretends and open them and be herself. It's that sudden discovery of self and of a natural unpretended response that allows a woman confidence to seek more from herself and to give more. The look of a woman who enjoys her moments is unmistakable because sexuality for everyone – man and woman – depends upon emotion that is true and deep and guiltless. It really wasn't a bad idea to keep sex important and not let it just become another means of social acceptability.

Cassavetes' reply to criticisms that his title characters were 'bourgeois' and that contemporary 'realities' like drug-taking were left out:

I hate the Hollywood idea of saying, 'We're going to make this film, and it's going to be about a junkie, it's going to be about a guy who takes pot.' Because they know that there's a great mass of people out there who are drug-oriented. It's a drug-oriented society that we live in. It would be pretty dishonest of me to make a drug-oriented picture when I don't dig drugs. Because then I would be a commercial son of a bitch. But I can understand why people take dope. I don't think it can be cured by saying it's wrong, by saying to your children, 'Don't do this.' For people to stop, you have to give them a different way, a better way. People have got to learn to be dopey without the dope.

He replied to the charge that the women in his films were not as 'liberated' or as 'fully competent' as the women in other seventies films:

I don't see women as talky, intelligent and political creatures, though some of them must be. I see them as soft friends, in trouble like the rest of us. I don't put 'fully competent' women into my films because I don't know any 'fully competent' anyone.

He replied to a question about what he thought of Stanley Kubrick's *2001* (which was critically celebrated a couple of years earlier). Cassavetes had followed the progress of Kubrick's film ever since he had worked on an adjacent MGM soundstage at Boreham Wood Studios during *The Dirty Dozen*. Cassavetes was more than a little envious of the financial backing Kubrick got for his projects and of the reverential treatment he received from critics. As was his custom, his scorn was expressed through wry self-deprecation (as well as in the puckish wit of the allusion to Kubrick's movie that is worked into *Minnie and Moskowitz* itself).

Stanley's a *genius*! While I'm a bum from Port Washington who grew up on the Long Island railroad. Metro *built* a great big moon for him, but when *I* want a moon, I go outside and shoot what's up in the sky! I'm not really interested in the moon or any heights that are beyond my scope. What *I am* interested wildly in are questions like is a person really crazy for thinking differently? Is there such a thing as love? Where do children fit in? I would like to be part of our society in making films and address ourselves to the audience that we think has been neglected that is still interested in the *human* things, human beings and what they feel and what they are striving for. We try to make films that people who still believe in the human spirit are able to get something out of.

When he was charged with ignoring the violence and brutality of the contemporary world, Cassavetes framed his reply by contrasting his film with Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Kubrick's movie was very much on his mind at the time. By an incredible stroke of bad luck, the Kubrick film had opened three days before *Minnie and Moskowitz* in many of the same theaters. *A Clockwork Orange* received rave reviews from the New York critics ('A brilliant *tour de force* of extraordinary images, music, words, and feelings,' in the words of Vincent Canby) and instantly achieved the status of a must-see cinematic 'event', while *Minnie and Moskowitz* was not even a blip on the popular-culture radar screen. Cassavetes told me that that first week in New York he would

stand in the lobby of the Cinema I and II and count a hundred people going into Kubrick's movie for every one who went into his (and that even that person sometimes turned around, realizing that he had made a mistake and was headed into the wrong theater). He later joked that 'you couldn't get into *Minnie and Moskowitz* for weeks after it opened in New York' – not because it was sold out, but because the crowds streaming into *A Clockwork Orange* blocked the path.

There's a difference between *being* violent and having violent emotions. There's a difference between anger and the act of shooting somebody in the face. I've never known anyone in my life that ever shot anyone in the face. And I've seen it on the screen too many times. There's no morality there, no feeling of anything for anyone. It's a lie to say that people are violent. There are more good people than there are bad people. To see constant terror builds a nation, builds moviegoers that can only love constant terror. We become used to it, inured to it like doctors knowing they have to be tough. They can't think of that person with tenderness, but must be dispassionate.

There's a lot of violence in *Minnie and Moskowitz* but violence that I can understand. Violent feelings, but nobody kills anybody or shoots anyone or knifes anybody. Without having seen *A Clockwork Orange*, I know, because I know the story. I really couldn't go to see it, because I don't want to see people kill each other. I don't want to see any more hostility toward one another. I just don't want to see that reflected any more. I'm tired of violence and dehumanization. I think the artist has a tremendous obligation to bring trust to people. Because the only thing we don't have time for is ourselves. We can't live with ourselves if we have no respect for our life and the human condition and the foibles that exist in all of us – then we have no tolerance, we're *all* Nazis. We can't survive with people being that inhuman. It's impossible.

I look at *A Clockwork Orange* and ask, why did Stanley make it? Did he make it for anyone in particular? Why did he choose a story like that, in this day and age? For what: to incite a revolution, to stop everything? Maybe that would be OK, if he really believed that, but I don't believe it. I don't know why he made it.

The more films are made about insanity, the more fashionable it will become. And, eventually, as we become more and more dehumanized, there will be no answers for anyone. You can't get any pleasure out of being an animal. There should be a Kubrick who can make that film and show that life can be violent and harsh. But, on the other hand, where are the equalizing forces of happiness? Art films, in stressing the

weakness of society, have lost their balance. The majority of people would rather be filled with illusion than disillusion. And we just have to find some way to reflect that. Not just to constantly say, ‘Oh, God, things are wrong and all, and I don’t know what to do about it.’

The kind of ‘emotional violence’ that Cassavetes appreciated was figured by a film released the month before *Minnie and Moskowitz*: Cassavetes deeply admired Clint Eastwood’s *Play Misty for Me* and wrote an appreciative essay about it at the time of its release. (Don Siegel’s heavy involvement in the production was more than likely one of the reasons that Cassavetes was so enthusiastic about it.)

Cassavetes replied to the charge that *Minnie and Moskowitz* failed to engage itself with the burning political and cultural issues of the day. While films like *Easy Rider*, *Putney Swope* and *Medium Cool* offered political stances for the audiences to rally around, the drama in Cassavetes’ movie stayed ‘personal’.

After a screening of *Minnie* the other night, some guy asked me why I didn’t make an anti-war movie. Why did I want to make a movie about people getting married and being happy and in love with one another and all that? Well, why the fuck should I want to make a movie about a war? Pro or con? I’d rather deal with the longings of the mind, the heart. Life is men and women. Life isn’t, say, politics. Politicians are liars and corrupt by the very nature of what they do. I never voted in my life and don’t ever intend to. Politicians are only bad actors grubbing around for power. I’m never going to make any other pictures except about men and women. We always look for great causes, for answers. But, in my opinion, these people and these small emotions are the greatest political force there is. These small emotions, these character disagreements, are of vital necessity. I’m a revolutionary – but not in the political sense.

Cassavetes saw politics as the real escapism.

To rap Nixon, even if you don’t like him, is a cop out. To put your life’s problems on the war or the impending threat of the bomb is a cop-out, because everyone knows, and still feels, that it begins with you. That life begins with yourself and your relation to people, your feeling about them, and your ability to stand up for something at the right time. To stand up for every individual thing that *you* really feel and not let that die, even if you have to do it all alone.

I make films about social relationships. I strongly believe that we are

social animals and the nature of living is defined not by money, political power and the like, but by virtue of the fact that we are social beings. The problem with people in America is that they are so politically oriented, so economically oriented, that the human level has disappeared and there is only an abstract level of agreement – and that’s lifestyle. If your lifestyle is like my lifestyle, then we like each other. If your lifestyle is not like my lifestyle then we can see nothing in each other.

Cassavetes distrusted all forms of group analysis and group action. As far as he was concerned, the problems of society were individual problems with individual solutions.

We’re living today with insanity – a globe gone mad – but I wouldn’t join any demonstration or peace march. I’m not a joiner. I don’t want to walk down the street with people I don’t know and who themselves don’t know what they’re doing. Running down a street shouting generalities against the police and getting involved in controversy solves nothing. People who engage in demonstrations do so without thinking. It’s just a matter of procedure with them. They choose up sides and are then committed. But they lose their individuality. Setting standards for yourself and your family is one way of making a statement. It’s a good beginning to get the world back to sanity.

In a group-think culture, Cassavetes was committed to radical individualism. The most important part of what we are eludes social definition or control.

I feel that people are ultimately individuals and it’s only when they are trained to fit into a sociological pattern that is convenient to someone that they begin to blame their conditions, even up to being born. So all my pictures are the same actually; you can take all of them. They’re all about individuals. And that’s the only thing I believe in. And the rest of those groups can go fuck themselves. All of them. You know, a Black to me is a Black. And when he’s a person he’s a person. And when a Puerto Rican is a Puerto Rican or a Hispanic – I don’t care what they put the title on – to me there’s a name for each person. I think it’s marvelous to have a name. And a woman is not a ‘woman’. It’s either Gena or my mother or some person. So I’ve never had any difficulty defining the difference between people. The difference between people is what they want, where they come from, how much money they have, all those problems, but they’re not groups of people. If this can only save

me from joining any of those groups that send me letters, I'd be very happy!

It is telling that the one moment in *Minnie and Moskowitz* generally praised by ideological critics – the scene in which Minnie talks about how ‘the movies are a conspiracy; they set you up’ – was understood by Cassavetes in a non-ideological way. He argued that the scene was about two women’s states of loneliness and disconnection, not an argument about the influence of the media.

Everyone focuses in on the conversation where Minnie and Florence talk about ‘the movies’, but I wrote that just to have something for them to say. The scene at Florence’s was important to me because it showed two lonely women together: Minnie and what she might become. *That* was what the movie was about. Not that stuff everyone talks about!

The ultimate limitation of political and economic understandings is that they focus on the outsides of life, while Cassavetes was interested in the insides – people’s feelings, dreams and desires.

To talk about the people or the social problems: there *isn't* any clear-cut social problem today. The problems are all *human* problems. Everything that affects our lives is determined by the influence that one sex has upon the other. Sure, we’re in the midst of political decay and turmoil – but that’s not nearly as interesting. That’s more *mental*, based on how much information you have. The relationships between men and women are permanently fixed in our instincts, not our minds. I really don’t try to communicate about so-called ‘important subjects’, I talk about the *people* involved in those subjects. I really don’t feel that there are any good films being made, because the artist has to make films about what he knows, and what he doesn’t know is conjecture and bullshit, and it’s just a new *idea*. It’s some kind of *theory* but it isn’t real and the audience looks at it and it opens them up but it really doesn’t mean anything to them in their personal lives when they walk out of the theater except that – Yes! – it’s another escape. It’s like popping a pill or taking a drink or smoking a cigarette. It’s not really part of your life.

Even Cassavetes’ understanding of earlier films was colored by his focus on the individual’s feelings.

In John Ford’s *Grapes of Wrath*, we saw a family of love being degraded through man’s inhumanity to man, but the most important effect was

the diminishing of feeling within the family itself. The social injustice in *Grapes of Wrath* was a condition that was temporary. It was secondary to the loss of feeling within the family.

He even thought of Capra's work as being less interested in groups than individuals, less about politics than feelings.

I adore Frank Capra. He was and still is, in my opinion, the greatest filmmaker that ever lived. Like Capra, I make films about the individual who asserts himself or herself in the face of a multitude. I want my films to reflect a truly democratic spirit and I find myself siding with the lone minority. I love the ethnic groups in our country and am pained to find that they are willing to trade in their uniqueness for white-collar materialistic existence. To change the world we must start with human behavior, the human spirit, and isn't that what Capra's films were all about? I see a terrific country that is so capable of feeling. To me it's Capra country and will always be Capra country – that's the way I grew up. So there was no question that it was not the *system* that was wrong but *individual* greed and fear in individuals; fear of taking a stand, of being individual, that made the country lousy.

At the same time I don't emulate Capra. The characters in my films display a lack of comfort and find themselves in petty and embarrassing situations, but this is only so because they haven't yet come to grips with their emotional natures. I am a tough and deeply cynical person. Capra didn't care about his cynicism. I wish I could be as independent as him to really express the beautiful ideas he could without feeling perhaps that these ideas were not truthful. If I had the capacity, the means and the temperament, I would love to make every one of Capra's films but so far I've never done it. None of us can ever be someone we're not. When I started making films, that was exactly what I wanted to do, make Frank Capra pictures. But I've never been able to make anything except these crazy, tough pictures. It's not intentional. You just are what you are.

Anyone who ever spent time with Cassavetes noticed how, as a person, he was absolutely of a piece with his films. That is to say, the kinds of things he noticed and got excited about in life were exactly the kinds of things he put into his scenes. He didn't converse in generalities and abstractions; he wasn't interested in politics, religion or the arts scene; he almost never discussed the news or the stock-market. He was fascinated with human behavior – nothing was too mundane to interest him;

Telling jokes and stories between takes of a scene in which the characters tell jokes and stories. Tim Carey (Morgan Morgan), Cassavetes and Seymour Cas- sel (Seymour Moskowitz) in the diner. © *Sam Shaw*

in fact, the more ordinary the better. He was incredibly observant and responsive to the tiniest emotional flickers in everyday social interac- tions. He found drama and comedy in the most ordinary events – some- thing a cabby said to him that morning; the tone of voice of a hotel clerk as he answered a question; how someone at a neighboring table held their fork. He was always noticing: ‘Did you see how he put out his cig- arette?’ ‘Did you notice her eyes when she said goodbye?’ ‘Did you hear the way he said that?’ He had an odd sense of humor and half the time seemed to think the way someone ate, talked or walked was funny (as he hilariously ‘did’ them for you) or moving. And invariably turned his observations into touching, half-crazy stories.

After one of his happiest shooting experiences but most frustrating distribution experiences, Cassavetes vowed he would never again work for a studio. In subsequent years, he patronizingly referred to *Minnie and Moskowitz* as his ‘entertainment movie’. It is hard to know why. Perhaps he felt the film was sentimental compared to his other work; perhaps his clashes with Wasserman and Universal colored his feelings about it.

Even as he was rehearsing, filming and editing *Minnie and Moskowitz*, Cassavetes could not get *Husbands* out of his mind. He was working on a new script, to star Ben Gazzara, that was a continuation

of the earlier film. *Two Days in Rochester* involved a group of men on a business trip who interact with a group of hookers in a long, dark night of the soul. Though the script was only about two-thirds complete, in July 1971 he began telling everyone he ran into that he was about to make it.

I don't have anybody to do my next film. It's called *Two Days in Rochester*. The screenplay's finished and has been for several months, but I can't get anybody interested in it, and it's very easy to see why. It's a very expensive picture, and it's one that probably won't appeal to too many people. In actuality, it's an extension of *Husbands* – the Ben Gazzara part. It has nothing to do with *Husbands*, but it's basically the same character, after he gets married and moves back to the United States. But that has very little to do with the picture. The picture is a very difficult picture, and beautiful. And I love it.

Although he didn't mention it to anyone at the time, that same month, while he was editing *Minnie and Moskowitz*, he began writing another script, titled *A Woman Under the Influence*. It might be viewed as a more serious retelling of the film he had just made, with a gender reversal – so that the woman was now the extravagant one and the man the cautious, conservative one.

It would be a deeper film than *Minnie and Moskowitz* because the Boudou character, a housewife named Mabel, is endowed with self-critical self-awareness. She is similar to Moskowitz in her performative eccentricity, but ultimately far more interesting because she is capable of reflecting on her own actions. She is daringly iconoclastic and free, but she is also able to be embarrassed by the reactions of others. Moskowitz may act as crazy as his creator sometimes did, but Mabel gives us a portrait of his soul. If Moskowitz represents Cassavetes' bravado, Mabel figures his self-doubts, uncertainties and pains.

A Woman Under the Influence (1972–4)

One of the distant sources of *A Woman Under the Influence* was Cassavetes' experience of 'staying home with the baby' for a couple years after the Stanley Kramer imbroglio.

I know when I was not working, and Gena was working for me, I was a pretty good housewife and everything else. But I didn't have really the same reactions as a woman would have. Mainly because I didn't *have* to be a housewife the rest of my life. I didn't have to think into the future of when I'd get older or when my attractiveness would fade, or when the kids would grow up or when the baby would cease to cling to you, and you're not really a mother then, and you have to think, well, should I be the friend or should I be the mother?

Another was his off-camera relationship with Gena Rowlands and questions he had about maintaining love in the face of differences of personality, temperament and background.

Gena and I were speaking about the pictures we were going to make, how the roles are so thin and everything is made so a narrative can work. We were talking about how difficult love was and how tough it could be to make a love story about two people who were totally different culturally, coming from two different family groups that were diametrically opposed and yet still regarded each other very highly. I kept thinking about that. Gena and I are absolutely dissimilar in everything we think, do and feel. Beyond that, men and women are totally different. When I started writing the scripts, I kept these things in mind and didn't want the love story easy. I made a lot of discoveries about my own life.

As with *Faces* and *Love Streams*, *A Woman Under the Influence* began life as a stage-work, to feature Gena Rowlands and Ben Gazzara. Rowlands had requested a starring-vehicle, and Cassavetes accommodated

her by writing three interrelated plays to be performed on successive nights. The first was written in the summer of 1971, while he was still engaged with post-production on *Minnie and Moskowitz*; the second was written in September; the third was written in the winter; and all three were revised in the spring of 1972.

In retelling the events, Cassavetes plays a little free and loose with the facts: first, by suggesting that the idea of doing three plays was merely a response to Rowlands' objections, when in fact the three-part narrative was part of his initial vision of the work (with each play presenting the story from a different character's point of view); second, by implying that he succeeded in obtaining financing for a Broadway production, when in fact, he was not able to.

I absolutely wrote *A Woman Under the Influence* to try to write a terrific part for my wife. Gena wanted to do a play. She was always complaining we're living in California, she loves the theater and everything. Gena really wanted to do a play on Broadway. And I had always fancied that I could write a play. She wanted something big. She said, 'Now look, deal with it from a *woman's* point of view. I mean deal with it so that *I have a part* in this thing!' And I said, 'OK,' and I went off and had been thinking about it for a year anyway. And I had taken seven or eight tries at bad plays and came up with this play, which was not the play that the movie was, but it was based on the same characters.

And Gena read it and said, no, she wouldn't do it. And I'm very stubborn so I didn't realize that she liked the part but that on the stage, to play that every night, would kill her. I had no concept of that because we're all obsessed, everyone's obsessed, that is, in this stupid thing. And so I wrote another play on the same subject with the same characters, deepening the characters and making it even more difficult to play. And I gave it to Gena and she said, 'I like that tremendously. I like the first one too, but I don't think I could do that on Broadway.' So I wrote another play, and so now there were three plays! And I took them to New York and I got a producer to produce the plays on Broadway and I thought it was a terrific idea to do these three plays on consecutive nights with matinees, see? [Laughs.] And Gena's not a particularly ambitious woman in the trade, as it goes. Although, if she sees a good part, she'll kill herself for it, but I mean kill herself performing it, but not getting it. I mean, it's either *given* to her, or she'll play with the kids or do something else or go out. When Gena read the plays she said, 'No *one* could do this every night!' She feared they would take her to a sanitarium if she became that keyed up over a long

period of time! So then I said, well, all right, let's try to make it a movie.

Although narratively connected works have been presented on Broadway a few times subsequently, at the time Cassavetes proposed it, his idea was rejected out of hand by every backer he approached as being commercially untenable. In March, he began thinking of recasting the three full-length plays as three one-acters to be performed in a single evening but was unable to get financial backing for that idea either.

If the plays were to be made at all, they would have to be recast as a single film. In late July 1972, Cassavetes took 'Play #1' and added eleven pages of new material at the start and twenty-one pages at the end to create the first draft of the film script. (The manuscript shows its double origins: the bulk of the material in the middle is clearly written as a play, but the additions, with revision dates between 26 and 28 July 1972, have camera directions indicated on them.) The hybrid text begins quite similarly to the film but ends with Nick committing Mabel, taking the kids to the beach and returning home alone with them afterwards. In August, Cassavetes added material from 'Play #2' and 'Play #3' which presents Mabel's return from the hospital and the events that comprise the final third of the film. This draft, which is very close to the final text of the film, is dated 23 August 1972.

The decision to make a film didn't solve Cassavetes' financial problems; it simply shifted them to a new arena. Though he later denied it in interviews, he did approach several studios for financing, but none would touch the project. Cassavetes was told not only that the narrative seemed too 'down-beat' and the confinement of the characters to a single set was 'uncinematic', but that his refusal to use a studio-approved union crew (not only for financial reasons but because of his experiences on *Husbands* and *Minnie and Moskowitz*) made support absolutely impossible.

I can't just go out and make what I want. I have to go through a whole big process of crap, talking to people and talking to people, proving to them that whatever we are going to do is going to make money. If I can prove it to them that my intentions are to make money, then they will let me make any film I want. But it becomes increasingly more difficult to tell them that since I'm not concerned with making money. You con people and you lie to them. You try to keep a little part of yourself when somebody says to you, 'You figure it's the greatest picture ever made?' You try to keep a little part of yourself alive. So I went through all the

processes of calling people in Wisconsin and Idaho and, you know, big industrialists, and trying to find out how to raise the money. And we couldn't raise anything, not *anything*!

What made the situation even more difficult was that in the year Cassavetes had devoted to attempting to get the plays financed, Ben Gazzara had become involved with another project and Cassavetes was now without a 'bankable' male lead. But it was his personality to forge full-speed ahead – even if he didn't know exactly where he was headed. By early fall 1972, he had assembled a crew and told them the production would start on 1 November, though he had neither the money to make the film nor an actor for the lead at that point. (Cassavetes briefly considered casting Val Avery in the Nick role, Elaine May in the Mama Longhetti part and Nick Dennis in a supporting role.)

Peter Falk said he never knew whether what followed was an accident or a carefully calculated strategy on Cassavetes' part. The two men had become close friends as a result of the *Husbands* publicity tour, and only a few months prior to this meeting Cassavetes had acted in the 'Etude in Black' episode of *Columbo* – turning in a superb performance which, in the final five minutes, transformed a routine 'whodunit' into a deep psychological study of a man undone by his embarrassment at being humiliated in front of his wife. (French critics and the Internet Movie Database have popularized the notion that Cassavetes directed this episode and did other television work under the pseudonym Nick Colasanto. It is not true.) In private, Cassavetes had been warning Falk about the dangers of being pigeonholed as a 'charming comical klutz' (*à la* *Columbo*) and had been encouraging him to tackle serious dramatic roles. The two men were at Elaine May's house, meeting about her upcoming *Mikey and Nicky*, and when the conversation flagged, Cassavetes pulled out a copy of his script.

When Elaine May and Peter and Gena and myself and people get together at a party, we always read – instead of just sitting around drinking and talking about the business and what's wrong and all: 'What have you written?' 'What have *you* written?' And it's an excitement for us. So, in September 1972, Peter and Elaine May and I were in New York and we were about to make another movie, *Mikey and Nicky*. And Elaine said, 'Let's read your plays.' And this one day Peter read *A Woman Under the Influence*, and I had no idea that he could play the part; it was a lousy part – I thought it was a terrible part – there was a lot of work to be done. And at that point it was a very small part.

He said, 'I've gotta play that husband.' And I said, 'Peter, I don't know if you could play that. What kind of a part is that for you to play, a heavy? You're the most loved character in the world.' *Lying!* I *wanted* him to play it! [Laughs.] I *wanted* him, but if you say, 'Please, Peter, play this,' he won't play it. So you gotta say, 'Peter, you *don't* play it. You *can't* play it' – and then he wants to play. 'What do you mean I can't play? I can play anything!' So it's not all lying, but –! [Laughs.] So that's the way that thing came about; he *insisted* on doing it.

Cassavetes had a lead but still no financing. Though he had money from a couple of quickie television acting jobs and could mortgage his house one more time, the grand total he could raise came to less than half of the \$250,000 he estimated he needed to start. Falk would have to provide the other half. Fortunately, *Columbo* had been launched the preceding year, and Falk was willing to contribute four episodes' worth, or \$125,000, but didn't think a 35mm feature could be done for that amount of money. He also told Cassavetes that it was ridiculous to think the shoot could start in November, since that was only about six weeks off at this point. Cassavetes typically argued that as long as they had enough money to start they shouldn't worry about how they were going to finish the movie. The point was to begin – and the sooner the better. (In fact, Falk's financial calculations were right: when post-production and lab costs were factored in, *A Woman Under the Influence* eventually cost more than four times the amount Cassavetes started with.)

I said, 'We have a November date and Gena's in it and you're in it, and we're gonna have a reading and we're gonna get all these people, gonna read it now.' He says, 'What do you mean? You can't start – you don't have the money.' So I made him put up half the money [laughs] and we just started to make the picture. By that point I knew that I couldn't tolerate any interference from a studio or even from an independent financial backer. So I mortgaged my house to raise half of the \$250,000 budget I needed, and Peter provided the other half out of his earnings from *Columbo*. Everything in my whole life has been propelled by panic. The shoot was only a couple months off, and we didn't have much to go on, but we had ourselves and some enthusiasm.

Once it was resolved that Falk would be playing the part of Nick, a certain amount of rewriting was necessary. Cassavetes' scripts were always written with particular actors in mind.

We had some readings of the play and started to work on the script and

got involved in it. I have a definite person in mind when I write, which is why I like to work with people who are very close to me. I know the way they think, so I try – *presume*, if you will – to put down some of those thoughts, not in their own terms but in the character’s terms. I often get extremely close to someone’s real personal problems, but that’s our hope – no *fictitious* emotion. Knowing who the two central actors would be, I revised the screenplay. I wrote it for Peter, as he would expect me to. I study his speech patterns and study the way he works, and how he really feels about it, and then start to write off that.

One of the sources of dialogue material was tapes and notes Cassavetes made of things he heard at home.

Gena tells everyone that it’s hard to live with me because there is nothing she can say that I don’t write down. I see Gena around the house and with the kids and I tape record what I see. I do tape record things and exaggerate them and blow them up and the incidents are not the same. I mean, I’m not a *writer* at all! I just record what I hear. As prattle. What people are concerned with in a day’s living. I have a good ear for prattle. Every line in your life is eaten up by the movies you do.

Cassavetes got great pleasure from writing.

When I first start writing there’s a sense of discovery. In some way it’s not work, it’s finding some romance in the lives of people. You get fascinated with their lives. If they stay with you, then you want to do something – make it into a movie, put it on in some way. It was that which propelled us to keep on working at *A Woman Under the Influence*. The words kind of spell out the story in a mysterious way. I deal with the characters as any writer would deal with a character. There are certain characters that you like, that you have feeling for, and other characters stand still. So you work until you have all the people in some kind of motion.

Making a film is a mystery. If I knew anything about men and women to begin with, I wouldn’t make it, because it would bore me. I really feel that the script is written by what you can *get out of it* and how much it *means* to you. What the film is about is not deliberate in the original intention. I mean, I know that the subject is going to be a family. But I don’t know what my initial motivations are. You’re interested in where you’re going. The idea of taking a laborer and having him married to a wife whom he can’t capture is really exciting. I don’t know how you work on that. So I *write* – I’ll do it any way I can. I’ll hammer it out; I’ll

kick it out; I'll beat it to death – any way you can *get it*. I don't think there are any rules. The only rules are that you do the best you can. And when you're not doing the best you can then you don't like yourself. And that's very individual with everyone.

There was a lot of thought behind even small details. Cassavetes and his actors would brainstorm many things that never made it into the movie: the background of the characters, where they went to school, how they met, etc.

The preparations for the scripts I've written are really long, hard, intense studies. I don't just enter into a film and say, 'That's the film we're going to do.' I think, 'Why make it?' For a long time. I think, 'Well, could the people be themselves, does this really happen to people, do they really dream this, do they think this?' There were weeks of wrestling to get the script right. I knew hard-hat workers like Nick, and Gena knew women like Mabel, and although I wrote everything myself, we would discuss lines and situations with Peter Falk, to get his opinion, to see if he thought they were really true, really honest. The actors discussed the clothes the characters would be wearing, the influence of money on their lives, the lives of the children, why they sleep on the ground floor, etc. Everything was discussed, nothing came from me alone. We write a lot of things that aren't in the movie, as background. So that when we got to the scene, you might rewrite on the spot, but we might have already gone in three, four, five, seven, eight, nineteen different versions of the scene.

Rehearsals for *A Woman Under the Influence* consisted of ten or twelve readings with the actors around a table. This was not only an opportunity for the actors to get to know each other's rhythms and paces but for Cassavetes to rethink the script. The scripts were not collaborations – Cassavetes was very much in control – but these readings would suggest new directions to pursue or places that needed work.

I do a full and total screenplay and then the actors come to me and tell me what they don't like. We get together for several weeks, in the evenings, for example, and read the script together. We get on well together, we've known each other and worked together for a long time. The actors come up with various suggestions and I ask them to write them down because sometimes I don't understand what they are trying to say. Gena, for example, read the finished script and said, 'I hate this woman. What does she do? What clothes does she wear?' I replied that,

at this stage, I didn't care what she wore. But for her this is important; and she's right, I had given a superficial response.

I try to get deeper into the characters and find out what the actors want to play. In what they want to play, somehow they're adding to the film. They're adding their own sense of reality and perceptions I wouldn't know from my relatively limited point of view. It's a necessary part of the process for me. If for me a line is right, I won't let the actors change it, but will allow them latitude in interpretation.

Questioning the meaning of his life.

After *Minnie and Moskowitz*, I thought, 'All right, I would like to make a picture to really *say* something.' The most important thing in my life, in Gena's life and in the lives of our intimate friends was the idea of marriage. We were deeply concerned with the change in illusions that marriage engenders over a period of years and the overwhelming need to understand the problems of retaining the family. Out of that came the characters, the feelings for the characters and, in a more specific sense, the complex delineation of the woman in the film.

The film was born out of my despair and questioning of the meaning of my life. As I thought about this, and, later, during the filming, I became very conscious of certain problems that were unknown and foreign to me. I'll use anything I can to straighten out a problem – even write a movie about it. When I finally saw the finished film, I was shocked by the reality of these problems.

Usually we put film in such simple terms while being endlessly involved in talking about our personal experience. We admit how complex *it* is. But it's as though we never look into a mirror and see what *we* are. So the films I make really are trying to mirror *that* emotion so we can understand what *our* impulses are; why *we* do things that get us into trouble; when to worry about it; when to let them go. And maybe we can find something in *ourselves* that is worthwhile. Look at it this way: if I were writing a picture and I used a situation which none of us were involved in or interested in, then I'd feel ashamed about doing it – and so would everybody else. So I use absolutely everything I can find in our own lives, in our friends' lives, to make what we're doing interesting. But you'd better do it honestly, and you'd better cure all those personal problems that might be holding back something you want to say.

I don't think audiences are satisfied any longer with just touching the surface of people's lives; I think they really want to get into a subject.

Love within a family is a universal subject, but one that's always treated lightly. We've learned to gossip about life instead of living it. A woman is either a married housewife who is happy or a married housewife who is unhappy. It's not that simple. It is possible to be married and in love and unhappy too. And love fluctuates. Marriage, like any partnership, is a rather difficult thing. It has been taken rather lightly in the movies. Family life is so different than what has been fed into us through the tube and through radio and through the casual, inadvertent greed that surrounds us. Films today show only a dream world and have lost touch with the way people really are. For me the Longhetti family is the first real family I've ever seen on screen. Idealized screen families generally don't interest me because they have nothing to say to me about my own life.

I spend months and years working out the philosophical intent of each picture. We create such problems in making a film by being so nuts as to say, 'What's *underneath* these characters? What are we *really* trying to say? Why are most movies so exploitative? Why don't we go in and try to find out what people are *really* thinking? Even if we don't know how to answer the question.' The idea was to take all the experiences that I've had, all the family and love that's been given, all the bitterness – to take all that and say, 'OK, we've had all this,' and put it all together.

In replacing narrative, *you need an idea*. What you do is take an idea that you have about a situation and then translate it into a dramatic situation that seems as normal as everyday life so the audience doesn't see the idea. So it doesn't show. Of course the idea itself has to be good – it really has to be first-rate. And the idea in *A Woman Under the Influence* was a concept of how much you have to pay for love. That's kind of pretentious, but I was interested in it. And I didn't know how to do it, and none of the other people knew how either, so we had to work extremely hard. But you have to deal with philosophic points in terms of *real* things. Children are real. Food is real. A roof over your head is real. Taking the children to the bus is real. Trying to entertain them is real. Trying to find some way to be a good mother, a good wife – I think all those things are real. And they are usually interfered with by the other side of one's self – which is the personal side, not the profound, wonderful side. And that personal side says, 'Hey, what about *me*? Yeah, you can't do this *to me*.' But if you're in the audience, the audience is saying, 'Hey, what about *me*?' All the way through *A Woman Under the Influence* the characters are *not* thinking about themselves – and therefore the audience is allowed to ask that because the characters

can't. In that way, the film was a little unreal. Because in life people stop and say, 'What about me?' every three seconds.

I knew that love created at once great moments of beauty and that on the other hand it makes you a prisoner. It just seems to me that women are alone and they are made prisoner by their own love. If they commit to something then they have committed to it and it's a torture. And it's true. I mean, I see it in my relationship to Gena. Within such a system men have always been in a more favorable position – they are allowed to test themselves against the rest of the world since they are in contact with it. But I feel it too. A man feels that also. And nobody knows how to handle it. Nobody knows how to handle it.

This is complicated in turn by other characters and their lifestyles that come and go within the structure of the film. The interrelations between the characters must not be made too easy; like people in life, each presents unique problems, so that even though they come from the same class background and share similar experiences, problems still arise. To make sure it wouldn't be sentimental, when I finished the script I crossed out all the references to love except one.

I think we're just reporters, all of us basically. We report from a certain editorial point of view on what we feel, on what we see and on what is important to us. A story like this is not newsworthy really – it's not Watergate, it's not war; it's a man and woman relationship, which is always interesting to me.

Filmmaking as an alternative to life's humiliations.

There's a very small part of all of us that has any kind of value. I think there's a small part of us that says we'd like to say something better than what is usually said, on the purest level. And the rest of it is con-men and struggling people just like everyone else – where you're constantly humiliated and go through your life, even if you're not humiliated, *thinking* you are. And then you get very lucky and you meet a group of creative people that are very much like you who are locked up in their own selves, trying to come out, trying in some way to express something that is very personal to them. And then suddenly one thing develops and another thing develops, and *Gena* has a fantastic day and we respond to it and *Peter* has a fantastic day, and the rest of the actors come in and they want to do something, and it all happens out of a day-by-day situation and a commitment. The commitment comes and grows more and more into something, that little part of you that isn't a con-man, and all of us get better as a result of making that picture and the

picture then has no importance really until you then see it or someone sees it and says, 'Yeah, that's all right. That was good.' Or somebody's very touched or somebody's bitter, and then ideas that we never even had seen, collectively, suddenly someone sees.

We don't know what we're doing. There's no way of knowing what you're doing. It's more of a *community* effort at the community situation of creativity. You just have to deal with people on their own level one to one and not feel you're *making* anything, not feel you're *doing* anything. But suddenly you find that everybody is working toward one regard not because we all got together and said, 'Let's go ahead and make a movie,' but because the questions that are asked are worthy of your time. I don't feel that it's a movie at all. I feel that it *does* connect with the mystery of a family and mother-in-laws and the fact that we all are living in this crazy world where we hate and love at the same time. And that is more important to me than seeing somebody shoot somebody in the eye and seeing the effect of the eye popping, you know? It may not be as entertaining always! It may not be the mood that you want to see. But it's enough to keep us going for two and a half years.

Seymour Cassel and other friends worked on the crew or acted. Cassavetes had confidence that almost anyone could act. In the final days of the New York shoot of *Husbands*, when he was stuck for a wife for Ben Gazzara's character to return home to and had no money to hire even a day-player, Cassavetes had producer Sam Shaw call up his daughter, Meta, to ask her to play the part. Although she had been a student at the Cassavetes-Lane Drama Workshop in her teens in the late 1950s, she had gotten married and been a New Jersey housewife for the past ten years. She told me how nervous she was about acting and how embarrassed she was about her matronly figure and the fact that she had to wear a nightgown on-camera; but she also told me how Cassavetes' and her father's faith that she would do a great job carried her through.

It was an intensely cooperative effort. Everyone worked on deferred salaries. One of my kids – Alexandra – played a neighborhood kid. One of the Longhetti kids was Seymour Cassel's son, the oldest boy, Tony. And then one was an actor and the other was the daughter of Grimaldi, Maria, the girl that fell on the beach. Other relatives and friends helped out by acting or by working on the crew. Like, somebody said, 'I'd like to do the music.' People came off the streets and those that hit me as people that would just – would be fun to work with – I chose and then we started working. I *love* them, the people who work with me, and I

guess they see things in the material and the way of working that makes them want to do it.

I was stuck for a mother for Peter Falk. I knew my mother would understand the basic values of protection of the son and not be afraid to take the brunt of criticism from the audience. She didn't do that easily. She would rather be funny and liked, like any other actress. She was absolutely terrified, as an actress, that something she had done would hurt the movie because she played a woman so defensive of her son. But she did it with such authority that I don't think an actress of thirty years' experience would have her purity of intention. I really believe almost anyone can act. How *well* they can act depends on how free they are and whether the circumstances are such that they can reveal what they feel. I don't think there's any great trick to my directing: I just get people I like, people I'm interested in, and talk to them on the basis of their being people rather than actors.

Gena Rowlands had casting input.

Gena and I talk it over. I take note of all our conversations. We discuss who will play the doctor, but since that bears no relation to her I don't worry about it. On the other hand, the choice of actress for another female role concerns her directly and I wouldn't choose anyone without discussing it with her. Otherwise it could affect her inspiration.

But even with friends and relatives working for free, Cassavetes still didn't have enough money or resources to get started. A few months before filming began, he came up with an idea to get additional support. He went to the American Film Institute and made them an offer he was sure they couldn't refuse. If they appointed him filmmaker-in-residence and gave him access to their equipment and facilities, he would give their students on-the-job training by letting them sit in on his film as he made it. What he didn't tell them, of course, was that he was desperately in need of free offices, equipment and crew, and the AFI wouldn't merely be assisting an existing project, but partially underwriting a movie that probably couldn't have been made otherwise.

I found out that there are Fellows there. And they give Fellowships. And we didn't have any money. So I thought, Well, I'm an American. This is an *American* Film Institute! I'm a student! No one's ever accused me of being professional! [Laughs.] I'm a filmmaker, hell. So a friend of mine got me introduced to a woman who said, 'Oh yes, we'd love to have you here,' and we had a very formal lunch and got a little

The Longhetti house, located on Taft Avenue in Hollywood, was much larger than it appears to be in the movie. Cassavetes had production offices and equipment rooms upstairs. He deliberately minimizes its size in the film.

© *Michael Ferris*

stiff and they said, 'Well, would you like to come here?' And I said, 'Yes, I'd like to come here. I'd like to get as much out of the place as possible, and you can have anyone audit, come see how a film is made.'

Though Cassavetes thanks the AFI in the credits, in many different respects the relationship was not an entirely comfortable one. In general, Cassavetes had a fairly low opinion of the Institute's activities.

It made me sick to watch those businessmen applaud Welles during the 1975 AFI tribute, when you know that the next day if he asked any one of them for money, they'd say, 'We'll let you know.'

A Woman Under the Influence would be plagued by financial problems for the entire shoot. At a pre-production meeting a week before the start of filming, a visibly upset production supervisor, Michael Lally Jr., began yelling at Cassavetes that there was no money in the budget for film stock and suggested that they delay the start of shooting. Cassavetes' reply is revealing:

On 1 November we will have actors, we will have a crew, we will have

lights and we will have a camera on a tripod, and I don't give a shit if there's no film. We *will* begin shooting this movie!

On Halloween night, the day before the shoot was to get underway, 10,000 feet (two hours) of film mysteriously showed up. Where it came from has never been satisfactorily explained, but one theory is that Seymour Cassel or someone else went to a porno house in the San Fernando Valley and obtained two hours of 'short ends' (unused footage from already shot magazines). It didn't really matter where it came from. It would be enough to begin. It was not the last time a Cassavetes movie would be filmed, at least in part, on short ends.

Cassavetes used every trick in the book to save a dollar during the shoot. Everything that could possibly be solicited as a donation was taken advantage of: from 110 free boxes of pasta and free Chianti Brolio for the spaghetti breakfast scene (Cassavetes was supposed to show the brand name but didn't); to a new Chevy truck for the construction site scenes (which Cassavetes accepted but didn't use because he felt it looked too fancy). Necessity was the mother of invention. He used his own car for Martha Mortensen's car. In the location scenes at the beach, Cassavetes didn't have the money for a generator truck so Mitch Breit tapped into a local city power line – without permission, needless to say. Gena Rowlands tells the story of how much Cassavetes wanted rain for Mabel's homecoming scene but couldn't possibly afford a rain machine. The day before the scene was to be filmed was a typically beautiful, cloudless Southern California day. Cassavetes only half-jokingly suggested, 'Let's sell a piano and call the fire department.' When it rained the next morning, she knew there was something magic in the air.

As usual, the actors worked for nothing (or for points, if there were any profits to be shared once the film was released) and the crew volunteered their services. Cassavetes made no promises of pay, and no one was paid for the first few weeks, but by the third week, Cassavetes started giving the crew paychecks of \$60/week, which increased to \$75/week by the end of the shoot.

Cassavetes had already made arrangements to rent a house at 1741 Taft Avenue off Hollywood Boulevard from an old couple (whom he moved into another house). The house was actually far larger than it appears to be, with more rooms downstairs and a spacious second floor, which Cassavetes converted into production offices and equipment-storage rooms. He deliberately minimized its size in the film. It was important that Falk and Rowlands believed in it, so a backstory about its history and how it was acquired was worked out. In October 1972,

while the actors were doing script readings, Cassavetes sent the crew in to clean, paint and decorate it. The point was not only to get the set into shape, but to help the crew get comfortable with each other by working together.

We looked at maybe 150 houses in Los Angeles. It was really hard to find something in the right price range that would make you feel you were in a real house and also depict the kind of blue-collar existence we had in mind. Some of the houses we scouted had plastic covers on everything, plastic pictures on the walls, and most of the family's money went into electrical appliances. That's a very real thing, but we didn't want it. So we decided we needed a hand-me-down house and finally found one that had been given to the Nick character and still had all the old furniture and old woodwork. We decorated to correspond with the characters: sporting trophies, photos of the children. Everyone brings their own ideas. For instance, should the house be painted? We painted the front but not the back, which could have been painted by some friends in exchange for a couple of beers but was left as it was. We decided Nick was too busy worrying about his family.

The location could have been a serious problem. At first everyone said, 'How can you do a picture where eighty per cent of it happens in the same house?' I think that's one reason why we had such difficulty financing the picture; it didn't seem to have enough movement, enough openness. But we decided we wouldn't try to exploit the house or make a 'thing' of it.

After the union crews and schedules of *Husbands* and *Minnie and Moskowitz*, *A Woman Under the Influence* represented a return to amateur filmmaking. The production manager kept things highly organized from day to day, providing call-sheets with scenes and locations specified, but there were no artificial deadlines by which something had to be done, no punch-the-clock mentality on the set and no specified number of shots that had to be made on a given day. If a scene took three days to get right rather than one, there was no sense of panic or rush as there is on a commercial shoot. Cassavetes had the house for as long as he wanted and was committed to taking as long as it took.

The intimacy of the working conditions was important to the effect. Rowlands said that since the cast and crew worked together in such a small space for such long hours, almost living together as a kind of big happy family, by the second week of shooting she felt that she actually lived there – that it really *was* her house. She moved through the spaces,

from room to room, naturally. For moments she forgot that the children were *not* really hers. She got used to the locations of the furniture. (She says her one fictional liberty was the desire to put on a bit of mascara or make-up on occasion to improve her appearance, which Cassavetes would instantly spot and make her remove. In the spaghetti breakfast, for example, she manages to sneak both eye shadow and lipstick past her director-husband; but, in this scene at least, it isn't necessarily a betrayal of her character. Rowlands' desire to look 'pretty' for strangers would undoubtedly be shared by Mabel.)

Cassavetes' preproduction schedule broke the script down into a sixty-one-day shoot, running from 1 November through 24 January, working five days a week with single days off for Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's. (In interviews he later exaggerated by saying that the crew shot six days a week.) To save time and money (including the cost of hiring a welfare worker for the children's scenes), he abrogated his normal practice of shooting in strict chronological sequence. At the end of January he added four more days of shooting at the construction site, to make a grand total of sixty-five days of work. Dailies were screened two or three times a week and on weekends. Cassavetes stopped at the end of January and did some preliminary editing to see what the film looked like. Then, in March 1973, he shot a few weeks of additional footage, including the beach and the truck scenes.

Though the shoot was relaxed in terms of its schedule, it was one of the most emotionally demanding of Cassavetes' career.

Making the picture was tough. Once we began shooting, it was hell. The emotional strain was so great that we never went out, socially, for thirteen weeks. No movies, no parties, no home entertaining, nothing. At night we'd collapse, make coffee, then start talking about the work. Yesterday's work, last week's, last month's, next week's, next month's. We'd wake up in the night and talk some more. It was that kind of total commitment. Sometimes the tension on the set was so great we could taste it. We'd quarrel and somebody would say, 'No, that scene isn't true, it isn't honest, let's do it again.' We sat around the Longhetti house and again talked out every scene until it seemed right, seemed right *in this particular environment*. It was hard work. It was disciplined work. It wasn't freewheeling, you didn't feel like going out after the shooting. Every time we make a movie it's always going to be fun and it never is. In the ultimate finish of our relationship on that film it never is fun. It's always, you look back on it with a great feeling of what a grueling adventure that has been.

Notwithstanding his reputation as the 'wild home-movie man', Cassavetes' sets were surprisingly disciplined (albeit occasionally noisy) places. When the actors came onto the set they were expected to leave their ordinary identities behind and become the strangers they are in the film. Actors were to stay in character, or at least not to blatantly come out of character. That meant that they were forbidden to discuss their characters and roles with each other; and were not allowed to indulge in chit-chat. That is why when Cassavetes was asked by interviewers about his actors' personal lives, as he frequently was, he invariably said that, with the exception of collaborators like Rowlands, Cassel, Falk and Gazzara, he really didn't know his actors as people; the character was all he saw, and presumably all they saw of each other.

We didn't allow chit-chat. I set some ground rules when we work that are impersonal rules: (1) *No one knows anyone.* (2) *And no one must be subjected to the penalties of social conduct during the filming.* That's a little difficult at first for everyone. People do want to be social. That goes for all actors. They've known each other a long time, but now you must be selfish and you must be temperamental and you must fight for what your instincts tell you. The relationship between a director and an actor has to be cold. You can't be sympathetic to their personal problems. I don't want to hear if they didn't get any sleep last night or have some other problem. After the shooting, that's different. I don't expect them to eat and sleep the movie. But I don't like small talk on the set. I won't tolerate gossip. I won't tolerate anyone talking about anything but the film, anything but *these* people, because we're working in such a condensed period of time that there's no time to be lackadaisical about what we're doing. You waste your energy, mainly. You could talk about what happened last night forever. And I think it's a psychological escape from putting yourself up, from really committing to something. I can feel the commitment of our people on the screen. I felt the people who were doing it should be respected, because it's so embarrassing to relive moments that are private and delicate.

Mabel hosts parties; Cassavetes does the same.

In directing you're really like a host, that everyone's going to your party, and it's very difficult for the crew to help you get glory. Once they trust that you really are interested in the work and not in your own perfection, they will work very hard for you. The actors are the same. They don't want to be second fiddle to a camera. When people begin to feel a little upset, there begin to be mysteries about filmmaking. There are no

mysteries to making films. There is no mystery to writing. I try to make it comfortable for the actor by realizing what they're doing is so personal. If you're doing a movie and somebody slaps a slate in front of you and everybody stands around expecting you to be brilliant, then it's gonna be like a contest. I like to develop an atmosphere where that doesn't exist; where nobody is looking at you to see how good you are; where people can function. It's very hard to let the technical processes of film take over and then expect the actors to reveal themselves. I mean, you can't take a shower at a dinner party. You make a movie to tell what you know about life – about your life. But after waiting around for eight hours, for set-ups, for lights, all of it, when it comes time to shoot, you're thinking, 'I don't *wanna* tell you about my life anymore! Why should I tell *you* about my life!' On a set there's really a lot that can hamper the actors. For example, in this film, here's maybe the most important moment in two people's lives: a guy is committing his wife to a mental hospital. In a normal movie, while this is going on someone is also fiddling with your hair, putting lipstick on you, placing lights above you, sitting you down, marking your feet, moving cameras, yelling, 'Hey, she doesn't look good; her skin is out of focus.' Now, I ask you, how can the actors concentrate? So we do all this *before* the actors come on stage. We all work quietly, and hopefully efficiently, and get it done.

On rare occasions, if an actor was having trouble playing something, Cassavetes might surreptitiously film a walkthrough of a scene – whispering to the operator 'start filming' when the actor thought he was just working something out. But the impression that events and relationships are evolving spontaneously and that the actors are genuinely reacting to events was more commonly achieved by not having movements and blockings completely worked out in advance. The actors were allowed to experiment with ways of playing as the scene was being filmed, and by the same virtue, forced to think on their feet.

Rehearsals are tiresome, boring, and the whole crew becomes a kind of audience. If the crew gets bored, the actors feel that it's bad. That is why I want everything to go fast and use long focal lenses and a set that has some depth. What's important to me is just that you convince the audience and yourself that what's on the screen is really happening. People ask me, 'Doesn't the crew need a rehearsal?' But they really don't, because they watch all of the preparation. In other words, everyone is *always* rehearsing. They're rehearsing for hours. They're doing the scene for hours. The only way a crew member wouldn't know what's

going on is if they're out playing cards, if they're out talking or making points with the producer, or Elaine May comes on the set and they want to get her coffee. *Then* you'll blow the scene, you know? If you *really* are interested, you have lots of time to know what's happening.

As he did with *Faces*, Cassavetes introduced a degree of spontaneity by calling out directions during the filming and then taking the sound out in editing.

I certainly give some specific directions – but I'm not aware of it. And hopefully the people I give them to are not aware of taking them. So I know, for example, Peter and the kids went up the stairs and I must have said something about it, but I tried to do it within the framework of the action so it didn't become a set direction. I might have said, 'Take them up the stairs, Pete,' and then eliminated that from the soundtrack and that was his function, to take them up there, but they'd run down by themselves. So in that sense I guess it's improvisational because it's what happens.

Since new gestures, movements and moods came out in the actual take, actors and crew could be surprised by the results. Peter Falk said he was taken aback by the unexpected intensity and unpredictability of Mabel's breakdown scene when it was first played. It was almost as shocking and frightening as it would have been to experience in real life. In a similar vein, it sometimes was hard for an actor or crew member to tell what was 'really happening' and what was 'acted'. Since Cassavetes believed that awkwardnesses and hesitations contributed to the truth of the work, his long-standing rule was never under any circumstances to stop a take – no matter what happened. (Rowlands said that if someone knocked over a glass, you went to the kitchen, got a broom and cleaned it up; and, to prove her point, there actually is a moment in the final family gathering scene where someone does knock over a glass and the take goes on.) In one of the takes of the moment in which Mabel jumps out when Mr. Jenson comes to the front door, Rowlands jumped up too rapidly and fainted, passing out in front of Mario Gallo. He continued to play the scene without missing a beat, assuming it was part of her performance. The moment when Mabel misses the chair sitting down in the living room is an example of an on-camera accident being used in the final edit. As a complementary illustration of acting being mistaken for reality, Cassavetes himself thought Gena Rowlands actually was 'losing it' during the first take of the scene where she is begging not to

be separated from her children. He got so upset he called cut, threw down his camera and ran to her side.

On the other hand, Cassavetes readily admitted that there were certain scenes that required extensive rehearsal and careful planning to come off at all.

Certain times we rehearse extremely hard, for long periods of time. Maybe two days. The spaghetti scene was rehearsed for a couple of days before we shot it – and without the spaghetti! That was a carefully rehearsed scene which came out of a lot of pre-rehearsing, pre-talking the picture. The end scene, where Gena came home followed by the sitting around the table, was rehearsed for two solid days. Some things can be loose, some things cannot be. It all depends on what they are and what the degree of difficulty is in performing them.

The spaghetti scene was added during the shoot. Some of its dialogue (Nick's 'it's in the air' speech, for example) was lifted from other scenes in the film that were not being used; other parts of it were written by Cassavetes on the spot. (Mabel's looking into Hugh Hurd's mouth while he sings *Aida*, for example, was something Cassavetes remembered from the shoot of *A Child Is Waiting*, when a retarded boy looked into Judy Garland's mouth to see where the sound was coming from while she was singing.)

When it came time to shoot, Cassavetes had to have the men go through the scene approximately thirty times to get enough usable material for the film. As Falk later reported, 'A lot of spaghetti got eaten.' For three days, Carole Smith, Elaine Goren (who doubled as 'script girl' on the film) and two other assistants cooked the donated pasta, producer Sam Shaw (who was a fine cook) simmered the sauce and helpers shuttled planeload after planeload of spaghetti downstairs. Cassavetes worked with the actors (many of whom, like football player Leon Wagner, were non-actors) in his customary ways to relax them so that their real personalities would come out rather than some idea they had of how they wanted to look.

Cassavetes never drew a hard line between events in his films and events outside the films. Since, as an actor, he found it nerve-racking and distracting for a director to call 'Take' or 'Action' to start a shot or 'Cut' or 'Wrap' to end one, as a director he almost never emphatically proclaimed when a scene began or ended. To paraphrase something Rowlands once said about the difference between her husband's set and a Hollywood set, on most shoots they shout 'Silence' and give you two

The overlap of life and art. Actors John Finnegan and Vince Barbi helping Cassavetes set up and block the spaghetti breakfast scene. Nick Spaulding stands in the background. © *Sam Shaw*

minutes to tighten up and get ready to act before each take, but the very point of Cassavetes' method was to prevent the actor from 'tightening up' and 'acting' in this way. He wanted the actor to react in a more authentic way than that. The same point was made by someone on the set of *Minnie and Moskowitz*, who told me that after one of Elsie Ames' (Florence's) takes the sound man asked her to speak up a little. Cassavetes went bananas: 'Don't say that! That's *your* job. That's why we have rehearsals. I don't want to change her rhythm. I *want* her to talk the way she talks.' It was the same attitude that drove cameramen wild. The point was, as much as possible, *not* to turn the person into an actor; *not* to change reality in the process of recording it – to keep life as loose and disorganized (and mumbled) as it actually is. (Using non-professionals, people who didn't have a bag of actorly tricks to reach into, was another way of doing the same thing.)

When necessary, Cassavetes would do almost anything to break the tension or relax an actor (or the crew) at a difficult time. If he was filming at his house, it was not at all uncommon for him suddenly to call a break and have everyone go outside for a quick game of basketball. Or he would take an actor or a member of the crew aside and take a brief walk (or jog) with him or her.

Another zany technique he employed during an actual take was to run into a shot and say something to one of the actors or do something nutty, and then dart out of the shot, while the camera rolled the whole time. In action scenes, he would move along with the actors – sometimes with a camera on his shoulder, more frequently without, simply out of empathy, the way a football coach’s body-language mirrors the movements of his players or a choreographer pantomimes his dancers. He might tell a joke to get a laugh during a scene to change the mood or call out a redirection in the middle of a scene and take the sound out later. In the spaghetti breakfast scene, he might sit down at the table and strike up a conversation with the actors in the middle of a scene. As a result (as was the case on other shoots as well), it was difficult or impossible to tell the difference between what was being filmed and what was not; where off-camera pleasantries ended and on-camera acting began. Was your laugh at his joke going to be in the film? Was your lunch break going to be part of the spaghetti breakfast? Were Falk’s nutty comments his own conversational filler or something in the script? When *A Woman Under the Influence* was done, many of the actors in this scene, including Falk, reported that they felt it was one of their favorite parts of the shoot, since they had had so much fun doing it.

When we rehearsed the breakfast scene with Mabel and Nick’s co-workers the first time, it was terrible, absolutely terrible. No one knew what to do. They thought they had to tell stories and be funny. I didn’t want to tell them what to do. My only instructions were, ‘Do what you would normally do and take all the time you need. This woman’s invited you, she’s got up to cook you spaghetti. These are your friends. You can be at ease. Don’t talk shop at the table. Come on, we’ll do a ton of takes. Just remember who you are. If you want to be a jerk, go ahead.’ But they were pleasant and told stories. We had to do the scene about thirty times to get usable material. The reason it seems improvised is that everything was ordinary, and there was no clever dialogue.

The suicide scene also took a lot of work. To begin with, there was the problem of getting the children to come in at exactly the right points. Rowlands and Falk also had individual problems with the scene. Rowlands disagreed with Cassavetes’ decision to have the children present. She felt that they took dramatic attention away from her situation, were hard for her to act with (since their movements were unpredictable) and broke the mood of the scene. Cassavetes’ response was:

Explaining without providing shortcuts; dealing with a problem without providing answers. Talking to O. G. Dunn about his role. Note the look on Cassavetes' face in the second and fourth photos. © *Michael Ferris*

Do you think in such a small house, if they heard this stuff going on, the kids wouldn't be in the middle of it?

Falk, for his part, had trouble with the transition from getting the razor blade out of Mabel's hand to dealing with her on the sofa. The problem was accentuated by Cassavetes' technique of playing and shooting scenes whole rather than breaking them down into short shots: as Cassavetes' staged and shot it, Falk really had to wrestle with Rowlands and the kids, and then, in real time, compose himself enough to return to the sofa and deal with the situation more calmly. He couldn't make the shift work. In this case, going against his general policy of non-directive direction, Cassavetes gave Falk a specific action to perform to help him out. He told him, 'Go up three stairs and turn. Stop what you're doing and take a breath before returning to the living room.' Falk reported that the pause to compose himself – both as an actor and a character – was just what he needed.

Cassavetes handled the children in the suicide scene the same way he handled the adults. It was not about him telling them to do something but about them originating their own actions.

They just caught on. They just caught on to the spirit. They were out playing whenever they could. Whenever they came in we shot them

individually until the homecoming and suicide scene. And that scene, somehow they just accepted the fact that it was a game and they were having fun – while we weren't – but they were having a lot of fun. And when they came in and they saw Peter attacking their mother, whom they accepted as their mother, they instantaneously reacted in the way you saw them. I mean, there was no direction. There was no staging, there was no anything. Just the fact that those kids accepted the fact that Gena was their mother and that Peter Falk was their father, the kids *automatically* attacked the father. I never said for them to do that, they just did it – and in an exquisite way.

You don't quite know how much the children can comprehend or how good they're going to be, so you're always terribly afraid they're going to be little snot-nosed cute kids. The delicacy with which they approached their own intervention and the taking of sides was something that could never have been *told* to them. You just try not to put any pressure on the children so they can listen and do things their own way. And I think they did. And they behaved in that manner. You can do as many takes as you want as long as the situation is the same, because the kids didn't hear you say, 'Let's do it again,' they just know that it's still happening. We must have done five or six takes on that.

In the same scene, Peter Falk felt so much for his part that he reacted

the same way he would have reacted in his own life with his own children. The important thing is to work with actors who like their work and who are willing to explore with me something that we don't know yet.

One of the sources of the power of the acting was that the actor was forced to actually look and listen during a take; he experienced the events the way he would in life.

We deal with thoughts and emotions and I hope that the actors don't feel that the material is scripted. So they don't think of the script. They take their time until the text seems to belong *to them*. Everything must find its inspiration in the moment at hand. The words are there but two very good actors must want to express more of their love than by just reading the script. Only in this way can they really believe in their characters and express them. It really is a product of a group of people coming in and interpreting their roles. Really, truthfully interpreting their roles. Everything that Gena did she did herself. Everything that Peter did he did himself. Everything that all those other actors did they did themselves. I give a lot of room. I would never tell an actor that he is doing it wrong or that it doesn't connect with my interpretation.

Almost every actor who worked with Cassavetes felt frustrated some of the time during the shoot. They felt they desperately needed an explanation of some fact or motivation; they craved a piece of information about their character; they pleaded with him to tell them something they needed to know; and, in almost every case, he refused to give them an answer. He would double-talk them; he would give a meaninglessly vague response; he would stand silent and look them deep in the eyes; but he would not give them a direct answer.

O. G. Dunn (who plays Garson Cross) was uncertain how he was supposed to play his scenes. He practically begged Cassavetes to give him an action or a feeling to play. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for Cassavetes to have said something like, 'You're a gentle, polite man; you're not a brute, so you're not going to force it; but you would like to sleep with this woman; and she did invite you home, so you think she probably wants to do it; but she is a woman, and you have had woman problems in the past. So you are not sure what she expects . . .' That's the explanation a thousand other directors would have given to actors in similar situations. But it was the sort of answer Cassavetes almost never gave. According to a crew member who watched the whole exchange, what happened was closer to the following:

OGD: How should I play this?

JC: Look. You're here. She's there. You see? (*Followed by a long, intense look, which was the way Cassavetes often ended this sort of explanation.*)

OGD: Well, yeah, John, but . . .

JC: No, no, no. Don't! Don't! Just. You know? (*Followed by another deep, soulful look.*)

Thus it went, four or five times in a row, until Dunn gave up in frustration and bewilderment. It's the same sort of apparent inarticulateness that drove Peter Falk crazy during the filming of *Husbands*. It's not that Cassavetes could not have given a long, articulate explanation. It's that he knew that if he wanted Dunn to act convincingly hesitant and uncertain, the last thing he could ever do was to tell him to act that way.

Actors always want to know, how is it all going to work out? I don't know. Where does it lead? I don't know that either. The actor has to make a decision. I hate control. I'm not a leader. I'm only happy where there's total confusion, where people function on their own level. You don't know what's gonna happen. You're meeting twelve strangers and you see a bunch of people standing behind the camera and there are lights all over the place and obviously it's being lit for one specific area because all the lights are there. So you see that and you don't know what you're gonna do! So the question is, at what point do I reveal what's going to happen? My system is *never* to reveal it! My system is to create as much confusion as I possibly can so the actors have the full knowledge that they're on their own, that there is nothing I'm ever going to tell them, ever, at any point in the thing. Except if somebody would say, 'I think I'm going too far,' I would disagree with them. Or if somebody would say, 'Let's take a break,' I would disagree with them, you know? Or if somebody would small talk. In other words, 'You are now to reveal your life and parts of your life that you don't even know exist.' I refuse to let myself or my characters seek refuge in psychology either for purposes of motivation or character analysis.

Cassavetes deliberately created a state of insecurity in certain actors for certain scenes. Dr. Zepp was played by Eddie Shaw, Sam Shaw's brother. Eddie was a sweet and gentle man, but as a novice non-actor he was extremely insecure about what he was doing. He barraged Cassavetes and everyone else on the shoot with demands for reassurance – 'How was I?' 'Do you think that was right?' 'I didn't know if you could see my face since I was turned away.' 'Was it good enough?' 'Tell me exactly

what you want me to do in the next scene.' Cassavetes was annoyed by the questions and was quite stern with him (as he was with many of the non-professionals on the shoot); but he knew better than to attempt to stop them by answering them. He realized that the actor's tentativeness could enrich the characterization.

I don't want big, long discussions; I don't want to know what they're thinking. If an actor tells me, 'Look, I'm going to be this,' and then tries to do it, he's putting untold pressure on himself. Eddie Shaw, he's the producer's brother, came in, and we didn't have anyone to play the thing, and he said he'd play it. It was the greatest thrill in his life to play this doctor, so when he came in he kept on saying, 'What do I do?' I thought, 'That's *wonderful!* That's a *great* kind of a doctor to have! That's the doctors *I've* known!' [Laughs.] This guy says, 'Where does it hurt?' Why should I *tell* him?

Mario Gallo (who plays Mr. Jensen) was another friend whose personal feelings became part of his performance. Gallo was not entirely comfortable with Cassavetes' direction and was fairly awkward or tentative in his playing, but Cassavetes realized that his 'nervousness' should not be eliminated, but should be 'used' in his performance.

These are fairly minor cases. Cassavetes' treatment of Rowlands and Falk is a textbook example of the use of psychology to massage souls and spirits. His relationship with Rowlands was extremely rocky at times (to the extent that at one point he told her he would never work with her again). Rowlands on her part felt lost at moments and desperately in need of help, which Cassavetes seemed at times deliberately to withhold. Prior to shooting the homecoming scene, Rowlands pleaded with her husband for guidance. It was months into the shoot; she was tired and confused; more than information, what she probably needed was a little reassurance. Cassavetes not only refused to provide it but undermined what little confidence she had left with the coldness and distance of his response. She wanted to be calmed down; he did everything possible to work her up.

GR: What do you want me to do?

JC: I don't want to *tell* you. What would Mabel do?

GR: I don't know. Help me. Please! Come on! You could help me! Take me outside. I don't know what she's . . .

JC: Gena, that's enough! I *refuse* to talk to you. No more!

By this point Rowlands was glaring at him, really irritated and upset.

She was no longer pleading but angry, and started yelling at him, protesting at the way he was treating her. Instead of trying to calm her down, he then started taunting and mocking her back. The moment built with exchanged charges and countercharges. Then Cassavetes suddenly turned on his heels and walked away, leaving Rowlands alone in front of the actors and crew. A few minutes after that, without saying anything else, he gave the order to shoot the scene.

If the result was not one of the greatest performances ever captured on film, Cassavetes' treatment of Rowlands could be called heartless and brutal. What is even more interesting is that when the cameras rolled Rowlands gave Cassavetes something he never expected. It seems clear in retrospect that he was deliberately winding her up to get anger, resentment or bitterness out of her in the scene; but in response she gave innocence and vulnerability. Just as he was shocked into dropping the camera during the breakdown scene, Cassavetes later confessed that he was bewildered by the choices that ensued.

When Gena was committed by Peter and she went to an institution, and as the film says, six months later she comes out – I would have thought that she would be so hostile against her husband. But she comes in the house and she never even acknowledges his presence. She's only considering her children. And we did a take, and I thought, 'Should I stop this? I mean, she never looked at Peter.' She walks in the house and everyone greets her and she never looks at her husband – I mean, she looks at him, but she never sees him, yet she's not avoiding him. And I thought, 'Well, that's that defenseless thing carrying itself too far here! What are we doing?'

All through that homecoming scene I was astounded by what was underneath people, what these actors had gathered in the course of this movie. And I was *way* behind them. I was staggered because Gena was so quiet and mild. She wasn't hostile at all. I started yelling because I thought she was acting so the audience would like her, but I was wrong. She was expressing fear, which separated her from the people she loved. At the moment when Nick's mother, Mabel's enemy, subtly changes her approach in the most malicious way, just at the moment when the audience is hoping that Mabel is going to get out of there, Mabel stays so tender. She wants to stick with her family to the very end. If she'd come back from the asylum with hate in her heart, the film couldn't finish the way it does.

Gena's interpretation showed me how frightened Mabel was. As a matter of fact, when we looked at the dailies, Gena said, 'What do you

think? I'm at a loss, did we go too far?' And I said, 'I didn't like it, I just didn't like it at all.' I mean, I found it really embarrassing to watch. It was such a horrible thing to do to somebody, to take her into a household with all those people after she'd been in an institution, and their inability to speak to this woman could put her right back in an institution, and yet they *were* speaking to her, and Gena wanted to get rid of them and at the same time not insult them. But then I thought what Gena did was like poetry. It altered the narrative of the piece. The dialogue was the same, but it really made it different. I would grow to love those scenes very, very much, but the first time I didn't. The film really achieved something really remarkable through the actors' performances, not giving way to situations but giving way to their own personalities.

Gena had taken away the pettiness of women as a weapon. The woman in a sense became idealized; you took the purity of a woman minus pettiness. One of the things we had worked out in the beginning of the movie was that these characters could not be petty because you would lose the whole intention of what the film was about. Gena wasn't a hostile person and didn't use a weapon. Taking that weapon away made the woman extremely vulnerable. No one is defensive in the whole film. There isn't one shield on anybody's psyche, or anybody's heart. It's just open.

It would be hard to find a clearer illustration of how Cassavetes' 'non-directive directing' allowed his actors to give him things he couldn't anticipate. He learned things about his characters and their situations. He changed his mind as he went along.

As the shoot goes on all these things that are happening are revelations to me also. I'm seeing Gena do this, and Gena as my wife now suddenly is becoming Mabel Longhetti and those pink socks are becoming something that you see on something. Those nice legs are becoming Mabel's nice legs and her manner of insanity is recognizable and suddenly she's not insane. These discoveries are happening to me, to the crew and to the characters.

There's *a lot* I don't understand. If I say we're gonna make a picture and we don't know what we're doing, I'm absolutely straight when I say that. I don't think that Gena has any idea when she comes on the set that she's going to be able to break down, have a commitment scene, be frightened when she comes in. I see her when I come home at night and I see her on the bed with the script and I see her going over it and thinking about it and relating to everything and preparing herself and asking

me questions. I mean, Gena reads this script and she takes and interprets that woman as someone that is innocent. That's not *my* interpretation. That's *not* in the script. *You* could interpret it as a person that fights it. *She* interprets it as someone that's innocent. She's crazy, but she's shy, too, really. She's not an outward person really. She's outward because she thinks she's supposed to be. She wants to please somebody. Gena has a lot of consideration for the character and the woman behind the character. She tries never to vulgarize or caricature people she's playing. She really resisted turning Mabel into a 'victim' or a 'case' or a 'feminist'. That was her insight.

I'm totally an intuitive person. I mean, I think about things that human beings would do, but I am just guessing – so I don't really have a preconceived vision of the way a performer should perform. Or, quote, the character, unquote. I don't believe in 'the character'. Once the actor's playing that part, *that's* the person. And it's up to that person to go in and do anything he can. If it takes the script this way and that, I let it. But that's because I really am more an actor than a director. I appreciate that there might be some secrets in people that might be more interesting than a 'plot'. All people are really private – as a writer and a director, you understand that that's the ground rule: people are private.

There were also more benign and playful instances of manipulating Rowlands' (and other actors') feelings. Rowlands and her mother were extremely close in life; but Cassavetes tried to pit them against each other at moments, as in the scene when the mother is dragged onto the bed.

Gena's mother played Gena's mother, and it was difficult because that was a committed part. It was difficult because she had to *be* something. It was difficult because she had to not like her. She had to love her but not *like* her, so it was very difficult, because the relationship is both like and love. And it was difficult for Gena, because for Gena anything her mother does is terrific. I enjoyed terribly much making them not like each other! I enjoyed the double-cross that existed between these two people. I enjoyed it. I had a terrific time watching Gena's mother not do that and yet in her way she found some understanding. She found terrific understanding of the character getting on the bed, of not liking somebody and loving them and having the privilege of doing that so that that becomes a discovery, and then you have to catch that whichever way you can. And all these people sit there and they have to

trust that whatever they're doing, all these individuals, they're doing all *individual* things and they're doing to the fullest of their ability. They gotta trust that somehow at the end of it it's gonna be a movie. So, all I can tell you is what I did. All I can tell you is that I made that so impossible for it to be a good movie that they just had to address themselves to the problem that they had, because there's no possibility that the way we were working anything could ever come out in a movie theater.

Though tempers may have flared on occasion, Rowlands clearly understood the subtlety of the method when she later reflected back on the shoot. As she put it: 'John encouraged you to the point that you pushed yourself into areas you feared with other directors.' One positive direction she says that Cassavetes did give her more than once during the shoot was, 'Go all out in your playing, because Mabel is someone without inhibitions. She's freer than "normal" people; she doesn't have restrictions on what she may do.'

Peter Falk's performance not only illustrates the conflation of the personality of the actor and the character he plays, but is another instance of an actor being left so free in his interpretation that his performance initially shocked and confused his director.

Peter was a struggle. A little like Nick, he's a tremendously introverted, closed-in man. I never saw a guy capable of so much, restraining himself and containing himself to that point where Nick gets to, when his wife is gonna be committed and his own mother says to her, 'Your children are funny.' As an actor Peter became very passive. Those were peculiar choices that he made. When the doctor came in, he had the freedom to throw him out. But he chose to let him in. Peter also had the freedom not to stand by and let his wife go crazy, but he chose to let her go crazy. When he finally came up to her and tried to stop her, it was too late and he knew it was too late and why did he wait that long? Now in talking with Peter afterwards, Peter said, 'She was doing great. I didn't want to stop her. I didn't want to step on her performance. I didn't know what to do.' That was a lie. Peter is a tremendously internal man, and I think he *wanted* her to be committed. I think he *wanted* her to go away. I don't think he recognized her worth because to him at that moment she was worthless. She wasn't behaving like he would behave so he didn't want her anymore. That is what *I* saw.

Now within the values of his getting upset, within the values of his being too loud, too boisterous, whatever these actions were by a man who was not used to functioning outside himself, outside the bound-

aries, without his control. When he went out to the work area the day after she was committed, I really felt he was shocked that anyone would give a shit that Mabel went to an institution. Who was *she* that anyone would care? Why would anyone like *her*? Who was *she*? She was a product of his imagination. She wasn't a *person*. She was a person who did exactly what he said. She was a *kook*. She was known as a nut. So he didn't like to be discovered. He didn't like it when the guys said something because he felt enormously guilty for it. Now it is very complicated to structure that. The emotions are complicated. It is hard to explain because they are hard messages to get over to anybody. So you have to allow the actor total freedom. Not a little freedom. Don't say, 'Improvise your emotions,' and then stop and say, 'Wait a minute, buddy, if you could do this it would be good, and by the way, go back to what you were doing before.' It won't work. So what you do is you let that actor run with it. He grows with the part. He is making a fool of himself and he is making a jerk of himself and he is becoming more transparent.

So by the time you get him to the beach – the beach scene, I think, is wonderful, and Peter is wonderful because he absolutely has no idea what he is doing there. I had the camera down there and they just started walking. I never went near them and they are walking and Peter has some lines and he says the lines and then they don't know what to do. Now I could *tell* them, but that would kill it. What difference does it make what he does? *He* has to do it. *I* can't do it. The camera can move. It can follow, you know. So where they play that scene and what they do has to be in their own timing. And when Peter gets there at the beach and he pushes the little girl down, there was a wonderful moment. I see him trying to communicate with his children. I see him trying to touch. I see him not caring. I see so many things that developed that wouldn't have if you formalized a view of the character through your own mind and didn't allow room for interpretation. I wrote it and as soon as I wrote it I killed the writer. There is no writer because the writer can only make the actor feel insecure. I have been in a lot of movies and as soon as the writer would come on the set everyone died. Because the writer knows exactly how everyone should be played, exactly what the intentions are. But writing is one medium and film is another medium.

Cassavetes later said that he was completely taken aback when Falk taunted Mama Longhetti by making the 'ba-ba' sounds (which were not in the script or the other takes) at the height of Mabel's breakdown scene.

The conflation of actor and character in the beach scene:
'Peter is wonderful because he absolutely has no idea
what he is doing there.' © *Sam Shaw*

The actors occasionally get carried away and go off in their own direction. To have a sense, to be able to have the same kind of sense of humor about his mother even in the most terrible situation, to go ‘ba-ba-ba-ba’. When I saw Peter go like this I almost fainted! And I really I *want* people to do what they want to do, but I . . . I almost fainted! I had to hide it. I thought, ‘What the hell is he doing? Click-click-click.’ [Laughs.] I can’t figure it out and yet Peter’s a person. He’s behaving like a person. *Strange* – you know? He came to me afterwards and he said, ‘You think that’s too much? I went like that to the mother. Maybe I should be more sensitive to Gena.’ And I said, ‘No, I thought it was fine.’ Because you can’t, you can’t really control a scene. You can’t control life.

Another directing technique Cassavetes employed in all of his work was to act out scenes himself. He would play the parts, prior to the shoot or even while the scene was being filmed – mugging facial expressions and gestures, momentarily becoming one of the children greeting Mabel, Mabel entering a room, Mr. Jenson fighting Nick. The beauty of his method was that it was non-verbal, non-analytical, non-intellectual. It gave the actor a suggestive gesture or movement without dictating a particular motivation or feeling or interpretation. (A comical side-effect of the pantomime process is that someone familiar with Cassavetes’ personal gestures or tones of voice can see and hear them in many of his actors’ performances – e.g. the times in *Shadows* when Ben holds his nose, shakes his head and giggles as Cassavetes frequently did; the times in this film when Mabel waves her arms or makes punching gestures, which Cassavetes, a born gesticulator, sometimes did.)

The point was for the acting to come from a deeper place than language, and for an actor not to focus on mere words. It is interesting in this context that when Cassavetes ran the drama workshop with Burt Lane, he had wanted to bring in Jean Shepherd to teach a class on memory (since Shepherd claimed to have had a photographic memory which he relied on to construct his elaborate monologues) – not because remembering lines was important, but so that the actors could become so comfortable with their lines that they could, in effect, forget them and focus on the feelings instead. Cassavetes gave the same advice to dozens of actors over the years:

Don’t worry about the words! I don’t care about the words. I don’t care if there is not one word right. Go through your mind what the attitude would be if there were *no* lines.

Life imitating art or art imitating life? Cassavetes and Vince
Barbi singing a duet on the sidewalk between takes.
© Michael Ferris

There is a characteristic indirection to Cassavetes' characters' dialogue and interactions. Characters almost never simply say what they desire or need. They don't verbalize their goals, intentions or feelings. Cassavetes was upset when reviewers criticized this aspect of his work.

I get hot. I resent the idea that someone says about the film, 'If only the dialogue had been more concise, if only the dialogue could have reached some conclusion.' Some critic said that, and I laughed when I looked at it, because I feel those kinds of scenes are very corny and boring to watch, when the words are right on the nose and they're no fun for an actor to play.

What happens in family relationships, if you were really to ever put a tape recorder to your emotions – forget about what's being *said!* Most of the arguments between men and women are based upon somebody's *inability* to express what they *really* mean. When a man and a woman get together, they fight about the television – turn it on, turn it low, turn it up – drinking, etc. The things that really count are very rarely expressed, no

matter how long a marriage goes on, no matter how long the love goes on.

People have such a belief in the 'written' word. When they don't hear a 'written' word, particularly in my movies, they think it's improvised. It's not. Only two lines in *A Woman Under the Influence* were actually improvised [Falk's 'ba-ba-ba' and Rowlands' driving instructions to her mother]. I try to make things believable and natural and seem like they're happening. I do write differently. I write looser dialogue. The words are there, but they don't necessarily have to come to a conclusion. Do you know what I mean? It's just what you hear in life. Very few places in the script do words have any clear or definite significance. I've had many fights with Elaine May on this, who says, 'John, you must understand that people do listen to what the character says.' Her view is that the word is gospel and my view is that it isn't gospel – and that the intention of the character cannot be simplified by having that character *verbally* commit to sadness, to laughter. Dialogue should be tied up so heavily with the incident that you don't feel dialogue and you don't feel talk, rather you feel the emotions of the people. I'm more interested in the *intention* of the dialogue, in the emotion expressed by the moment, than in the right words.

The point was not to reduce complex events to simple psychological motivations. Cassavetes allowed multiple, oblique, indirect, contradictory meanings to coexist at any one moment.

Within the framework of the writing all that's there is the words. And the rest of it is how it is played. That's where improvisation comes in. Somebody tells a joke within the framework of a scene. In most pictures you are committed to laugh because the words say there is laughter there. I want to give that actor the freedom to be a person, not to have to act like an idiot. Not to have to act like a buffoon, if it's not his own buffoonery, you know? So that you don't have to tell a joke well. You don't have to be good. You don't have to be anything. If somebody tells you that you're supposed to cry at something, and you have some other reaction, I want you to have it – don't want you to say that, 'This is all. Everything hinges upon a tear falling down my eyes.' I saw that movie. I don't want to see that again. Because I know that that's in a way the greatest form of manipulation. I don't like things that are neat. I'm very superstitious: this is *life*.

He illustrated the point by citing the scene in the driveway between Mabel and her mother.

Because the people have done some homework and come in with something, and that's why when Gena comes off the porch on her very first line she says, 'Get over there,' you know something interesting is going on. And you can smell it. It's *true*. And I can smell it as I see it, that it's true. The line is still there, you know. The lines of Lady [Gena's mother] are there when she comes out of the house and says, 'Your mother's very nervous.' But how that's played could be played farcically, terribly, wonderfully – a million different ways. It's all *interpretation*. In that sense it's improvised. After Gena sends the kids away from her house so she can be alone with her husband, we all know how to make something lonely. You go far away and you light it very dimly here and there and very sketchily and very beautifully depending on how you want to do it, and you shoot wide-angle and you let a woman wander through a house. It's easy to make a woman lonely. But there isn't one line in there that says, 'I want to be alone with my husband.' She's going about the task of getting her kids off to her mother's house, as I know it would really happen. I didn't know there would be laughter there. I'm delighted that there's laughter there, but the laughter came out of Gena's mother – who has a delightful and delicious sense of humor. And so when the kids were there, she allowed you to laugh, because she allowed herself to be martyred for a minute. As to backing out of the driveway, she can't drive worth a damn, so Gena *does* give her instructions when she's backing out of our driveway. [Laughs.] So it's lovely that she does this in the film. When that happens, I have a clue that it is right.

Just as he had added the sound of the beeps in post-production in the parking lot scene in *Minnie and Moskowitz*, Cassavetes added the sound of the car stalling and being restarted in this scene to make the moment even more comical. The sound of the ringing telephone in the film's final seconds – which was not in the screenplay – is another of Cassavetes' editorial additions in terms of his sound design.

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Since he didn't have the resources of a studio to draw on, Cassavetes used fairly old equipment, a big Mitchell BNC in this case.

We were shooting in regular 35mm with a Mitchell BNC. We used an Arri for a second camera – for the hand-held work and for exteriors. Twenty-five or thirty per cent of the film was hand-held. I like to use it where it wouldn't ordinarily be used – for example in an acting scene

rather than in an action sequence – for fluidity, for intensity. I do it myself, because on hand-held shooting the feeling you want can't be transmitted to a cameraman. It's too delicate. It's not that they don't understand, but I have an enormous advantage in that I'm not afraid to talk to the actors while the scene is going on, and you want to be specific at times. When I'm shooting, I think nothing of saying to the actors, 'Get the hell out of there, move, move!!' – but I don't think the camera operators would dare to take that privilege. I also like the hand-held camera, because the actors go faster. In the Mitchell scenes [the non-hand-held ones], they can be more relaxed. They're not pushed by the camera. A hand-held camera pushes the actors' tempo up without words.

Cassavetes would always ask the cameraman to have a number of prime lenses at his disposal, though he frequently ended up using a telephoto for more than half of the shots in his films. It not only allowed him to keep the camera away from the actors while still being able to get close-ups, but it saved time on changing lenses. He could do successive takes with several different focal lengths without ever changing the lens. The only drawback was the shallow depth of field of the telephoto, which is why in *A Woman Under the Influence* and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* he frequently racks focus to get from one point in space to another.

Most of the film was shot in the dining room and the foyer, basically from two angles. One good thing about the house, of course, was that we could shoot all the sequences there in continuity. I directed it in chronological sequence, just as it would have been lived. I used long, long takes so that the actors could develop emotional scenes without interruption. One of the reasons we used long lenses, especially for all the work in the house, was to avoid a feeling of confinement. So much of the picture takes place in the Longhetti house there's a real danger of getting the feeling the actors are locked in by the camera. The long lenses meant the camera could be far away and the actors wouldn't be constricted by its proximity. And after a while, the actors weren't aware of the camera. It seemed to work very well, very easily.

With respect to Mabel's breakdown scene in particular, we just set it up on such an extremely long lens that I knew it would be technically impossible to do it all in focus. The operator and the focus-puller couldn't possibly be in concert because there'd be no way of knowing where the actors would be at any moment. It had to be a natural thing: certain things would come in and out of focus because there were so

many points of interest switching back and forth all the time. We did that sequence many different times in many different ways. But out of maybe twelve takes, this was the only one that seemed to play in continuity in terms of performances and everything else.

One of the things that frustrated many cameramen who worked with Cassavetes was that he made no concessions to staging the action for the camera. All of his attention was placed on the actors. For the cameraman it was sink or swim. He was expected to get the shots on his own – any way he could – with no help from anyone, including the director.

We would light the whole picture generally and let the actors play it to the best of their ability. The important thing is for the operator to shoot whatever action is most interesting at the moment. I'm not going to stand over the camera operator's shoulder and say, 'Swing over to that. Do you have a good frame there?' It's more like documentary work. Besides, we had a wonderful camera crew. I knew they would be as artistic as possible and would frame in such a way that it wouldn't seem like a movie. The fluidity of the camera really keeps it alive and allows the operator to make his selections emotionally. In the course of the shoot we become attuned and sensitive to what this person is trying to say. So we try and make it easier for her to say that. Easier for her to express herself. So if I see her doing something that maybe someone wouldn't see, it would become terribly important that I shoot that and that we shoot that, and I don't say, 'LET'S MOVE THE CAMERA IN AND GET HER IN THAT MOMENT!' You know, the poor thing would be destroyed. That would destroy her. The people that worked behind the camera were the damndest crew because they really were for the actor and put themselves second. And if they saw something wrong they just went like this [winks almost imperceptibly] but didn't let the actor see it.

Film is the cheapest thing on a shoot. I'm not going to stop and say, 'Let's go back and get that moment of that woman or of that man or of this whole area.' When you multiply that by twelve performances, by fourteen performances, each person coming in with something else – there's a lot going on. So I anticipate that and I say to the cameraman, 'OK. We have no money, but we're going to spend money in one area – we're going to shoot *a lot* of film.' So our ratio goes up. We must have shot 600 or 700,000 feet of film [more than 120 hours]. The finished film is about 13 or 14,000 feet.

Cassavetes later said he deliberately kept the photography in *A Woman Under the Influence* a little rough and the colors muted.

I have never liked ‘metallic’ colors, the ‘hard’ picture, even when this was fashionable. It doesn’t leave anything to the imagination, there are no secrets. People expect beautiful effects. Some people like a slick, metallic look. I can watch a black-and-white film that’s rough and grainy. I can feel more belief in that film. I made a slop print of *A Woman Under the Influence* in black and white, but after seeing it I realized that there were certain values greater in the color print.

Cassavetes insisted that he never used marks; but he would, in fact, occasionally mark a position. (Tape is visible at the bottom edge of the frame in the scene of Mabel’s return from the hospital, for example.) Al Ruban, who was strong-willed and extremely outspoken, would occasionally insist on the use of marks and on limiting actors’ movements to keep them in the light or in focus. However, as much as possible Cassavetes tried to minimize these constraints.

It’s much easier for an operator to follow action that’s free and natural than staged action. To give you an example, here’s the way an actor to me moves when he’s staged. [Cassavetes walks with a series of comical, jerky movements.] Impossible to follow! I mean, it’s *just impossible!* When a person is free, how can you *not* follow him? You’re so concentrated on what’s happening that there’s no way to do it wrong. But if the action is wrong or you don’t believe it and you’re not zeroed into it and it’s phony and it stinks, your photography stinks, you know? So you don’t like it and you want to do it again or you miss it. And thinking that you have to have the actors hit marks is a fallacy. It’s a nonsense rule that’s been passed down. I think it’s much easier *not* to stage, *much* easier – of course, you must be prepared!

The sound must be prepared, film has to be in the camera. The focus-puller has to know approximately what his distances are. OK. For example, we’re in a lecture room here, and say I have a camera and I’ve got to shoot everybody in this room. That’s the problem. If you want to be a *good* technician, you measure everybody and mark it down. If you want to be a *better* technician and *better* at your job, you’ve got to have good depth perception. To be a good focus-puller you have to have good depth perception. You’ve got to know that *this* is approximately twelve feet. And you’ve gotta know that it’s twelve feet, and then you check it by eye, and then you go here – that’s fourteen, that’s sixteen, eighteen, so you know how many rows there are. One, two, three, four

– and you count them. And if you’re good at your job, you’ll do your own homework and you won’t wait until the scene is being shot to figure it out. And if you were getting ready to film the spaghetti breakfast you’ll think to yourself, ‘Now here’s this whole group and the camera is here.’ That’s all there is to it. We’re here, man. And you’re in your chairs. No one’s moving around. So it’s the easiest scene in the world to do. And the lighting man has got to figure out before everyone comes in how to light it.

But if you’re *professionally* trained, you’re gonna walk in and say, ‘Put everyone where they’re gonna be. Now, we’re gonna move everyone out of here and now we’re going to put all the actors in.’ And somebody’s going to walk around saying, ‘You’re in seat one, you’re in seat two, you’re in seat three, you’re in seat four, you’re in seat five.’ And it can go on indefinitely. That’s what they do to get their technical perfection! Now who the hell cares whether *you’re* there or *you’re* there! It doesn’t make any difference. The lighting still has to be the same. And what they’re *really* saying is, ‘Give me a lot of time to light. I don’t want to be hurried, because I don’t want this to look bad so Bobby Evans can go to a screening room and say, “This guy was in the dark or out of focus.”’ Because everyone double-crosses you when you sit in a projection room. You’re a technician and you’re sitting there and all the executives are sitting in this room and they see something out of focus and say [Cassavetes says it with a mock executive voice], ‘WHAT HAPPENED HERE? RUN THAT BACK! PUT THAT – WHO IS THAT CAMERAMAN?’ And the director’s sitting there and he knows who the cameraman is. Well, Evans knows who the cameraman is too. So what you as the director are saying is that it’s *his* fault not yours. And so on and so forth. *That’s* a professional film. It’s one built on fear and not one built on a relationship between people. And yet every film student would *love* to work for Universal Pictures or work for all those other studios! What *we* do in the greatest sense is try to offer an option for people that would like to be independent. [In a stage whisper] I’ll tell you the truth – the money’s much better when you work for Universal than it is when you work for me. But at the same time, I think that you have a different kind of reward. The reward is that it’s a shot in the dark – *if* you can make it. And *that’s* the reward. And it’s yours. It’s not mine; it’s *yours*!

Cassavetes actually preferred using amateurs with little prior experience on his crews. Over the years he had discovered that it was extremely difficult for professionally trained cameramen to adapt to his methods. AFI

students made up the majority of the crew when *A Woman Under the Influence* began shooting. The price was right, since Cassavetes could get them for nothing. As they were students, presumably they would be eager to work and open to new ways of thinking. But, ironically, even most of them turned out to be 'too professional' for his methods. Caleb Deschanel was one of the star students at the AFI, and Cassavetes appointed him DP and allowed him to hand-pick his own crew from among his classmates. It was his first feature filmmaking experience, but he simply could not work the way Cassavetes wanted him to. (To be candid, there were also a number of serious personality conflicts between Deschanel and Cassavetes and non-AFI members of the crew.) Cassavetes fired him a few weeks into the shoot (only a few of his set-ups and shots are still visible in the early house scenes of the final edit – the scenes in the bar and the house with Garson Cross, the scenes on the construction site after Nick commits Mabel and when Eddie falls, the scenes involving Nick's nighttime work and his call to Mabel, and the scenes where Mabel is alone in the house after her mother leaves with the children). The Deschanel touch is visible in a number of them, which have a degree of gorgeousness that Cassavetes seldom allows himself. It would not be at all surprising if the visual beauty of some of Deschanel's shots was another reason Cassavetes fired him.

Writing to me recently, Deschanel indicated that he still does not agree with Cassavetes' view of cinematography: 'I think John would just as soon pull the film through his brain and expose it that way as worry about what it took to record something on film through a camera . . . He really never accepted film as a craft that is mastered in order to make it work as art.' Even Al Ruban, who worked on several of the films, said he and Cassavetes had knock-down, drag-out arguments on other films almost daily, since Cassavetes made virtually no concessions to the cameraman and his crew, and consequently made photographic demands that were almost impossible to meet.

When Deschanel was dismissed, virtually the entire crew went with him in protest (since they were fellow AFI students and friends, and all equally regarded Cassavetes as impossible to work with). If Cassavetes had been less driven (or more sane), he would have quit then and there. He had no money to hire replacements and no one else to call on for help. The only person left in the camera department was a lowly apprentice named Michael Ferris. Cassavetes took him upstairs and, as Ferris recounts it, said, 'Look, I want you to take over the camera department. You and I are going to shoot this thing together!' Ferris had little previous experience, had never shot a feature before and, by his

A Children's Crusade. Talking to Caleb Deschanel (extreme right) while Elaine Goren (later Kagan) takes notes on a copy of the shooting script. Nick Spaulding holds the boom. They are off to one side of the sofa bed that Nick and Mabel sleep on. © *Michael Ferris*

own account, was not ready to handle a camera department. Cassavetes knew it; but it just didn't matter. When he took over, Ferris wasn't even sure how to load the camera they were using (with the result that his entire first week's worth of shooting had to be thrown away because of scratches before he figured out that he had missed a roller), but Cassavetes was a believer in on-the-job training. One of his most remarkable qualities, with both actors and crew, was his capacity to show enough belief in someone to make them better than they thought they could be, and to this day Ferris is deeply grateful for the trust Cassavetes placed in him. ('He thought of you as a hero, and you became one in response.') Ferris continued to work with Cassavetes on *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and *Opening Night*.

Beyond his crew problems, Cassavetes was having union problems. Given that the production featured Falk (which drew a lot of attention) and was entirely non-union, the unions were determined to shut it down or impede its progress in every way they could. While Deschanel was fomenting resistance from inside, the unions were lobbying other members of the crew to quit (succeeding with a few). They threatened immediate legal action and future blocking of the exhibition of the film (which they succeeded at two years later), as well as secret mischief and

sabotage on the set (which more than one member of the crew is convinced actually took place).

Bo Harwood was another individual who would stay with *A Woman Under the Influence* through thick and thin, and who would become an even longer-term artistic collaborator with Cassavetes. Two years earlier, while *Husbands* was being edited, Cassavetes had met him at an AFI screening of an experimental film for which Harwood did the music. As he sometimes did, Cassavetes took an immediate shine to him, and without much more than a brief conversation, asked him if he would help him do a little editing on *Husbands*. A year later, he asked him to do a little sound editing on *Minnie and Moskowitz*. From that point on, the friendship grew.

Harwood tells a story similar to Ferris's about how Cassavetes could believe someone into doing more than they thought they were capable of. Just prior to beginning *A Woman Under the Influence*, Cassavetes asked Harwood if he would do the music for the film. Harwood was a young, unknown, unemployed rock musician who couldn't read music, but he embraced the challenge and began experimenting with things on his guitar. A few days later, Cassavetes came in and said he had decided he wanted piano music. When Harwood protested that he didn't have access to a piano, Cassavetes blew off the objection and said that Peter Falk had one in his offices that they could use. When Harwood said that he didn't know how to play the piano, Cassavetes was still unfazed. That didn't matter; he could learn. Then a few weeks later, just as Harwood was getting comfortable at noodling around on the keyboard, Cassavetes came in again and said he had just bought a Nagra and decided that Harwood would also be doing the film's sound. When Harwood protested that he didn't know the first thing about sound recording, Cassavetes again said that that was fine: 'It's just a tape recorder. They're all the same. It's easy. You can figure it out.' Harwood spent the next three weeks carrying the recorder and microphone everywhere he went, experimenting at home, in restaurants and on the street.

With no more professional training, background or experience than that, Harwood would, from this point on, be in charge of sound and music in almost all of Cassavetes' subsequent work, including the stage-plays of the eighties. Since Harwood did not have access to professional equipment, and Cassavetes had no budget for music or sound effects, he used whatever guerrilla methods he could think up to create sound effects and music for these works. Effects were recorded not in a sound studio on a mixing board but in Cassavetes' office on a portable tape

recorder. Cassavetes himself often came up with the lyrics for the songs that appeared in his later films, and hummed or pounded out a primitive tune on a guitar or the piano. Harwood's assignment would be to turn the stammering and strumming into music. Some of the music for *A Woman Under the Influence* was created with tissue paper and a comb. Some of the sound effects for *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* were created by recording Cassavetes or Harwood knocking objects over in Cassavetes' office or pounding on a table. It wasn't only by financial necessity that music was created in this rough and ready way. According to Harwood, on the rare occasions when for some reason he had the resources to mix a few professional-caliber musical selections and presented them to Cassavetes, when Harwood finally saw the finished film in a theater, he would invariably discover to his surprise (and embarrassment) that Cassavetes had, in the end, used the office recordings rather than the studio ones. He just didn't like things that were too smooth or polished.

Cassavetes did make one attempt to involve a professional musical performer in *A Woman Under the Influence*. When he decided he wanted some opera music for the opening sequence, he got Maria Callas's phone number in Monaco and called her up, asking permission to use her recording of *La Traviata*. She said she would be glad to have him use it – for a \$10,000 fee. Cassavetes spent an hour on long distance trying to convince her to give it to him for free, 'as one Greek to another', but ended up stealing the music off 'some Russian record'. (Significantly, there are no permission credits for the opera excerpts used in the film.)

In an attempt to free up the actors' movements, Cassavetes began *A Woman Under the Influence* using radio mikes; however, due to the poor quality of the sound, he switched to booms early on. (Even though the sound was still inferior to boom miking, *Opening Night* and *Love Streams* would employ radio mikes extensively for the same reason.)

Editing on *A Woman Under the Influence* began in February 1973, briefly paused during the period of additional shooting that took place in April, and was more or less complete by November. Cassavetes did some of the editing and sound mix at the AFI. But when he was done, he discovered that their equipment was so substandard that the mix had to be redone at a professional studio. Cassavetes' work on the edit was interrupted by the most important acting appearance he ever made in films beyond his own: Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky*, which was shot in Philadelphia in the summer of 1973, with a couple weeks of additional pickup footage being filmed in January 1974. Cassavetes pro-

vided technical help to May during the filming and editing period – giving her advice or assistance on every aspect of the process – at one point during the filming of a difficult night scene, according to May, showing up with a group of ‘kids with cameras’ and positioning them on rooftops to grab additional footage he thought she could use. He spent many months between the spring of 1973 and the spring of 1975 helping her edit the print. (In typical Cassavetean fashion, and as he himself had done with *Minnie and Moskowitz*, he and May would go into the editing suite where *Mikey and Nicky* was being assembled late at night and undo much of what the film’s professional editors had done during the day.) And he provided moral support in her battles with Paramount over the film’s release.

As always, Cassavetes experimented with many different shot selections and assemblies on *Woman*. At one point, he had a ‘final’ edit that ran just under four hours in length. (Many people who saw it testified to its brilliance. ‘As slow and stately as Dreyer,’ one friend told me.) The film was eventually pared down to a 155-minute edit, which was the one shown at several pre-release screenings, at the New York Film Festival and when the film was first released. The film was shortened to a 147-minute running-time a few months into its run. This is the print currently distributed and released on video. (Unfortunately, even beyond the loss of eight minutes of footage, all recent prints I have seen – in all video and film formats – also have a new, remixed musical soundtrack dating from the early 1990s, a remix supervised by Al Ruban after Cassavetes’ death, which is significantly different from the soundtrack Cassavetes created.)

The first version was three hours and fifty minutes long. I didn’t want to make too many cuts because I don’t think viewers would be interested in emotions stimulated by a technical effect. Gena is a miraculous actress and I think Peter is a miraculous actor. And you can’t really tell until you’ve seen take after take of these people being just absolutely true, true to themselves. They could break your heart in every take and it’s a terrible responsibility to come in and have the fear, the terrible fear on all of our parts, that we will screw up something. So then we start to go to work with our preconceived notions of how a scene is going to play well, and we do it, and all of us take a shot at it. Maybe there are five or six people working in the editing room, all of us wanting to get at the scene and trying, you know, terribly excited by the material that we have. You have the tremendous problem of structure. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. It was a terrible trial-and-error in which we

screwed up the movie, put it together, screwed it up, had a nice version, tried to fix it, screwed it up, tried to fix it, screwed it up. And eventually this is what came out. The rhythms and the idea of what's happening aren't dictated by movie terms because this isn't a movie. There are no geniuses. It's just a lot of fucking hard work and *trying to get it*.

Cassavetes was aware of the demands his movie made on viewers.

You can't edit the film any more than you can direct that film. You're not able to make the film play any better than it plays. I mean, certainly we can take ten minutes out of the beginning and trim everything. I mean, it can be trimmed easily but it's an awfully tough film. It's just an awfully tough film. You can't get a breath, I mean, a breath to breathe because it's too tough. I mean the fact that you're in love with a woman and a woman's in love with you, or that you commit yourself in one way or another to another person and you can't live with it. You can't change that basic reality. Take the scene of Mabel's breakdown, for example. We had to prolong it. The sequence was full because unless you actually see them do that, unless you actually see the continuity of that, the actual idea that he would do this and carry it through could have been weakened. And I didn't particularly like the scene upstairs. But I felt it was necessary for Nick to go upstairs and make up his mind that he would actually do this in the face of the children, in the face of his wife. It was very important that he actually decide to commit this woman so that it would become a memory for him. It's the hardest thing in the world to put someone that you love in an institution. There is a lot of pain involved. To make it play is nothing, that's just a cut – boom – like that. But to keep the ideas of the people, so that at the end when they go upstairs and tuck the kids in bed that it has some relevance to what you've seen was the hard part. The rest, it's a matter of a week of trimming, of bringing together. How far and deep we do it depends on how intense it gets. If we rushed the story just to get to the dramatic areas, it would no longer be a valid picture. We're just talking about people and their lives, their loves and their activities. If it becomes exciting, that's because it is exciting. I'm not going to push it.

We've spent maybe seven months trying to find some things in it that would soften it. I think in a great sense the music score will soften it. I think that those other feelings will be amplified through it. But I don't want to use music as a trip. We have a great musician, Bo Harwood, who's been with the picture from the beginning and has done sound on the picture and he's just a sensational guy and he understands the prob-

lems that we're confronted with. I mean, there's certain things that will make laughter come when we need it and make time not last quite as long as it does. I mean, sure, it's long. It *is* long. When we started to cut the picture it was mandatory first for us to *see* it in that length and make sure that everything we have is in there so that we can begin now deleting and finding out where we are as we take stuff out of the picture. I can't take into consideration what some theater-owner or distributor might think about the length or the painfulness. I couldn't care less. You do one thing at a time. After we finish with the film we distribute it. But we don't distribute the film while we're making the film. You know, I'm an artist, not a friggin' salesman.

As was always the case, Cassavetes shot many scenes that never made it into the movie, including one Falk was particularly fond of – in which Nick and Mabel talk about their dreams and, according to Falk, 'the crazy side of Nick came out,' as well as a tender side, since it is the only time in the film that he gets to interact with Mabel alone, away from the pressure of relatives and co-workers.

The picture fluctuates between being a romantic picture and a realistic one. We all know how to make a movie that's a little more romantic, but frankly, I get bored with that because it has nothing to do with anything I'm seeing. I cut out many entire scenes. For instance, there were several scenes where Gena and Peter were alone together. I very much liked what developed between them. There was a very beautiful scene in the morning when they tell each other their dreams and another when they walk together in the rain. When I saw the whole edit, I realized that, perhaps unconsciously, I was giving the public what they wanted and that this was possibly the result of a certain romantic desire on my part and that of the actors to see the union in a romantic way. Yet in my view marriage is not really a 'romance'. The romantic episodes in a marriage are very short. The relationship between the two characters was so intimate in these scenes that one could no longer believe in the fundamental problems facing them. So I cut them out.

Though he hated most of the films he saw, Cassavetes made it a policy to see as many movies as he possibly could – the good, the bad and the ugly. He told me he thought it was his professional responsibility. He was influenced in some way by almost everything. *Mrs. Miniver* was one of his favorite films and *Rosemary's Baby* one of his least favorite, but

The filmmaker's real family during the time *A Woman Under the Influence* was being made. The children are, from left to right, Xan, Nick and Zoe.
© Sam Shaw

both are ghostly presences in *A Woman Under the Influence*. The bedroom scenes with Walter Pidgeon in Wyler's film echo some of the scenes with Falk in bed in *Woman*, and the commitment scene and the general sense of a woman being imprisoned in her own home by apparent friends in Polanski's movie are in Cassavetes' film. But Cassavetes had problems with the veracity of even the Capra movies he most adored. One of his complaints about more recent Hollywood films was that although they were about falling in love, romance, infatuation and lust, they almost never dealt with complexities of mature, adult love.

One of the reasons I make films is to make clear to people that family life is not always going to be a bed of roses. Don't be upset if you fall out of love, because it's gonna happen lots of times. Don't be upset by conflict. The film shows that there is something to a one-on-one relationship, something so beautiful that it is worth all the problems. There is in some ways a greater value to family life, and that is something that hasn't been said since Andy Hardy. Everything is so negative! No matter how 'horrible' the love story was, it really was a love story and not just a chance meeting and a two-second love affair. Nick and Mabel,

with all their problems, and they have a *million*, were more comfortable with each other than they were with anyone else. And when they were alone I don't know if there were two people who liked and respected each other more than any two people I've ever seen.

*

Once post-production was complete, the next step was to interest a theater chain or distributor. Cassavetes later said that he conducted so many distributors' screenings at the American Film Institute that he wore out his work print and was still unable to get anyone to pick up the film. Years later, he would tell me that he was personally convinced that the studios and unions had put word out that any theater-owner or distributor who touched the film might find it difficult to get future studio releases.

In the following statement, although Cassavetes doesn't overstate his difficulties securing distribution, he does slightly exaggerate the amount of time it took him to get the film into a theater. It was about fourteen months from the completion of post-production in November 1973 to the first commercial screening in December 1974; but, as I shall describe, even at that point *A Woman Under the Influence* still did not have a distributor.

I finished the film almost two years before I could get it screened in a theater. I knew what I had but couldn't convince *anyone* to give it a shot. It was always the same thing from theater-owners and distributors: 'Too long.' 'Too depressing.' Absolutely nobody wanted it. It was the most discouraging eighteen months of my life. I almost gave up, threw it in, at that point. I really did.

Distributing is a closed shop – perhaps the tightest shop in the world. Amateurs are not welcome. The studios have had no interest in *A Woman Under the Influence*. And if they did come to us, we wouldn't sell it cheaply because we've taken our risks and expect to be paid well for it. After all, who the hell are they? Unless they finance the production, they're a bunch of agents who go out and book theaters; that's what it really boils down to. Most of them don't have any real interest in films. How could they? They hate artists anyway. The only thing the distributors are interested in is financial rip-off, and that's all. No one ever says it, but it's true.

My films are hard to assess or categorize commercially. They're always a gamble. We'd submitted this picture to every company before

we started. We don't have any desire to finance and be the whole show, we really don't. We can work under any circumstances, but obviously the financial problems become a burden. There's no way to know if this film will draw an audience. The companies take precautions. Their pictures take precautions against failure. They put unrelated violence in just because there is some kind of an audience appetite for it. They'll put action scenes and production values in, things that don't have too much to do with the films that we make. I have to put a rape scene in or a nude scene, or I have to shoot somebody in the face for this film to be 'good'!

Distributors have all kinds of lists of what you can do and what you can't do for commercial sale. They go on the basis of what's worked before, while this is an original film. You can't go to *A Woman Under the Influence* on the basis of having seen my other films. It's hard for the major companies to fit it into a category. We've learned a long time ago not to even try to second-guess them. You can go crazy.

Everyone who makes a film is at the major distributors' mercy. We don't want great sums of money, but we do expect distributors to offer us some continuity and be more practical: not to offer actors a million dollars when times are good and make the business impossible; not to take twenty-five per cent overhead so they can put more money in their coffers; and not to make destructive pictures they don't even believe in. They'd make a picture about a revolution in which all major studio heads were killed if they thought it would make money. The one group that has any leverage is reviewers. It's important for the critics to object because they're the only ones who have a voice with the studios and the public.

In the late summer of 1974, Cassavetes turned to his old standby, the New York Film Festival, as a way of breaking the log-jam. Unfortunately, his friend and long-time supporter Amos Vogel was no longer there, and under the leadership of Richard Roud the festival had switched to almost exclusively programming European features. Cassavetes brought in the print and screened it for the festival jury (chaired by Roud and comprising Andrew Sarris, Susan Sontag, Richard Corliss, Arthur Knight, Henry Langlois and Arthur Mayer), but according to the filmmaker, who told me he was present, one of the members of the selection committee left in the middle of the film and never returned, and Molly Haskell (who accompanied Sarris to the event) expressed her distaste for the movie on the spot. The final comment is probably an allusion to the checkered commercial career of jazz clarinetist Sidney Bechet.

I decided to let the New York Festival have it. But *they* rejected it too! We had a screening. When I walked up the aisle, Molly Haskell called it 'the biggest piece of garbage I've ever seen'. They told me they rejected it because it had no ending! [Laughs.] I made the film, and I know that if anything it was a series of endings. [Laughs.] I wanted to *choke them!* [Gesturing and laughing.] I decided to open a tailor shop.

About a year earlier, Cassavetes had heard that Warner Brothers was having trouble finding someone to direct *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More*. He had some contacts there, and in the spirit of helping out people he knew and liked, he kept calling them and telling them how good Martin Scorsese was. Scorsese got the job and owed him a favor. He got on the phone after the jury screening.

I went back and called up Marty Scorsese and said, 'Pull your film.' *Italianamerican* had already been announced as part of the Festival's 'Roots' series. An hour later, the phone rang. Guess what? It was the Festival. They said there had been a mistake! That's how I got it in. The film got some attention after that.

A Woman Under the Influence was shoehorned into two back-to-back screenings at 6.00 and 9.30 p.m. on the next to the last night of the Festival, Saturday 12 October 1974. Cassavetes went without sleep for most of the week before the screening, tinkering with the edit. He had the final cut rush-processed, and made the event with only hours to spare. Both events were sensations – arguably the two most resoundingly successful screenings Cassavetes had ever had. The applause started with the final credits and turned into a sustained standing ovation as Rowlands rose to accept the audience's homage. (Cassavetes was not there; though he sat through most of the film to gauge the reaction of the audience, he left just before it ended; he was still mad at the Festival.)

Woman garnered pages of press coverage over the course of the next week, but Cassavetes still could not make a dent with the New York critics, who continued to agree about one thing – the awfulness of his work. For John Simon *A Woman Under the Influence* was 'muddle-headed, pretentious, and interminable'. For Pauline Kael it was 'a murky, ragmop movie'. And for Stanley Kauffmann *Woman* was 'utterly without interest or merit'. (To give a twist to the shiv, Kauffmann's negative assessment appeared in a two-film review which went on to praise *Murder on the Orient Express* as 'first-class entertainment [and] one of

the best all-star pictures I can remember'.) Cassavetes found himself still completely unable to get distribution for the movie. The cold, hard truth was that after *Husbands* and *Minnie and Moskowitz* had lost money, the distributors and theater-owners wanted nothing to do with him, no matter what 'The Critics' said – pro or con. He was box-office poison.

The majors told me nobody is interested in women's problems. They have no desire to see it. It scares them. They would have to put a considerable amount of money in to sell it, and they've already decided it won't reach an audience because it's about a painful part of people's lives. But I think we'll be successful. I think it's a very delicate movie. Yet if you tell audiences that, they won't go. They're so conditioned to anything called beautiful and tender being boring. The first thing that anyone wants to know about a movie is whether it moves along with a lot of action or whether it is about boring, fantasized problems that don't really exist. We're in the middle with our film, because these problems really do exist. You do see a film that has something to do with you. To me it's so boring to see a movie that has nothing to do with my life in any way, shape, form or gender. I think the only interesting thing in films is to see a man–woman relationship.

After spending the rest of October and early November unsuccessfully attempting to interest a distributor, Cassavetes decided on a novel strategy. He would four-wall the film (renting the theater at his own expense) in prestigious New York and Los Angeles theaters; launch a major publicity campaign (spending tens of thousands of dollars of his own money on large-scale newspaper display advertising for the opening weeks); make a number of rapid-fire television appearances to promote the movie; and then would publicize the receipts. The goal would be to persuade a distributor that the film was worth picking up.

Cassavetes swung into action, opening *A Woman Under the Influence* at New York's Columbia I and II on 20 November and at Ted Mann's Fox Wilshire on 11 December. The choice of the theaters was not random. On the East Coast, he played *A Woman Under the Influence* on both screens of the Columbia, because initially he could only provide one screenable print. Since the theater was a duplex, he was able to shuttle the reels between the two projection booths. On the West Coast, he chose Mann's theater, because Mann was a friend and the only theater-owner in all of southern California willing to buck the union and studio blockade.

Cassavetes made the rounds of the talk shows. Unfortunately, he was

never comfortable on television or skilled at turning the triteness and superficiality of a talk-show visit to his advantage, and his publicity appearances frequently backfired. That happened, in this instance, most egregiously on 6 December, when Cassavetes and Peter Falk appeared together on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*. Not only was Cassavetes surly and rude to Carson, but the studio audience, automatically assuming that Falk would be playing a comic role, inappropriately laughed during the airing of a serious dramatic clip from the film: the moment in which Nick and Mabel talk after the construction workers leave.

A full-page ad in *Variety* on Wednesday 4 December 1974 blazoned the revenues from the first two weeks of the Columbia I and II run: \$33,600 in the first week; \$45,624 the second. The figures were really quite respectable, but even at this point no distributor contacted him. He gave an interview to make sure that there was no misunderstanding: he would be glad to sell *A Woman Under the Influence* for just about the same amount as *Husbands* had been sold to Columbia for.

There was this article that said I'd been turning down studios who wanted to release and distribute that film. For \$3.5 million someone can have that film. Hell, do I look like a distributor to you? Do I look like the kinda guy who likes to work with his hands?

A Woman Under the Influence continued to do strong business throughout the holiday season, and to Cassavetes' surprise the demand to see the film continued unabated as December turned into January. But there was still no offer of distribution from anyone. Cassavetes waited until the middle of the month, and with no other prospects in sight, decided that the only alternative to putting his film into storage was self-distribution. In the mid-1970s, such a step was even less common than it is today. Independent distribution on a large scale had been attempted only a few times prior to *A Woman Under the Influence* – by Ely Landau in his *American Film Theater* project, by Cinema V and by Libra. Actor-director George C. Scott had also attempted to self-distribute *The Savage Is Loose* a few months earlier in 1974. But the results in every case had been quite disappointing. Cassavetes knew virtually nothing about distribution, but, as always, threw himself into it with gusto.

We're taking the picture on our shoulders. We'll distribute it *ourselves*! Let's go down to the all-night newsstand! Let's get all the newspapers from all over the cities, see what movies are playing at what theaters!

Then we'll know which theaters we like. The distributors have forced us to go directly to the exhibitors, and they've eliminated their percentage of the profits, that's all.

He talked a good line in public, but in private expressed a different view of the situation. He hated the self-distribution process from start to finish – finding it expensive, time-consuming and discouraging. It immediately cost him \$750,000 of additional out-of-pocket expenses, bringing his total expenditures on *Woman*, prior to any receipts, to more than \$1 million (though he later estimated it would have cost a studio at least ten times that amount to do what he did).

To manage the operation, Cassavetes hired a twenty-one-year-old Long Island theater manager named Jeff Lipsky with no previous experience in distribution. Cassavetes was never big on résumés, and Lipsky got the job simply because Cassavetes had liked him when Lipsky had interviewed him for his Nassau Community College newspaper a couple of years before. The result was a little like the Children's Crusade in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Cassavetes rented offices in New York and Los Angeles, hired a staff of twenty young people to man the phones, paid to have more than 200 prints of his film made and sent Rowlands, Falk and himself on a whirligig round of interviews and media appearances. In what was considered an innovative practice at the time, two staff members were assigned to handle college markets exclusively, an audience that Cassavetes always felt was more open to his work. On 31 January, the filmmaker issued a press release (which generated an article in *Variety* a few days later), announcing that the office was staffed and ready to accept bookings. While prints were being struck, Cassavetes booked the few prints he had at his disposal into a few large city theaters in February, and then opened the film nationally at more than a hundred theaters from Miami to Minnesota in March 1975.

It was a learning experience all around and a not entirely pleasant one. Local theater-owners in Louisiana or Idaho had cozy, long-term relationships with friendly representatives at regional distribution offices and balked at having to deal with strangers in Los Angeles or New York, or having to make long-distance phone calls to reach them. Larger theater chains tried to take advantage of Cassavetes' situation by insisting on having 'back-up prints' which they would then surreptitiously screen without paying rentals. Many theaters never returned the prints they rented, falsely reported their ticket sales or refused to pay their bills after the rental was over, knowing that Cassavetes had no way to police the situation or retaliate. The most he could do was what he

had done with *Faces*: ask friends in various cities where *A Woman Under the Influence* was playing to visit theaters unannounced and check if he was being cheated (as he invariably was) or to try to retrieve a missing print and personally ship it back to him. (Cassavetes' screening problems were not confined to the United States. Several months after the fact, he discovered that all of the Paris prints of *A Woman Under the Influence* had thirty minutes cut from them to fit the film into a two-hour screening slot.)

Not all of Cassavetes' distribution problems were caused by others; many of his wounds were self-inflicted. For example, because of the problems Cassavetes had had with New York critics over the years, he fatuously believed that urban viewers and reviewers were too 'artsy' and 'intellectual' to appreciate his work, and that black and working-class viewers were the natural audience for his work. He spent a lot of his money in the distribution of his films on newspaper ads and bookings directed to working-class and minority viewers. The result was a number of foolish bookings. Lipsky tells the story of how the owner of Harlem's Apollo Theater called up in desperation to beg to be released from his contract after his first two screenings of *A Woman Under the Influence* had grossed a total of \$2,500.

If somebody says there's an *art* picture – I don't want to go! They usually mean it's beautifully shot, or they used certain techniques, or it's about loneliness, an empty room with beautiful lighting. And somebody walks through and you hear some eerie music. Very few things come out of the people themselves or their own frustrations. I'm not a *high-brow* or an *intellectual*. I'm a street person. I just really believe that all the things that I can think everybody else can feel. I'm not shooting through rainbows or glasses or anything like that, just taking life and saying what is my problem. The greatest thrill for me is that an uneducated person like me can look at the film we make and understand we were making it for him. It aggravates me when people say, 'You make intellectual films.' I'm not an *intellectual*!

Yet I believe in art. I believe in it in the movies, in music and in fine art, where it can become a great investment. What's all this about certain stories being commercial and others not? People in the movies should go on strike for quality, not money. In this country we're not really in love with films, are we? I mean, we're really in love with some kind of attitudes to success, and it's a sad truth because then there doesn't seem to be room for the *students* of film. That's a sad commentary, not on the greed, but on the numbers game and on the new art of

American life, the only all-consuming art, the art of business. So that supposing you don't want to be in *that* art, you want to be in another art – of self-expression – then there's no outlet.

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So powerful is most viewers' tendency to identify an actress with the character she plays that for years afterwards many women equated Rowlands with Mabel, ignoring the fairly breathtaking differences between the wealthy, designer-attired actress who had a maid and boarded her children at private school, and the working-class wife in mismatched clothes who waited for the school bus on the street. Mabel's and Rowlands' personalities were about as different as they could be. Rowlands impressed everyone who knew her as being elegantly turned out, poised and emotionally contained and reserved – more or less the opposite of the gawky, exuberantly unbuttoned Mabel. If any deep imaginative linkage between on- and off-camera life exists, Mabel's crazed non-conformity, her clumsy passionateness, her child-like enthusiasms and her frustration with social conventions were more a reflection of her creator's temperament. Cassavetes' post-release comments touch on the differences between the actress and the character, and his own imaginative affinities with Mabel.

If you knew Gena, she's so unlike that thumb-flicking, raspberry-throwing girl. In real life, Gena is as calm and composed as Mabel is nervous and troubled. By comparison, I myself am half mad. It surfaces at the least expected moments. I can usually tell it with my own life when the insanity's going to surface. I think it comes from loneliness – our own dedication to what we're doing – whether we're laborers or whether we're white-collar workers or college students or whatever. I think it's the promise of two people getting together and having a love affair in a one-on-one relationship, where two people get together that may not have that much in common because one is a man and one is a woman. One day I think that marriage is the best life I've ever had, the next minute I feel like killing myself, or someone else feels like killing me! Life for me is difficult and full of mysteries as to what will happen next or what I'm going to feel. Half of life is taken up by unpredictable moods. This particular woman isn't really mad but frustrated beyond imagination. She doesn't know what to do and she is socially and emotionally inept. Everything she does is an expression of her individuality, but she doesn't know how to interact with others. She's like me in this

respect. Yet it is only by interacting, by engaging in some sort of competition with others, that she feels alive.

But if Cassavetes' personality was as different from Nick's as possible, Nick and his creator had a few things in common. Like the construction worker at the beginning of the film, the workaholic filmmaker had missed many 'special nights' with Rowlands over the years – birthdays, anniversaries, events with his children. He had stood her up for dinner or canceled at the last minute too many times to count. He had left her at home hundreds of evenings while he was out with the boys. Notwithstanding Cassavetes' reputation as a 'family man', his family frequently – in fact almost always – took second place to his work. Many times he had promised Rowlands that he would take time off from his work to be with her and then reneged when a film project came along. In fact, this was exactly what happened on the film preceding *A Woman Under the Influence*. In December 1970, after spending more than a year editing *Husbands* virtually around the clock, day and night, followed by months with Falk and Gazzara promoting the film, Cassavetes vowed to Rowlands that he would absolutely take the next three months off to go on a long, leisurely vacation with her. The deal to make *Minnie and Moskowitz* materialized less than a week after the ill-fated promise, and Cassavetes told her their vacation would have to wait. They never did take it. In a comical vein, years later, Rowlands told the story of how during the final months of finishing *Shadows*, Cassavetes was so absorbed in his work that he briefly 'forgot' they had a child. Only a few days after their first son, Nicholas, was born, Cassavetes flew to Los Angeles to begin work on the *Staccato* series, leaving her alone in New York. She flew to the West Coast by herself a few weeks later and met him at his office. After a little chitchat, she impatiently inquired, 'Aren't you going to ask *about the baby!*?' 'What baby?' Cassavetes replied. (It's evidence of how Cassavetes mined his relation with Rowlands in his work that the same exchange appears in *A Woman Under the Influence*. Mabel asks the work-preoccupied Nick a similar question.)

I spend eighty per cent of my time working. I'd been so horrible as a husband in my life that the long hours, the incredible ambition to try to make something that would satisfy me, the obscure conversations that have no meaning to anybody except to artists, for so long, that I thought, 'My God, look at this woman who has stood beside me every inch of the way thinking, "He has such an incredible potential, if *only he would listen!*" – you know?' I think there was a terrible double-cross

of a man sending his wife away, knowing full well that she hadn't really warranted being sent away before he instigated something. And yet I think that's quite revealing about men's relationship with women.

I've double-crossed Gena several times. I don't mean badly, I don't mean that I've plotted it out and planned it out; but I've done things that have been a double-cross. Working late at night. Working hard. Not keeping up always the romantic impulses that is the promise of two people when they get together. Being in love with other things. Things that really, I think, that all people within a marriage or a long relationship go through. In recent years I've come to recognize the errors of my own ways perhaps, the selfishness and the insensitivities of my past, but mind you, I'm in no way putting these down. From an actor's and a director's point of view the pains and problems are wonderful things – his art is forged from them. It's just that now I recognize things I had eliminated from my life and *A Woman Under the Influence* is an appreciation of those other values in familial and social relationships.

Cassavetes' chief gratification was the pleasure of seeing people respond to his movie. As part of their deal, Ted Mann had provided Cassavetes with a fourteen-room suite of offices on the second floor of a building almost directly above the Fox Wilshire Theater, where *A Woman Under the Influence* was playing. Many evenings Cassavetes would stand in his window looking down at the people lining up for tickets, going in or briefly stepping out for a smoke. On more than one evening, he ran down to ask them what they thought of his movie.

Rowlands' performance was an obvious candidate for an Academy Award, and *A Woman Under the Influence* garnered two nominations – one for her as Best Actress and the other for Cassavetes as Best Director. The filmmaker basked in his moral victory over the establishment on the day the nominations were announced. Bo Harwood tells the story of stopping by Cassavetes' offices and of Cassavetes taking a bottle of Courvoisier and two glasses out of his bottom desk drawer and arranging a quilted moving blanket out on the fire escape. The two men sat out in the open air, looking down at the theater and the people buying tickets for that evening's screening. Cassavetes raised his glass and triumphantly proposed a toast that summed up the sweetness of his victory over everyone who had told him for more than three years that it could not be done: 'Fuck 'em.'

In an irony that was not lost on the filmmaker, Rowlands lost the Actress Award to Ellen Burstyn in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More*, the film Cassavetes had helped Scorsese land (and in which Lelia

Goldoni from *Shadows* coincidentally plays a small role). The Director Award went to Francis Ford Coppola for *The Godfather, Part 2*.

Even without an Academy Award, and without the support of critics like Kael and Canby, Cassavetes' self-distribution gamble paid off. *Woman* more than doubled the receipts *Faces* had brought in – the film that was Cassavetes' previous career record. Though there were inevitably many negative reviews and responses (which generally took the line that Mabel was 'too crazy' to be interesting or 'too extreme' to be believed – American critics always being more comfortable with visual than performative extravagance and stylization), *A Woman Under the Influence* received hundreds of enthusiastic reviews and touched the hearts of hundreds of thousands of viewers. It played successfully at first- and second-run houses throughout the United States for more than six months, from the spring through the summer of 1975. It entered the history books as one of the first and most important cross-over independent film success stories, and the biggest commercial success in Cassavetes' career – eventually grossing \$6 million in the United States and an equal amount in foreign markets. Even after Falk's share had been taken out and various expenses were deducted, the profits would pay most of the production costs of Cassavetes' next two films. In his new-found fame, Cassavetes was asked to direct *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; however, negotiations broke down over details of scripting and casting (including Cassavetes' desire to feature Seymour Cassel in the film).

Even as he was enjoying the greatest commercial success of his life, Cassavetes continued to speak out about the plight of the director who aimed to make more than 'entertainment'.

I see people like Bob Altman, Elaine May, Elia Kazan – great directors. These people shouldn't be left alone. Somewhere along the line there has to be somebody who makes things easier. Not someone who says like most distributors, 'Can you do it? Can you be a killer? Can you pretend that everything is right?' The one difference between the film industry now and the old days is that back then nobody had a responsibility to make a *great* film. They had a responsibility to sucker in the big guys, band together and have fun on their own small level. Through that, the accidents of great films occurred because the love was always there. All those guys had pride in making a good film, if only to be able to say, 'Well, our picture was good at least.' No one thought in terms of millions of dollars. Now the big question is, 'Can a picture make a hundred million?' Who the hell cares? If you're thinking that way, you're

not making films, you're making money. If that's what it's come to, let the audience look at pictures of money, put money on the screen, and then rape it, shoot it, defecate on it – because that's basically what everyone is doing. I'm not really an angry person, but I get angry when I see people of extraordinary talent and ability abused so terribly by the majors who defile anything.

There are blockbusting pictures that have been heavily promoted. The audience looks for deeper meaning because these films are sociologically acceptable. The better movies do not give you acceptable meanings. I think that consequently the audience has lost its taste. There's too much emphasis on how successful each and every picture should be. You're really doing an experiment and no matter how hard I work or you work on something, it's just one thing out of billions and trillions of things. It shouldn't have that much importance placed on it. To be forced to have that much importance forces films out of a productive area for both the people that make them and the people that view them.

It's just the stupidity of not allowing certain pictures to be made simply because they're not expensive enough. You have to kill yourself to make an expensive picture out of an inexpensive movie, in order to suit the economic standards everyone is used to. Why? It's a camera and some people – why should that cost more than a five-story building? It's dumb, and it's really frustrating. That's the kind of impossible situation that makes paranoids out of all people who make films. We have to contend with it; we accept it, and in accepting it we hurt ourselves and everyone else around us. I don't say I've been a saint in my life, but I couldn't sell my soul out for things I just don't believe in. And if that means I'll never make a film again, then I'll never make another film again.

In a series of post-release interviews, Cassavetes replied to a host of criticisms directed at the film. He replied to charges that his work was 'apolitical':

When I took *A Woman Under the Influence* to American universities, I was accused of being apolitical. The film doesn't take a political stance. I'm incapable – if I make a film – of checking in first with my political party or newspaper. *A Woman Under the Influence* is an individual story *behind which* you can find political issues.

Though a number of feminists embraced Mabel as a heroine, it was an uncomfortable alliance in that Cassavetes' film confounded many con-

victions to which they were ideologically committed – for example, that Mabel had no desire to leave or criticize Nick; that Nick was not treated as a villain; and that Nick and Mabel were clearly in love.

I'm sure we would have had a much more successful film if the picture were rougher, more brutal; if it made statements so that people could definitely take sides. But along the way I'd have to look at myself and say, 'Yes, we were successful in creating another horror in the world.' I don't know anyone who has such a terrible time that she doesn't smile, ever, that she doesn't have time to love, open her eyes, think about the details of life. Something happens all the time, even at the height of tragedy, even in a prison or insane asylum.

Gena in this film became a figure for the women's movement as an example of what was happening to women. But I would think that Women's Lib would not like the film because I really think there *are* basic differences between men and women. A biological difference, a sexual difference, a lifestyle difference, a training difference. People can say, 'No, there isn't a difference,' but I have two daughters and a son, and I see the difference.

The film really shows, beyond any other movie I've ever seen, the real, solid differences between men and women. Women are more receptive by nature than a man is. I don't know whether it's a conditioning or whatever – it's an actuality, anyway. I've seen my daughter, when she was very young, practice on me, practice seeing herself through a man's eyes. I mean, no one told her to do that. I don't see boys doing that. They don't practice being. They just grow up, and they are either something that pleases them or nothing that pleases them. I don't think that the question of identity is so strong with a man as it is with a woman. Most men don't go around worrying if they're good enough. And women do. When a woman commits herself to a man, she doesn't quite know what to expect. She *can* be almost anything the man wants her to be. If she's deeply in love, she wants to please him. Mabel had a sense of worthlessness. She assumed the personality she thought she should have, wanting to be a good mother and a good wife. I watch lots of women pick up their children from the bus stop like Mabel does and my heart leaps. I want those other women to talk to her, tell her the time at least!

As so often in Cassavetes' work, the problem is created by the individual's need to please or do what Cassavetes always referred to as 'follow the rules of society'.

I wasn't concerned with the problem of *women, per se*, in *A Woman Under the Influence*. I was concerned with the problems of someone who was forced to behave in a manner that she couldn't cope with. Mabel's problem was that she had no self. Her problem was that she was doing everything to please someone other than herself. When Nick wanted her to go to bed with him, she'd go to bed. When he wanted her to be embarrassed, she'd be embarrassed. If he wanted her to apologize, she'd apologize. He wanted her to be nice to guys coming in at eight o'clock in the morning – ten guys for spaghetti – well, OK. That is a man's dream for a woman to get up and say, 'Yeah, let's cook it and have a good time.'

That is a man's dream, not a woman's dream. I mean, when women are married for five or ten years, they begin to say, 'Look, that's not me. What happened *to me* here? I'm here every day taking care of the kids and waiting for my husband to come home,' and there's a dissatisfaction there. And I don't think it's a social thing. You can't blame that on politics so much. It's really the way things have been because men really are not willing to stand up and say, 'I am me and I want to be me at any cost.' And women too.

Mabel's not behaving herself, but you can't behave yourself when you've been pushed so far from your own way of being. How do you act when you can't be yourself? In the homecoming scene, she's separated from herself. She's upset, afraid of coming back, she's afraid she's no longer herself. I think that Nick makes it clear that he's not been tormented by her being in the asylum or for having sent her to that hell for six months. It's not important for him, or for her. What's important for her is to behave herself and not to make any mistakes. So when he takes her over to the staircase and says to her – it's a horrible scene – 'Be yourself,' he's sincere. He just doesn't know what to do or what to say.

In response to repeated criticisms of Nick as a 'male chauvinist' (particularly from student audiences, who sometimes hissed Falk if he was present), Cassavetes argued that the situation was more complex than that.

Nick shows that people would rather follow the rules of society than deal with emotions. It's awful. People suppress their emotions to follow their idea of what society expects of them. Nick is upset because he can't control Mabel. I mean, here is a construction worker, a guy who goes out and works with his hands. He is a very formal guy. He believes

in family and home. His mother really has a great influence over him. Relatives have a great influence over him. He is a conservative and all of a sudden he marries a girl. He takes the one little act of danger in his life. She is a little kooky. She is a little crazy. She loves him intensely. It is a little embarrassing to him. He doesn't want to display that emotion to the world. He wants distance in his public life. And while he feels this thing in her to be attractive – crazy in bed, divinely kooky, whatever – he can't handle the results.

His life is falling apart through a series of embarrassments, the pull of family, the pull of friends. How is he going to look in front of his friends when this woman carries on? He is attracted to her, but only when they are alone. To Nick, being embarrassed in front of his family and friends is against all 'rules'. Society, embarrassment, his relatives, his men, his feeling that he is doing the right thing, all of this background comes between them. The first half of the film is a series of these embarrassments, minor and major. Life is a series of attempts to avert being exposed as a fool. But in the effort to do this we make even bigger fools of ourselves. Most of us like to think we know how to handle life, but, actually, we are ignorant emotionally. We have to learn not to be so hard on ourselves. I'm obsessed with the idea that people are human and have fallacies, and that those embarrassing fallacies are better out in the open. That way we don't waste time covering up. I see life as a struggle, and the real romance is in not walking away from it.

Cassavetes' response to comments by students that Mabel should leave Nick. (Note the echoes of Nick's speech pattern near the end of the second paragraph.)

There is the outside world and there is the inside world. The inside world is your home, your family, the things that create emotions within you. The outside world is you and where you are going and how you move and where you fly, you know? And they are two worlds. I realized after making the picture, not before, that the inside world really holds you, really contains you, can cause you pain that you don't show outside and that is why no one ever talks about it. He has two selves and she only has one. The entire film is brought together for me in the argument scene near the beginning after the men leave. To me, it's two people trying to really talk to each other on such a specific level: they're two people who are unmistakably in love with one another, they're not covered and they're not supposedly 'doing' something for one another. It's our screwed-up psyches that have been warped by thousands of books

and millions of feet of tapes and advice so that we don't know how to have one-on-one relationships anymore. That's what that scene is. They're just one-on-one, trying to work things out.

I hate separatism in anything. Women's movements only spread distrust between people and move people further away from each other than they should be. I really like people and I don't share any of these biases; I don't like people to be separate from me. I really like people to be accessible, not films so much, but people. I think there *is* an underlying hostility between the sexes today. And so we chose in this for there *not* to be an underlying hostility there, for there to be a love there. And there is a peculiar love there. It's peculiar but it's definite. The man is not trying to throw her away, really. He doesn't know what the hell he's doing! Doesn't know what love *means*! Doesn't know what it is. Doesn't know what a woman is. Has no ideas. Both – thinks it's something that's supposed to be something that cleans and sews and cooks and stays home at night and never has a thought or a sexual idea or an instinct in her to do anything at all except to be his wife, you know. And she accepts that idea! And she can't live with it!

In response to Pauline Kael's breezy dismissal of the film as a trendy adaptation of R. D. Laing's theories about madness (arguing that Casavetes presented Mabel as 'a sympathetic . . . symbolic victim' and failed to criticize her 'for not getting herself together'), he argued that madness was only a metaphor for the everyday.

I reject what Pauline Kael has to say. I'm sure there *are* people who are clinically in trouble, but most people just don't know *what to do*. I don't find them to be 'crazy people'. I find them to be just individuals not able to blow with the orchestra, to go with the orchestration. A lot of people say the behavior is too extreme, but we know that within the intimacy of our homes even worse emotional things than this take place, within even more extreme feelings. We can learn to live with these things in our families, or we can avoid them by looking to the outside world and saying that 'things aren't going well' or by using expressions like 'madness', etc., to describe them.

His response to a question about why Mabel was 'shackled with' children:

I wanted the Longhettis to have children because children grow up with innocence and an instinctive love for the people they care about. Firm in their emotional commitments and thrust into the middle of changes

in their immediate surroundings, their permanence and fixity of purpose contrasted with the on-going flux of a domestic household.

His response to an interviewer's question about the decision to depict a 'working-class environment':

That's kind of a crazy question! Was it intentional? [Laughs.] I don't do anything that's hidden in my films. There's nothing elite or fashionable or subtle in this kind of choice. Other people worry about classes. I didn't really worry about that. I wanted to make a film about a man and a woman and I wanted to reach the problem fast. This woman has three children. I wanted her to take care of them herself; I don't want her to have maids and nannies and helpers and all that sort of stuff. I want her to be close to those children and close to her husband – and yet alone. It's very hard to be alone if you're in a certain economic class; working-class people understand home and family. It would really be terrible if a woman was separated from that in her own life and in her own mind and had nothing but that, doing everything for that man and her kids. But it's not only a problem for people who work with their hands and their families. It's also a problem for Park Avenue people. Anyway, I don't deal with a social structure to 'expose' it.

His response to a question from a foreign journalist, about 'why he had chosen members of a minority group as his main characters':

It's not significant that they're a minority. Every group in America is a minority. The only oppression in America is money. It's the fear of losing your job. Class might be important in world politics, but not in my personal life. It doesn't matter to me whether someone works with his hands or is an international financier. For me, it's people who matter. I didn't want to show a particular milieu, a particular background. They could have been Martians or communists or whatever. What interested me was their relationship to life. How they got on with it.

In response to questions about 'gaps' in the narrative, Cassavetes suggested that the presentation of facts was less important than emotions:

A lot of people ask the same question about how did the mother know Mabel had a man over? The Falk character told the mother. And how did he know? Listen, you have to assume that everybody has lived. Men and women both have an understanding of these things. If a man walks into his house and sees his wife sitting like that in a mood and he has lived

with her for a number of years, he knows that something is wrong. I'm not interested in pursuing that dramatically. I'm interested in the involvement between the mother and the son. And the mother does control that son, a grown man. He's forty-six years old and she comes into that house and she runs that house. And she asks Nick to commit this woman, and he only commits her because she wants to. And she really feels that what Nick told her about Mabel is the truth. And then she adds her own truth to it and feels that the son can no longer live with this woman. Nor did I film a scene in which he told the mother about it. You know, when you're making a film, you deal with it somehow in a subjective view. I would rather not deal in terms of conventional expectations of what actually happened. It didn't seem very emotionally important to me that Peter would tell his mother and we would see it. There is no point in repeating in a film what everyone knows from experience: that while a man goes to work at nine in the morning and comes back at seven at night, his wife is on her own; that she goes shopping, looks after the children, watches television, reads a book, plays cards with some friends. All I am interested in analyzing is the relationship between this couple.

His response to the charge that pacing was too slow:

Family life doesn't move at an enormous rate of speed. *Ordinary People* is one of the slowest beginnings of any film ever made. But it's worth waiting for. That's the language with which Redford tells his story. And it's a lovely language. I find it so much more appealing than the common film language that pushes us to the brink in the film's first ten minutes, and then for the next fifty minutes you fall asleep.

His reply to the statement that people would rather see escapist pictures:

You name me a picture that people go to just to escape their feelings and I'll name you a bad picture. People go to have their emotions *aroused*. Anyone who goes to a movie not to be emotionally affected is an asshole. They might as well dig a pit and jump in. I don't believe people do that. I think the escape theory is a lie. You go to Hitchcock to be frightened. You go to *The Exorcist* to be scared. You go to *Orient Express* to match wits with the smart guys, to play detective. You go to *Towering Inferno* to see a fire. We're talking about *emotions*. No one goes just to sit there. You think a *Death Wish* isn't talking to your emotions? There's no reason why a serious film, one about life, can't be 'enjoyable', maybe even fun. Emotions can be very entertaining. I try to use them generously in my films.

His response to the criticism that the film's view of marriage is disillusioned:

It looks like Mabel and Nick have a hard time, but that's a hard time we all have. What man doesn't get caught up in his work? What woman hasn't been double-crossed by a man she loves? What man hasn't been terribly embarrassed by a woman he loves? We've seen a lot of stuff about how marriages don't work, but you've got to work at it. Love is a full-time job. But then there are other things. They take time too. Sometimes it's too much to handle.

For years I heard women talking, I would overhear them in the street in New York saying, 'Gee, I wish they'd make love stories.' Well, my idea of a love story is when two people get together and go through so much turmoil and so much pain in just loving each other. I don't know what anybody else feels, but that's the way I've always known love to be. It's been an extremely, extremely harrowing experience to me. It's easy to be in love with somebody for five minutes. But you put it over a twenty-year period of marriage – you get tired of a wife: you like them, you love them, you get excited by them, but you also know all their stories, all their jokes, and your tastes begin to splinter and go in different directions. In every love situation, whatever people do, they mess it up. It's very tough. From my own point of view, men do double-cross women sometimes, even when they're in love with them.

He argued that Nick seemed rough only because he wasn't presented in the idealized way figures in most other films are.

I think that men can connect with the Nick character if they want to. If they want to admit that they're really people. But you don't get a chance to see a guy like Nick on the screen very often, a guy that will really say, 'I'm gonna be the way I am at home, and not the way I am in front of people, and not the way I want to appear to my girlfriend or to my wife or to the world at large.' So a guy like Peter Falk, who could with a smile get out of any situation, goes up there and, in a great way, speaks about the emotional ignorance that all men feel to all women. The movie is really about the woman. If its subject was what happened to the man, no one would be interested.

He confounded many questioners by arguing that *A Woman Under the Influence* was not despairing but hopeful.

The films are a road map through emotional and intellectual terrains

that provide a solution to how one can save pain. As people we know that we are petty, vicious, violent and horrible, but my films make an effort to contain the depression within us and to limit the depression to those areas that we can actually solve. They represent the assertion of a human spirit. If, along the way, in *A Woman Under the Influence* you find something that you didn't know before or if you find something out about people that you might have thought one way about and then possibly might think another way about, then it has some value. An experience that leaves the spectator vacant is not art.

We took a chance with this movie. It's naïve in that sense, because we weren't sure that people would want to see family life, family life with problems, not hyped up. I find my films both enormously funny and enormously painful. And the more painful they get, sometimes the funnier they get. It's pain. We love pain. I think all good humor comes out of pain, and all good works come out of the understanding that life is painful. The modern world denies this, but it's a normal thing, it's nothing spectacular. I see young people turning away from pain – like an older person would turn away because he's had enough – when to overcome it is a glorious part of life. I just hope our films keep on opening up a dark pathway for young people. We really make them for the young, we don't make them for older people. Old people already know all that stuff. Maybe for them it is defined a little more clearly, but for young people it's a mystery. We hope we don't make lecture films. But by seeing people who have lived a little bit maybe they'll see in their own lives that it never changes. When I'm told that our films are painful, I think, 'Oh God, I know real pain.' We soften our pictures so tremendously. We make them almost romantic fantasies and just barely touch on these things in a less idealistic way than other people do.

We have problems, but they are human ones.

I could never make an unrealistic type of picture; I cannot work that way, but I admire people who can. I think Frank Capra is wonderful, and I think many of the early Lubitsch films were great. I even admire Dick Powell and his detective stories; he's wonderfully talented in those areas and it's a good thing he can make that kind of picture so that we can have a little variety. It would be awfully somber if people made only realistic films. However, that's the best way I can work and if there's no market for it then I'll pack up as it's the only kind of film I am interested in. I'd rather work in a sewer than make a film I don't love. If I directed a picture like *Return of the Jedi* or even *worked* on one, I would faint –

Lining up a shot for the scene in which Nick sheepishly
brings the construction workers home with him.
© Michael Ferris

I'd faint and never get up again I'd be so ashamed. If I did *The Towering Inferno* it'd be all black leader. Nothing. I'd get sick. I'd take the insurance money. I couldn't do it. I'm not interested in starting fires. I like to feel pain through what really causes pain. I don't want to frighten people by showing them tragedy. I've never seen an exploding helicopter, I've never seen anybody go and blow somebody's head off. So why should I make films about them? But I *have* seen people destroy themselves in the smallest way. I've seen people withdraw. I've seen people hide behind political ideas, behind dope, behind the sexual revolution, behind fascism, behind hypocrisy, and I've myself done all these things. In our films what we are saying is so gentle. It's gentleness. We have problems, terrible problems, but our problems are human problems. I like to deal with subjects of divorce, subjects of children being battered. I don't know – you can say, '*Please*, there is *no* problem at all, I'm *American* and I know there's no problem here, *nothing's* ever touched *me!*'

At the same time, he laughed at the suggestion by a questioner that the 'happy ending' made the film affirmative.

[A laugh followed by a sigh.] If that's what you got out of it. I can't sit down and explain what I worked on for two and a half years to you or anyone else in one sentence. I thought it was an optimistic film in my terms. My most optimistic film to date. If you see it as not being that, that's an opinion. If you're talking about it being happy simply because they get together at the end, that's really a put-down to me. But I do believe that the end of the picture shows that love is possible, not only possible but practical and appealing, and not maudlin and quite noble.

I think by the end of the film that this man has started to realize the delicacy of the woman he's dealing with. That he has some idea of the contradictory expectations men have of women. We want them to be impressive, to be admired, but we want to keep them to ourselves. We make being a woman a kind of tightrope act. I think Peter's character has started to realize this. Whether he'll do any better, I don't know.

The synopsis he prepared for the film's press-pack indicates that he felt that Nick and Mabel had come to some sort of understanding by the end of the film.

When the storm of emotion clears, everything appears to be calm – graceful goodnights to the kids, much kissing and apologizing. Nothing that has taken place seems to have any importance except that Mabel has been set free. The children still accept their parents, and Nick and Mabel in some way discovered they can accept the difference between commitment and emotional needs. The ritual of preparing for sleep, re-establishing, without conversation, the need to make room for the dilemmas of love.

Cassavetes always felt that something in him died after the struggle to get *A Woman Under the Influence* made and released. The experience left him weary and burnt out. It was more than a reflection of a passing emotional state. Up to the end of his life, he told friends that he felt his best work had all been done by this point and that he had nothing more left to say.

I'm doing whatever I can. It's kind of a disappointment to realize that you're inadequate in certain areas. That's a terrible disappointment. You've had your opportunity, and then you find out that you were much more dynamic in your ideas and pure in your way of doing things

ten years before the time that you actually achieve them. *Woman* was a heavy emotional burden. I almost killed myself and Gena and everyone around. I felt used up. I don't think I could ever make another film like this again. And I'm not talking about the quality of the film – I mean the kind of film where you do everything. I've done it four times, and I don't know that I could do it again. It's too difficult. You say to yourself, well, what is it? It's a film. All right, it affects people's lives. Maybe it'll connect with somebody. But it doesn't affect my life that much – I'm just putting down what I know. So is it worth it to kill yourself to make the film and bring it to an audience so that someone will applaud? Or so that you'll have a big house? I can't like making films anymore if they're this tough. The pressures are too unnatural. I'm not crying, because I enjoy it. But I am saddened by the fact that I have physical limitations.

What you have to spend is terrifying. I feel that my filmic life has come to some kind of an end. It's too tough; in my mind I've already beat the system, so the only thing that remains to do is to find other people I can torture with that same idea. You can corrupt people bad, you can corrupt people good, and it's the same thing. If you take somebody and make them believe in something that is not practical, it's torture. It's not practical to make films the way we make them. There's no reward at the end of it. I don't know. But I guess it's still more interesting than steeping yourself into a dinosaur society.

I'm retired. This is it. I've had it. I don't want to go through this anymore because I don't know the difference anymore myself. I've been doing this since I started without a stop, and I want to stop because I've nothing more to say. I just like men and women, that's all. Nothing else that I want to talk about. Bombs, killing, sex, up, down, I don't care. So now I'll go out and I'll watch people on the beach and see sailboats and enjoy the mountainside. I'm through making films I don't want to make anymore. I feel that I'm one of the few filmmakers in America who is truly independent in the sense that I've gone beyond my first film, I've gone beyond my second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth films. So in a sense I should achieve the place of a guy who has now, at least, earned the right to cop out and make films that are easier and more relaxed. I want to have more ease and relaxation; I want to have some endorsement of my talent and the film I'm making.

Privately, he told friends and relatives that he wanted 'to take the wife, the dog, the kids, and start a farm' – an artists' colony, where actors could 'work on scenes together'.

We'd have a theater in a barn. And a rehearsal space. And young artists and actors could come there and learn and have fun. There are so many scenes to do; there would be so much to learn. We don't have to make a movie. It would be great just to do it.

It was an old dream that he had had back when he made *Shadows* – of being part of a group of people living, arguing, working together like a big family, doing it all simply for the love of it. In some respects, it was an anticipation of the world of his next film.

The Killing of a Chinese Bookie (1975)

In Cassavetes' view, *A Woman Under the Influence* marked a change in his creative methods. He felt that it and all the works that followed were less direct expressions of his feelings and experiences than conscious acts of artistic craftsmanship.

A Woman Under the Influence was the first picture I've had anything to do with that wasn't made out of plain, simple feeling, but rather out of a real desire to do something in my profession. It was extremely frightening for me not to come to work out of enthusiasm and instead put myself up as something of a craftsman. Earlier films such as *Shadows* and *Husbands* grew out of personal experiences reaching all the way back to my childhood days. They were expressions of my innermost feelings, and now that I've dealt with all that, I feel obligated to view life in other terms. I want to explore other areas of human and artistic experience.

I made *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* as an intellectual experiment – not because I am in love with it. I enjoy a more intellectual and less emotionally demanding view than in my previous work. If I can make, out of certain intellectual ideas, films that are complex in their nature, then I'm entering into new ground. And that is certainly something I look forward to. It is a film that has little to do with me and with how I feel about life. It's interesting to me to see how other people live in our society, to look at them and ask myself, 'Why do they do it? And how do they do it?' Without trying to explain. The fun and challenge of the film was to imagine a self-contained world different from the one I live in: to move into it and live in it.

The origin of the film was an idea Cassavetes, Martin Scorsese and Sam Shaw tossed around. (This story has been twisted in the retelling to suggest that Cassavetes intended Scorsese to direct the film, which is not the

case. The confusion was created by the fact that Cassavetes did at one point discuss another script with Scorsese that coincidentally also had a Chinese bookie in it – a work titled *I've Got a Yen for You* – but the two projects are unrelated.)

Years ago, Martin Scorsese and I were talking and in one night made up this gangster story about this nightclub-owner who owes a lot of money and is talked into killing someone who isn't really the person he thinks he's going to be killing.

The choice of genre and star was a calculated decision to do something less emotionally demanding than the film that had preceded. Cassavetes and Rowlands always argued when they worked together, but *A Woman Under the Influence* had been an especially trying and divisive experience.

After we completed *Woman*, I told her, 'We won't be making another movie together. You just don't realize how you've been affected by the role.'

Beyond that, the gangster genre was an attempt to create something that had broad commercial appeal.

I can't withstand the rejection anymore because I want to live. I want to enjoy my life now. I did *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* just as an effort to get out of the distribution business.

But Cassavetes didn't view gangsters merely as fictional figures. Throughout his life, his casual conversation was woven through with references to 'gangsters' – real and symbolic. One of his favorite metaphors for the studio heads he interacted with was that they were 'gangsters'. And, like his father before him, he was convinced that there was actual gangster money and gangster backing behind many of the most powerful American institutions – especially in the entertainment industry (which is another reason he didn't like to use studio money for his pictures).

He had been a fan of gangster pictures in his youth and had acted in many gangster films and crime dramas over the years – from *The Killers*, *Bandits in Rome* and *Machine Gun McCain* in the 1960s, to Steve Carver's *Capone* in 1974. (Ben Gazzara played the title role in the latter film and helped Cassavetes and six actors from *A Woman Under the Influence* secure bit parts.) But the deepest influences on *The Killing of*

a Chinese Bookie were three works of which Cassavetes was personally fond: Arthur Penn's surreal *Mickey One*; *The Family Rico*, a television drama about a nightclub-owner that Gazzara had acted in a couple years before; and Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky*, with its clumsily all too human gangsters.

Cassavetes also drew on his personal experience of the New York strip-club milieu, which Sam Shaw had introduced him to in the 1950s, and his more recent experience of Sunset Boulevard nightspots. Even more than that, the film was heavily indebted to the evenings Cassavetes had spent at Alain Bernardin's legendary 'Le Crazy Horse' on his trips to Paris. Cassavetes had often sat in Bernardin's club and thought of the parallels between what Bernardin did as a club-owner and what he himself did as the manager of a low-budget repertory film company. (Bernardin's club was similar to Cosmo's in being the expression of a personal vision – Bernardin founded, owned and operated it, hired the acts, choreographed and scripted the shows, and treated his 'girls' as 'family'.) Cassavetes also drew on conversations he had had over the years with Seymour Cassel, whose mother had been a burlesque dancer and who had spent much of his youth hanging around strippers and baggy-pants comics.

It's also important not to overlook the success of Coppola's *The Godfather* (the second installment of which had just enjoyed a stunning commercial run in 1974). *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* was an attempt to cash in on the gangster-movie trend; but there was an ambivalence in Cassavetes' stance, since he not only did not have a very high opinion of the genre but didn't think of gangsters themselves as being very interesting.

Why make *The Godfather*? It's an entertainment? Terrific. I consider myself an artist and making a bestselling book into a bestselling movie is in no way art to me. It's not really exciting – is it? – an antagonism between people and guns. It's really boring, and I personally think that gangsters are really boring people. They make me uneasy, not because they intimidate me, but because they say nothing to me. But strangely, at the same time, I don't want to expose them. I don't want to hurt their feelings. I can't say anything much about gangsters because everything that matters to them is ridiculous. What's important to them is false, materially as well as spiritually. Their lives are dull. What happens is too predictable: you meet somebody; he smiles at you; he tries to control you; he beats you. It's boring! I find it uninteresting.

We actors, when we play gangsters on screen, we give them depth, a

heart, a soul, something that's not really there in most cases. I started out on the beach when I was ten playing gangster movies. Most little boys play cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians. But as you grow up your imagination teaches you that things aren't so simple. When you learn that, you stretch away from the simple idea of make-believe and you try to incorporate those simpler ideas into more complex feelings. If I made a gangster film, I would have to make it sheer entertainment, since that's what we expect from that specific genre, which is a specific American art form. I don't know whether I'm capable of making sheer entertainment.

As Cassavetes worked on the film, Cosmo grew into a reflection on male psychology. In particular, he represented a meditation on aspects of Ben Gazzara's off-camera personality. Gazzara was similar to Cosmo in many deep and half-veiled respects – most notably in his devotion to living a life of 'style' and 'class' and his interest in 'looking good' and being the center of attention in a group. Cassavetes was fascinated with this aspect of Gazzara's personality because he shared some of its qualities, including the love of costumes, corsages and limos. (The 'style' issue was possibly suggested to Cassavetes by Carver's *Capone*, which briefly raises it in a scene in which Capone comically attempts to play golf at a country club.)

It's hard not to see a portrait of Cassavetes' older brother in Cosmo. Shortly after he got married in the mid-fifties, Nicholas Cassavetes took a big gamble and left his metallurgist job to become a stockbroker at E. F. Hutton. In 1957, when the market went down, he lost thousands of dollars of his own and his friends' investments. With the sense of dutifulness that had defined his entire life, he was overcome with feelings of personal responsibility and attempted to make good on many of the losses. He died a short time later, never having finished the repayments. The obvious question is where our responsibilities to others end and our responsibilities to ourselves begin. Cassavetes had been asking it since he created the character of Hugh in *Shadows*.

The Killing of a Chinese Bookie is the story of an ordinary man who has constructed his life as many American men do. He has defined himself in terms of his work; it is more than a way to make a living, it is his entire existence – paid for in monthly installments. He proclaims that he wants to live in style and comfort, but for Cosmo comfort means living on the edge. For seven years, he has run and ruled a club he doesn't own (where strippers don't just strip but act out pageants, where out-of-towners drink 7&7 and sloe gin, and where, occasionally, some high-rollers drop by). But his reign is a sham, sustained only by monthly meetings with a

loan shark. The Crazy Horse West is his world, a world he re-creates every night: he writes, directs, choreographs and announces such acts as 'The Gunfight at O.K. Corral' and 'An Evening in Paris'. But he lets his *doppelgänger*, Mr. Sophistication, do the on-stage performing. The film is about a conformist, about somebody who would have been a white-collar worker years ago and who does all the right things and who is going to be killed for it. It was not a difficult subject. Maybe it was hard to make, but being a prisoner of a conformist world is not a terribly challenging subject. It's the story of so many people's lives. It's not hard to understand because it happens all the time.

At the same time, Cassavetes' hell never has other people in it. Cosmo is not someone else; he is also a portrait of the artist. Ben Gazzara says that became clear to him one day a few weeks into the shoot when he confessed to Cassavetes that he was having a difficult time bringing his character into focus. Gazzara had agreed to do the film – which after all represented a lot of unpaid work – largely as a personal favor to Cassavetes, and in hopes of recapturing the original *Husbands* experience, and was finding it very difficult. He told Cassavetes that he was just not having fun and couldn't work up any enthusiasm for his role. It was just prior to filming the scene in which Cosmo picks up the girls in the limousine, and Cassavetes, crouching on the floor in front of him with a camera, put it down and started talking about the movie as tears welled up in his eyes. (If one needs more evidence of Cassavetes' identification with his hero, it's provided by an event that runs throughout the screenplay but was cut from the final film. Every time Cosmo goes into his club, he 'counts the house' – something Cassavetes habitually did every time he went to a screening of one of his own films.)

Ben, do you know who those gangsters are? They're all those people who keep you and me from our dreams. The Suits who stop the artist from doing what he wants to do. The petty people who eat at you. You just want to be left alone with your art. And then there's all the bullshit that comes in, all these nuisances. Why does it have to be like that?

It's not surprising that Cassavetes later said he felt the scenes in which Cosmo was face to face with the gangsters were the key moments in the film. They were dream-image reflections of the hundreds of meetings he had participated in over the years with studio executives, producers, distributors and theater-owners that, in one way or another, turned out to be 'double-crosses'.

The gangsters are producers (right down to their obsession with contracts), and Cosmo is every filmmaker who agrees to adhere to someone else's script and 'shoot' something he doesn't really believe in in order to clear a debt. But the tone is not dismissive but tender; Cassavetes refuses to feel superior to his hero. It's revealing that he later named his dog, whom he dearly loved, Cosmo. There was a soft spot in his heart for the obedient schmo who gave love and attempted to please people and do the right thing.

Cosmo is trapped in a conformist world. This is somebody who will do anything if enough pressure is put on him. I don't have a lot of respect for people who buckle under to the conventional non-approach to things. Yet I've been plagued by the same temptations: to be liked, to be secure, to be a member of our society. At forty-six, I woke up and found myself part of the Establishment. I don't want to be a member of the Establishment, but how the hell do you talk about a society you're not really a part of? Are you above it, so pure and good that you can rationalize the lives of people you don't know anything about? It's not unhealthy for me to sometimes want to be a member of society. The picture says something to me: that we might sell anything mindlessly – even our own lives.

Cosmo clearly parted ways from his creator in his unwillingness to fight for his vision of who he is and what his life means; but Cassavetes admitted that he also felt pressure to 'please' audiences and keep people happy.

I hate the present system of directing because there's too much pressure to be good. There's no relaxation at all. You're constantly aware of the financial responsibility, the fact that your life without directing is very empty and that you have to make a successful movie. So your instincts and what you know sometimes give way to what you have to do. You must please distributors and your audience.

But Cosmo differed from Cassavetes in his need to please; Cassavetes was willing to give up everything before he would compromise an inch.

Filmmaking is a craft that I want to keep learning. I'm in love with it and I would make films for nothing, and do, and pay for them myself or with the help of my friends. I don't feel I have a responsibility to anyone if I'm going to take my own losses. I've lived my whole life that way and I am really not afraid. I never mind if Gena thinks I am stupid or outspoken, ruining things for our everyday life. But I would hate it if she

Cassavetes and his close friend, supporter and producer, Sam Shaw, celebrating the start of filming on the first location for *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. © Sam Shaw

thought I was a coward or that I would back down on something to which we had devoted our lives. If you have something to give, you've got to fight for it. You really have to *fight* for it.

The most profound link between Cosmo and his creator is their mutual solitude. In a memorial piece following the filmmaker's death, Meade Roberts wrote the deepest appreciation of this aspect of Cassavetes' personality, which he kept hidden, covered up with endless games, routines and jokes (and which it took an artist like Roberts to see and understand). *Bookie's* screenplay has several evocative descriptions of Cosmo's profound, existential loneliness (which is that of every truly independent artist). The following passage punctuates a description of Cosmo sitting in the club watching the acts immediately after he has shot the 'bookie'. Its power comes from the fact that at the very moment he seems most present and publicly available to everyone around him, he is imaginatively elsewhere. As he plays the smiling, public man to the hilt, his real thoughts and feelings are completely invisible. (The ellipses are in the screenplay.)

In the deepest part of his mind or soul or whatever it is – Cosmo is alone. He is set adrift in a boat, naked in the hot sun. Walking in the desert, drifting in the air without a parachute. He walks and talks like Cosmo . . . but the feel of his body is alien to him. The heart is not his . . . He has gone from the child to the adult and there is no turning back. All the innocence of his previous years seems distant and without recollection of their details. Nothing goes together and yet he can see everything much too clearly. A waitress's face strikes him . . . the bar looks like it needs to be redone. The bartender moves with too much effort, and sudden insightful flashes of doom wall up his mind. He watches Mr. Sophistication. He views Sherry behind. The comic

sings . . . ‘Imagination is funny’ . . . The hard, coarse strains of the too heavy tape hurt his side and he looks down to see blood.

Both Cassavetes and his *alter ego* had trouble going through with the ‘shot’ and put it off as long as they could. Cosmo went to Chinatown. Cassavetes sat in Hamburger Hamlet with his actors and crew from 6 p.m. to midnight on the appointed evening, debating whether he should actually go through with it, soliciting their opinions: ‘Do you think he *really* would do it?’ ‘Do we *have* to shoot him?’ ‘Why?’ ‘What if we don’t shoot the Chinaman?’ It was evidence not only of his antipathy to cinematic violence but also of his willingness to re-examine every aspect of his film as he was making it. (It’s worth noting that the shoot was a bit more complicated in the script: not only did it take two bullets, with the victim screaming between the two, but Cosmo pleaded with the guards afterwards not to come in, so that he won’t have to shoot them.)

A similar revisionary openness was illustrated by the way the scene in the phonebooth came about. Ben Gazzara has said that while he and Cassavetes were driving to the location of the murder shoot, Cassavetes suddenly had the car pull over to the side of the road and wrote the scene on the spot. That is a slight exaggeration, since a version of the moment is already present in the June 1975 shooting script, but it is true that Cassavetes greatly expanded the scene (and inserted all of the Bob Newhart comic tone) on the spot.

Both anecdotes demonstrate how Cassavetes was continuously putting himself in his character’s shoes to keep his film true – asking himself what *he* would do in this predicament, how he would *actually* behave in a particular situation. As a filmmaker, he refused to be trapped by the apparent demands of the ‘plot’. While gangster movies are almost invariably about ‘externals’ – actions and events – Cassavetes was always more interested in ‘internals’.

I came into this business as an actor to express myself and to express things that I thought might be of value to other people. When I first started to make *Shadows*, it was because I was predominantly an actor who was frustrated in expressing human qualities rather than in expressing qualities that were more *thing*-oriented or concerned with *plot*. I’ve been concerned from the beginning with the problems confronting real people rather than emphasizing dramatic structure or bending characters to fit a plot.

Truth is revealed not by events, but by breaks in the action, by narrative

pauses, by moments when a character hesitates or puts the plot on hold. Cassavetes cited *Apocalypse Now* as an example of a film where the characters were reduced to being functions of the plot. In his view, the actors could have saved the movie, if only they had put in a few ‘delays’:

The problem with *Apocalypse Now* is that Sheen and Duvall didn’t find any truth in their roles. They couldn’t justify them. You *have* to do that. If only Sheen had inserted some delays, he might have saved that script. Phoniness doesn’t interest me. There are lots of phonies in the movies, an actor playing a part. *Nobody* is a phony like *that!* I’m interested in how people fool themselves, not how they fool others.

As all of his films illustrate, truth lay in presenting surprising behavior rather than adhering to a boring story.

Whatever I see, *I* see. I try to see it like *myself* and not like I’ve been *told* to see it, or how I *should* see it, or how *others* see it, or *why* I should see it. I hate being told what something is. I always want to find out myself. I want to express what a character *really* feels, not just what he feels in a story sense. Hollywood seldom lets you get on with that. Of course, a lot of people say I now give myself and those who work with me enough rope to hang ourselves. But for me that’s better than the other way around.

Every time *Bookie’s* narrative gets up a little momentum – as when Cosmo is yanked out of his club, pushed into a car and sent racing down the highway to a hit – Cassavetes suddenly lets the air out of it, breaks it down and brings it to a screeching halt in order to pursue zig-zags of feeling that puncture the apparent seamlessness of the plot.

When you see something really frustrating, people say, ‘No, no, we don’t want that because it looks frustrating!’ But you pray you can get a script and a feeling where you can have somebody become frustrated, truly. I believe that if you put it out there, truly – frustration, love, inner life – people are capable of understanding and wanting to understand feelings. When they’re sure that it’s not a mistake and when they’re sure that you’re not going to double-cross them midway in the picture and go streaking back to plot, I think they’ll watch with great fascination.

Another respect in which Cassavetes and his protagonist are similar is that they were both interested in the power of art and the imagination to transform reality. The routines Cosmo choreographs and his night

out with his girls testify that his real love is not naked bodies but the costumes that adorn them. Cassavetes and Shaw frequented strip-clubs less to see exposed skin than to study the art of concealing it. Cassavetes was, in fact, quite conservative in his attitude toward nudity – in life and in art. There are no ‘love scenes’ in his work and extremely few moments in which you see anyone unclothed. Here and in *Love Streams*, when it came to playing nude scenes, Cassavetes was extremely deferential to his actresses, never asking them to do anything they were personally uncomfortable with or that would violate their sense of modesty. The reason why the two girls Robert Harmon sleeps with in *Love Streams* are not naked is that, when they expressed shyness about removing their clothes, Cassavetes allowed them to keep them on. In a similar vein, he told his actors and crew to be extremely respectful when they shot the dressing-room scenes in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. The line – ‘What kind of strip-joint is this? Nobody takes their clothes off’ – was actually something Gazzara improvised on the spot in response to Cassavetes’ decision to allow his actresses to stay clothed for some of the stage acts.

I don’t understand all this interest in nudity. This desire to bare it all. Bodies are boring. It’s our imaginations that make them interesting. Every woman looks better with her clothes on than naked. I tell my daughters that. *Playboy* is the worst – to try to make it sophisticated for an audience to swallow; then, ten years later, they come up with a few pubic hairs. Isn’t that wonderfully daring? I loathe *Playboy*. They just do it because there’s money in it. Because we live in a Puritan society.

We’re becoming a voyeuristic society. I also think we’re starting to lose faith in the idea that one man and one woman can totally please each other in bed. Sex is becoming something of a community activity; more and more people have to hop into the sack together in order for all of them to achieve sexual satisfaction. That kind of thing finally robs sex of all its delicious and very private pleasures. When sex becomes commonplace, when the girl you want is trying out half your suburban community and the same is true of you, where are the romantic and secret pleasures you need out of sex? I don’t like sex to be ordinary and rational and organized and sane. That was what kept me away from meeting Elia Kazan. As a young man, I saw him with these three girls going upstairs in a club. I never wanted to have anything to do with him after that. Maybe I would have liked him. Maybe I am a prude. But it just shocked me. I want more out of life – more than the knowledge that I can perform.

As usual, many of the actors were friends or acquaintances with little or no previous experience: Virginia Carrington (Betty) was a Hamburger Hamlet waitress Cassavetes took an interest in. When he was working on *A Woman Under the Influence*, he told her he was going to put her in the next film he made, and to her astonishment, kept his word a couple of years later. Gena Rowlands' mother, Lady; her brother, David; the filmmaker's mother, Katherine, and Rowlands' and Cassavetes' sixteen-year-old son Nick make cameo appearances in the limousine sequence. Cassavetes found other actors in various ways.

Two of the girls, Donna May Gordon, [who played] Margo, the little red-head, and the tall blonde, Alice Friedland, [who played] Sherry, were actual strippers on Sunset Boulevard. I went to see them and I talked to them and I was very fond of both of them. They were really sweet, very sweet. Jurgen Hellway, from Janus Films, who is our distributor in Germany, I once said to him, 'I'm looking for a girl.' And he told me, 'I know a very beautiful one who has just done a *Playboy* cover. She was Playmate of the Month in June 1975.' That's the black girl in the film, Azizi Johari, [who played] Rachel. We got on so well. She's a great girl. And as for Carol Warren, she's a girl that I met through Jack Ackerman, who acted in *Shadows* and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. I've known her for a very long time. Carol always said to me, 'Why don't you ever give me a part? I would love to be in your movies.' She's an actress. 'You never hire me. We're just friends.' I answered, 'I think you're the most wonderful girl in the world, but wouldn't you mind being a stripper?' 'No, for you I'll do it, I don't mind at all.' I told her she's so sweet that everyone's going to love her. And, actually, she has, like nobody else I know, this incredible simplicity in the way she talks. You feel her goodness. Gazzara, as a character as well as a man, treated all the actresses like real people. They *think* they're dancers. They *are* dancers. They worked really hard for their scenes. The ending came from the fact that they kept saying: 'It's too bad we haven't had the opportunity to dance.' Haji, the girl who sets fire to Mr. Sophistication's hair at the end, was one of the greatest striptease artists in Europe and elsewhere. She's a very, very good girl. She has a wonderful sense of humor. Everyone got on well, very well. Everyone worked together really well.

Meade Roberts (Mr. Sophistication) was someone else who had never acted before. Sam Shaw had introduced Cassavetes to Roberts around 1960, and the two men had become close friends. Roberts was a screenwriter who had done some good work in the 1950s and 1960s (*Kraft*

Theater and *Playhouse 90* on television; *Summer and Smoke*, *The Stripper* and *In the Cool of the Day* in film; *A Palm Tree in a Rose Garden* in theater) but whose career had stagnated after 1970. Roberts and Cassavetes had spent a lot of time together reading plays – Roberts’ work, Cassavetes’ work, Tennessee Williams’ work (*A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie* were favorites) and many other American classics (*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Picnic* and *The Crucible*, for example). He was reluctant to act, but Cassavetes twisted his arm by saying that he had written the part especially for him.

Cassavetes and Rowlands were both fans of Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel*. Rowlands loved the toughness and unsentimentality of Dietrich’s performance. Cassavetes liked the film for a different reason – because it was about an artist-surrogate who creates an artificial, artful world in which to live. (The filmmaker once asked me to give him a rare photograph I had from it, as well as a photograph showing the set of Yen’s palace in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, another film with the same subject.) It’s not accidental that there is a photograph of Dietrich visible on the mirror of the strippers’ dressing room in the first version of the film. Although none of Cassavetes’ interviewers picked up on the allusion, in several post-release statements, Cassavetes wryly implied that he had modeled the character of Mr. Sophistication on Sternberg’s Professor Rath.

Another reason Cassavetes was fascinated with *The Blue Angel* was that the film focused on the situation of a scorned, humiliated stage performer, an emotional event that spoke to Cassavetes for personal reasons. Notwithstanding the macho-man image he so diligently cultivated (or perhaps because of it), he often thought of his own life as a series of public humiliations – from his grade-school, high-school, college and drama-school days; to his years of unemployment and unsuccessful audition experiences – like the time he was jeered off-stage as an M.C. at a burlesque house (an event dramatized in *Shadows* in Hugh’s nightclub debacle); to the various and sundry fiascos associated with his appearances at screenings and on television shows; to his run-ins with directors when he was acting (some of which are dramatized with the character of Myrtle in *Opening Night*).

Meade Roberts is a scriptwriter. He’s been a scriptwriter for years, a very good one. In fact, he’s writing a play for me. He’s a very dear friend of mine, but he’s had lots of problems. He hasn’t worked for a long time and people forgot about him. I have great belief in him as a writer. He

always reads his plays for me. We used to gather, a group of friends and him, to read Tennessee Williams together, and he was always very good, very theatrical, very sensitive. As a scriptwriter, he can really structure a character and work on it. He would hang around, and I had a wonderful relationship with him. In *Bookie*, he insisted on me putting make-up on him, though I never normally use make-up. We used to talk and have a good laugh as I was making up his face. We started fantasizing about the character he played. He said, 'Who is he?' I answered, 'Well, he's a high-school teacher. But he was not happy with his relationship with his students and not happy about his life either. He is very cultured, but he doesn't know what to do with it. He enjoys singing, and he meets this nightclub-owner who has no culture, but who has a big heart and wants to do everything himself. And this guy Cosmo discovers that he can do himself a favor by giving this man something to feel good about himself – so he hires him. He hires this man, who appreciates the club so much that something else happens. There is this sort of metaphysical link between them. It's mystical.' That's what Meade's part is about. He says, 'I feel everything this Cosmo is saying, everything, because it takes me out of my own problems and gives me a new life. He gives me other problems, but that's my life now and I enjoy it. And I couldn't be anything else except a strip-show artist now.' Meade is a great, sensitive guy. All I could say to him was, 'That's amazing. That's wonderful.' People on screen become much more interesting when they are revealed to themselves.

It's not hard to see a theory of art as a 'substitute life' in Cassavetes' remarks to Roberts and in the film itself.

I don't know – somehow I got hooked. I got hooked on movies being an expression. A *substitute* for living! And a good one. I don't know how to live. I mean, I don't know how to dress or – get on with people. I don't even understand all that stuff. It drives me crazy.

The other side of the use of Roberts that makes the Mr. Sophistication–Professor Rath–Roberts equation more than a clever imaginative conceit is that Roberts was really quite similar to Professor Rath and Mr. Sophistication in many ways. Roberts *was* a teacher (of writing at the New School in New York); he was extremely 'sensitive' and 'artistic' in his demeanor and deeply frustrated and disappointed by much of life; and he lived most of his adult years in the same state of fretful, whining discouragement and feeling of underappreciation as the character he

plays in the film. The point is that when Cassavetes described Professor Rath to Roberts or cast him as Mr. Sophistication, he was not merely telling Roberts a fairy story or giving him motivation for a fictional role. As he did with all of his actors in all of his works, he was conducting a life study and inviting Roberts to explore aspects of his own personality along with him. The point, as always, is that acting is not about pretending to be something simpler than what you actually are. It was about being yourself in the richest, most complex way possible. In this form of drama nothing was wasted or superfluous; everything was acceptable to be 'used'. (As a small illustration, Cassavetes and Roberts even used Roberts' chronic emphysema in the film. His laborious movements and pained steps – particularly when going up and down the club's dressing-room stairs – became part of his characterization.)

I've come to the conclusion that it's damn difficult to make films. It's such a terribly unnatural journey into all the actors' personal lives. I don't really feel you can make many. One day you're depressed, another day you're mad, another you're happy, another insane. But it's always with a driving purpose – to get something true on film. It becomes more difficult all the time, using yourself and other people up like that. You call upon enormous energy from the actors. I try to find some kind of positive way to make a world exist like a family – make a family, not of us behind the camera, not of the actors, but of the characters.

I always feel left out of most movies. They have nothing to do with me. I don't particularly like movies. I'm not really fascinated by them. They're usually a double-cross. I think you like 'em when you're a kid. You like the adventure of it. And you like it when it doesn't get mushy, and you like it when it's tough and hard. And it's an expression. But I don't usually like movies because movies are made for people to go in and see them and make money on them. It's never as clear as it is in movies. People don't know what they are doing most of the time, myself included. They don't know what they want or feel. It's only in the movies that they know what their problems are and have game plans for dealing with them. Why should we have to be the way people *aren't*? Life is stranger than the movies. All those things are much more interesting than what they're making movies out of.

Cassavetes wrote the script in the spring of 1975, while he was making publicity trips connected with the release of *A Woman Under the Influence*. It was written rapidly, as all of the scripts were. The title page bears a final date of June 1975, but there are inserted revision pages

An early script reading in Gazzari's for a scene that would be set in the Crazy Horse dressing-room. Meade Roberts is in the center; Ben Gazzara is across the table facing him; Cassavetes is standing up with his arms extended, 'conducting' the scene at the top left. © *Michael Ferris*

dated 8 and 9 July, which was immediately prior to the start of the shoot. Filming ran for eleven weeks, until the fourth week in September.

For sets, Cassavetes used whatever was available and inexpensive or free. The coincidentally named Bill Gazzari's Sunset Strippery (later transformed into The Roxy) became the location for Cosmo's club. Cassavetes transformed the disco into a strip-club by building a false front, adding a stage and building a set of props for the strippers to use. Lady Rowlands' house, which had been used as Jeannie Rapp's apartment in *Faces*, became the home of the first girl Cosmo picks up with the limousine. Carmine's Italian Steakhouse let Cassavetes use their facilities for free for an evening as the restaurant setting for the gangsters' meeting late in the film. (As a typical example of Cassavetean black comedy, the filmmaker invited every studio executive he knew to be an extra in the scene and got an overwhelming response – since they all wanted to be in a movie – then deliberately didn't include any of their faces in the final edit.) Since Cassavetes did not have the financial resources to rent or build the exact sets he needed, the guard house with the driveway leading up to it and the house of the 'bookie' that is supposedly behind it were actually in two entirely different locations. (If you look closely when Gazzara opens the gate after feeding the guard dogs, for a split

second you can see that the street behind him is not the same as the driveway he walked up in the preceding sequence.)

A bit of trivia: David Bowie sat in on much of the shoot and is visible in some of the audience scenes. Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, which was made a few years later and featured Bowie, was one of Cassavetes' favorite contemporary films. Cassavetes had a high opinion of Bowie as an actor, though in the case of Oshima's film he was even more fond of Ryuichi Sakamoto's performance.

Even beyond the usual headaches that went with Cassavetes' low-budget methods and inexperienced crews, the shoot was unusually difficult, acrimonious and aimless at times. The old man who played the ganglord turned out to be afraid of water, so that he refused to do the jacuzzi scene until underwater supports were rigged so that he wouldn't slip and drown. Gazzara neither understood nor liked the character he was playing, and was unable to work up much enthusiasm during the entire shoot. Tim Carey and Seymour Cassel had a number of personal conflicts, and a few fights almost broke out between them. Carey was a notorious ham and scene-stealer, averse to direction, who more or less did whatever he felt like doing in his scenes; Cassel was similar, and the combination was volatile. (By the same virtue, both actors brought a lot of originality to their work. Carey's shirt and white gloves in the restaurant scene and the way he eats his spinach were entirely his own invention. These were the sorts of things that made other directors shy away from using Carey but which Cassavetes adored.) Most seriously of all, because of the late-night nature of much of the shoot and the Sunset Strip location, there was a lot of drunkenness, drug-taking and carousing by the 'boys', who kept dropping in on neighboring bars to ogle the girls between scenes. Cassavetes was completely fed up and ready to throw in the towel at several points. One evening at 4 a.m., he lined up the actors and paraded up and down in front of them, according to one of them, 'like a drill sergeant chewing us out':

You think I'm doing this for myself? We don't have to do it, you know. I'm doing it for *you*, not for me. Let's get with it or everyone go home. I've had it!

Al Ruban began as one of the cameramen, but early in the shoot got into a fight with Cassavetes over the use of gels in the nightclub scenes. Cassavetes absolutely insisted on them in order to give faces a garish look. (The conversation between Tim Carey and Cosmo in the club during the 'Imagination' number illustrates the effect.) Ruban quit the pro-

duction in protest. Cassavetes removed his name from the photographic credits but retained him as one of the film's gangsters – a role Cassavetes only half-jokingly later described as 'type casting'. Cassavetes completed the film with Michael Ferris (who had shot *A Woman Under the Influence*), a very young Frederick Elmes (an AFI student whom Cassavetes had met during his time there, and who had briefly worked on the crew of *A Woman Under the Influence*), and himself, shooting with one, two or (very rarely) three cameras simultaneously. As in *A Woman Under the Influence*, he was in charge of the hand-held 'wild' camera – at liberty to shoot whatever he wanted to, picking up 'accents', odd moments and eccentric close-ups at will.

I worked with two cameramen, though most of the time we only used one camera. They were both ready to shoot, but they didn't know which one was going to be asked. Every cameraman works his own way, and I know the people I work with. I know one enjoys shooting extreme close-ups. And the other would rather film in a more classical way. I like to do the hand-held stuff. I've worked with lots of cameramen. They see something that they like, they want to shoot it. For the big Paris number, we used three cameras. I was holding one camera, and two cameramen had two others. I wanted to shoot it because I felt strongly about the scene. Each just went along according to their own angles. That's what makes me happy. I have my way. They have their way. They see something and I trust their eye.

As was always the case when he shot his work, Cassavetes was given to suddenly becoming interested in something and spending hours photographing it out of all proportion to its narrative importance. He shot the five-minute scene in which the gangsters meet with Cosmo in the restaurant for an entire night, exposing more than 80,000 feet (fourteen hours) of film in two cameras running simultaneously, much more film than is normally shot to make an entire feature. Tim Carey told me about many other times Cassavetes gleefully spent hours filming something when he must have known that he wouldn't be able to include more than a few seconds of it in the film. (One example was a long sequence in the garage in which Carey's character sang 'The Star Spangled Banner' over and over to Cosmo.)

A daring cinematographic choice on Cassavetes' part was the decision to photograph the entire meeting in the car between Cosmo and the gangsters with no artificial lighting. Everyone Cassavetes asked told him that the emulsions of the era would not support the low-light condition;

An intense moment between Cassavetes and Val Avery in the scene set in Carmine's Steakhouse. © *Michael Ferris*

he was convinced otherwise. As he had previously done with the stairway sequence in *Faces*, he instructed the lab to 'push' the processing to compensate for the underexposure. And, as he had told Elaine May when questions about the lack of light in the cemetery scene in *Mikey and Nicky* were being raised, he argued that viewers' eyes would compensate as long as the sequence stayed dark and was not interrupted by a bright scene.

Cassavetes was racing a deadline, since he had committed himself to a location shoot in Europe. He worked around the clock editing as soon as he finished shooting. Gazzara says he saw the filmmaker at one point in this period and his eyeballs were actually bleeding from lack of sleep. But at the point he had to leave much of the film was still unfinished, and he had to turn it over to Tom Cornwell. With any of his previous works, Cassavetes would simply have put the edit on hold and finished it when he completed his acting projects, but the problem was that he had already committed himself to open *Bookie* in more than fifty theaters in February 1976. (The release date and the frantic rush to meet it were dictated by two factors: first, he wanted to cash in on the success of *A Woman Under the Influence* while people's memories were still fresh; second, he was due to begin a quickie two-month acting job on *Two Minute Warning* at the end of February and wanted to be able to squeeze in a slew of publicity interviews before he got tied up

with the other project.) The result was the 135-minute, 1976 version of the film. It was the first time since *A Child Is Waiting* that he didn't have the opportunity to personally supervise the final edit of the film.

We edited it in a hurry. And we had to rush it. After shooting was complete, I had to leave almost immediately for Europe, and the editors worked alone for three or four weeks. I kept phoning the office and asking, 'How is it going?' They answered, 'Great.' But one of the editors was very sick, and the other one was more of an assistant and was waiting for the first one to get well. In the meantime we had offers from movie theaters and only had a week and half to finish the movie after I got back. So we were working right up to the last minute. We sent the negative out to be cut, and from then on it was too late to make any changes. We did the sound after the negative had already been cut. So we couldn't change a thing. But I don't really see much difference between the two versions except in their length. There was just a little more action and a little more color and atmosphere in terms of the club in the re-edited one.

The final and arguably the deepest connection between the filmmaker and his hero was that, like Cosmo, Cassavetes enjoyed living on the edge. He was a regular at casinos and a wild, impulsive gambler to the core. Cassavetes made bets on everything with everyone throughout his life, especially when it came to sports: from facts like how tall Muhammad Ali was; to trivia about baseball averages and records in bets he made with Peter Falk throughout the *Husbands* shoot; to long-shot 'Hail Mary' wagers – like the time he won \$30,000 on a sixty-to-one bet he placed with a Vegas bookie on the Mets to win the Series in their first year as a team. (It's not accidental that several of the films have gambling scenes or that many of the characters are risk-takers.) But bar bets and casinos were the trivial manifestation of Cassavetes' passion for gambling. The profound side was his willingness to take crazy chances with his life and his art.

From start to finish, *Bookie* represented the highest of high-stakes gambles that he could not only duplicate the success of *A Woman Under the Influence* but exceed it. To talk to Cassavetes at this point in his life was to be swept up in his dream that he would finally break out of the art-film ghetto he felt he had been trapped in. He decided not even to look for a distributor. He would release and publicize *Bookie* completely on his own. Drawing heavily on the profits (and the lessons learned) from the self-distribution of *A Woman Under the Influence*, he decided

to go for broke. He had thousands of Sam Shaw-designed press-kits printed up – sparing no expense: the fanciest photo layouts on the highest-quality stock. He put in an order for hundreds of prints to be struck. He rented offices in New York and Los Angeles, had phones and furniture installed and hired a staff of thirty, a fifty per cent increase over the previous film. He committed himself to large-format display advertising in major newspapers. His staff began to take advance bookings – with initial commitments from fifty theaters, growing to 110 before *Bookie* was released and before any of the theater-owners had seen a minute of the edit. It would be a one-man show, financed entirely out of his pocket. The film cost almost \$1 million to shoot, process and edit, and the print costs, distribution and publicity would run to more than a half million more, but Cassavetes forged ahead. It would be double or nothing.

He decided to open *Bookie* almost identically to the way he had opened *A Woman Under the Influence* – at the Cinema I and II in New York and Mann's Village Theater in Westwood. (*Woman* had opened at the gargantuan 2,200-seat Mann's Fox Wilshire, which had been hard to fill, so Cassavetes' one change was to choose the smaller theater in its place.) Previews for the press, invited guests and the general public were scheduled for Sunday 15 February 1976. Word of mouth was excellent; Cassavetes' name was hot; there were lines around the block for tickets, and the screenings were sold out. Cassavetes personally attended and introduced all three Los Angeles screenings, but his dream of a hit didn't last even an hour into the movie. At each screening, more than a quarter of the audience left before the end of the film, and a smattering of hisses and boos rose from many of those that remained as the lights came up. Cassavetes stood at the back of the theater and saw and heard the same response at each screening. When he buttonholed people in the lobby, almost no one, not even his friends, had a good word to say. Though everyone tried to be polite, and many told him it was an 'interesting' movie, it was clear that even those who didn't hate it were utterly bewildered by its narrative looseness and obliquity. (A version of this event appears in *Opening Night*.) Tom Bower, a friend who dated back to Cassavetes' Variety Arts days, described the filmmaker's mood of discouragement after the screening Bower attended, and how he afterwards 'watched him walk alone across the street to a bar. It was an unforgettable image of him, ashen face, smoking a cigarette, stomach distended, looking as though the weight of the world had fallen upon him.'

When *Bookie* opened in New York and Los Angeles a few days later (with the bad luck of starting its commercial run within days of Martin Scorsese's more conventional *Taxi Driver*), it was savaged by the few

Having fun putting Gazzara in a predicament: wondering how he will deal with his scene with Tim Carey. Cassavetes talks with Gazzara about the warehouse scene (left), then walks away giggling (right). © Joan Almond

journalists who even bothered to mention it. The reviews were more than negative – they were virulent. Judith Crist called the film ‘a mess, as sloppy in concept as it is in execution, as pointless in thesis as it is in concept’. The *New York Times*’s Vincent Canby compared watching the movie to ‘listening to someone use a lot of impressive words, the meanings of which are just wrong enough to keep you in a state of total confusion. It takes a little while to realize that maybe the speaker not only doesn’t know but doesn’t even care to think things out.’ Cassavetes quixotically refused to admit defeat, the day after Canby’s review appeared taking out a full-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times*, blazoning a sentence from an unknown reviewer in a tiny New Jersey suburban newspaper, *The Bergen County Register*, because it was the single favorable critical comment *Bookie* had elicited.

After the first reviews appeared, almost all of the advance bookings were canceled. Less than two weeks after it had opened, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* was critically and commercially dead. Cassavetes valiantly tried to rally support with a few press interviews and a few more newspaper ads, but the film played to almost completely empty houses. There was no point in continuing. Cassavetes could see the writing on the wall and withdrew the film from circulation, closed his distribution offices and cut his staff back to the few friends who would continue to assist him on and off over the next decade: Richard Kaye, Robert Fieldsteel, Helen Caldwell, Doe Avedon Siegel, Esmé Chandlee, and a few others.

Only two or three critics in America liked the film. Every other one attacked it. My films live or die by what the critics say because the audiences who see our films are influenced by critics. So when the reviews came out I said we should close. I didn't know how we could fight a unanimous blast. We only played five or six theaters in all, and it did not do well at any of them. Audiences generally disliked the film and didn't want to see it. Pauline Kael has never given me a good review, but I have this dream that she is going to not go along with the crowd and like *Chinese Bookie*. [Laughing.]

Cassavetes' hopes were in vain. Kael continued her hostility to him and his work and didn't even review the movie. In an ironic repeat of the journalistic coverage that accompanied *Husbands*, the longest single article on *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* during its entire release, a 1,700-word *Los Angeles Times Sunday Calendar* piece, was devoted to describing how much audiences hated the film.

If one asks where Cassavetes' calculations about piggy-backing on the success of *A Woman Under the Influence* to attract viewers went wrong, the answer probably lies in the fact that the American filmgoer pays more attention to who stars in a picture and what it is about than to who directs it. In other words, viewers – especially women – who loved Gena Rowlands' performance in Cassavetes' 'woman's picture' had no desire to see a gangster movie starring Ben Gazzara. Though only speculation, it's just possible that if Cassavetes had followed *A Woman Under the Influence* with a second Rowlands vehicle like *Opening Night*, the rest of his career might have been a little different.

By March 1976, Cassavetes had not only lost almost \$2 million of his own money, but squandered whatever goodwill *Woman* had gained him the previous year. In American critics' minds, he was relegated back to being that half-illiterate, self-indulgent, actor-centered director incapable of telling a simple story. Even *A Woman Under the Influence* was retrospectively reinterpreted, so that whatever merits were found in it were attributed to the virtuosity of Rowlands' performance rather than Cassavetes' filmmaking. In the press, Cassavetes displayed a philosophic acceptance of the situation; to his friends, he expressed bitterness, anger and disappointment.

As far as I can see there are two ways to play it. The professional way of working in Hollywood or on TV is to take a script and do one's job in the best way possible. You make things as credible as possible within the commercial limitations. The other way is creative interpretation.

You aim, without worrying about your career or the profit, at rendering your own life clearer, through the expression of your feelings and the exercise of your intelligence. When you go all the way that way, it isn't really about making movies anymore. It's about trying to find yourself, to understand yourself, through a character. Too many actors and directors lie according to fashion. They earn millions of dollars without really knowing why; they listen to advice about payments on a house which they can't afford, so that in the end they are no longer artists but businessmen. Most people who work for a studio simply want to make financially and critically successful movies. That's not my goal. My criteria are that I enjoy it, that it puts into question some of the feelings that I or others have, that the actors have good parts and that the characters express themselves with a certain amount of dignity, even if they show themselves in a ridiculous light.

Cassavetes meditated on the enduring unpopularity of his work in his native country.

Audiences have become so business-oriented that they really care about how a picture is doing financially and very little about the picture itself. They call me up and say about a movie, 'I don't think it's going to make any money, but I really liked the picture.' People are becoming conditioned to believe that what they like no one else will like. This country is built upon endorsements. If you watch television, if you read the newspapers, if you go to a movie, the first thing somebody asks is, 'How many people were there, was it crowded?' That's the nature of the success of a film in this country. The difference between my movies and professional ones is that mine are about expressing something that doesn't necessarily make money.

We all get too obsessive because we know films are expensive and difficult, and you know you're making something that audiences will not go to in great numbers. There's no way to break a form and please everybody. People love form. In films, they love genre. Is it a comedy, an epic, a thriller? There doesn't seem to be anything in between. I'm no different. I go to a film sometimes, 'Oh, God! I don't want to see a Bergman film tonight! I'll watch a gangster film.' I would have liked to have made more commercial films, closely knit, not confusing, where there is an answer for everything and it's all greatly entertaining. But I started to make films and none of that came out. Instead, this expression of dissatisfaction with the tightness of the form kept emerging.

He replied to a few of the most common criticisms: When asked why the film was so bleak, he denied the charge and said he saw it as a parable about 'going on' in the face of adversity. The importance of 'going on' is one of the dominant themes of his work – and life. He again draws a parallel between Cosmo's life and his own.

I've awakened many days thinking, 'What the hell is all of this rejection about?' I don't know how I'm going to face this. I don't know what's going to happen in my life. And I feel that if some characters in this movie can go on – on the smallest, lousy level – in that atmosphere of strippers, fringe people and gangsters – I feel that they're better than most people I know. They're more motivated. They're happier doing a job. I wanted to make a morality film to say, 'Yes, something is right and something is wrong.' The characters in my films may have a terrible time of it, but they will always keep hope and have it in the end.

Cassavetes believed that if he had only gotten a little more feeling into certain scenes, the film might have been appreciated.

It is many people's story, but because it was an unflattering portrait of themselves, the audience couldn't identify with him [Cosmo]. I remember very distinctly when we were shooting the scene in which he lost all the money, and then he went and shook the hands of the criminals. Ben Gazzara did it with such skill and sincerity. I kept thinking, if we do this another twenty times, maybe Ben will reach the audience by enjoying it more. I thought the difference between success and failure, in terms of the audience response, would have been had he said, 'Thank you *very much!*' instead of, 'Thank you. Thank you.' I thought that little point would either make the audience go with him as a character or want to shy away from him because he really *is* polite, he's not putting anyone down. He's not standing up for himself. I think it became a sad film for most people, because that point of reality was something they couldn't swallow.

Yet, at the same time, he admitted that the form of the film was deliberately fractured, flattened out, de-melodramatized and de-emotionalized. The programmed conflicts, crises and resolutions of Hollywood film-making told lies about experience.

My films don't have the form and convention. If anyone attacks me on the basis of fractured films and things like that, well, let them. I think the whole world is having a nervous breakdown. I don't know *anyone*

who is at ease. I don't know *anyone* who is not aware that life is tough, impossible. I loathe the simplicity of Hollywood movies. I hate it. I've seen all the philosophy I want to see, all the *structured* talk, all the *man-nered methods* of curing people.

I am not an unrealistic person. Dear friends of mine come out of *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and ask me to explain it. Somebody called me up and said, 'Listen I just didn't get it. If you could've only just laid it in for the audience, because the audience doesn't understand what's going on.' And I think to myself, yes, that's right. That's right. And I don't either. If I were in that situation, I wouldn't understand what's going on and I don't want you, the audience, to be fifty steps ahead of my main character. To give people what they expect is the ultimate rip-off in film.

I like to make films that are difficult, that make an audience scream, make an audience walk out. I'm not in the entertainment business, you know. If nobody likes it, then obviously it didn't go down well. But it doesn't really alter my feeling about what I'm doing. I understand that a lot of people want to like it, just as a lot are happy to hate it. I am not a conventional filmmaker nor do I seek success in that area, and I am not even saying that if people don't understand it they are stupid. Maybe my ideas and method of filmmaking are not in line with what somebody wants, but then if they want a filmmaker who makes them feel comfortable, it's not me. I'm interested in shaking people up, not making them happy by soothing them.

He replied to the criticism that his films were not 'entertaining'.

The way we make pictures is, we make pictures for people that are interested in specifics. They're not gonna be interested in everything. They're gonna be interested in that scene: 'I love that scene.' Somebody else says, 'I hate that scene' – because it has something to do with their life. And in that sense, our work is not like a *movie*. A *movie* tries to pacify people by keeping it going for them so that it's sheer entertainment. Well, I hate entertainment. There's nothing I despise more than being entertained. You go with the expectancy as an audience to see something that's gonna knock you off your feet and you settle for a nice movie, you know? And you think, 'I don't want to do something different! I don't want to see something different! I don't want to! I hate it! I hate it! I want it in my form! I want action! I want this!' And then when you see something that's different, and you can't get it out of your mind, you're still angry with the son of a gun, and you think, 'I hated that pic-

Thinking on your feet, functioning in a step-by-step universe – for both the character and the director. Cassavetes talks with Art Levinson, the production manager, as they work out the scene in which Cosmo shoots the Chinese ganglord. © *Michael Ferris*

ture! I hated it! I hated it!’ But, you know, ten years later, you remember it. And you think, ‘Hmmm. I saw something that’s interesting!’

I won’t call my work entertainment. It’s exploring. It’s asking questions of people constantly: How much do you feel? How much do you know? Are you aware of this? Can you cope with this? A good movie will ask you questions you haven’t been asked before, ones that you haven’t thought about every day of your life. Or, if you have thought about them, you haven’t had the questions posed this way. Film is an investigation of life. What we are. What our responsibilities in life are – if any. What we are looking for; what problems do *you* have that *I* may have? What part of life are we both interested in knowing more about?

Filmmaking is a way of being with people that you like and becoming extremely close by trying to find the answer to something that you may not find. We’re endeavoring not to come to some *conclusion*, but to investigate some of the things that might bother people and the only way we can know that is that they bother us. We find people to act in the pictures and to work on the pictures that share some of those feelings. Now they all approach it in a different way and they all come with a different perspective because their lifestyles have been different and the combined result would be what the film is.

I like to make movies that dig deep into a very short life, to say what we all think without any regard to entertainment because I don't think life is entertainment. What am I going to do? Why should I sit around and penalize myself for doing the best I could? Even if I made the worst film in the world – which I didn't – I would hate myself only if I set out to make the worst film. The nice thing about the film is that it's *there*. This one is a section of life that I think there's a place for. I'd like to make that film about four or five more times, because it had interesting characters, interesting people.

Cassavetes' suggestion that he wanted to make *Bookie* four or five more times was not mere rhetoric. After completing *Opening Night*, he did a complete re-edit of the film which was a wholesale reinterpretation of many of the film's scenes and characters. Unfortunately, in the United States, only the first version has been released on video and, even more unfortunately, in the current Anchor Bay video release it is presented in a mutilated version with remixed sound and added mood music at several points.

One of the few works in all of American film that compares with Cassavetes' in brilliance was released in December 1976 and met with a coincidentally similar reception: *Mikey and Nicky*. Because of disagreements with Elaine May during the production process, Paramount retaliated by giving the film minimal publicity, playing it in only a few theaters and leaking rumors about the director being 'difficult'. American journalists predictably followed the studio script and panned the movie. (Summing up the party line, Molly Haskell's *Village Voice* review treated Cassavetes and May as if they were the same person: 'A pretext for Falk and Cassavetes to indulge in one of those long, lugubrious Actors' Studio exercises that wore out its welcome with the last frame of *Husbands* and the first frame of *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*.) In a rerun of Cassavetes' experience with *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, *Mikey and Nicky* closed after only a few weeks.

In the spring of 1976, Cassavetes announced that he was preparing two scripts for production: *Mind-Reading Jewel Thieves*, to star Peter Falk and Glenda Jackson, and *Opening Night*, in which he intended Bette Davis to play opposite his wife.

Opening Night (1976–7)

In late 1974, Barbra Streisand was deeply moved by a screening of *A Woman Under the Influence*. She asked Cassavetes if he would consider directing her in her planned remake of *A Star Is Born*. After reading the script, he turned her down (the apocryphal response – ‘Why would I want to direct you?’ – made the cocktail-party rounds at the time); but the reading left its mark. Both *A Star Is Born* (the 1937 Wellman version) and *All About Eve* were two of his favorite films, and as far back as 1968, he had had the idea of doing a backstage drama titled *Opening Night*. He began working on his own version of the story in earnest following the aborted release of *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*.

Cassavetes’ movie has some superficial similarities to *A Star Is Born*, but a deeper understanding of it is that it is a dream vision of what Cassavetes’ and Rowlands’ lives might have been if they had never met. At the beginning of her career, Rowlands (whose birth name was Virginia, the same as the character she plays) had in fact resolved to devote her life to the theater and never to get married. By the same virtue, if Cassavetes had not married Rowlands, he himself might have ended up a lot like the Maurice character he plays: a slightly cynical, lady-killing charmer, making his way on his own – which is not that different from what he was before he met Rowlands.

Cassavetes had previously dealt with the situation of women as they aged and their sexual appeal diminished in the characters of Florence and Maria in *Faces*, the Countess in *Husbands* and Florence in *Minnie and Moskowitz*. It was an issue that touched his actress-wife personally, and one that Rowlands and Cassavetes had talked about many times over the years. By the point he was working on *Opening Night*, questions about aging were less theoretical: he and Rowlands were in their late forties, a time when actors and non-actors are forced to take stock of the fact that they can’t be everything they dreamed of in their youth.

Choices are made during the course of a life that inevitably limit its possibilities; and time makes its own choices.

I get up in the morning and I used to be eighteen. I'm not eighteen anymore and ninety per cent of my active life is finished. I always looked young. And suddenly I'm going to be forty-eight. I look at myself in the mirror sometimes and I tell myself, 'What is this fucking head? Who would have such a face?' So I understand these kind of feelings. Since I'm not particularly vain, I think of someone who has this sort of vanity, someone who would always have been told that they are what other people see in them. This particularly applies to an actor when you *seem* to be more than you really are, and nobody really knows you or sees your inside. And I think, '*That's* a problem worth dealing with.'

The three generations of women were important, because the film really is about women and their points of view as professionals. Here's an old lady, Joan Blondell, who still has all her life and sexual feelings, which you can see though we don't go into them; and Gena, who's a few decades down from Joan; and the young girl, who is really seventeen years old. And these three generations do haunt the waking hours of women: your powers waning, your attractiveness having to be worked on more. I think these are real things, and to put them in terms of this story really gave me fits.

In the discussion of *A Woman Under the Influence*, I quoted Cassavetes as saying, 'In replacing narrative, you need an idea.' There are several themes that link the characters and situations in *Opening Night*. One is the idea of the kind of weariness that settles in on many professionals as they reach middle-age. In their different ways, Myrtle, Manny and Dorothy are all experiencing feelings of exhaustion, doubt and despair about the value of their lives. They are tired of their own routines, bored with their own successes and cynical about the praise lavished on them. It is not hard to see an autobiographical dimension to this side of the film. Another idea that links the characters is men's and women's different responses to aging and feelings of mortality. Manny Victor and Gus Aaron respond by having affairs. Their relationships with younger women are their way of denying their age. Myrtle Gordon, Dorothy Victor and Sarah Goode respond in other ways to their fears of getting old. In the service of exploring the aging theme, Cassavetes methodically compares and contrasts the lives of more than a dozen women of different ages and situations – teenaged, middle-aged and elderly; wives, lovers and loners; childless professionals and fertile earth-mothers. As

he always did before he began writing, Cassavetes did 'research'. He talked to Sam Shaw's wife, who was in her sixties. Cassavetes called her almost every night for a year on the telephone and talked to her for hours. He watched television talk shows and read women's magazines. He played bridge in the afternoons with Rowlands, her mother, his mother and anyone else who would join them.

I love spending the afternoon with these women! I never talk. I just sit and listen and smile. They tell me everything! They forget I'm a man! I might as well have a dress on. Then I also read for two years all the women's pages. Everything is how to be younger. How to stay younger. What is the answer? What is the secret? So we made a film. I'm not afraid of putting in aging. I sit up and watch the morning shows. I was watching people patting people on the cheeks all morning. If I made a movie like that they'd kill me because they'd be so embarrassed. I would never choose that because it's exploitative. That would be taking somebody and embarrassing them.

The problems with getting old have been talked about forever. Aging is a serious problem. It's a fear. Somebody reaches forty, it's a bigger fear. They want to be thirty. Somebody's thirty, they want to be twenty, you know. So they can have all the access to life. So I think I can make a movie about that and maybe some poor sucker who has the same problem can figure it out. What I am asking is, can we *beat* that? Can we make it *unimportant*? Can we put it *in perspective*? Can we see life? Can we afford to talk about something instead of kidding ourselves?

Half of the fun of writing a script was to inhabit alternative identities. As he created his characters, Cassavetes would 'become' them for hours at a time. Bo Harwood describes afternoons during the preparation of *Opening Night* when Cassavetes would come into the office 'as Myrtle' – trying out lines for the script, doing her tones, experimenting with gestures to see what they felt like.

You can't do this kind of exploration through film techniques. You have to write and write and write. Without the writing, I don't think that filmmakers could do as well because *techniques* – well, you've seen *all of them*! They become less important after a while. The same techniques have been more and more perfected, and what else can you do with a camera? It's not enough. You can see within yourself this has been done before. Everything has been done to dissect in a mechanical way everything, but then what about *really* difficult things like

answering questions about your life? Your belonging to life, your loneliness, your love, your happiness, your joys.

When you start feeling a certain emotion, when you start understanding the scene, believing in it, the film starts to work, to take on meaning. It becomes, in some way, comfortable. You get used to the characters. I don't think that there is a director or a writer or even an actor who knows what's going to make it work or when it's going to happen. It is very difficult to recognize. It is a secret of the heart that no one understands.

In general I start with a premise, with a basic idea. *Opening Night* deals with people's reactions when they start getting old: how to win when you're not as desirable as you were, when you don't have as much confidence in yourself, in your capacities. When you have less energy, and when you're conscious of that. This is the first idea in the film. The next idea is to show the life of an artist, of a creator. I think that I know a lot about the life of somebody who is creative. At this point different ideas come along that progressively take shape, and I start writing the script. I write a first draft, and then a second one, and so on. Then, once I've chosen the actors, they start telling me what *they* think: 'I don't like this.' 'I don't like that.' 'I don't want to be merely a functionary; I want to be a real person.' They quickly catch onto the places where their character is boring or conventional because it is just following the plot. Conventional people are the ones who want to succeed, who always need to be understood and thought well of. Actors are people who don't care about getting ahead or what you think of them. Their one goal is to communicate a precise thought in a way that can be clearly understood. It's a very difficult job.

Much of *Opening Night* is anchored in real-life events and experiences in Cassavetes' and Rowlands' lives. With respect to the stage-door scene, he and Rowlands had been long aware of how many of the people around them lived vicariously through them; but the issue of mixing up your identity with someone else's was brought to a head by Rowlands' experiences following *A Woman Under the Influence*. For months after the film's release, she was mobbed on the streets by female admirers with tears streaming down their cheeks, embracing her and telling her that 'she was them', as Nancy Stein says to Myrtle.

Aging was also an incredibly important issue in Rowlands' personal life. She had fudged her age for years in interviews and in press releases, and physically warred against signs of aging in every way she could. It was an extremely sensitive issue for her; though, like Myrtle in the scene with

Sarah Goode, Rowlands would deny that it mattered (denying it perhaps even to herself) at the very times she felt most uncomfortable about it.

There was also a lot of overlap between Rowlands' view of acting and Myrtle's. It was not at all uncommon for Rowlands to get so 'into' a role that she would not come out of character between takes. The 'ghost' metaphor in *Opening Night* reflects Rowlands' own view of acting. She frequently compared playing a role to 'being a medium', 'channeling', 'going into a trance' or 'letting ghosts inhabit you.' In terms of plot events, it's also worth noting that Rowlands invariably consulted her psychic, Carole Richter, before making important decisions. When I expressed a degree of skepticism about the plausibility of the seance scenes in a conversation, Cassavetes defended them as what he'd expect 'a woman in this situation really to do'. At other times, however, he seemed apologetic about this aspect of the film.

Here's a theatrical story, and suddenly this apparition appears – and I started giggling. Everybody knows I hate that spooky-dooky stuff, and they said, 'Are you going to leave that in?' But this is a figment of her imagination, it's not a fantasy, it's something that's controllable by her. It's something necessitated by her own loneliness and individuality, and she's childlike by the very nature of being an actress. And it isn't a man. A man wouldn't have that apparition, he'd dream of a dead body or his own demise.

Cassavetes' real-life relationship with Rowlands also resembled certain aspects of the relationship between Dorothy and Manny Victor. Among other things, the couple had shared many late-night conversations like the one Dorothy and Manny have early in the film. The scene in which Maurice gives Myrtle a 'stage slap' and is accused of actually hurting her was also drawn from Cassavetes' and Rowlands' real-life experiences in *Minnie and Moskowitz* and *A Woman Under the Influence*, where actors and crew members were occasionally uncertain about whether 'stage falls' were acted or actually taking place. When Cassavetes hit Rowlands in *Minnie and Moskowitz*, for example, the crew sprang to Rowlands' aid, imagining she had really been attacked by Cassavetes, and Rowlands, to retaliate for Cassavetes' refusal to tell her in advance that he was playing this part, pretended she had really been hurt. Cassavetes was reduced to unconvincingly pleading with the crew, 'I didn't touch her. If I had, there would be a mark on her face' – just as Maurice does in *Opening Night*. In Cassavetes' account, note the characteristic conflation of on- and off-screen emotions:

You know the scene in *Minnie and Moskowitz* when I slap Gena around? The crew thought it was real! They jumped up to restrain me. They gave me the worst looks after that scene! Gena is such a marvelous actress. She didn't get up off the floor after the take. She just lay there. When it came her turn to hit me, she said, 'I can't do it.' I really hated her then – as an actress. I have been criticized in this scene – where I am telling her to hit me – but not so hard. They said I was like a director coaching an actress; but it came from sheer panic. She was really upset, and when she eventually took a swipe at me she really connected. [Laughs.]

As a director, Cassavetes had had many experiences dealing with distraught actresses similar to the scenes between Manny and Myrtle in *Opening Night*. During the filming of *A Child Is Waiting*, Judy Garland used to call him in the middle of the night to be reassured exactly the way Myrtle calls Manny. In fact, Cassavetes said that one of his earliest lessons in how vulnerable an actress could be was provided by Garland during that shoot. One day Cassavetes was sitting with her in her dressing room when she began to cry for no apparent reason. When he asked her what was wrong, she said she had been on the film for a week and would have thought someone would have sent her flowers by then.

The screenplay of *Opening Night* describes Manny Victor's company as 'the most exciting, dedicated members of the American theater' and as 'extremely talented professionals' – but in Cassavetes' artistic universe, to be polished and professional is not necessarily a virtue. It can be the end of creativity.

You have to fight sophistication. Sophistication comes to anybody that has been doing their job for a while. You have to fight knowing, because once you know something, it's hard to be open and creative; it's a form of passivity – something to guard against. Have I ever felt insecure as an actor? Yes, I've felt insecure. I mean, who doesn't? Even after many years, I don't think you feel any differently. But insecurity isn't bad. Really, it isn't bad at all. I think it's healthy in a lot of cases.

There is clearly an autobiographical dimension to Cassavetes' story of the actor fighting to redeem a role. A few years before he began the film, Cassavetes described his own commitment toward improving a bad part, and how he and Rowlands would sometimes improvise together exactly the way Maurice and Myrtle do at the end of *Opening Night*:

In my early days, I would fight with everyone. And never win! Never won one fight! Never. And Gena said to me, 'Why do you do that? I

work for the same people you work with and I don't fight with them at all.' And I said, 'Well, they just *like* you. You're pretty and . . .' Sometimes after we talked some more, we took a bad script and did take-offs on it, and we found ways of doing it that made it fun. We *made* it fun. When you're forced to play a part you don't believe in, what you do is make it better. You make it better individually. In other words, you go on the thing, and if you don't like your part, you argue about your part, or you find a better way than arguing.

As was the case in *A Woman Under the Influence*, the character played by Rowlands was Cassavetes' *alter ego*, while the character played by himself was an example of the sort of self-protectiveness that Cassavetes' own directing was devoted to breaking through.

The only measure of an actor's success is what he can create on film or on the stage, and if he cops out it shows. I've often copped out, choosing to be well-liked and to compromise rather than choosing to fight. But then you are always disappointed later on. You say that you didn't like the picture, or you didn't like the director, and those things have nothing to do with it. The fact is you didn't have the courage to express what you knew you had to express at the time. The biggest problem a professional actor faces is to learn how to express that with a minimum amount of pain. If a director can work on that problem with the actor and be understanding and put the emphasis on that rather than on pettiness and on who's going out to dinner tonight, he will have taken a giant step toward getting a great performance.

When you have a problem as an actor people want to know why your feelings are different from theirs. And if you can't explain it to them, they attack you. And this woman can't resist the attacks – attacks that come not from her enemies but her friends. They are more threatening because they can destroy her image of herself or what she's trying to do a lot more quickly. It's easy to say, 'This idiot has no idea what he's talking about.' But if it's someone you love and respect, then it hurts to hear it when you're told that you're wrong. And when Myrtle hears these attacks, she can't function the way she used to because she's not sure that *she's right* any longer. Because her feelings are fragile. They don't come from a magazine, from Women's Lib, from her mother's advice, from her husband, or someone else. She formulates her own ideas. It's very brave on her part to try, then, to follow her idea of herself. She is special in that she's completely honest with herself, very stubborn and very alone.

However, Myrtle was not merely a stand-in for himself. Cassavetes emphasized that he had put a lot of thought into the decision to organize the film around a female character. Beyond that, it was critical that the character was accorded a depth of self-reflection that most viewers would not readily have granted to a male figure. Cassavetes had learned from the failure of *Husbands* and the success of *A Woman Under the Influence*. Audiences were much less tolerant of and interested in a man's emotional needs and performative eccentricities than a woman's.

I thought an actress would be a wonderful character: a woman who wouldn't use any weapons, the usual ways women get their way – tears, sentimentality, sweetness, all these old ideas. So I picked a woman who has a career, a job. She's not interested in children, she's not interested in men, even if she still is capable of romantic feelings. Myrtle has a job to do, a career, and that's the most important thing for her. Her whole life is acting, being an actress. Myrtle doesn't go along with the crowd and accept every conceivable formula of life that is fed to us twenty-four hours a day on the radio and on television and in films. An actor is a very loyal person to life, a person who fights against all odds to make something work and doesn't want to be fed a lot of lies.

Sometimes I thought about her fighting and I would think, 'Why doesn't she just accept being a woman and be glad about it? Why doesn't she stop asking herself all these questions? Why be so pig-headed and only see one side of things? If only she had a sense of humor!' I thought, 'Go out. Enjoy yourself. Have a good time. Find a man, spend the night together. Do something, for God's sake!' But she hangs onto what she feels is important to her in spite of all the unpleasantness it creates. That's what makes her so special. She hangs onto her ideas. And in the end she's proven right. Though there's no real need to do it. In the end, she doesn't even get anything. She only gets what makes her happy. I find that moving.

Opening Night is the other side of *A Woman Under the Influence*, about a woman on her own, with no responsibility to anyone but herself, with a need to come together with other women. Myrtle is alone and in desperate fear of losing the vulnerability she feels she needs as an actress. She is a woman unable any longer to be regarded as young: sex is no longer a viable weapon. The film shows a woman and her dreams and fantasies that she confuses with reality. And suddenly someone puts an end to her fantasies after so many years and says to her, 'You don't like this play because you're getting old.' She doesn't believe at first that that could be right, but she can't prove it. You never see her as

a stupendous actress. As a matter of fact, her greatest thrill was comfort, as it is for most actresses. Give me a play I can go into every night and can feel I have some awareness of who I am, what I am. She didn't want to expose herself in certain areas. So when she faints and screams on the stage, it's because it's so impossible to be told you are this boring character, you are aging and you are just like her. I would be unable to go onto the stage feeling that I'm nothing. I think that most actors would, and that's really what the picture is about.

Cassavetes was extremely sensitive to the casual humiliations of the acting profession for women. Though the first statement that follows focuses on the audition process, much of what Cassavetes says applies to Myrtle's situation. He knew the deep fears and doubts every actress lives with.

Casting is a cruel and animal thing. God knows what pain we cause those we choose, let alone those we reject. It comes down to whether you like a person. Nothing can soften this brutal fact. When a woman comes looking for a part, she lays herself open to the marketplace, to be taken or be turned down. Small wonder she is not herself. From the moment she enters the casting-office to the moment the door closes behind her, she is holding her breath. How can a girl be relaxed and true to herself in front of strangers who question her identity, probe and peer to discover if she has a good figure, an expressive sexuality, a capacity to generate excitement on the screen so that audiences all over the world will wish they held her in their arms?

For the director, this is both his cross and his challenge. The actor is a performer whose instrument is his own ego. He is both vulnerable and infinitely rewarded. Actors have nothing to sell but themselves, and the way they communicate is so special and different that if someone tells them they are not able to play a role, it's impossible to express their mental upheaval, the shock to their feelings, the pain they feel. They can go into themselves, but the insult still hurts because it touches their personality, their whole way of life, their sense of themselves.

Working with Bo Harwood, Cassavetes wrote the lyrics to a number of songs that were intended to be used in *Opening Night*. The first three stanzas of one of them show his sensitivity to an actress's vulnerability on her big night:

It was quiet,
Like a holy night.
I was frightened

With the crowds in sight,
They were noisy –

All the work
Of my lifetime,
Pushed into this one
And only moment.

Every tear I've shed,
Every laugh I've laughed,
Every insight into woman,
Every feeling of delight,
Everything!
– Holy God, Almighty,
This was opening night!

The idea of enlarging the self through theatricality, of freeing it from social rules and obligations, was important in all of Cassavetes' work. At the same time, he understood that there were necessarily limitations to individuals' freedom.

Almost everyone is interested in theatricality – because almost *everyone* wants to be funny; almost everybody wants to be dramatic; almost everyone wants to be better than anyone else. People have to perform. There is a need for theatricality in life. So, *Opening Night* was about the sense of theatricality in all of us and how it can take us over, how we can appear to be totally wrong on some little point, and we never know what little point we're going to fight for. Divorces have been caused by little points, wars have been caused by little points, friendships have been broken on little points, and great successes have been gathered on the basis of little things that don't appear very important to a mass public, but they're important to us. And I thought it was something worthwhile to make a movie about.

I think that there's a pull and a push between whether you're an individual, as I feel right now, or whether you are a part of society, and I think we are, all of us, pulled and pushed between these two things constantly. And you keep on saying, 'Do I want to be what *I* am?' or 'Do I want to be part of society?' Myrtle has two selves. One was that background of Gena Rowlands' own personal life, of children, family, home, schooling; the problems of who you are and trying to fight for your own individual survival as you do all these other prescribed chores. The other is what you could be if none of these other things existed. The

selfish, individual part of the person – your own mind’s eye view of yourself – is to me the epitome of an actress. If you would have no boundaries of commitment, you could then express so much. But in one sense, to me, it’s an anti-art film in that it says if you had your way you wouldn’t express a goddamn thing. If you had your total way. Actors, or writers, have to work under this duress – under a limited duress. You can’t be tortured, your ears can’t be torn off, your mustache pulled out hair by hair.

Cassavetes completed a mammoth 162-page draft of the script on 20 September 1976. On 22 October 1976, a week before shooting began, he had pared it down to 138 pages. The final draft bears an evocative pen-and-ink drawing by Peter Falk on its cover depicting Myrtle on stage with her arms extended, similar to her angel-like pose in the credits sequence.

Filming took place between November 1976 and March 1977 in Los Angeles and Pasadena. The three main locations were the Lindy Opera House on Wilshire and La Brea (which Cassavetes was able to use because it was scheduled for demolition shortly afterwards) for the ‘New Haven’ out-of-town theater; the Pasadena Civic Auditorium for the ‘New York’ opening night theater; and the Green Hotel in Pasadena for the theatrical company’s apartment scenes.

We always shoot on location. I think it’s an advantage for audiences to see real buildings, real locales, real rain. Besides, since we’re always putting the money up ourselves, costs are always such a major factor. It would have been prohibitive to try to build those theater sets on a soundstage; it was too costly to even go to New York with travel expenses and all. We also figure, since we live here, we know the town well enough we can find something in the area to double for almost any place in the country.

Opening Night was the most challenging shoot Cassavetes ever put together. It was an ordeal from start to finish. As always, the money was extremely tight and all of the performers and most of the crew worked on deferred salaries. The first hurdle was casting. For the leads, Cassavetes had wanted Bette Davis in the Sarah Goode part, Seymour Cassel in the Maurice Adams part and himself in the Manny Victor part. Davis turned him down; Cassel was busy on another shoot; and he himself had to take the Maurice Adams part because Ben Gazzara asked to play the director role after he read the script. The cast changes made a

A high-stakes gamble on a big-budget production financed out of his own pocket. Two scenes from *Opening Night*: Rowlands playing Virginia in the stage play; Gazzara in the scene in the bar in which Manny tells Myrtle about an affair he had. *Top photo* © Sam Shaw; *bottom photo* © Michael Ferris

difference. If Rowlands had been caught between Cassel (whom she was not fond of) as her former lover and her husband as her director in the play, the pressures on her – both as a character and as a person – would have been much greater.

The second problem was the size of the supporting cast. For many of those roles Cassavetes simply hired more or less anyone who struck his fancy: John Tuell was a truck driver who had never acted before and had no real desire to be in a movie. Cassavetes got into a conversation with him, thought he would be right for the role of Gus and asked him to be in the production. The logistics of shooting in different geographical locations – the two theaters, two hotels and his own home for the seance scene (relocations which his earlier one-set projects had minimized) was another issue.

Opening Night cost about a million and a half, which I borrowed, and it's just been a terrible experience. The unions were killing me. Part-way through the shoot I was really up against it – far behind and way over budget. The financial conditions were impossible. So much so that I really have absolutely no feeling for the picture itself. Every film is an experience and really relates back to the way you worked on it, what kind of a pleasure it was in dealing with the people. This was just a war from the beginning to see if we could do it; I found myself spending all my energy saying, 'I don't care, we'll do it anyway.'

I'm taking a gamble making the film. I don't have any money. I just go to the bank and borrow it. And hope. But what *isn't* risky about movies? It's always risky when it's original. Nobody thought it would be easy. We thought we might fail because it was such an ambitious project. But that makes things even more involving and interesting. So all you can do is work hard at it, and if you don't succeed it's painful, but it's great to be able to say you've tried to do it.

There were a number of struggles and disagreements between Cassavetes and his actors during the shoot, and many explosions of exasperation and rage on his part (though in at least some cases, he apparently staged screaming fits with the crew to break a mood or take the heat off a particular performer). The struggle between Sarah and Myrtle that takes place in the film was paralleled by a real-life struggle between Cassavetes the writer and Rowlands the actress with regard to the film's treatment of aging. Cassavetes had intended to present the issue more toughly, but Rowlands objected. She always had the power to bring a production to a halt if she disagreed with something in the

script or wanted something changed, and some of those associated with the shoot assert that the ending was softened because she simply refused to play some of the scenes the way Cassavetes wanted her to.

I softened the aging theme because it is all very, very painful and the people I care about were upset by it. I mean Gena, who plays the lead. But it wasn't just that. I didn't want the film to be too destructive.

Other disagreements between Cassavetes and Rowlands were traceable to their different views of narrative.

I'll come in and write a scene for Gena, and she will read it, and she's a very thoughtful woman. And she'll read the thing and *her* leanings – *all* of her leanings – are toward plot point. Plot point. It has to be *extremely clear*. Now, all my leanings are *anti*-plot point. I *hate* plot point! I don't like focusing on plot because I think the audiences don't consist of only thirteen-year-old kids and also that each person you see in life has more to them than would meet the eye. It's offensive to me that you'd have to explain to an audience what is so apparent. She had big doubts about *Opening Night* while we were shooting. So, there *is* a friction. Then I always go back to Gena at the end of the picture and say, 'Do you think they will understand what we're talking about?' [Laughs.]

While Rowlands pushed for narrative clarity and causality, Cassavetes favored an elliptical and acausal presentation. In the case of *Opening Night*, he said he deliberately wanted to prevent the viewer from too easily understanding and 'identifying' with Myrtle, because the result would be a sentimental idealization.

I really think that every character in this is a cliché, with the exception of Gena, because all of us are clichés and we can all be deciphered once somebody knows us. Gena had the most difficult part, because it was the least defined and the least connected with other people. I said, 'We're going to take it objectively. It's not going to be a subjective point of view which people can identify with quite easily, because I don't want them to identify with performers, with backstage theatricality, to the point where they become just as mundane as everybody else.' So we didn't use those strengths that we know can create loneliness: long shot, then tight shot, key lighting and everything else. We shot it much more conventionally. Everything was normally lit and nothing was really explained. She came in drunk, we didn't know quite why she'd decided

to drink, we didn't know quite why she smoked a lot of cigarettes, we didn't know quite why she didn't like the play. It was never articulated that clearly, yet it was all there for people to see as themselves if they were that actress.

Cassavetes respected actors who took things seriously enough to get upset about them.

When I am the director and Gena is acting, disagreement is *not* a bad thing. It's really interesting. You don't want an actor who is always polite and serious. You need someone who gets angry. They call me at five in the morning to insult me and that's normal. If someone is angry with me, I'm not going to say I'm not going to use him again under the pretext that he's too much trouble. On the contrary, that's what life is about – for living through problems and for sharing them, isn't it?

When it came to arguments between actors and writers, Cassavetes had walked both sides of the street – having spent half his career as a writer-director struggling with actors who didn't understand his scripts, and the other half as an actor struggling with writers who didn't appreciate his suggestions for changes in what they had written. Cassavetes' initial conception of *Opening Night* involved an even more titanic struggle between two immovable objects – the writer and the director – and an irresistible force – the actress.

Opening Night was originally about the *writer*, and the integrity of the actor standing up to the writer. I wanted Bette Davis to play the Joan Blondell part. She would have been tougher. Gena can be grand. Intimidating. And Blondell was *too nice* to her – as a person and an actress. She didn't fight as hard as Bette would have. Joan got scared. She was *afraid* of Gena. And me!

Had Cassavetes succeeded in casting Davis as the writer and himself as the director (played in his customarily tough way), Myrtle would have been pinned down much more tightly. His final comment about Blondell being 'afraid' was not a rhetorical flourish. Blondell was uncomfortable and intimidated throughout the shoot. Because of the realism of Cassavetes' dialogue, his toleration of actors' deviations from the script (and his introduction of frequent last-minute changes) and his willingness to keep the camera running with several takes sometimes being done in succession, Blondell said that she couldn't tell when the actors were talking privately among themselves and when they were

actually saying their lines in a scene. She couldn't tell when a scene started or stopped; what was life and what was film. It's a creative place to get a performer to, but a potentially unsettling one.

I could see she was terrified. Paul Stewart said, 'Go talk to Joan. She doesn't know what she's doing. She's scared to death.' I'd go over to her – I couldn't help liking her, her warm, open face – and ask if she had a problem. 'No, not *at all*. I'm having the time of my life! Absolutely *not*.' And you could hear the hysteria in her voice.

To add to Blondell's bewilderment, in several scenes Cassavetes privately took Paul Stewart aside to suggest changes in his lines that might help her responses, without telling her that he was doing it; the result only confused Blondell more. She would find herself in the middle of a conversation that suddenly didn't proceed the way she expected and would feel even more insecure. Another time, when Cassavetes thought Blondell was expressing insufficient emotion in response to something Stewart's character said to her at the beginning of a conversation, he told him not to say his opening line at all. When the next take was filmed, Blondell waited for Stewart to start the conversation, then in utter puzzlement finally started on her own. Cassavetes got the emotion he was after; but the event threw Blondell even more off-balance than she already was.

Though Cassavetes was seldom given credit for visual effects, he in fact put a lot of thought into the film's camerawork. Cassavetes was a student of Welles' work, and, influenced by the opera-house sequence in *Citizen Kane* and the opening sequence in *Touch of Evil*, he wanted to begin his film with an elaborate, unbroken tracking-shot that went, in one continuous movement, from inside Myrtle's dressing room, out the door into the back-stage spaces, into the toilet, down the corridor behind the scenery, onto the stage, into the audience, up the wall into the lights and flies, and out into daylight. However, Al Ruban, the DP, refused to cooperate and the shot was never attempted. Part of the difficulty of the whole film was that Ruban argued with Cassavetes and voiced objections to his methods virtually every day of the shoot. He even tried to talk Cassavetes out of using the locations he wanted, objecting particularly vehemently to the cavernous apartment which Cassavetes had selected for Myrtle, which Ruban – not seeing its importance in establishing the grand loneliness of her life – thought was not only narratively ridiculous but, more importantly from his own perspective, too hard to light.

The two cameramen on the film, Michael Ferris and Frederick Elmes,

reported that, just as in the two previous Cassavetes shoots they had crewed, Cassavetes relied on massive overshooting and coverage of even the most minor characters to allow him to rethink the film during the editing process. As always, much of the film would be written in the edit.

On top of all of Cassavetes' other problems, there was the bureaucratic nightmare of obtaining audience members for the theater scenes. Given Cassavetes' no-budget resources, it proved a particular challenge. Filming of the 'opening night' sequence began at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium on Monday 17 January 1977, with Wednesday and Saturday that week reserved for shots involving the tuxedo- and fur-clad audience. It was financially out of the question to use union extras. If Cassavetes had paid the requisite minimum \$47.50 per day wage for the minimum 700 SAG extras he estimated he needed to fill the most visible sections of the theater's 2,000-seat space, it would have cost him an extra \$66,500 for those two days alone. His initial plan was to hold a 'charity gala' where people would pay to come and watch the play and filming – from which he would then donate the proceeds to a good cause. However, after several months of trying, he was unable to interest any local charity in sponsoring the event; so in desperation he distributed flyers in Pasadena shopping-malls and senior citizens' centers, opening the shoot to anyone who was willing to dress up. As an enticement, he offered free lunches donated by Kentucky Fried Chicken (whose bucket is still visible on stage) and the Pasadena Community Services Commission, and a 'Champagne Reception' after the Saturday shoot. Despite his best efforts, which included newspaper articles about the upcoming event, only about 500 people showed up, which meant he was able to fill fewer than twenty rows.

The final 'leg shake' was originally completely improvised in front of a running camera. However, it was then re-played and refilmed three different times with Cassavetes stipulating to Rowlands that they would play it in a different mood ('silly', 'serious', 'dramatic') each time. Just as Cassavetes took pride in allowing his actors to make their own decisions about the feelings they would express during a scene, he took delight in the fact that the audience was not a group of extras paid to respond in a particular way but 'real people off the street' free to respond in any way they wished.

There was no prompter to tell the audience when to applaud. I addressed them off-camera by saying, 'You're going to see a play just like you were in a theater. If you feel like applauding, do so. If you don't, don't. I want your true reaction – no fake.'

Cassavetes taking a final look through the camera prior to stepping into an on-stage scene in which he is acting with Rowlands. © *Michael Ferris*

Cassavetes had problems with the unions throughout the shoot. The production was leafleted and picketed by various chapters of the AFL-CIO, and the film was threatened with being shut down and picketed nationally when it opened (not only because Cassavetes did not use Screen Extras Guild members in the audience, but because his entire crew, from DP Al Ruban on down, was almost entirely non-union). Cassavetes' strategy in earlier films – from *Faces* to *A Woman Under the Influence* to *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* – had been simply to ignore the unions and tough it out, but the problem in this case was that he needed the cooperation of the various unionized stagehands and lighting personnel who worked at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium; so it was a real tightrope act of pretending to appease the unions and keeping the production going at the same time.

Peter Bogdanovich was tangentially involved in the production. He allowed Cassavetes to use the personal screening room in his home to project dailies. Also, when Cassavetes fell far behind schedule because of the various problems in the shoot, he asked Bogdanovich to shoot a

'second unit' scene he didn't have time to do himself – the brief three-shot exterior scene in which Myrtle and Sarah pull into the parking-garage prior to visiting the psychic played by Rowlands' mother. In return, Cassavetes gave Bogdanovich a cameo at the very end of the film. But it is telling that even after the favor Bogdanovich had done for him, Cassavetes didn't flatter him. On the contrary: Bogdanovich (who had no idea what Cassavetes was doing when he filmed the scene) is cast as a shallow, sycophantic charmer who is brushed aside by Dorothy Victor as if he didn't matter (with the film ending with the hug between Dorothy and Myrtle that echoes the hug Nancy gave Myrtle at the beginning).

It's unclear whether Cassavetes regarded the ending as a success or a failure. Ted Allan, who attended a pre-release screening, recounted how Cassavetes was clearly upset when the audience cheered and applauded Myrtle's final improvisation as a 'triumph'. Allan congratulated Cassavetes on having a resounding hit on his hands, but to Allan's surprise, the next time he saw the film, the ending had been recut to make it more ambiguous. After the first screening, Allan said Cassavetes turned to him and said:

I failed. All they got was the surface stuff. They didn't get any of the other things.

Just as it was at the heart of Cassavetes' directing technique not to dictate 'readings' of lines, it was the essence of his method not to give the actors an overall 'reading' or interpretation of the film they were in – since that would only simplify their playing. If they knew they were in a comedy, they could play everything for laughs. If they knew they were in a tragedy, they could play everything for tears. In *Husbands*, Gazzara and Falk didn't know whether they were in a laff riot or a serious drama. In *A Woman Under the Influence*, Falk and Rowlands didn't know if the ending of their own film was happy or sad. In *Opening Night*, Joan Blondell said that Cassavetes left her on her own as the writer of the play to ponder how she felt about the film's final improvisation as she watched it. It was up to her to decide if it was a triumph or a failure. To this day, Gena Rowlands talks about the play within a play as a 'disaster' and a 'flop', and describes the improvised ending as figuring its 'ruination'. On the other hand, in the press-pack, Cassavetes describes Myrtle as 'winning'.

Although she resists facing them, Myrtle must finally accept and resolve the dilemmas which lie not only at the core of the play she is

doing but which reflect the basic realities of her own existence, from which she has heretofore fled, aided by alcohol, men, professional indulgence – and fantasy! The character is left in conflict, but she fights the terrifying battle to recapture hope. And wins! In and out of life, the theme of the play haunts the actress until she kills the young girl in herself.

In February 1977, a few weeks from the end of the shoot, Cassavetes ran out of money. He had to stop production for a month and act in a script for a television pilot to raise what he needed to finish shooting the film. (He followed his customary practice of choosing the script he thought had the least prospect of getting picked up as a series so that he'd never have to deal with it again.) In discouragement, he told the actors that if they needed to take other jobs and couldn't finish the film because of the delay, he understood. No one left. He resumed shooting a month later and finished at the end of March.

Cassavetes spent most of the spring and summer on editing and sound work, finishing in time to keep a prior commitment to shoot and direct friend Sam Shaw's film of Debbie Harry in concert at Los Angeles's Whiskey Club, from 27 September through 2 October. The forty-five-minute work featured, among other pieces, Harry's 'Rip Her to Shreds'. Excerpts were aired on MTV a few years later. It was shot with three cameras. Though it was still the early days of music videos, Shaw reported that Cassavetes came up with many innovative visual ideas, including overcranking some of the drum footage (with David Byrne playing) for a slow-motion effect.

Cassavetes' post-production work had been racing a deadline, since he knew that in October he had to go Chicago to begin acting in Brian DePalma's *The Fury*. When, in a change of shooting plans, he was informed that ten more days of exteriors were required to be shot in Israel, he refused to agree until he was paid an additional \$10,000 over and above his contract. The Hollywood rumor-mill interpreted it as a typically Cassavetean display of temperament; in fact, he needed the money to get *Opening Night* out of the lab.

The film is utterly without interest and the action-centered plot allowed Cassavetes to do almost no memorable acting, with the single exception of his final scene on screen – in which he came up with the idea of playing the most evil lines he has in the entire film with diabolical gentleness. As proof that he was under no illusions about the nature of the project, during a scene in which Amy Irving said she needed a few minutes to ponder the 'motivation' for one of her speeches, Cassavetes

turned to Kirk Douglas and sarcastically remarked loud enough for everyone to hear: 'She thinks she's playing Joan of Arc.'

*

Cassavetes had no desire to repeat *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* distribution debacle and was determined to go with a commercial distributor this time. The only problem was that no one was interested in his film. He decided to four-wall the movie in hopes that the initial critical and commercial response might persuade someone to take it on. Since it was now close to the end of 1977, it was assumed by industry cognoscenti that he was cleverly trying to squeeze *Opening Night* into the last week of the year so it would be fresh in mind for Academy Award consideration. Cassavetes' thinking was more practical. He had to begin repaying his loans in January.

We want to open and get it in front of audiences and critics. It's *their* opinion that will determine our release pattern and plans. We're not opening right now because it's Academy Award deadline time either. Believe me, we're not *that* presumptuous! We're opening now because of financial needs. The film is ready, and we need to get it on the market. If some major doesn't pick us up, we'll probably distribute the picture ourselves, but we really don't want to get into distribution. We want to *make* films. Distribution is such a specialized field. The only reason we distributed *A Woman Under the Influence* is because *no one else* wanted it. And who wants a motion picture just to have it sit in a vault?

In preparation for the theatrical release, Cassavetes attempted to launch himself on a rapid-fire national publicity campaign. However, he had considerable difficulty convincing television producers to host him – not only because he wanted to publicize an obscure, unreleased, non-studio film, but also because he had alienated several of the most influential talk-show hosts during previous appearances. He was only able to get onto a few programs. One was *Tom Snyder's Tomorrow* (which was taped on 9 December but saved for broadcast until after *Opening Night's* Los Angeles opening), where Cassavetes seemed stand-offish and contentious (bickering with Rowlands over several points during the interview and arguing with Snyder over the host's desire to play a clip from the film, while Cassavetes insisted on playing only the music with no image). The other appearance was on a show hosted by Hugh Downs, *Over Easy*, which was broadcast on Sunday mornings and

Switching from a large, impersonal crew to a small, intimate group when the scene and the feelings of the actors dictate it. Cassavetes handholding a scene between Myrtle Gordon and Melva Drake (played by Rowlands' mother). © *Michael Ferris*

focused on the concerns of 'senior citizens'. Downs, Cassavetes and Rowlands talked about the problems of aging.

As he had done with *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, Sam Shaw (working with his daughter Meta and assistant Richard Upper) designed handsome press-packs, posters and ads. Not counting the unsuccessful distributors' screenings, *Opening Night's* maiden voyage on a big screen would be a 21 December Los Angeles press screening. Cassavetes knew that a good review in *Variety* (which was the main source of information for distributors) could change his film's fate. It was not to be. The write-up was dreadful. As a fair summary of the relentlessly commercial evaluation, the final sentences of the *Variety* assessment concluded, 'One must question whether more than a handful of moviegoers are interested in the effort, whether audiences have not already seen enough of Cassavetes' characters . . . He's made these films before and not many seemed interested in them.'

Cassavetes also held three preview screenings at UCLA's Royce Hall for publicity purposes and the benefit of the UCLA Film Archive. Because of the commercial marginality of his work, Cassavetes was one of the first feature filmmakers to appreciate the importance of film archives and specialized exhibitors. Over the years, at his own expense, he donated copies of all of his films to many of the major archives, including the Cinémathèque Française in Paris. (And after New York's Museum of Modern Art held its retrospective of his work a few years later, he thanked them by donating prints to their collection.) His comments about the Royce Hall screening are telling. Given that there are so many things worth fighting for in terms of art, Cassavetes was always critical of actors who conveniently found their causes elsewhere – in the disease of the week or the political issue of the day – while never speaking out against problems in their own art.

I know it's important to aid charities like hospitals, but nobody seems to do much to help films, and negatives on those older films are wearing out, like paintings do. We agreed to do the UCLA thing because we wanted some feedback about our movie but also because we wanted to say a kind of 'thank you' to films for giving us a medium to work in. Brando is one of the best actors that ever lived, and I like him personally. But I'm angry with him. He's so involved with causes. I would think that if he were so concerned about the plight of Indians, for example, he would make a picture about them instead of going to Washington and talking about it. I don't think an actor should involve himself with causes. Whatever he has to say can be better said on screen.

Prior to the theatrical opening, Cassavetes took out large-scale newspaper ads (some of which were illustrated with a drawing of Myrtle done by Peter Falk). *Opening Night* opened at the Fox Wilshire on Christmas Day.

In the end, the press-packs, the ads and the television appearances were all for nothing. *Opening Night* fared as poorly as, or even worse than, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* had, playing to almost completely empty houses. In a last-minute effort to get some people into the theater, Cassavetes called up a local Los Angeles television station and told them that he could produce Gena Rowlands, Ben Gazzara, Paul Stewart, Seymour Cassel and himself for a group interview if they would agree to do it. The station sent an interviewer and a camera crew, and the five of them sat in a restaurant and talked about *Opening Night* for almost an hour. Near the end of the session, in anger and frustration, Cassavetes launched into a tirade about the pusillanimity of the city, its viewers and its critics. He was not smiling by this point; his voice was laced with contempt, disgust and weariness.

This is a *stupid* town! It is a stupid town in the sense that it is – polite. It is so sissy in its mentality, so go-along with everything that goes along. It's corporate-owned; it's a town owned by Hollywood. And it's about time it grew up. It's about time that it took art and said, 'Come on baby, show me something!' And *we're* showing them something. And there are not many people showing *anything*. And there are not many people that will go out and put themselves on the line in this world today because everyone's *frightened*. I'm *sick* that this is such a little sissy town that they will only go to see something that is going to be successful, that a corporation says is great.

There are a bunch of idiots around in this world who don't deal in concepts, they only deal in narrative and in cocktail parties and in what's going to be not only successful but *acceptable* to the way people currently are. They make it all so *easy*. They gear things to be *dramatic*. They want them to be *simple*. But life is *not* simple.

I'm *sick*! Because there are just such a bunch of sissies in this world that won't go out and see something that's wonderful. All they care about is, 'Is it gonna be a *success*? Is it gonna be a *success*?' I don't *care* if it's going to be a success. I want those suckers to come in there and to see this movie because they'll see what they've always wanted to be, and that is to be theatrical, to be wonderful, to be liked, to be friends, to have something in their life that is warmer, to regard someone that has more guts than you do. And to be inspired by people. And I'm not

ashamed of it. I really hate this nonsense: kill somebody, shoot 'em in the head, the blood pours out, isn't that wonderful? I hate it! I hate it!!

And I feel sad for all the youth that has to be coerced into that thing – that they feel sick and sorry because they have nothing to go to. And we're gonna show them something else. I'm not saying that we're superhuman. We just are terrific people. We're *terrific!* We are sensational! We are better than all those guys that steal from their corporations, that stand up and say, 'We're gonna rip off –' I don't care, man! I don't *care!* It's *sick!* It's *sick!* I'm tired of that nonsense. I really feel more for the young people in this world. I really believe in them. I think that they're terrific, but they're a bunch of sheep. And I'm telling you that! They go, '*Here.*' 'No, it's no good.' 'OK, we'll go *here.*' 'No, it's no good.' 'It's wonderful, we'll go *here.*'

I'm telling you *we* have something so much *better*, so *wonderful*, that you are just privileged to see this movie! This picture is *terrific*. Everyone should see this movie because it's better than anything out! And that's the way it is. I'm sorry, baby, that's the way it is! I take a lot of pride in this film. I can watch that movie 500 times because I'm seeing something absolutely, sheerly beautiful and inspiring. People are floundering and walking around the world with nothing in their lives simply because they are not led by anybody of any responsibility. And I don't want to lead anybody but we'll all go and we'll take a chance and we'll try to express ourselves and hope that somebody will recognize that expression. And I don't care about CBS, NBC, ABC – *television sucks!*

We're going for a way of saying something that might be different than the normal, conventional, boring way of saying something that most people like in an audience because they are dull in their own lives. It's true! The world is comprised of a group of people that have opinions and lack emotion. And we make pictures of emotion. And if people go to see them they will become touched and emotional in ways that they have never experienced before.

In confirmation of what Cassavetes had said, the interview was never broadcast. *Opening Night* never got beyond the Fox Wilshire. It closed in mid-February, after seven weeks of playing to almost empty houses in a single theater. Cassavetes simply could not afford to keep advertising and playing it. In bitterness, he vowed that he would never work in Los Angeles again.

This town takes the fun out of filmmaking. The fun hasn't been taken out of films any place else. They are trying to get rid of anybody that is

not in the club. Control is important. You know, there are nice people within that club. There are terribly nice people and beautiful people. But they're all corporate mentalities. These people are paranoid. They get up in the morning looking to see who they can hate and that's the truth. And anybody who has anything that is different than what they have, that is absolutely no competition with what they have, they will go after it. No one wants to go after them because they supply a lot of people with livelihoods. I will never make a picture in Los Angeles again. It is an absolute hypocrisy to make a film out here, an absolute business, enjoyed in an art way by nobody. The technicians that are employed are there to satisfy the grosses, to superficially stroke the people that are paying for the pictures. I think the people that make films are a bunch of idiots. It wasn't always so. There was something in people that used to make films. Some deeper desire than just to be successful.

Cassavetes had hopes that an East Coast audience would be more receptive to a theater picture. He went to New York in January to work out a booking, but though he tried to rent a theater that month or the next, couldn't get a booking earlier than the end of March. The delay meant that he would not be able to attend his own film's East Coast opening, since he had a prior commitment to be in Switzerland to act in John Hough's *Brass Target*. (When he had made it, he had no idea releasing *Opening Night* would take so long or be such an ordeal.) To add to his problems, he had even more difficulty drumming up pre-release publicity for the film than he had had in Los Angeles in December. The major magazines and newspapers said they were not interested in conducting interviews with him, since they argued that the single-theater release and limited run were not important enough to their readers to merit major coverage. When March rolled around, the New York screenings of *Opening Night* took place in the filmmaker's absence and were, if possible, even more demoralizing than the Los Angeles screenings. Cassavetes and his movie were simply ignored. Most of the major New York newspapers and magazines did not send a reviewer to the press screening or run a review. The truth was that, after *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, Cassavetes was written off by most reviewers as a crank whose work they were not interested in seeing. (As an illustration, neither *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* nor *New York Magazine* ran a word about *Opening Night* during the entire time Cassavetes was in the city to set up the screenings nor during the film's release.) Since reviews were always the main source of publicity for Cassavetes' work, and since he couldn't afford to pay for more than a few days of newspaper ads,

Opening Night again played to almost empty houses – with the additional result that no other theater-owner would consider picking it up.

It was the end of the road; the film was completely dead. Cassavetes was even more bitter about New York than about Los Angeles, since he felt the New York critics (who were the taste-makers for the rest of the country) – and in particular Canby, Kael, Kauffmann, Simon and Sarris – had never given any of his films a fair chance.

I was quite upset. After its first play in Manhattan, I called people I know there to see if they'd book it. But *nobody* wanted it. Then I said it would *never* play New York. I got so angry they wouldn't take this very good movie in New York, I said – *never again* in New York! I will *never* play it! I will never play it for an audience. I will not humiliate myself and the film by begging anyone to attend it.

Cassavetes divided how much *Opening Night* had cost him (\$1,500,000) by the total number of people who had come to see it for its entire run in New York and Los Angeles (approximately 500) to come up with his only half-facetious pronouncement about what he would henceforth charge for tickets if someone wanted to see his film.

We kind of kidded ourselves saying the films were too painful for people, or they didn't like it because it threatened their lives too much – but it gets very tiresome to be disliked after a while. Or regarded as some kind of weirdo – an oddball maverick! I'd put my films up against anyone's. I think they're *much better!* You really do want a voluntary acknowledgment that you're an artist. If I played this for an audience I'd charge them \$3,000 a seat. So it's either free or nothing. And they *ought to* have to fight for it. If they *really* want it, they'd *fight* for it!

Cassavetes pulled the film from distribution and refused to rent it to the few exhibitors who expressed interest – including the New York Film Festival (which he had had bad feelings about ever since the experience with *A Woman Under the Influence*).

In 1979, the New York Film Festival asked us to put it in the 'lost film' section, which I resented. How could it be lost if we have it?

The story was different in Europe, where all of Cassavetes' films received far more favorable critical treatment than in America. From the time of *A Woman Under the Influence* on, Cassavetes had attained virtually a cult following among European critics and viewers. In late April

and May 1978, on his way back to the States from the *Brass Target* shoot, Cassavetes made a brief publicity tour connected with the opening of the film, which was playing at a few festivals and about to be distributed. It was the opposite of the situation in the United States. He was mobbed by fans and besieged by journalists for interviews. The film was critically acclaimed – and won the Silver Bear for Gena Rowlands as Best Actress at the Berlin Film Festival. Upon its release, the film had successful commercial runs in Rome, London, Berlin and Paris. Two years later, in 1980, in London, it was chosen to be featured in a special BBC art-film series. (It would be twenty years before the film received its first American television airing.)

Europeans are more appreciative of my work than Americans. I just feel that, in Europe, the person who makes the film is more highly regarded and there's more expected of that person to be original. Here, though, if you break the genre of the film, it's disturbing to the public. In Europe, that's what they look for. You get points for originality there. They believe in art in France.

As far as I have been able to determine, Cassavetes allowed *Opening Night* to be screened in America on only four more occasions in the next ten years: at the Museum of Modern Art in 1980 (at an event which the filmmaker attended); at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1982 (where the mislabeled reels were projected in the wrong order); at Middlebury College, in Vermont, for a film class I taught in 1983; and at the San Francisco Film Festival (for which Cassavetes always had a soft spot because of their long history of screening his work) in April 1984.

I agreed to show it at MoMA because they like us. When they started going through all of this stuff on *Opening Night*, I was kind of excited. I wasn't flattered, but I was happy. And whether that movie ever shows commercially or not, I don't care! It doesn't make any difference to me at all. I think it's a *great* movie, and when you went to get into the Modern museum, you couldn't get into it, and that made me very happy; that people wanted to see the picture. We're going to make it a collector's item at museums and festivals. A museum is a good place for a film. A good film is like a painting. It doesn't go away.

By the time of the San Francisco Film Festival events, Cassavetes' temper had cooled a bit. In a question-and-answer session following the screening, he stated that he would be willing to make a distribution deal that allowed *Opening Night* to be seen more generally; but, even then, more

than six years after the failed initial release, he still refused to recant his anti-New York pledge. In his own words, any distribution agreement he signed would have to stipulate that the film would play ‘anywhere but New York’. The terms were moot, since he had no takers. *Opening Night* would not play again in New York until four months before his death, when he gave permission for the New York Film Festival to screen it twice, on 1 and 2 October 1988. On the other hand, it wasn’t as if New York exhibitors were exactly fighting to release the film. Not a single American distributor expressed interest in giving *Opening Night* a regular theatrical release throughout Cassavetes’ lifetime. The little screening interest that did exist came from specialty venues who only wanted to show the film once or twice, as an unreleased curiosity that might draw a crowd for a night or two. It would not be until May 1991, two and a half years after Cassavetes’ death and thirteen and a half years after *Opening Night* was completed, that an American distributor would take a chance on sponsoring a brief theatrical run at a single theater.

It wasn’t as if *Opening Night* were being singled out for special neglect. Cassavetes’ other works were equally unscreened in the United States in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Cassavetes told me that during this period he got fewer than ten requests a year from anyone in America to show any of the five films he personally owned the prints of – *Shadows*, *Faces*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and *Opening Night*. That included requests from all sources – movie theaters, museums, film archives, classroom screenings and college film societies. He was in a position to know exactly how often the films were screened since his personal assistants, Robert Fieldsteel and Richard Kaye, made the bookings. He also told me that while most of the rentals were to universities, to his surprise he had the same problems with being cheated that he had experienced with commercial distributors. He laughingly cited one of the world’s richest universities, Yale, as sneaking in unpaid screenings of movies they rented from him and trying to beat him out of rental fees so often that by 1980 he would no longer ship them prints unless they paid in advance.

Possibly inspired by Michael Hausman’s plans to re-release *Mikey and Nicky*, Cassavetes spent a few months in 1978 re-editing *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. He shortened the running-time by approximately twenty-five minutes and completely rethought the movie: cutting certain sequences entirely; adding completely new scenes and shots; and changing the shot choices in many of the scenes the two prints shared. Under the principle that the film was no longer ‘new’, his

attempts to interest an American distributor in releasing it got nowhere. No one wanted it, and he was not going to go through the travails of self-distribution a fourth time. With the exception of a few screenings in my own film classes, as far as I can tell the re-edit never played in America during his lifetime. He took the print to Europe where it did good business in France, Germany and Italy in the summer and fall of 1978. At the same time, commercial failure or not, Cassavetes refused to repudiate his kind of filmmaking.

I'm prepared to go on making pictures my own way and hoping they'll relate to other people's experience. It gets harder every time, I can tell you. Harder to go through all the shit of setting them up, then making them, and then, maybe, having them ignored. Doing the acting stuff for other people is much, much easier. It pays more too. My philosophy is simply this: 'Don't allow yourself to be bought, especially if you can sell yourself.' Anyway, I'm glad I'm *not* a success, because then, though you think you have greater freedom, you in fact have a great deal less. How can you do what you want with \$10 million to spend on a picture? Where does Spielberg go now, after *Jaws* and *Close Encounters*? I guess I'll stick to being a well-appreciated failure.

The concept of accessibility really bothers me; really, I don't think that people want their lives to be easy. I think it's a United States sickness. In the end it becomes more difficult so that my life will be easier. By affording the spectators a glimpse into ideas that confuse, rock and disturb them, I offer the mind food for thought. All my life I've fought against clarity – all those stupid definitive answers. Phooey on a formula life. I think if the world wasn't so screwed up and there weren't so many misconceptions that I would get out of the whole thing. The conformists are a dime a dozen.

You go to Italy and you look at Michelangelo's work, and there are people saying, 'Come on, let's go, I can't stand it.' [Laughs.] And it doesn't lessen the achievement of what he has done. It just says that everyone is not going to be enamored of your particular art, and I don't think that's an unhealthy thing. But American society says, 'Wait a minute. If that happens, then you won't get to make another film, therefore you must make your films more accessible to people so that they will like it.'

If you don't like my films, I can't do anything about it, but I'm a street person so I don't care about being esteemed. If esteem will help you make the next picture, then great. And if antipathy will help you make the next film, I don't really care. I'm going to be myself. I want to make

Directing Rowlands in the bar scene as Myrtle spirals downward to darkness on extended wings. Note how Rowlands does not come out of character between takes. © *Sam Shaw*

a film I can be proud of. We don't make a picture and then pray nobody likes it – we pray everybody likes it – but you still have to make that film. All you can say is, 'Yes, we set out to do that picture, I think we did a nice job on that picture.' We can't be careful of what we say, we can only be careful that what we say is true. We can't lie because in lying you'll never find anything emotional.

Everything in the mainstream production is dictated by profits and grosses. It's hard to find people who still want to make movies with no regard for that stuff. If the major people want to make money, let them make it. I just want to make movies. I want to be in them, direct them, have a good time with other talented people. The only mistake the major studios make is they don't realize most people understand small ideas, the ideas of life. You're usually bored with them because they're done in unexciting ways. I'm not interested in attaining wealth or success or power under the terms prescribed by events. I'm not interested in events. And none of the people I work with are really interested in events. We don't care if there are lines around the block and people flock to us and we make \$90 million. But we are not apologizing for putting something on that we feel is interesting, really, deeply interesting. I've been accused of being too artistic or too internal. Well, I'd

rather be that. I really am bored by those other pictures, strictly commercial, sophomoric simplicity. I really don't like it.

I think that people are bored with entertainment, but they have nothing else and they would prefer to see something that has to do with their lives. Now, movie companies aim everything at a fourteen-year-old mentality. Well I'm not fourteen and I want to be aimed at too. I want to be told something different. I want to be thrilled by some aspect of life that is a little more important than rock and roll or punk rock. I'm sorry, but that's the way I feel. There is something more in life besides just getting it off. I'm going to fight for it. It may be a losing cause, but I've seen too many artists come out of nothingness to believe that's true. I would like people to believe that I'm not apologizing for making things that I feel are much, much better intentioned than other things.

I consider movies as an art, I don't care what anyone else says. I know it's an art, because there's nothing that can induce me to work four years on a film in a garage if it wasn't something artistic and it wasn't an expression. And three years another time. And I totaled it up one time: I spent ten years in an editing room. And I didn't spend it because I wanted to get rich, and I didn't spend it because I wanted to get famous and have my name in the newspaper. It's an expression. So I have to admit that, good artist or bad artist, I am one, and all my friends are artists, whether they would deny it or not. They're forced to deny it under a dictatorial system that says that art is a dirty word.

I bumped into an old woman sitting at a table next to me in a restaurant. And she leaned over to me and said your films are too painful. And I believe that people mistake life for being sweet. Life is not sweet. Life is tough, life is aggravating. And I'm fifty years old, and when you reach fifty years old, it's a little harder than when I was twenty because I know that it's going to be tougher each time out. It's not even energy, it's just that people know you and you don't have that privilege of being a virgin.

The final years of the 1970s were difficult. The accolades Cassavetes had received for *A Woman Under the Influence* had long been forgotten. He had spent everything he had, and a little more, on *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and *Opening Night*. With two gigantic box-office disasters behind him, he was back to being a failure in the minds of studio heads and journalists, and, worse yet, didn't have enough money to bankroll another project. Though he generally got more angry than discouraged, this period of his life was as low as he ever felt (ranking with, he told me, the year he couldn't get anyone to screen *A Woman Under the Influence*).

You have to tell yourself that you're not in competition with the studios. They're doing one thing, you're doing another. Their film can be good; it has nothing to do with mine. We have our world, and we believe in it, and we don't want the whole world to come with us, but we don't want the whole world to be against us either. We just want the possibility to do what we do. It's important that young filmmakers know that at least there is a choice. When an independent film fails, of course, I can understand that they are upset, because they are doing a superhuman task and society tells them that they're wrong. And the public tells them that they're wrong. It's difficult to tell them, 'Go on, go on this way for a hundred years, till you die. Till you're an old stupid man that nobody loves, that everyone makes fun of.' I suffer like anybody else. I know that what I do makes me happy, but it's hard. It's hard to find the money and the time. It's hard when people think you are rich, whereas you're not. It's hard to owe money to everybody constantly. It's hard for my family.

I don't think the path I've taken has been a deliberate choice. People do what they're capable of doing. If I could take a lot of money from studios and enjoy myself at cocktail parties, I probably would make a conscious effort to take that route. I'm just not capable of doing it. My filmmaking is an expensive, personal madness. If I didn't have friends like Peter and a wife like Gena, it would have been impossible for me. And it's not possible any longer. It's just not economically feasible, because it has become such a business. And it's a hell of an expensive hobby to get into. We continued to do it ourselves on *Chinese Bookie* and on *Opening Night*, but it was a tremendous emotional cross to bear and really came too dangerously close to destroying our family.

Gloria (1978–80)

In revulsion against the difficulty, expense and scale of feature filmmaking, Cassavetes increasingly turned to writing and workshopping scripts with small groups of friends. It didn't seem to matter to him whether these projects would ever actually be produced – as plays or as films; the enjoyment was finding forms of expression and finding others to work with. It wasn't about money, success or fame; it was about being with creative people, sharing thoughts and feelings with them, and having them share theirs.

It was almost comical that he had gained the reputation as the man who worked without a script. Writing had been a passion throughout his life. He wrote and revised dozens of scripts and plays over the course of the next few years, and systematized a practice he had begun more desultorily in the mid-1970s of holding dramatic readings at his house on the weekends. Neither Cassavetes nor Rowlands enjoyed the L.A. party scene, so rather than going out and making the rounds the couple would invite friends like Ben Gazzara, Peter Falk, Meade Roberts, Paul Stewart, Rob Reiner, Elaine May, Carol Kane, Seymour Cassel and Ted Allan to their house to sight-read scripts by Cassavetes and others – new scripts, old scripts, revised scripts, scripts written by friends and acquaintances, and old classics. During the week, when he wasn't busy acting in someone else's film, Cassavetes either rewrote the Saturday night material or worked on other scripts in his office.

As a writer, Cassavetes was astonishingly prolific – and fast. Richard Dreyfus tells the story of how Cassavetes wrote an entire play in a weekend because of a misunderstood answering-machine message: when George Segal dropped out of Blake Edwards' *10*, Cassavetes called Dreyfus about the opening and left a vague message on Dreyfus's machine; by the time Dreyfus returned Cassavetes' call, the part had been given to Dudley Moore. To cover the embarrassment of why he had called him, Cassavetes invented a story about inviting him over to

read one of his plays, which he then proceeded to write in the next few days. *Mood Indigo* was the result. Dreyfus, who didn't discover what had happened until afterwards, said he thought the play was wonderful.

As another illustration of Cassavetes' astonishing fertility, and an example of a dramatic project that seemed to be done strictly for the fun and challenge of doing it, Elaine May tells the story of how, sometime after *Mikey and Nicky*, she, Carol Kane, Cassavetes and a few other actors met daily at Cassavetes' Columbia offices for more than six months improvising a play. Cassavetes would stipulate a 'premise' (at the start that May was a 'tough old hooker'; Kane 'a young ambitious hooker who wanted to buy a condo'; and Cassavetes 'a caller who had dialed the wrong number') and the three would start building scenes around it. But, as May tells the story, at every point a scene or series of scenes would start to take shape and come together, Cassavetes would change the premise in some way and the procedure would start again, with new given circumstances, new dialogue and new scenes. There would be six weeks of amazing work, followed by Cassavetes changing the premise one more time. After six months, Kane and May were wondering why they were there, what they were doing, and if it would ever end – if Cassavetes had a goal in mind. And, sure enough, around that time, Cassavetes called the whole thing off. As far as he was concerned, they had learned enough. Though May later went on to write a script based on the experience, and Cassavetes later wrote a different script based on it – his *Begin the Beguine* – it seemed obvious to May that it had been done chiefly for the fun of it.

There was no end of plans and projects. Cassavetes briefly had plans for a comedy called *Dancing in the Dark* – to star Cassavetes and Falk as two sailors in Las Vegas who fall in love with characters played by Elaine May and Gena Rowlands. But when Falk decided he didn't want to act in it, Cassavetes tried to sell the script – first to Ivan Passer and subsequently to Peter Bogdanovich.

Cassavetes also frequently freelanced as a story doctor and uncredited screenwriter on a number of Hollywood scripts to keep a little money coming in. He thought of most of it as hackwork to which he had no desire to attach his name, which is why he did it under a pseudonym. (When I asked him to tell me what he had done pseudonymously, he said, 'If I had wanted people to know, I would have put my name on them in the first place.')

He had an extraordinary power of concentration that allowed him to write rapidly seemingly anywhere he happened to be – in his office with telephones ringing, on an airplane, in an editing suite. Don Siegel tells

the story of walking past Cassavetes' Screen Gems office in the early 1960s late on a Friday afternoon and asking him why he hadn't gone home, and Cassavetes telling him he needed money and was knocking out a screenplay on the spot. Val Avery describes being on location with Cassavetes during the shooting of *Machine Gun McCain* and of going past his motel room at 4 a.m. and seeing him through an opening in the drapes lying on his belly on the bed madly scribbling away on a pile of pages. According to Rowlands, writing was Cassavetes' 'way of relaxing'. Years later, when Cassavetes was in Switzerland for the *Brass Target* shoot and learned that the production would be paused for a few days over the Easter weekend, he went all over Berne looking for an English-language typewriter so he could pound out a script in the few days off. (At least as Cassavetes later told the story, he finally found one on Easter Sunday.)

Thus, it should come as no surprise that he accepted the opportunity to make some quick money when MGM called in early February 1979 to see if he could give them a script for Ricky Schroder. Two weeks later, he had finished it. The title was *One Summer Night*. It would later be changed to *Gloria*.

Gloria was an accident. Of course, I believe the business is a metaphysical thing – no rules apply. The phone rang and it was Dick Shepherd, who's at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and he said, 'We've been very successful with a kid's story, *The Champ*. You don't happen to have a story about kids, do you? If you could come up with something for Ricky Schroder, I'd buy it immediately.' So I wrote a very fast-moving, thoughtless piece about gangsters. And I don't even know any gangsters! I sent it over. In the meantime, Schroder signed to do a picture with Walt Disney, so MGM lost interest. And then my agent Guy MacElwaine said, 'I like this script very much, let me give it to Columbia,' and I said, 'OK.' So they sent it to Columbia, and a couple of days later he called and he said, 'I have some good news and some bad news. One, they like the picture very much and want to buy it. And they want to have Gena in the picture.' And I said what's the bad news. 'The bad news,' he said, 'is they want you to direct it.' So that's where we started.

Cassavetes' account tactfully omits a few intermediate events. Gena Rowlands inherited the role only after Columbia offered it to Barbra Streisand, who turned it down. Streisand was still smarting from Cassavetes' refusal to direct her in her remake of *A Star Is Born*, though the

official reason her agent gave for her not wanting to play the title role was that it was 'too maternal' and 'not glamorous enough'.

Cassavetes expressed astonishment that any studio would even talk to him about directing for them at this point in his career.

Your reputation precedes you as this kind of neurotic man that doesn't have any script. The people in the studios have read the reviews of the pictures and they *know* that they're unstructured – that we just go and make it up as we go along. I never thought anybody in the major companies would want me to direct, because I'd had my run-ins and I thought it had all been over for a number of years. I'd *like* to feel that everybody's against me, but it's not true. Not *everyone*. I have a way of taking a simple piece of material and complicating it and making it non-commercial – and having no guilt about it. That's a tough problem for a studio or somebody trying to make money.

When I'm dealing with studio people, I never know what to say. I always ask Gena, and Gena tells me what people are thinking. Gena said to me that the reason they don't like my pictures is because they don't like the stories, and if we could ever get together on stories, they wouldn't have any further objections. I'm kind of Neanderthal about those things. I don't know what the hell anyone means when they start talking like that because I always like my stories, whether they're simple or complicated, better than someone else's stories.

Though one might have thought Cassavetes would have jumped at the chance to direct his wife in his own script, he was initially reluctant to go forward with the project.

I wrote this story to sell, strictly to sell. I really didn't want to do that movie. Columbia *insisted* I direct it, which I really didn't want. Too commercial. I like to make movies that don't go. Besides that, I didn't like killing off an entire family to make a picture. In the end, I decided that it is a story of violence, but less physical than emotional violence.

That last objection might sound like a joke, but Gena Rowlands has said the violence of the early scenes weighed heavily on Cassavetes' mind. As his previous comments about Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and his reluctance to shoot the bookie in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* already indicate, Cassavetes had a deep aversion to cinematic violence.

I liked *The Dirty Dozen*, but I didn't like the violence of the ending. I

tried to ditch out on the end of the picture, copped out that I was sick, wouldn't step forward anymore, and Bob threatened to sue me. I didn't care for killing ninety million Nazis stuck in a basement, throwing in a bomb and burning them alive. I didn't see what it had to do with acting.

The larger point is that art was not separate from life in his mind. Burning Nazis was not just an event in a movie. A couple years later, John Badham would tell an anecdote about the filming of *Whose Life Is It, Anyway?* where Cassavetes got into a heated argument about refusing to use the word 'retard', which was in the script, because he said it was an insult to the retarded. Movies were not just movies.

Once the studio had formally committed to the production, in his characteristic way Cassavetes began rewriting the script. The shooting script is his 'fifth draft', dated 9 July 1979 on the title page – only two weeks before shooting was scheduled to begin. He continued to make minor revisions of the scenes involving the gangster headquarters, which were the last ones shot, right up to the final days of the production. Some of those pages in the script were revised as late as 24 September – two days before the film wrapped.

The script was no great shakes. Originally, my producer and close friend Sam Shaw was disappointed. He said, 'Sell it – don't make it.' The intention seemed to be less fulfilling than we would like. But Sam kept pushing it toward a more truthful area.

Gena Rowlands had recently acted in two major television movies: ABC's *A Question of Love* (taped in the early fall of 1978 and broadcast on 26 November 1978) and CBS's *Strangers: The Story of a Mother and Daughter* (taped in the early spring of 1979 and aired on 13 May 1979). To give her a little time off and opportunity to prepare her role and rehearse, principal photography was scheduled to begin on 25 July. Columbia budgeted the picture at \$4 million – the most money Cassavetes would ever have to work with and the largest and most experienced crew he ever had on a film. But since he was working for a studio, he had to accept a number of compromises in return: shooting would be limited to nine weeks; it would not be done in sequence; and he would not have the right to approve the final cut (though his wishes were generally honored).

Since there was a two-month lull during the pre-production phase of *Gloria*, he put it to good use. He acted in a two-part, 140-minute made-

for-television movie, *Flesh and Blood*, directed by Jud Taylor and starring Tom Berenger, Denzel Washington and Suzanne Pleshette. (It aired six months later on 14 and 16 October 1979 and was subsequently issued on video under the title *The Heavyweight*.) He also wrote a script called *Friends and Enemies*, devoting most of his spare time to it during the months of April and May, and finishing the final draft on 25 May. As if to counter the charge of being a 'man's director', the four main characters are women. The premise is that three of them try to commit suicide on the same day, end up in the hospital together and become friends (along with a female nurse they meet there). In Cassavetes' dreams, the film would have starred Gena Rowlands, Sophia Loren, Geraldine Page and Liv Ullman. The script made the rounds but ultimately ended up back on the filmmaker's shelf next to dozens of other unproduced pieces. It contains many quasi-philosophical passages about how life can make people 'mechanical' and turn them into 'robots'. And about how the only viable alternative to 'running' from life in this way is to 'stay and face the horrible little irritating problems, and get up and work and laugh and don't judge'.

As usual, Cassavetes used as many friends in the cast and crew of *Gloria* as he could: Meta Shaw (who was the daughter of producer Sam Shaw and had played Harry's wife in *Husbands*) played a waitress. Lawrence Tierney (who had worked with Cassavetes on *Staccato* and *Too Late Blues*) played a bartender. Close friend John Finnegan (who appeared in the screening-room scene in *Faces*, was a construction worker in *A Woman Under the Influence*, a mobster in *Machine Gun McCain*, a cabby in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and a stagehand in *Opening Night*) got a part as a gangster. Val Avery, one of Cassavetes' regulars, played another gangster. Richard Kaye, Cassavetes' devoted personal assistant and an aspiring actor, played another gangster. Hugh Hurd (who had appeared in *Shadows* and *A Woman Under the Influence*) was offered the role of the kind cabby but had to turn it down when he revealed that, as a born and bred New Yorker, he didn't know how to drive. On the other side of the ledger, Seymour Cassel begged Cassavetes to let him play the accountant, but Cassavetes was determined to use Buck Henry – according to Cassel, telling him, 'Do you expect to be in *every* movie I make!' Basilio Franchina, who played Tony Tanzini, the mob boss, was a former screenwriter for Fellini and DeSica who was included as Cassavetes' homage to the directors he had worked with. Liz Gazzara, daughter of Ben Gazzara, Larry Shaw, the son of producer Sam Shaw, and friends Robert Fieldsteel and John 'Red' Kullers were all involved with the production in various capacities.

Seven-year-old Juan Adames (occasionally rechristened John Adams by the Columbia publicity department) was a complete novice, picked personally by Cassavetes from 350 children at a group casting call held at the New York, New York disco on a Saturday in June. Many of the parents complained about Cassavetes' decision to have the children assemble there all at once in such a large group. But Cassavetes later defended his policy. He said he deliberately created an intimidating situation to test the kids' responses to the mob scenes that actually constitute a shoot. He was after a certain kind of 'toughness' and wanted to see who would be able to stand up under the pressure. Juan passed the test.

In the end, Cassavetes said that he agreed to do the film largely as a favor to Rowlands, who relished the idea of playing a larger-than-life role. The role deeply appealed to her. It tapped into a side of her that captured the way she sometimes thought of herself – the 'sexy but tough woman who doesn't really need a man' personality type that described many of the actresses she had idolized over the years. Or one might say that Cassavetes was having fun with her love for Marlene Dietrich (whom Gloria resembles in many subtle ways).

Though she really wanted to do it, she doesn't go about this very easily, you know. After the picture was written and the deal was made, she said, 'Maybe you ought to get someone else.' [Laughs.] Which is always maddening. On every film that we've ever made, she has enormous trepidations before she goes out and acts, but it's not because she can't act, but because she doesn't know whether she's capable of speaking for a bunch of women who are childless, and she wants to represent them truthfully. She doesn't want to represent them as caricatures, she wants to represent the people she's playing with some authenticity as to what they are feeling, what they would feel in a certain circumstance and in a way that not many actresses do. She's an artist. And her holdbacks are her pain. I mean, she went through a tremendous amount of pain thinking she's not good enough to play these things. Once she starts going she forgets 'I'm not good enough' and the scenes hold her in check and she just keeps on going as long as she can.

Cassavetes was always in awe of what Rowlands could do with a script – even a weak one.

Gena is subtle, delicate. She's a miracle. She's straight. She believes in what she believes in. She's capable of anything. It's only because of Gena's enormous capacity to perform that we have a movie, because a

lot of people would be a little bit too thin to work on it. Gena is a very interesting woman and for my money the best player that is around. She can just *play*. Give her anything and she'll always be creative. She doesn't *try* to make it different – she just *is* – because the way she thinks is different from the way most actors think. She goes in and she says, 'Who do I like on this picture? What characters do I like, what characters am I so-so about?' I picked up her script once and I saw all these notes, all about what reaction she had to the various people both in the production and the story. It was very personal to her, and I felt very guilty that I'd snooped. Then I watched her work. She sets the initial premise and follows the script very completely. Very rarely will she improvise, though she does in her head and in her personal thoughts. Everybody else is going boom! boom! boom!, but Gena is very dedicated and pure. She doesn't care if it's cinematic, doesn't care where the camera is, doesn't care if she looks good – doesn't care about anything except that you *believe* her. She caught the rhythm of that woman living a life she'd never seen. When she's ready to kill, I'm amazed at how coldly she does it.

Cassavetes' father, to whom he was very close, died on 26 April 1979, during the final weeks of preparations to shoot, which possibly contributed to the film's autumnal feel and its striking emphasis on death. Three weeks were reserved for rehearsals. Shooting began at the former Concourse Plaza Hotel on 161st Street in the South Bronx, which was the set for the seedy apartment building at the beginning of the film. In the 1960s, it had become a home for welfare families, but it had been abandoned for four years at the point Cassavetes found it. An apartment house at 800 Riverside Drive (at 158th Street) served as the location for three of the nice apartments: Gloria's sister's place; the final hotel room Phil waits in; and mob leader Tony Tanzini's headquarters. Cassavetes loved the history both locations wore on their walls and had to struggle to keep Rene D'Auriac and the Columbia set-design crew from cleaning them up or retouching the graffiti on the Concourse Plaza.

In the beginning, I had to instruct them in bad taste, but now they're beginning to revel in it.

For the outdoor shots, Cassavetes deliberately picked non-glamorized, non-touristy sections of the city to avoid the 'Woody Allen movie' feeling.

I *love* New York! I grew up there, and it seemed to me that all the pictures that are made about New York never concentrate on neighbor-

hoods. And New York to me is comprised of a series of neighborhoods. But I didn't want people to just say, 'OK. Now we're here. Now we're on 57th Street. Now we're on 58th Street.' It was very important not to make the scenery be the center of attention, because, I don't know, I just feel there should be some more respect given to *life* than to the making of a film.

Producer Sam Shaw helped to select the locations. Since he had been friends with Romare Bearden and written a book about his work, he suggested using his watercolors for the title cards. (Shaw had a lot of input into the artwork used in all of Cassavetes' films and a couple of years before had provided the photographs that were used in Marty and Virginia's apartment in *Opening Night*.)

As part of his effort to break away from Hollywood clichés, Cassavetes and Shaw rounded up actual gangsters and various street-people for the scene in Tony Tanzini's apartment. Cassavetes solicited their opinion about whether this was the way things would really happen. The man Gloria shoots on her way to the elevator, for example, was an actual professional hit man, with fifteen years' experience, who got into an argument with Cassavetes about how the scene would have really taken place if *he* were running things.

The aspect of the film that came in for the most criticism from reviewers was Juan Adames' performance. They came in apparently expecting him to be cute and cuddly in the *Little Miss Marker* mode. When he wasn't, they judged that Cassavetes had failed. What they overlooked was that Cassavetes deliberately worked hard to avoid sentimentality (of which the Sidney Lumet/Sharon Stone remake is guilty).

The kid is neither sympathetic nor non-sympathetic. He's just a kid. He reminds me of me, constantly in shock, reacting to this unfathomable environment. He was always full of excitement and wonderment as to what he was doing, trying to comprehend this fathomless story of a family being wiped out.

To add to the toughness of the performance, Gena Rowlands didn't come out of character between takes and was as cool to Adames when they weren't filming as when they were. She felt that if she treated him any differently on the set than her character was in the movie, it would only confuse the boy and potentially spoil their scenes. Cassavetes endorsed her decision (and in fact wanted her to be even tougher and harder on him than she chose to be). An aspect of the film that Cassavetes

may not have even been conscious of was that Phil, the midget macho-man, was an emotional, if not a literal, self-portrait of the artist, and Rowlands' treatment of the pint-sized Puerto Rican tough-guy was a comical rendition of her real-life relationship with her swaggering husband.

She and the kid found an amazing restraint. Most people today say, 'Tell me you like me, tell me you love me.' People need that reassurance, that confirmation of things that *should* be self-evident. But these characters go on the basis that there are certain emotions and rules that go *beyond* words and assurances. They just *know*. I *like* that part of the movie. The kid is Puerto Rican. The woman is a blonde of a type who might not ordinarily think a Hispanic was the highest member of society. Even when they're thrown together, they don't *pretend* to care about each other because it's fashionable. So at the end, when they *do* care about each other, it's because of their personal trust and regard. And that's a beautiful thing to see.

The main interest of the film, for Cassavetes, was the character of Gloria.

It was about a woman who beyond her control stood up for a kid whom she wanted nothing to do with. Gena's character was of a very simple person that loved her life and having to give it up for a Puerto Rican kid in New York City; it's like if I meet somebody and they say, 'Hey man, can you help me? I'm in a lot of trouble, and I'm going to be killed.' It's one thing to be killed. But it's another thing to give up everything that you own in life, all your friends, your whole way of life. So I think this woman gives up her whole way of life, and she does it in such a fashion that you believe her, and that's basically the picture. If that works, then I think the picture works.

Gloria celebrates the coming together of a woman who neither likes nor understands children and a boy who believes he's man enough to stand on his own. There's a lot of pain connected with raising children in today's world. It's considered a big holdback for a woman. So a lot of women have developed a distrust of children. I wanted to tell women that they don't have to like children – but there's still something deep in them that relates to children, and this separates them from men in a good way. This inner understanding of kids is something very deep and instinctive. In a way, it's the other side of insanity. But we had to be careful how we evoked this in the movie. We avoided anything like a traditional mother-son relationship. Gloria doesn't know why she's doing any of these things. She's lost by it, and that's the way *I* feel. I'm

lost by life. I don't know anything about life. If I make a movie, I don't even understand why I'm making the movie. I just know that there's something there. Later on, we all get to know what it's about through the opinions of others.

Cassavetes' replies to criticisms kept invoking the fact that, gangster movie or not, he was still making a film about fallible, ordinary human beings. He explained why Buck Henry didn't pack and leave earlier:

You never can leave early. You always think, 'Now I'm gonna run out and get out of town,' but if you have a wife, you understand that she has to get ready, and if you have a child or two kids, then you realize that they have to get ready. And if you have two kids and a grandmother, there's an awful lot of packing to be done. So you can say 'let's go' a million times to your wife and family, and they're *still* going to be late.

He described why the gangsters weren't better organized:

I consider gangsters to be the same as regular people, the only difference is that they're willing to kill somebody. I don't consider gangsters anything more than that, except they have a deeper limit of what the tolerance of the human spirit will allow. And I don't think they're smarter than anybody else. I don't think they're smarter than I am.

He explained why Gloria wasn't searched before she met the boss:

I think that's protocol. I think it's OK to blow away small mob figures, guys that are trying to kill you or trying to kill somebody involved with you. But when you walk into the head Mafia guy's house and there are like ten people in the room – and this woman had been the head man's mistress – I don't think there's any doubt that she wouldn't be searched, because no one in the world would ever expect her to try to walk out of that place. It's such a come-down in position to search somebody. Can you imagine the Secretary of State of the United States going to Russia to see the top Commissar and being searched? You wouldn't be searched. Even with them, there's some kind of politeness.

He said why the gangsters didn't just shoot Gloria when she came in:

It's not a bunch of guys that the minute a woman gives herself up, that they take her off and put her in cement and throw her in a river. It's difficult for the head guy, who has bought her jewels, as he says, and he's

gone to bed with her, and who's lived with her, to just pull the trigger. It's never easy. I think that it's only in movies that it's easy. The hell with it. And I like to deal with people who have a little bit more feeling than just the stereotype – unlike other movies where it's the kiss of death and then it's over with.

The end sequence, when Phil is praying beside the tombstone and Gloria gets out of the limo, was originally in black and white (and was released that way in Europe), but a Columbia executive vetoed the idea for the American prints. It was the one editorial decision Cassavetes didn't agree with, but he didn't feel it was worth fighting over.

I got the idea as an accident. When we got some of the opticals back during editing, they sent that sequence over in black-and-white. I put it on the machine and liked the way it looked. So I said let's use it. John Veitch, who's one of the heads of Columbia, saw the picture and he said to me in a meeting, 'You *can't* have that in black and white! What *the hell* are you doing? It looks like we ran out of color film.' And I said, 'John. I agree with you because I don't really like the switches. I really don't because they're very self-conscious, usually.' And that's the truth, they are. I don't know how the audience responds because I've never seen that ending in black and white, except in the dubbing room. I've never seen it with an audience. It doesn't really make that much difference to me. The picture can be there with or without that device. There was nothing to fight about. And I would say that fifty per cent of the people like it in black and white, and fifty per cent of the people like the color. And a lot of people don't like the ending no matter *what* happens! In honesty, I think the ending is not as good as it could be. I just did it that way because I really didn't want the kid to suffer. What kind of picture would it be if at the end the kid went to pieces? I just didn't want to kill off the person who had protected that boy.

Gloria has many Cassavetean touches that distinguish it from most other Hollywood productions, especially gangster films: from the surprising kindness and trustworthiness of several of the cab drivers, and the rich humanity with which the bit parts are imbued; to the jaded, dyspeptic view of bureaucracy that is captured by the bank and safety deposit scenes; to the unexpected spirituality of the cemetery scenes (when did a gangster movie last include scenes about souls?); to the complexity of personal meaning that is communicated by the smallest details – like the way the decoration of Gloria's apartment expresses her

state of emotional closure at the beginning of the film, or the way Tanzini lights her cigarette near the end evokes the history of their entire previous relationship.

Though post-production was finished near the end of 1979, the film would not be released for nearly a year. As the months dragged on, Cassavetes told friends that it was clear to him that Columbia had made up their minds that the picture would not make enough money to justify releasing it. He was convinced that they were shelving it.

Lest anyone conclude that Cassavetes' decision to work for a studio proved that he had mellowed, two events in the spring of 1980 demonstrated that he was still the proud, prickly, principled filmmaker of old – very much alive and kicking. In an effort to put a little pressure on Columbia to release the film, Cassavetes contacted Black Sparrow Press (who had published the screenplay of *Minnie and Moskowitz* seven years earlier) and offered them the shooting script. But when the press was only willing to give him a \$500 advance because of the small market for the book, Cassavetes withdrew the manuscript. He would rather not publish it than sell it for what he regarded as an insulting fee. Then there was his boycott of a screening of his work by the Los Angeles Film Exposition (Filmex) in March. Cassavetes refused to attend the event because he thought it was disrespectful to him and to his audience to show five hours of his work at one sitting.

He devoted much of the spring and summer to writing, including a three-act play titled *East/West Game*. It was mounted in November by Susan Streitfeld in a brief run at the Callboard Theater in Los Angeles. The wry, vaguely autobiographical comedy starred son Nick Cassavetes and Sandy Martin as an off-Broadway playwright and his secretary who are tempted but ultimately resist selling out to a Hollywood producer. It received generally negative reviews, in large part due to its length. On opening night it ran for more than four hours.

Cassavetes was not present to hear the critics' murmurs and the audience's protests, since he had to fly to Toronto at the end of September to act in a trashy horror movie by John Hough titled *Incubus*. Immediately afterwards, he went off to act in John Badham's *Whose Life Is It, Anyway?* Cassavetes had looked forward to the Badham movie for a sentimental reason. It would be his first chance to act in a Reginald Rose screenplay (based on a Brian Clark play) since the mid-1950s, when Rose's scripts had been such lucky charms for him and Rowlands. But Badham reported that Cassavetes spent most of the shoot sparring with him, and Cassavetes felt that the experience ranked with *Rosemary's Baby* as one of the most difficult and contentious of his life.

An 'Anti-Academy Awards' party given by Tim Carey for Cassavetes and Rowlands. © *Tim Carey*

I take some roles because I am broke. Like anybody else, I need money. And if someone's willing to pay that money, I'll go and do it and do the best I can. I've stopped trying to raise money to finance my own films. I made the decision this year when I turned fifty. I don't want to finance my own pictures, have something happen to me and end up with my wife and kids having to pay the bills.

Within weeks of making the above statement, he went back on it. Debt or no debt, he had to do something. He announced his intention to plow the money he had earned from *Gloria* into a script he had just written. *She's Delovely* would feature himself, Rowlands and daughter Xan in the leads.

The next picture we make will be a deep personal statement. I don't know if anyone will finance it. Fortunately, now I have some money.

It's hard to say what finally persuaded Columbia to release *Gloria*, but it seems likely that a contributing factor was a retrospective of Cassavetes' work organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art, which ran from 20 June to 11 July 1980. There was a considerable amount of coverage associated with the screenings and fairly large attendance at many of the events. At Cassavetes' request, *Gloria* was entered into competition at the Venice Film Festival in September, where it shared the Golden Lion with Louis Malle's *Atlantic City*. Julie Carmen won an award as Best Supporting Actress and Gena Rowlands as Best Actress.

At last, on 1 October 1980, more than ten months after post-production had been completed, *Gloria* opened at the Cinema I in Manhattan. Since it was Cassavetes' most conventional, most 'Hollywood' film, it was not surprising that the middlebrow reviewers who had panned his other work considered it his best movie. *New York Magazine's* David Denby called it 'a fine action film with a thrilling heroine', and the *New York Times's* Vincent Canby praised it with faint damns as 'Hollywood-style hokum directed and acted in [a] bravura manner'. Gena Rowlands received an Academy Award nomination as Best Actress (though Sissy Spacek won for *Coal Miner's Daughter*).

But Columbia had been right to doubt the film's commercial potential. Even with the mildly positive reviews and the publicity budget of a major studio behind it, the film did only mediocre business. American filmgoing is star-driven, and Cassavetes, Rowlands and Adames could not come anywhere near the drawing power of Voight, Dunaway and Schroder.

Laughing with glee, enjoying the moment, being his actors' own best audience. Cassavetes filming the cemetery scene in his strangely spiritual but 'simple' gangster picture. © *Sam Shaw*

It was ironically fitting that the movie that was given the largest release and gathered the most favorable reviews of any film he ever made was the film Cassavetes believed in least of any of the work he had done since *A Child Is Waiting*.

It was television fare as a screenplay but handled by the actors to make it better. It's an adult fairy-tale. And I never pretended it was anything else but fiction. I always thought I understood it. And I was bored because I knew the answer to that picture the minute we began. And that's why I could never be wildly enthusiastic about the picture – because it's so simple. Whereas *Husbands* is not simple, whereas *A Woman Under the Influence* is not simple, *Opening Night* is not simple. You have to think about those pictures.

Love Streams (1981–4)

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, partly as a refuge from the astronomical budgets of film production and distribution, but even more as a way of establishing a personal connection with an audience the critics couldn't scare away, Cassavetes increasingly thought about starting a repertory theater company. It would become the big, noisy family he had always been questing for. Life would imitate art. He would become a Manny Victor or a Cosmo Vitelli.

I have an idea to have a theater where the audience doesn't know what they're going to see, where they just come to the theater. There would be two or three actors playing the same part. Today's audiences have no excitement of anticipation. What I'd like to do is say, 'OK, we start at curtain time; here is a list of plays we are going to be doing. You can get up and leave if you have seen it before.' I would like to have a restaurant only for the theater audience – no one else could go to it – where, if the performer wanted, he could mingle with the audience afterwards. I'm going to see Joe Papp in New York.

Cassavetes was headed to New York to film a forty-minute performance of John Finnegan's one-man show, *Unsung Heroes*. (As a favor to his longtime friend, Cassavetes allowed himself to be credited as the director of the piece, though all he really did was oversee a standard three-camera set-up.) Nothing came of the meeting with Papp. It was now late November 1980. Cassavetes had seven months of down-time prior to beginning a long location shoot for Paul Mazursky's *Tempest* in the second half of the next year. While making a film was out of the question, Cassavetes decided he had enough time and money to mount a quick dramatic production. Following the abortive release of *Opening Night*, he had written a play titled *Knives*. John Ireland expressed interest in playing the lead, and Cassavetes' first thought was to stage a workshop

production in Toronto for a possible Broadway run, since the Canadian city would provide a location to tinker with the property well away from the prying eyes of American critics. Then he changed his mind and decided to do something closer to home, though in his own unique way.

At the end of 1980, Cassavetes located a struggling rehearsal hall called the California Center for the Performing Arts and made arrangements to lease it for his production. He consciously crafted the deal so that it would be as beneficial to them as to him. Cassavetes would get to use their space from January through June 1981. They would get not only the rent, but the extensive improvements he intended to make. In the end, he spent four months, from January to April, and almost \$200,000 of his own money building them a lobby, box-office, stage and theater space with new seats and state-of-the-art lighting and sound. He even painted the exterior. Most of the remodeling work was done by an army of volunteers under the leadership of James Eric, with Cassavetes himself occasionally wielding a hammer or saw.

As always, everyone agreed to work for free – from the professional actors to the stage crew and theater staff. In all, more than 300 people rallied to help Cassavetes, simply out of loyalty to the man and his work – and on any given day fifty or sixty might be present and on duty. Volunteers did everything from manning the phones and ticket-booth to moving the scenery – which only added to the feeling of crazy, impassioned amateurism that suffused the entire venture, since on any given day or evening a third of the staff or crew would not show up for one reason or other and a merry musical chairs of job-reassignments would have to take place.

Beginning in January, in a back room with the sound of hammers pounding in the background, Cassavetes began daily rehearsals with groups of actors seated around a big L-shaped table – not for one play, but three. (He would finally realize the dream he had hatched prior to *A Woman Under the Influence* of presenting a series of three interlinked works on successive nights.) He drew upon his usual superhuman reserves of energy and rehearsed the first play from 9.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.; the second from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.; and the third from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. Though everyone was given scripts in January, it should come as no surprise that virtually every line of all three plays was rewritten during rehearsal. The script functioned as something for the actors to react to, to play off of, to cut and adjust until it fit them personally.

The plays opened at the newly christened ‘Center Theater’ on Friday 8 May and played six days a week (two evenings and one matinee for each of the three works). True to his non-commercialism, Cassavetes ran

things in a way that was guaranteed to lose money. Not only had he and Eric designed the theater to be so intimate that it only seated sixty-one (with thirty-eight more as standing-room), but Cassavetes insisted on practically giving the tickets away by setting a price of \$2.50 for matinees and \$4 for evening performances. He said the reason was to make sure ‘ordinary people’ could attend – the audience he was always convinced was his real one. For the same reason, he insisted that there be no VIP comps whatsoever. Agents and producers would have to stand in line and buy their tickets just like everybody else. As Peter Falk put it only a little hyperbolically, ‘Only John would spend a couple hundred thousand of his own money on a production that would bring in \$99 a day.’

I find it very pleasant to work in Los Angeles, because actors and cameramen and writers don’t have the feeling that anything can transpire there. So they’re very anxious to work on independent projects, they’re very happy to do little theater all the time. They don’t want to leave there because that’s where the financial work is, but you’ll find great Hollywood stars going out and working in waiver productions for nothing, simply because that’s what they need to feel alive. And you can do serious work in Los Angeles, whereas New York is such a diversion in itself. I don’t like to work in New York, because it’s too exciting. The phone rings all the time. I want to see friends. I want to live! Here, it’s as if I was on a desert island. My work is my substitute for living. There’s life in Los Angeles – you just have to work to find it.

Presented under the umbrella title ‘Three Plays of Love and Hate’, *Knives* was written by Cassavetes; *The Third Day Comes* was by Ted Allan; and *Love Streams* was credited as a collaboration between Cassavetes and Allan (though, according to Allan, it was almost entirely Cassavetes’ work). Bo Harwood did the sound and music; James Eric the sets.

Knives, which dated from 1978, was a dream play that blended fantasy and reality, past and present, thoughts and expressions. Cassavetes was pursuing the dramatic exploration he began in *A Woman Under the Influence* (which originally featured a dream sequence), continued in *Opening Night* and which would culminate a few years later in the film version of *Love Streams*. Peter Falk played a stand-up comedian who murdered his wife (played by Falk’s real-life wife, Shera Danese) and now must defend himself in a courtroom in front of John Hawker’s judge (Hawker was Joseph Morton, one of the construction workers in *A Woman Under the Influence*) and a team of all-female prosecutors. As

his defense, Falk delivers a free-association, word-salad stand-up comedy routine about the women he's known in his life, while the figures he mentions move through the courtroom and tell their side of things. In what is clearly a self-reflection on Cassavetes' part on the function of art, Falk describes how he wants his comedy routine to be more than joke-telling. He wants his art to express his fears, doubts and confusions.

Allan's *The Third Day Comes* (the title is indebted to Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*: 'The third day comes a frost, a killing frost . . .'), which was written in 1980, was a dark work about a dysfunctional family, a self-portrait of Allan's own. Cassavetes had originally wanted Elaine May to play the female lead, but she proved unavailable. Martin Landau (who was on the theater's board of directors and had helped to make the arrangements for Cassavetes' project) agreed to play the male lead and rehearsed with the company throughout the spring, but a month before the play was scheduled to open, backed out of it. In the end, Cassavetes went with Michael McGuire and Gena Rowlands as the parents of a traumatized and resentful son Robert (Nick Cassavetes), who is abused by his father and has an incestuous relationship with his sister Sarah (Risa Blewitt).

Love Streams was based on Allan's 1970 stage-play, *I've Seen You Cut Lemons*. Cassavetes' friendship with Allan, a playwright and scriptwriter originally from Stratford, Ontario, went back more than twenty years to the meeting in Ireland in the spring of 1960 described in the second chapter. Cassavetes had a high opinion of Allan's writing for stage and screen – which included *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969), *Lies My Father Told Me* (1975), *Falling in Love Again* (1980), *It Rained All Night the Day I Left* (1980), *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (1987–90) and *The Secret of the World* (unproduced). Allan's weakest work, oddly enough, was the production on which he first met Cassavetes, *The Middle of Nowhere*. Allan was so embarrassed about it that he tried to buy the film back and suppress it.

Paradoxically, one of the emotional bonds between the two men was that Allan's upbringing and personal life were, in many respects, the negative image of Cassavetes'. Allan's childhood was extremely unhappy and left him with many unresolved conflicts with his father and his mentally ill step-sister (with whom, in his own words, he had 'an emotionally incestuous relationship'). As an adult, Allan had been divorced four times and had a succession of unhappy romantic relationships. In Allan the man, the child was still very much alive, though in the opposite sense from what Cassavetes depicted in *Husbands*.

Cassavetes working on the stage version of
Love Streams with Rowlands and Voight.
© Joan Almond

I haven't yet been able to deal with my own family in my work. It's just too close, and I'm confused enough by life in general. I was attracted to Ted through friendship and work, and through the fact of his enormous obsession with family and loss and pain. Ted is very family-oriented, fascinated, like me, with the tensions and emotions coming out of family life. I'm really interested in his stories, because the roots of people have somehow been lost and shunted aside, particularly in America.

One of their long-term projects (which extended over almost the entire decade of the seventies) was a collaborative rewrite of Allan's autobiographical two-person play, *I've Seen You Cut Lemons*, which had been produced in London in 1970, starring Diane Cilento and Robert Hardy and directed by Sean Connery. It was panned by the critics. During Cassavetes' frequent visits to England, the two men spent hundreds of hours revising the play (with Allan at the typewriter and Cassavetes pacing the floor, having the time of his life dictating in the different voices of the various characters in his customary way). When Allan moved to Los Angeles in 1978, the collaboration continued.

By the time Cassavetes declared his intention of using Allan's play, it had been so heavily revised and augmented with new scenes, characters and events (particularly in two massive rewrites dating from the summers of 1978 and 1979) that it bore almost no resemblance to Allan's original or current conception of his work. Allan said he formally 'gave' the play to Cassavetes at that point, telling him he no longer recognized it as his own work and no longer wanted it; but Cassavetes, with his typical generosity, refused to take credit for the rewrite, telling Allan and everyone else that it was still his. The drafts went through many different titles over the course of the decade, including *Brother/Sister*, *Everyone Else Is a Stranger* and *Love Streams*.

In the version that was mounted at the Center Theater, the three main characters are Robert, Sarah and Susan. Gena Rowlands and Jon Voight starred as the grown-up brother and sister; real life daughter and mother Margaret and Diahnne Abbott (whom Cassavetes was instantly taken with when he saw her briefly sing in Scorsese's 1977 *New York, New York*) played a mother and daughter (with both characters having much larger parts than they do in the film). Nicholas Katt played Albie. Zoe Cassavetes played Debbie. And Neil Bell played the dog.

Voight and Rowlands gave interpretations of their parts completely unlike the characters Allan's original play had presented. Sarah was mentally ill, and Rowlands' and Cassavetes' reinterpretation lent the character a touching innocence and vulnerability that is entirely foreign

to Allan's conception. Voight, on his part, brought a manic, comic quality to the character of Robert, while Allan's Robert had been dour and sarcastic.

I've Seen You Cut Lemons was a two-character play; Ted's version began at the point Sarah comes to visit Robert, drives him crazy, and goes into a great deal of bitterness and recrimination at him for having committed her to an institution when she was younger. Ted and I started talking about what was wrong with the play and why it hadn't worked several times when we did it. It was brilliantly written. It was a very, very interesting play, and the first part was exceptional. But by the end you hated the woman because she just kept on being what somebody who was in an institution might be to you when you're living your life, however badly, and somebody comes and breaks your way of life up. And I also didn't like the man, he just sits there and listens to this woman raving on for a long time. And so we worked on it for years before we put it on the stage.

Ted's original play was similar to *A Woman Under the Influence*. We couldn't just do a remake. The Center Theater play was different in that it was basically a comedy. Jon Voight has a wonderful sense of the ridiculous in comedy. His basic instincts are absolutely humorous. I loved it the way Jon did it. It was wonderful. It was so wild, so crazy and full of spirit.

Cassavetes experimented with a novel 'cinematic' form of presentation in all three plays in which spot-lighting, multiple simultaneous areas of interest on stage, recorded music and sound effects (with four separate tracks playing at once), and scenes that seamlessly flowed into each other were used to simulate the 'realism' of a film's effects, the rapidity of its editing rhythms and scene changes, and its close-ups and two-shots. (*Knives*, for example, consisted of twenty-nine short scenes, and *Love Streams* twenty-five scenes, set in fifteen different locations, involving thirty-six characters.) There were crowd scenes with thirty or forty people on stage at the same time; a rain scene with real water; a bowling-alley scene with the sounds of balls rolling and pins crashing in the background; and, in general, a highly permeable 'fourth-wall' with the blocking flowing off the stage and into the audience at some moments and extending out a door into an alley behind the theater at others. Perhaps it was Cassavetes' attempt to recapture the feeling of his live television days.

No expense was spared on the production. What Cassavetes did was

as professionally mounted and produced as anything in the city. But, as was always the case with his work, the effect was unusual and off-putting in many cases. To start with, all three of the plays were in excess of three hours. Secondly, they were, in the typical Cassavetes way, not about event but character. It was hard for many members of the audience to know what to follow or pay attention to. Scenes didn't make obvious dramatic points, and to most viewers at least, seemed to go on too long. Brilliant moments were followed by moments that seemed to wander aimlessly. The dialogue seemed repetitive, loose and unpolished – whether by design or intention; the writing seemed unfinished and rough. The tone was hard to get comfortable with. It was hard to know how to react to a lot of moments. At one point or another in each of the works the audience grew restless. But it just didn't matter to Cassavetes. He was not interested in pleasing the audience. The point was to study, learn and explore the works, the characters, the art of stagecraft. It was a return to the days of the *Shadows* workshop: a tight-knit community of artists working together for the love of it.

Ted Allan himself characterized the plays as being directed 'as if they were a rehearsal for a film'. He pleaded with Cassavetes to delay the opening, predicting that, 'This town will kill us. You'll be eaten alive. These critics are used to such professionalism.' Allan knew his critics; but Cassavetes just didn't care what the critics would say. The dramatic strangeness of the productions, their length and their apparently rough-hewn state drove the reviewers to distraction. Not counting a few appreciations that appeared in L.A.'s alternative press, all three works received resoundingly negative notices from the theatrical establishment – the dismissive tone of which is summed up by the first paragraph of Lawrence Christon's *Los Angeles Times* review of *The Third Day Comes*: 'Had playwright and company set out to self-destruct before our eyes, the play could not have been more sloppily conceived and clumsily executed.' (The *Times*' Sylvia Drake and Dan Sullivan were only marginally more charitable in their assessments of the other two plays.)

The season ended as soon as the five-week run was completed. Though hundreds of people were turned away from the box-office each week, and Cassavetes was asked to extend the season for at least a few more weeks, he absolutely refused to. It is revealing that when a cable-television network learned of the production and offered money to tape it for later broadcast, and a couple of producers proposed taking the production to New York and London, Cassavetes turned the offers down. He was offered big money – a figure of \$200,000 up front was

rumored at one point – but, as Bo Harwood put it, ‘He knew that money would change things.’ He wanted the production to stay the way it was – raw, experimental, exploratory, personal. Letting outsiders get their fingers in the pot would change everything.

It was done for love and fun and friendship and not money. But there was a sadder side to this period as well. Ted Allan and Sam Shaw said Cassavetes seemed more worn out than they had ever seen him before. They had intimations that there might be something terribly wrong with his health. The demands of building a theater and simultaneously staging three works (even while rewriting two of them) stressed Cassavetes physically almost to the breaking-point. At one stretch, Allan said he was certain that Cassavetes went almost entirely without sleep for thirty days in a row to keep the show going. Peter Falk tells a comical story about realizing he left his wallet in the theater and returning to discover Cassavetes on his back in a stall in the men’s room repairing a toilet at two in the morning.

Cassavetes had always been a heavy drinker, but from this point on he drank even more than before, or at least more publicly. According to one friend, it was not unusual for lunch in the 1980s to consist of nothing but a glass of vodka. Shaw’s personal theory was that Cassavetes’ loss of his parents marked the start of the final downward slide; but what that doesn’t account for is why the drinking was so heavy for years before. Meade Roberts estimated that the filmmaker consumed at least a fifth a day the entire time he knew him. Cassavetes was clearly a possessed man in many different ways. The films alone would show us that, even if we knew nothing about the filmmaker’s personal life. The emotional violence, the failures of communication, the chasms of misunderstanding and the heartrending isolation and loneliness of the central figures – and the attempted suicides of so many of them – speak volumes.

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Cassavetes went off to star in Paul Mazursky’s *Tempest*. The two men had not seen each other since they were both young actors in New York twenty-five years earlier. Cassavetes had personally gotten Mazursky his first big break when he took him uptown to a casting director for *The Blackboard Jungle* and, according to Mazursky, said, ‘This guy is one of the greatest actors in New York’ – even though Cassavetes had never seen Mazursky act before. The *Tempest* part had originally been offered to Paul Newman, but when Newman turned it down, Mazursky offered it to Cassavetes as a way of paying back an overdue favor.

Now, when somebody says, 'I have a script for you, loosely based on Shakespeare, and you're to play the lead,' there are so many things that flash through my mind. Who is the director really? Even though you know him casually, you think, 'What is he really like? . . . Are you going to get along? Is he going to put up barriers? Is he going to be defensive? Is he going to worry that I too am a director, even though, strictly, I'm an actor? Is he going to ask me that? Is he going to be overly respectful or phony? What are the conditions going to be?' And with that in mind, I read the script. To my mind, it had nothing to do with Shakespeare – it was an interesting plot. It was complicated. And I thought it was a comedy, but I wasn't quite sure.

Tempest began shooting in New York in July 1981 and moved to Greece in early autumn. True to form, and as previous directors from Aldrich to Badham had discovered, Cassavetes was maddeningly difficult to work with. He complained about many aspects of the shoot and occasionally refused to do what he was asked – right up to the final day, when he declined to take the obligatory 'curtain-closing bow' that Mazursky wanted to end his film with.

Mazursky reported that the low point was a series of off-camera arguments in which Cassavetes teased and tormented Rowlands mercilessly, threatening to kill a goat in front of her in an upcoming scene (rather than merely simulating doing it). Looking back on it, Mazursky thought that it was possible that Cassavetes was using his off-screen squabble with Rowlands to deepen their on-screen depiction of an unhappy, frightened, feuding couple; but he also felt that there must have been a less painful and embarrassing way to get the same result.

Another illustration of Cassavetes' possible use of life's real emotions to enhance art's artificial depictions: Mazursky makes a cameo appearance in an early scene as a producer whom Cassavetes drunkenly dances with at a New York house party (a moment which recalls Mabel's interaction with Billy Tidroe at the spaghetti breakfast in *A Woman Under the Influence*). The scene is one of the most striking in the film. The discomfort level is high. Mazursky's embarrassment as a character is palpable. Mazursky later revealed that the scene was not in the script but improvised by Cassavetes as the camera rolled, catching Mazursky completely by surprise.

Cassavetes' comments about his relationship with Susan Sarandon during the shoot, and their fear as they approached the island location, reveal the extent to which life and art were blended in his mind. In his remarks it is impossible to separate the feelings of the actors from those

of the characters (similar to his statements about Falk in *Husbands* and *A Woman Under the Influence*).

I felt an enormous sense of nervousness working with Susan Sarandon in the beginning, because I knew that she was in a difficult position. She knew that the husband and wife would eventually get back together so that it was destiny that she would lose. It made me very uncomfortable – like somebody was going to double-cross somebody. We were actually afraid of going to an island – the way people when they run away are afraid of what they're going to find there: whether or not they're going to like it. Are they going to travel thousands of miles and then come home in one day? As it turned out, the first shot in Greece was our approach to the island. Molly [Ringwald] and Susan and I were on the boat; there was an incredible tension. This is the first shot. This is the approach to the island. Everything has to be in this. As the characters got angry with each other, the actors got angry with each other. The picture became so much a part of us in our relaxation hours that we never got away from it.

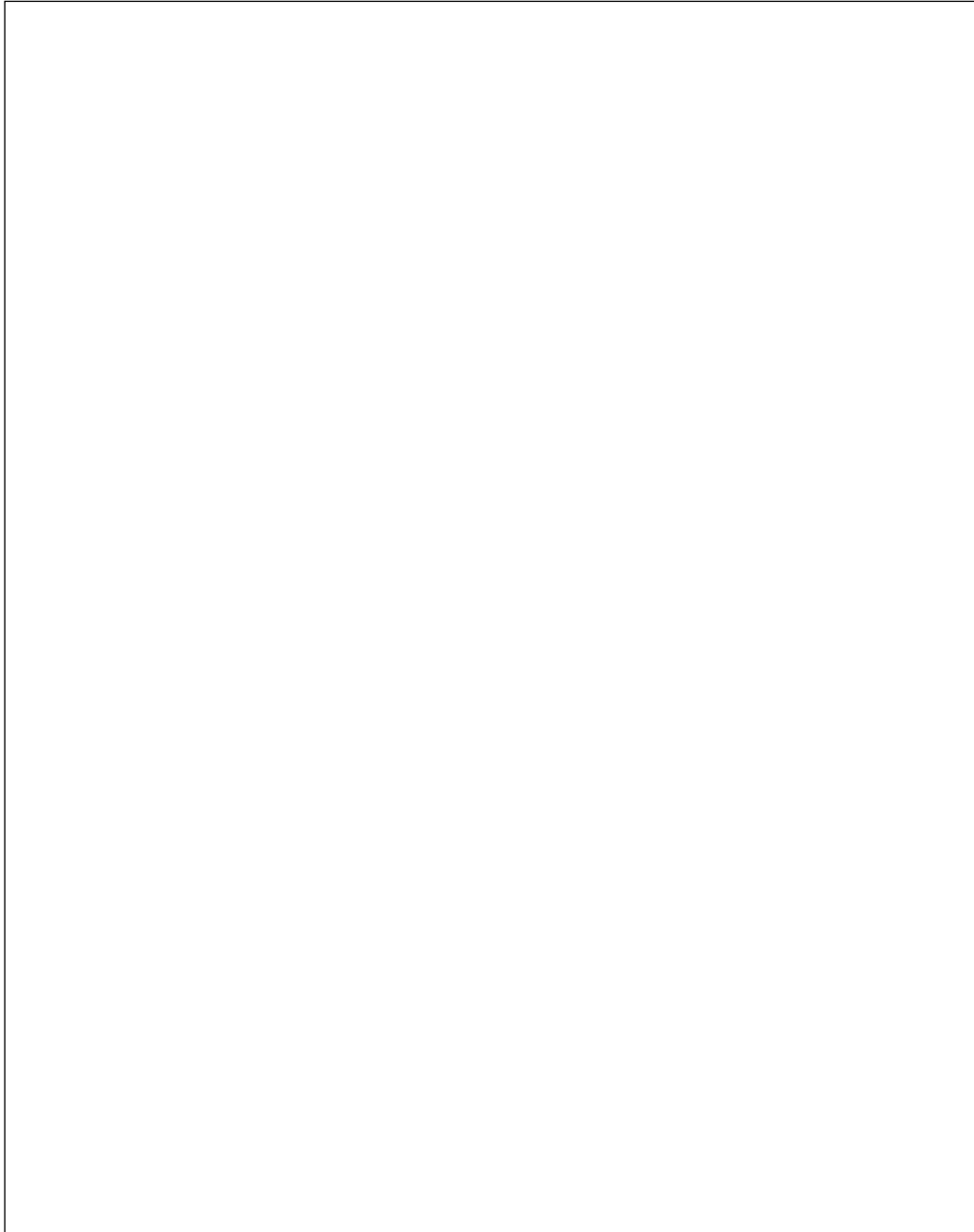
Though Cassavetes was a city-bred child of the streets, he always understood that urban life hid certain realities. During his time on the island, he thought back to one of the formative cinematic experiences of his life – Visconti's *La Terra Trema*, which he had watched over and over again in his pre-*Shadows* days. Again, it is hard to know where he is speaking as the character he plays and where it is his own voice.

I didn't feel the island location was marvelous. I felt it was terrible. Because I didn't really want to leave New York. I'd had such a wonderful time in New York and here we were in another time. The whole beach was rocks. You walked into the water, it was rocks. You stubbed your toe and it got bloody. The water was beautiful but very uncomfortable. I'm a New Yorker. But I ended up missing the island about two weeks after I left. We got to Rome and I thought, 'City life. Thank God! City life, away from that.' But I just kept flashing back to these images of these people and old ladies in black. And worn hands. And farmers along the road with shotguns, looking for three birds. And the roads. And the incredible beauty of the mountains and the water all around. And not having enough water to drink and not having enough food to eat and the poverty. It was very real. Much more real than city life.

Cassavetes' description of Mazursky's directorial methods is the closest



A letter from Cassavetes to the author responding to an invitation to be 'artist-in-residence' at a small New England college, advising students in an arts program there. © *Ray Carney*



he ever came to describing his own way of working with actors. Note also that he draws on the architecture metaphor of the film.

Interpretation of character and motive is not something you can just design like an architect can design a building. There are feelings that go back and forth and a sense of creativity and comfort. I think comfort is very important. I was enormously comfortable with Paul. He allows you to make your work your own. You never know with Paul whether he wants you to be upset or make a jackass of yourself or what. You have to constantly think and adjust your feelings. You become alive, not just as an actor, but as a person who is dealing with a situation. With Paul, the work is important, but it's also not important. It's important that you're human more than it's important that you do your duty to the film.

The fifteen months after Cassavetes' return to Los Angeles in November 1981 were a slack time. He didn't have the financial wherewithal to mount anything of his own, even a play, and was unsuccessful at interesting anyone else in backing one of his scripts. A lot of his time was spent writing screenplays, including a few co-authored with producer Sam Shaw and his son Nick. He involved himself in a variety of projects, plans and meetings, none of which ultimately bore fruit.

In the spring of 1982, he spent a long weekend acting in a twenty-minute student film, *The Haircut*, written and directed by a UCLA film student, Tamar Simon Hoffs. Hoffs originally wanted Ben Gazzara to star in it (since his daughter Elizabeth was producing the film and working on the crew); but Gazzara wasn't free. When he asked Cassavetes if he would take his place, to Hoffs' surprise, Cassavetes accepted as a favor to Elizabeth. The result is a charming, zany fantasy, a performance piece in a barbershop.

Between 1970 and 1982, Cassavetes and Scorsese had more or less reversed places in terms of their positions within the American cinematic pantheon. When Cassavetes first met Scorsese, the older man was the celebrated creator of *Faces* and the younger almost completely unknown. While Scorsese flourished in the 1970s, Cassavetes' reputation declined. But although Cassavetes was a big fan of Scorsese's early films (both *Who's That Knocking at My Door* and *Mean Streets* – with the exception of the sex scenes), he was disappointed with his later work and with what he felt to be Scorsese's borrowing of some of his ideas. (For example, he was convinced that many lines, events and scenes in *New York, New York* were stolen from *Minnie and Moskowitz*.) It is

entirely less interesting whether this or any of the other borrowings actually took place than the fact that Cassavetes felt threatened by such silliness. Then there was Scorsese's use of drugs. Cassavetes thought he was destroying himself and his work. As Scorsese was increasingly adulated by critics and swept up in the Hollywood money machine, Cassavetes felt personally betrayed by a man he had considered to be his friend. Scorsese was too busy to talk to him and Cassavetes felt that, after all he had done to help and encourage the young filmmaker, now that the tables were turned, Scorsese didn't reciprocate. In early 1982, Cassavetes approached Scorsese with a film about filmmaking (continuing the play-within-a-film structure of *Opening Night* and connecting with the plays he wrote throughout the decade that blended fantasy and reality). Cassavetes would play a director who has a nervous breakdown; Scorsese would play his assistant; and Elaine May would be featured as the female lead. It was, at this point in Cassavetes' life, a desperate attempt to get something going in the way of a film, even if it meant piggy-backing on Scorsese's reputation to do it. Cassavetes presented Scorsese with the script and made a passionate pitch, but Scorsese turned him down.

I've watched Marty as the complications in his life grow, and the frustrations grow, and I hope he can survive the mass hysteria of success. Your way of life is a hell of a lot more important than anything else, and by the time you realize what success will do to you, it has taken you away from everything you were saying, doing and enjoying, and thrown you into an area of lawyers and accountants that want your *success* more than they want your *music*. I never had *that*, but I never wanted it.

Later in the year, Cassavetes played the title role in Eric Weston's *Marvin and Tige*. He plays an alcoholic who adopts a young boy but has to give him up in the end. Cassavetes did an impressive job of inserting grace notes that keep the characterization free from sentimentality. Along with *Mikey and Nicky*, *Flip Side*, *Etude in Black* and *The Haircut*, it contains one of the four or five most interesting acting performances Cassavetes ever turned in outside his own work.

Encouraged by the Center Theater staging of *Love Streams*, Cassavetes had approached a number of backers about the possibility of translating the play into a film but was unable to arouse any interest between June 1981 and January 1983. At that point, things changed suddenly and unexpectedly. Two wealthy Israeli producers, Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus (Cassavetes later nicknamed them 'the Bagel

boys'), had acquired a controlling interest in Cannon pictures three and a half years before and were committed to reversing the company's image as a maker of low-budget exploitation films. To prove their artistic seriousness, they approached a series of 'prestige art figures' (including Cassavetes, Godard, Mailer and Altman) about working for them.

I think Cannon wanted to break into the artistic world and be accepted. They needed us to make an artistic film to give them some feeling of respectability – although *I've* never been! [Laughs.] And for that they said, 'OK, we'll make the film if you can make it for next to nothing.' And we said, 'OK. We'll make it for next to nothing because you're the only person that would do it.' And so they said, 'OK.'

Cassavetes proposed *Love Streams*. He was, at this point in his life, beyond attempting to convince himself or anyone else about the commercial appeal of his work.

I found myself going to Menahem and saying, 'We have a story. This absolutely will *not* make any money. Probably no one will want to see it, but it is a wonderful film.' And he said, 'Why the hell should I go into a picture you *tell* me is not going to make any money?' I told him I didn't *know* that it wouldn't make money but I suspect it wouldn't. Then he said, 'What's the story?' People get interested when you challenge them in that way.

I never made a film *I* don't like, you know. Maybe no one else does, but *I do* like them! And am thrilled for the opportunity – always – to be able to say, 'I'm interested in this and I have the right to make *this film*.' Now, I have to go and *lie* to everybody and say, when they say to me, 'John, will this film make money?', I say, 'Probably it'll make a *fortune*!' [Laughs.] But that doesn't work too much when they see the grosses and when people begin to think of you as 'idiosyncratic' or 'bananas' because you would make a film that would say something that's *personal*. It may not be interesting to *everybody*, but I'm sure to *some* people it is. To some people it is. If somebody would say, 'Listen, I'm sorry but the family is not a subject that interests the audience today,' I don't think *they're* crazy, and I don't think that *I'm* crazy. All I know is that it's something *I'm* interested in. And, if *I'm* interested in it, I want to do it. And if I can find other people to do it, even if there are only ten, then I want to do it. If other people are right and the family doesn't interest the audience, we'll see. Maybe in ten years' time it will be time. I will fight it out to make a film that may not be in vogue. I don't *want* a film that's in vogue. I like to do stories that are dangerous. Financially dan-

gerous. I want a film that I am feeling at the time. If you want somebody who makes impersonal films, there are lots of impersonal people who make films. The people I work with are *personal* and that's why we get together to make *personal* films.

Love Streams was so psychologically dangerous, lonely, terrifying and so uncommercial that Ted Allan, the two producers and I looked at one another and pretended that we had a comedy. 'Oh yes,' I said. 'The scene where Sarah brings in the animals with the cab driver is going to be a riot!' Yoram said, 'This is the first time that your films will make money.' Menahem said, 'They appreciate you in Europe. They laugh at your films in Europe, and they cry at your films in Europe. But here, they hate your films. I'm going to change all this. You're going to be a superstar director in the United States.' I looked at Ted, who is usually hysterical, but now was calm, wise, with a tear dripping from his eye. We were all strangers then, not trusting each other, not knowing why, unified for the moment. The contracts were signed.

Cassavetes was always a tough negotiator and got the best deal he could under the circumstances. The production would be done with a level of professionalism and support (right down to catered lunches on the set) unprecedented in any of his previous work with the exception of *Gloria*. He was given a little less than a \$2 million budget – which might be tiny by studio standards but was more than twice what he had had to work with on the most expensive of his own independent productions. Not counting *Gloria*, for the first time since *Minnie and Moskowitz* his actors actually received salaries. (Seymour Cassel's \$50,000 gives a rough idea of the modest but adequate pay-scale.) Ted Allan has said that Cassavetes got him the largest paycheck of his life as the film's cowriter (notwithstanding the fact that he hadn't really written the version being filmed). A starting date of 16 May 1983 was set for principal photography.

One of the reasons Cassavetes didn't see eye to eye with producers was that he never ceased to treat filmmaking as a highly mysterious and unpredictable process. It came out of unsystematic observations, discussions and arguments; and it took you somewhere you couldn't foresee. *Love Streams* explored the long-standing Cassavetean theme of male emotional inaccessibility and was grounded in Cassavetes' observations about particular men whose lives puzzled and interested him: Ted Allan and Leonard Bernstein, for example. But above all, it was an act of exploration.

My ideas came from lots of different places. I watch my son and daughters. I talk to Ted. We didn't always agree, but from our discussion would come a plan which we'd alter and reshape until it seemed right. We then proceeded to make the picture with no idea of how it would turn out. That attitude is difficult for a major studio to work with, as I won't give them any promises. They'll say, 'Is it going to be commercial, exciting; is it going to have sex; will young people like it?' I don't know and I don't care. Yet I don't want to be rude to them because it costs millions of dollars to make a picture. I'm not blind to the exigencies, but they're asking impossible questions and I won't answer them because it's insulting. I feel lucky to make any film. I don't want to tell somebody and say, 'I know.' It's not my field. I don't know what the hell I'm doing half the time in my life. I don't know how I work from film to film or how it will be. Film for me is a method of explanation. Not therapy, but education. Hell, I never had a sister, so I made this picture. It's taken me ten years to acclimatize myself and find out how to deal with family life, and I feel my confusion is in here.

Even long after the film was released, Cassavetes emphasized that he was still learning new things about Robert and Sarah.

Love Streams raises troubling questions about family love that took all of us four years to work out. Because this is such a universal and sensitive topic, it is a difficult experience for actors to deal with. All through the making of this picture I kept reliving my father's words. 'For every problem, there is an answer.' But since *Love Streams* is about a question of love, there didn't seem to be an answer that I could find, that Ted Allan could find, or that our hundred conspirators in this painful study of what love means could find. The complications of story and plot, and of entertaining the audience, I think we can truly say, had not been avoided but certainly were not solved. Even now, I still don't know what the brother and sister *really* feel about each other.

Cassavetes had been tinkering with the playscript before Cannon approached him. Two week-long bouts of revision in early August and mid-September 1982 are indicated by the revision dates on some of the drafts. But now that he had the realistic prospect of making a film, he completely rewrote the text – adding many new scenes and elements that were not in the play. There was one intense period of revision in mid-January; another in mid-March; another in mid-April; and a final set of revisions that ran from the end of April through the beginning of

May. In the end, the film would be almost as different from the Center Theater play as the play had been from Allan's original.

The rewrite drew on Cassavetes' *Tempest* experience in two different respects: the less important was that, inspired by Columbia's opening night party for Mazursky's film, which included barnyard animals wandering among the guests on a yacht, Cassavetes inserted similar animal scenes in his film. The more important was that after re-reading Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in preparation for his work on the Mazursky film, he decided to weave allusions to it into *Love Streams* as well as to incorporate dozens of references to characters, shots and lines of dialogue from his earlier films. The self-referential allusions to his own work and references to the play in which Shakespeare bids farewell to his art were motivated by the fact that, given the state of his health, he had an intimation that *Love Streams* might well be his final film.

Many themes, from the earlier films, are echoed. The photographic-negative quality of the brother-sister relationship was graphically portrayed in the interracial family of *Shadows*. The awful emotional isolation in which artists trap themselves was a subject of both *Too Late Blues* and *Opening Night*. We've seen Sarah and Jack fall in love and get married as *Minnie and Moskowitz*. (I even asked Seymour Cassel to duplicate his hairstyle and mustache from that film.) We saw the process of alienation of husband and wife, much like what Sarah and Jack speak of in the divorce hearing in *Faces*. The freedom that the three friends dream of in *Husbands* is the freedom Robert Harmon has and finds empty. A female intensity bordering on madness was explored in *A Woman Under the Influence*, with the difference that Mabel Longhetti's lunacy was accepted by her family while Sarah Lawson's is rejected. The night life that Robert Harmon finds so fascinating was the subject of *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. Even the combination of love and discomfort that Robert Harmon feels toward his son is not unlike the woman-child relationship in *Gloria*.

An important part of Cassavetes' negotiations with Cannon were that he would have enough time to shoot the movie in his own way. He asked for, and was granted, thirteen weeks for filming (which was even more leisurely than it sounded, given the fact that more than half of the film was set in Cassavetes' Hollywood Hills home and the rest of it was filmed within a few miles of it). The schedule was designed to allow him to return to his practice of shooting almost completely in sequence, working from the first page of the script to the last in order to allow the

actors to develop their relationships and identities in the course of the shoot. As an illustration of the absoluteness of Cassavetes' commitment to sequentiality, even the scenes in his house were not all shot at once. The crew actually moved in and out of the house seven different times during the filming, just as the script does. There were only a few scenes, like those in the courtroom and those in the airport and train station (which were shot in a Burbank warehouse) that were filmed out of sequence.

Cassavetes used as much of the stage-play cast as possible, supplemented with family members (Cassavetes' daughter Xan played one of the back-up singers in the nightclub; his cousin Phedon Papamichael was the art director, a job he had done on many previous films); business associates (producer Al Ruban); and friends (John Finnegan; George Sims; Robert Fieldsteel; Seymour Cassel; Doe Avedon Siegel, Gena Rowlands' personal assistant; Jakob Shaw, the grandson of producer Sam Shaw; and Risa Blewett, a family friend). Ted Allan made a brief appearance in the bowling-alley scene but didn't survive the final edit.

Voight and Rowlands were scheduled for the leads, as in the play, but a few weeks before shooting was about to begin, Voight unexpectedly announced to Cassavetes that he insisted on directing the film. Cassavetes was forced to remove him and to step into the Robert Harmon part himself to save the project.

We were two weeks away from shooting when Jon decided not to do the movie. So I did it – but reluctantly. It was very difficult. I hated Jon Voight for leaving because he didn't let us know that he was not going to do it until the last second. And though I like Jon very much and thought he'd be brilliant, it was either me play the part or not do the film. A lot of things were redone as a result. I'm nowhere near Jon's disposition or personality. Apart from the fact that he and Gena look so much alike. They're both blonde; they look like they could come from the same family. Everything had to change because Jon is a different person. Different ideas, different physical, you know, there were so many things. For one thing, I'm not a ladies' man, so I didn't know what the hell to do. It was perfectly all right for Voight to be a ladies' man, but I'm not exactly James Bond. Robert Harmon had girls living in his house. I felt too old and inadequate. Jon had been hilarious, really great. I wish I could have done it his way because I liked his version much more than mine. But I couldn't be that way. I had to do it different. All the work that Ted and Gena and Jon had done in the play would have to be redone. I had to do some studying and we'd have to

approach the story in a different way. I studied the script. All the things that I had ever told actors about studying, I was now having to do.

As he has described in terms of other films, Cassavetes employed what he called 'themes' to unify the film. Rather than merely telling a story, scenes compared and contrasted ways of being. (The references in the second paragraph to 'street life as searching' remind us how much of *Shadows*' Ben was still in Cassavetes and his *alter ego* Robert.)

In film, you hear score just as you do in music. Hear it, then it disappears and you can't express it. You have to get involved in that secret theme, know what its rhythms are; and you don't care what happens with the story. For instance, *Love Streams* is a sister coming to visit her brother, then she goes home. That's the story. Not much of a story. But within it there are complications. A lot of it was very carefully scripted. But sometimes you rebel against the formality of the writing – you want those block strokes, you want chords rather than there always to be specific notes. Specific notes are very pleasing to an audience but not big enough sometimes to encompass everything.

I'm very interested how the theme of family life and street life are part and parcel of one another. Sometimes family life gets harsher, though we expect street life to be harsh. Street life, night life, people in solitude looking for something – sometimes that's softer, because there is no sense of responsibility or pain to that. It's all exchanges without any penalty to it. The subject of family in conjunction with that – that's a drama that's very pertinent to people's lives. Happens all the time, you know. It's always a question of getting out of it once you're in it. Most people think street life is black belts and whips and sleaze and stuff, and that's not street life. Street life is searching. You search. You search. But there's never enough. Take a brother and sister. Take a divorce. Combine it with street life and you've got night themes and day themes all mixed up together. I don't think I'll ever change from going into that.

Loneliness really haunts me. That's a theme for the young – not wanting to be alone, not wanting to be older, not wanting to give up their teenage lack of responsibility. They postpone everything in order to find some beauty, which becomes increasingly difficult as you get older. And you can't go back to it. It's an endless subject. I loved having all those kids in the film, looking at their problems and fears. It's crazy, but only some of the exploitation films really seem to get kids right, what their reality is, where they're at, the danger they live in. They're closer to death than we adults are, in a way, because they take so many chances. Maybe they

want to die before they get to be like us. Even in those films, the women are still just along for the ride, meaningless. I liked the relationships, two or three mother–daughter relationships. To take time out in a film to deal with a woman, Margarita, who’s more correctly my age than the daughter seemed a little crazy but right. You want to put on the screen the way people can relate to each other, the way people want love, not money, not anything else, and the chances women will take to have it.

Cassavetes’ synopsis contains many insights into his view of the characters and further insight into the ‘themes’ he was interested in.

Love Streams takes us into the lives of Sarah Lawson and Robert Harmon – or rather, takes them into our lives. Sarah and Robert have lived very differently, but the trouble each of them has gotten into is equally desperate. Sarah Lawson has dedicated her life to her husband Jack and her daughter Debbie, but the marriage is over; both Jack and Debbie feel suffocated by her intensity, her enveloping love, her flights into mental illness. For Sarah, every moment is crucial and every conversation is capable of changing one’s life whether she’s been married to you for fifteen years or whether she’s only known you for five minutes. Husband and daughter love her but feel they need to live without her. This sends her way over the deep end, thrashing around to find a center for her life.

Robert Harmon, on the other hand, has intentionally tried never to have a center. He is a famous writer of bestselling books about lonely women – hookers, singers and the night life. But lonely desperation has become his life as well as his subject. He is in flight from the withering emptiness that is the basic truth of his life. Whether he is teaching his eight-year-old son, Albie, how to drink beer, wrecking the car of his latest crush, Susan, or getting a hilarious lesson from her mother on how to play the kazoo [in a scene cut from the final film], Robert Harmon enjoys only the emotional novelty of a new situation. As soon as there is the threat of continuity or commitment, Robert flees. Yet he doesn’t kid himself. A piercing self-knowledge is as much a part of Robert Harmon’s strength as his moody, alcoholic self-indulgence is his weakness.

He is a very conventional man. Such a conventional man that he makes a judgment and then lives with it even though he doesn’t want to live with it. He is a very organized person, even though it seems that he’s not because he goes out and he gets drunk and whatever. But he’s a very organized person. He has a very rigid way of living. And one of the ways that he lives is without any attention, affection, being poured on

him. He has no concept of children, doesn't know how to deal with somebody who loves him. He goes out with a bunch of dames and gets drunk and makes bargains with the boy as if he's buying off one of his girls. I don't think he's cruel; he's just ignorant. He's the kind of man that doesn't like people. But he has an affinity with having children around, with having people live in the house like a family, even though they're rent-a-people. He tries to simulate some sort of a family style of living, which is totally made up. The screw-up comes from the loss of family from not taking the good and irritating parts of family and putting them together. Harmon is running from childhood and is trying to create another family without any of the prescribed values. He has been married several times, but when any of his wives has a child, he leaves. As I studied the script, I decided it was because he is the child.

He is transferring his affections constantly, from this one to that other one, all the time, but when his sister comes she cuts through, right through all that. Where *she's* coming from is the end of a marriage. Maybe her husband and her kid did love her, but they didn't want to live that way anymore, with the fights and the tension all the time. The memories were beautiful but it was over. They've been through that time when someone knows you're vulnerable, knows it, but they keep sticking their finger in it, again and again. They can't stop. It becomes a habit. So relationships maybe end, but love doesn't end. *He* thinks it does, but Gena knows that he's wrong; it *doesn't*, even when you want it to. It goes on. But the important thing is not to *say* that, in the script, but to *do* it. So that ten scenes later *you* think, 'This guy's full of shit.'

All he has to hold him together is style. Style is all a guy like this ends up depending on. But his style collapses in the presence of his sister. He's suffering mentally. He doesn't know it, even, but he's suffering mentally – physically, he absolutely doesn't notice himself. Gets the shit kicked out of him, falls down stairs, could get laid five times over, doesn't notice. But Gena is suffering psychically – collapsing, having spells – because in *her* mind, her mentality, it's *decided*, she made a bargain, a marriage, and that's it, she doesn't want anything but.

Love Streams juxtaposes episodes of their lives against each other, confronting the silly with the tragic, and vice versa, in both their worlds. Their capacities for intensity and audacity are exactly alike, but in everything else they are opposites, each like a photographic negative of the other. For both of them, the trouble is love. While Sarah loves too obsessively, Robert shifts his attention every time involvement (much less commitment) becomes necessary.

As the punning title suggests, Cassavetes thought of *Love Streams* as a ‘dream film’.

Their reunion, after so long, causes an almost alchemical change not only in both their lives, but in the style of the film itself. Up to this point, we’ve seen both Robert and Sarah interacting only with supposedly ‘normal’ people. When their very different intensities start playing off each other, life, and the film, take on the quality of a dream. It is almost as though Sarah and Robert are dreaming of each other! Robert sees Sarah with a lover, causing complex reactions in himself – a classic brother–sister dream, but this is real life. Sarah sees Robert virtually run out of the house whenever she needs him – a classic rejection dream, but, again, this is real life. Sarah buys pets for Robert to love, since he has given up on humans. She reasons that pets would be a good place for him to start learning to love. But what pets! Two miniature horses, a goat, a duck, chickens and a pit-bull dog, all of which she stables in his Hollywood Hills home! In dream-like fashion, horses, goats and chickens have the run of the house, and now both Sarah and Robert seem caught in the same dream from which they cannot wake because, in fact, it is their lives.

While this is going on, Sarah is having her own actual dreams and visions. She dreams of her husband and daughter, a hilarious and heart-breaking sequence where she ‘bets our love’ that she can make them laugh. Finally, she dreams that she and her husband and her daughter are singing in an opera together. As sometimes happens in life, Sarah’s opera dream has a mysteriously healing quality. She wakes from it almost happy, and with a feeling of profound release, she is able to face her life once more. As she is leaving Robert’s house in a pouring rain, Robert has a waking dream – almost a vision. Drenched, he is heart-broken that Sarah is leaving. Facing the black hole that his life has become, he sees that the dog she has bought him has become a man, a sort of spirit man, a ‘visitor’ whose presence helps him accept this moment of shattering self-realization.

It was important that the audience not be able to dismiss the characters. Though Cassavetes saw Robert’s and Sarah’s shortcomings, he also felt they had redeeming qualities.

I like him. I like the person I’m playing. I adore the person that Gena is playing. Within the framework of doing it, of playing my part, I know this guy doesn’t know what he’s doing, just like me. So it’s easy to play somebody that has feelings but doesn’t know how to express them and

I like to keep that open enough to not know what we're gonna do tomorrow.

The greatest compliment Cassavetes could pay a person or a character was to say that he or she 'went on' or 'doesn't quit'. Although Zelmo turns his 'I go on; I go on' into a self-pitying boast, the capacity to 'go on' was something Cassavetes admired in all of his greatest characters – from Lelia, Maria and Florence in the earlier films, to Mabel, Cosmo and Myrtle in later ones, to Robert and Sarah here. Victory was less important than persistence. Life was not about winning but about continuing to work and love against all odds.

It's just the brother and sister left, and we have to find out the nature of these two people and what they are – their own lives, their own screw-ups, their own mysteries, the sense of nothing being there. And yet they continue to try, like most of us. They continue to go on, to try to make a new life, never copping out on their own screw-ups. They just keep, keep, keep on going.

In Cassavetes' view, melodrama was the opposite of this indomitability. Melodrama was characters stopping to feel sorry for themselves – like Lelia or Bennie in *Shadows* or Zelmo in *Minnie and Moskowitz* – but was something his most interesting figures never do.

Every bit of it there's no melodrama. It's just misplaced sincerity all the way through. This story can't take any melodrama. Whatever happens, *happens*. And when it happens, they laugh or get angry, but they don't – they don't give in. *They don't give in!* And that's what makes them likable. They *get it*, and they *grit it* and *go on*.

The importance of 'going on' applies to his situation as an independent filmmaker as much as to the situation of his characters. In *Love Streams* Sarah talks about love being an art, and it's clear that Cassavetes thought of her as an artistic *alter ego*. Like an artist, she refuses to 'accept anything except her own reality' and 'never gives up'.

When we went to Italy, all the young women at the Cinémathèque were very against the film because Gena's character lost so much. Gena's character was going to lose a lot. There was no place for her to go. It's insane that she should want to continue like this. And so I found her to be a fantastic character because she never would accept anything except her own reality, which made her an individual. The character that I had

chosen to play for myself was that I *denied* anything was wrong. But she said, 'Look, I don't care if it's wrong. I'm gonna make it right.' It's always been in women's power to get what they want, but it goes down the drain when you're obsessed by one thing – drink, drugs, even love – whatever it is. But Sarah's character never gives up, because love is the stream. It's all that matters and without it there aren't any miracles. I resent it when people say Sarah is crazy. She'd like love to be something special. That's not crazy; it's just hard. She'll do anything for love. Anything. She's trying to get with her brother what she couldn't get with her husband, and that's not possible. He hasn't had the courage for love. [Laughs.] I always like to do the same story.

He said he deliberately left the ending unresolved.

One of the central questions of *Love Streams* is summed up in the line I gave to Myrtle Gordon in *Opening Night*: 'I'm not interested in anything else, but does my character win or lose?' Does *this* character, Sarah, win or lose? There is no real answer. When she leaves her brother in the pouring rain at the end of the film, you don't know what is going to happen to her.

Robert's tree-house existence is tied in with Cassavetes' feelings about Los Angeles.

These people really are in solitude. It's something you feel if you live in California. You feel that life is really a dream. Nothing can bother you. Even the hospitals are so enormous and splendiferous that you feel you're in a social club. You're dying and people are coming to visit you in the emergency ward, bringing drinks and beautiful women. Los Angeles is quite an empty place. It's a series of houses, many people just living with a small coterie of friends like in a tiny village. People entertain in their homes and they work for a major studio – it's just like a small town with one factory. You see the same people and you grow old before you know it because the sun is the same every day.

Cassavetes once called himself a manic-depressive, and it is as if he separated out his two emotional tendencies in the characters of Robert and Sarah. Cassavetes is in all of his films and *Love Streams* is as autobiographical as anything he ever did. The 'awful emotional isolation' that Robert and Sarah feel was something he felt throughout his life. Their desperate quest for love and comfort was his as well. Cassavetes said he especially identified with the loneliness of his two main characters

Cassavetes with his mother, Katherine, a short time before her death.
© *Sam Shaw*

because of the recent loss of his own parents. His father had died four years earlier, and his mother, to whom he was extremely attached, died in her seventies only six weeks before filming began, on 29 March 1983. It was a very sad time in Cassavetes' life, and he thought his sadness colored the entire work. (The contrast was all the more apparent to him after the gaiety of Voight's stage performance.)

I think the toughest thing about doing this movie is doing a brother–sister relationship and a family that has been decimated, there's nobody else there. It's just the brother and sister left. It's interesting to me to make these discoveries because my own family is gone, and I miss them. I'm not a young man and I treasure the memory of my mother and father. They offered me a great deal of incentive for living because of the way they conducted the family and orchestrated our lives. The need for family has followed the ages around, and when we haven't got it, it makes us empty. Gena has lost members of her family, and family is still, to me, the most important thing in the world. The need for my father became the need of both of these characters for their father and their mother, and their family life, which in my case became an overwhelming need since my mother, my father and my brother were not available.

I don't think humor can come out of anything but hard work. I don't

think humor can come out of anything but tragedy. I know the film is funny in places, but it really is the last living relatives of a worn-out family. I thought, 'What are you without your family? What does it mean? If you only have one person left, what do you do with that person? How do you express love? Or do you die without ever expressing anything? Or do you just keep going in your life without ever expressing anything?' And that seemed very interesting to me – I guess not as commercial fare, but as an exploration into something that really counts. It's the saddest thing I've ever done, just the saddest film.

Yet, as he argued in the cases of *Faces* and *A Woman Under the Influence*, Cassavetes suggested that the sadness in the characters did not negate the existence of a 'framework of love'.

Oddly enough, this is not a painful film to watch. It's quite a pleasant film to watch. At least for myself, it makes me feel that life is worth living. I think that people live their whole lives trying to find something in it that will make them happy. This picture is about a struggle, about how difficult it is to be happy, but all these people are, in a strange sense, living their lives within the framework of love. The pain in it is the loss of that love, but nothing more.

Cassavetes drew on aspects of Rowlands' actual life for Sarah's character and aspects of his personal relationship with Rowlands for Robert's relationship to Sarah. The overlaps with life troubled and energized the acting, even when they were not something the actor was necessarily conscious of.

In the process of making the movie, Gena and I re-enacted the very struggles that so often push brothers and sisters away from each other. Ideas about the characters' positive feelings for each other were suppressed. We ran from each other. We were unable to speak to each other during the entire production, though Robert and Sarah have no other adult relatives to turn to.

For years I did everything for me. I claimed the artist's right not to be headed down by anything or anybody. But then I wanted to make a film for Gena to make up for having destroyed my wife for many years as I made films, got drunk, stayed away from home. Yet she stood by me through pregnancy, through child after child. So I made this film as a tribute for all those lousy things I'd done to her.

As always, acting was not about pretending but actually feeling what

you played. Note the echoes of *Woman Under the Influence* in Rowlands' words, showing how much the earlier film was based on actual events.

While the film was going on, Gena and I learned how to be brother and sister. It was a painful process and I didn't have any answers for why or how. Gena said to me, 'Look, you better eavesdrop on that phone and you better not just hang it up quietly. You better tell that guy to go screw himself because he's hurting me, you know? And if you don't the audience will hate you forever, and there's no coming back. You're just a chicken-shit if you don't do that, you know?' These are very personal things. I mean, these aren't things about how to make the film better. This is something real: I mean, 'Why don't you stand up for me?' OK. So I said, 'All right, all right. It's a good idea. I'll stand up for you.' [Laughs.] And you discover these things along the way through the characters that you're playing with and through the different people that you're on. It really doesn't take any longer to shoot that way. It just means that you have to be more involved.

Many events and lines of dialogue echo Cassavetes' personal feelings and ideas. He had taped conversations the way Robert does. He had made 'research trips' for his work. Fifteen years earlier he had told an interviewer almost exactly the same thing Robert tells Albie as advice:

A young man shouldn't worry about being suckled, he should just go out and be a man. Go into a diner and sit down with a bunch of hard-hats. Sit there and drink coffee with them and feel your manhood with them. Go to all the places you're uncomfortable in and prove yourself, because someday you're going to have to prove yourself. Do it while you're young and you'll never regret it.

Similarly, the line Sarah attributes to their father was in fact something Cassavetes' own father used to say – one of his favorite maxims:

My father, Nick Cassavetes, told me in 1947 when I graduated from high school and didn't know what to do about college or hitchhiking across the country or anything else, that 'for every problem, there was an answer'.

Cassavetes said he made his visual style reflect the emotional stasis of the characters' lives. Hand-held camerawork gave way to fixed and tracking shots.

Love Streams is much more formal than my other films. Everyone complained for so long about us being informal that I thought maybe we'd do a formal film. In a way, it's just a representation of the fact that nothing is happening in the characters' lives and relationships. You can't have it be goulash and have nothing happening. It just singles itself out from moment to moment, when somebody is in a place where nothing is going on.

Pauline Kael had criticized the wealth of the characters in *Faces*; Casavetes knew that *Love Streams* could be subjected to the same criticism. His reply was that the affluence of his figures just didn't matter.

Unlike the figures Kael adores, my characters are not violent or vile. They're everyday people. They have some money but find themselves discontented with their own loneliness, their own mortality, the sameness of life. I think, really, that it's vastly unimportant whether people have money or not. If they don't have money, they live a different kind of creative life; if they do have money, they struggle *for* a creative life. That's what I feel about loneliness, too. If you don't have any time to yourself, then you seek to be alone. And that is maybe more irritating, funnier, lighter, but somehow more proper than to be alone and to seek companionship and family. Certainly, in *Love Streams* nothing is sad except the fact that they're alone, they're the only two people left in their family. The fact that they don't have a financial problem at the moment is because they deem *that* important – not to have a financial problem – to the exclusion of many other things. Basically, I think that rich people are the real children. If we live in a materialistic world, then my view is that they have nothing if they have nothing. Being rich is just a little powder to put on people, a pill to pop, a momentary diversion. It helps to pay the bills, and once you're past that plateau, everything else is the same. Friendships are harder to come by for rich people, and they're more limited. I think it's very important that rich people and poor people realize that they have the same problems – it's just that somebody on the street made some money.

The important realities are not sociological but emotional. Problems are not created by external events and situations but by what we *are*. Those kinds of problems are the only ones worth dealing with.

I'm trying to make a film about people and their problems – what their *real* problems are, not something that is created by an *accident* of life but something we can control. We're making a picture about *inner* life,

and nobody really believes that it can be put on a screen, including me! The problems that show through your face.

In line with his general practice, Cassavetes minimized rehearsals prior to shooting a scene and frequently rewrote a scene the evening before or the day it was scheduled to be shot. If a scene required work or an actor was a little uncertain about how to play it, he wanted to record that tentativeness during the filming process, not eliminate it by getting everything perfect before the cameras started rolling. The point was *not* to have things too polished; the awkwardness was part of the truth.

However, Cassavetes' claims that he never 'directed' are not borne out by the reports of members of the crew who eavesdropped on his conversations with actors. A few of his conversations are recorded in the following excerpts. His words to Jakob Shaw, Albie, in the Vegas hotel-room scene about the actress playing the maid:

Give her a little help when she comes to the door. It's her first day, and she's nervous. Remember how you were on your first day? So give her some help. Are you weary? That's OK. You can use *that*, too.

His observation about the location of the scene where Robert leaves Albie (which Ted Allan said was based on occasions when he had actually left his own son in a hotel room while he went off and caroused). As a side-note, just before he filmed the scene in which he returns to Albie, Cassavetes went into the casino downstairs and lost \$3,000 in five minutes. He then went upstairs to play the scene.

It's a perfect room for this character. A room where lots of people have lost. Lost things important to them, not just money.

To get Shaw to cry in the scene in which Harmon comes back to the room the next morning, after several unsuccessful takes, Cassavetes shouted at him:

If you don't cry, I'll have to cut you out of the picture and get another kid.

Two different conversations emphasize the importance of an actor maintaining his or her own rhythms and pacing and not allowing another actor to dictate how fast or slow a response came. The first was with Julie Allan, Renée the secretary, in the scene in the hallway:

Just get the thought process going, and you don't worry about the

words. You're getting real calm, real slick. Get angry! You've really gotta go *harder*. Don't listen to *what* you're saying. When you say that, don't know what you're gonna say. Just let it go. Come on. Don't wait for *me*! Stop doing *cues*! Do it when *you* are ready!

The second was with Jamie Horton, the porter at Victoria Station:

No. No. No. You *can't wait* for the *cue*, Jamie! Take *your own* time. Do it again.

Two conversations illustrated his belief in the importance of not getting things down too pat. The first was said to the two girls in the bedroom scene with Robert:

I'm gonna start coughing, and when I do, somebody go for the lamp. Turn it on. I don't care *how* you get there. Grope around, do whatever you want. Don't remember where everything is. The confusion of what's going on *is the action* of the scene. If it goes too fast, it's bullshit. The problem is, if we rehearse it more than once, it won't have the sloppiness it needs to have.

The second set of comments were to Jakob Shaw in the scene in which he runs down the driveway:

Just go for it. Don't remember what you did before. Just do it for the first time. Do it different. Be creative. Don't be afraid to fall apart. [Following the next take:] Yell 'son of a bitch' before you run out the door. You have to really be mad when you say 'son of a bitch', you *really* gotta be mad. Scream! You're *so* mad you could kill him.

One of a few scenes that was improvised in terms of its words was the one in which Sarah attempts to make Jack and Debbie laugh. The screenplay had a description of the moment that didn't contain any dialogue. Since she was always uncomfortable even with the smallest bit of improvisation, Rowlands objected to not having written dialogue and kept insisting that Cassavetes give her something to study. But he refused and only gave her her lines a little before the scene was scheduled to be shot. He also kept the fact that there would be joke-store novelties on the table a secret from her. When she saw them, she was delighted. They sparked her imagination, and she was suddenly excited by a scene she had dreaded. She did it once in a completely improvised form and the second time with her lines. But even as he was being nice

to Rowlands by surprising her with the items on the table, without telling her Cassavetes took the two groups of actors aside and gave them private counter-directions that pitted them against each other.

To Rowlands: Make them laugh. Do anything you can to get them to laugh. Don't worry. You can do it.

To Cassel and Blewitt: Whatever you do, *don't laugh!* Act any way you want to, but whatever Gena does, *please* don't laugh.

JC: [an aside] I don't direct. I set up situations and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't.

Cassavetes similarly gave counter-directions to the principals in the ballet-opera scene. He was unhappy with the first take apparently because Rowlands' and Cassel's kiss in the 'I love that face' moment was too tender and loving. Prior to shooting the next take, he reportedly told Rowlands:

You've got to hold the family together. That is the only thing that matters.

But then he took Cassel aside and expressed exasperation with Rowlands for not having played the take properly and not taking his direction, telling Cassel:

She's a barracuda. Are you gonna *let her* do this to you?

In the next take, Cassavetes got the kind of meeting he wanted. When Rowlands leaned forward to kiss, Cassel stood his ground and slightly averted his cheek (though the moment was not included in the final film).

Rowlands' scene with the porter at the airport was another improvised one. The porter was played by the set photographer, François Duhamel. The general situation was explained to Rowlands, but she was given no scripted lines. All Cassavetes told Duhamel was:

You see this hysterical American woman with 6,000 bags. Even though you don't let her get to you, you don't want to let her push you around either.

The scene between Gena Rowlands and the psychiatrist (played by her brother) had originally come at the start of the film and had been much longer. It was written to allow Sarah to explain the situation between her and her husband. But when Cassavetes rewrote *Love Streams* and added the scenes in the courthouse (which provided similar background), he realized that it would be unnecessary to repeat it in the psychiatrist's

office scene, so the scene suddenly went from being heavily verbal to one in which Rowlands was left with almost nothing to say. But Cassavetes still thought it was important to retain it to show how Sarah interacted with someone outside her family. When Cassavetes directed Rowlands, he emphasized that since there were so few words to say, her tone would carry the meaning.

The only thing is not to be corny. Don't be a self-pitying person at all costs. If it gets, 'Oh, what am I going to do?' you're in trouble. No feeling sorry for yourself. Be calm. You know the way things are. You're in control.

Cassavetes' remarks about how Rowlands played the scene in which Sarah unexpectedly shows up in Robert's driveway:

I could have killed her yesterday. Because she'd just come to do it well, to do the part and not be in the way. All she wanted to do was do the scene. That's not this kind of picture. You have to own it for yourself, get *on* there, till it's *your* picture.

Reflecting on Rowlands' performance in the second hearing-room scene:

Her natural energy is amazing. It's impossible to make lines like 'My daughter and I visit funerals' work, but she does it, convincingly. She's just terrific!

On the bowling-alley scene:

Wasn't that stupid? I love stupidity. It was great. They all went toward each other. You *never* see that in movies!

Directing the scene in which Sarah comes into the kitchen to talk with Robert after saying goodnight to Ken:

JC: Just make the whole thing a little harder to do.

GR: A little harder to do? It's too easy?

JC: No, but . . . it shouldn't be *so* easy for her. That way it's a real conversation.

GR: Maybe I'm too glib.

JC: *Maybe*, but just a little. We have the other take, and it was a good take, so let's try it a different way now.

GR: OK. It'll be fun.

After the next take:

GR: That more what you want?

JC: I liked it a lot.

GR: It's really hard to decide what it is, because out there I'm at this very high level, then I come in, and I see you and it's so different.

JC: Take a longer pause at the door.

GR: Longer than the last one?

JC: [an aside] All during the thing I can't stand anybody to talk about anything but *me*, and she's talking about herself!

Directing Cassel in the hearing-room scene:

Cut! Stop. Start again, Seymour. But don't do *anything* unless you *mean* it.

The dancing scene in which Cassavetes tells Margaret Abbott to 'show your stuff' gives a decent snapshot of how Cassavetes sometimes directed amateurs simply by encouraging them.

At one point, this scene included kazoo-playing. Cassavetes directed that part of it by giving the props to someone else and playing dumb, so that Margaret Abbott would be forced to take the initiative.

Give her the kazoos and tell her she has to play and make me play them. And give her that speech. Let her sweat over it awhile. Tell her I am drunk. Tell her I don't know what I'm doing and need a little help. You get it? [An aside:] This lady really knows how to act because she's not afraid of being bad.

Directing Gena in the scene in Victoria Station, as she turns to Jamie Horton following the Lovemobile fantasy, about playing the subtext:

Don't say, 'I'm fine.' Say, 'No, I'm not all right,' or just say, 'No, no,' but *be* all right. You know what I mean?

Directing his personal assistant, actor Robert Fieldsteel (who plays the doctor):

What I need to do is to make it *almost* impossible for you to play the scene. Then you'll really be responding to something. Take the liberty of moving these cups and things, whatever you want, anything that makes you feel comfortable. I mean, if you *want* to do that. [Fieldsteel moves the props around.] No, don't work it out. I don't want you to work it

out. Just do it, when it's time. You have to be as uncomfortable as possible in this scene. If you're uncomfortable, it's good.

Cassavetes describes the 'attitudes' that are embedded in the scene in which Sarah brings the animals home:

JC: We're discussing, see, the attitude, basically, the attitude. The writing will come.

GR: She's totally crazy if she brings these things in –

JC: And she doesn't know it's crazy. I want to leave her with Finnegan, who replaces my attitude for the moment. When she sees his attitude, it will leave you with a situation where you've forgotten the dog and you're only concerned with my attitude. 'Is he gonna stay here too?', Robert will say, and that's a cut down to the driveway, to the foot of the driveway, to a truck pulling up the driveway. When the truck comes up we're in a different beat . . . We'll have to do something when we switch beats. 'Robert, I have to tell you this dog is dangerous. I know this sounds crazy, but he's not really dangerous if you don't think he's a dog!'

GR: I get it.

JC: Let's go over it again, now that we have the whole thing, and simplify what the beats are. Then the next beat will be the justification for what we've done, which we have down there.

GR: OK.

JC: Are you all right on the first part? Just the thought thing? Then we can iron out the words. We'll get it typed and mark the beats, and then work on it. Isn't it lovely? It's like music.

Cassavetes asked the Harmon-like Peter Bogdanovich to direct the brief scene where Diahnne Abbott comes to Robert's door. He said there was more to the decision than met the eye.

Peter had been out of circulation, really low, depressed. I wanted to bring him out. That was part of it. I also wanted to show him something about himself. I thought he could get something out of that moment to think about.

Cassavetes functioned with the same improvisatory openness he required of the characters in the film.

Making a film is not like standing in a church. For me, at least, it is scrambling. All the thinking, all the feeling and all the development of whatever talent you have comes *before* you start, but from that first day

on the floor I feel that it is a cruel game. I work out of panic. I know that. *Totally* panicked. Don't know what we're gonna *do* even though it's written! And the actors don't know what we're gonna do because I'm very changeable! The way we're working we just don't know what's going to happen the next day. So everyone has to be creative otherwise the whole thing goes down.

I go like a maniac. Because I figure if you work on a picture, *that's your life*. For the moment that you're working on a picture. It's like a beautiful woman. And you fall in love. And when the picture's over it's like a break-up of that love affair. And then somebody says, 'Well, are you gonna do another picture?', and it's offensive, because it's like saying, 'When are you gonna fall in love again?' To say one approaches this craft with humility under the burden of an ambition of greatness is a lie. Directors, and I am one of them, have absolutely no respect for anyone or anything other than the film, and from the first day of shooting until the picture is released, this condition does not change except for the worse.

Not knowing was not to be gotten beyond, but to be accepted as a way of moving through life. Consciousness could not precede expression.

It'd be silly to say we know. We take a subject and we try to deal with it, and all the people that are involved in the film, starting with Gena and Seymour and Diahnne Abbott, and myself too, we try to go in and make a film about a subject that we know nothing about. It is a very difficult thing to have people that love each other in this day and age and respect each other at the same time. All my best ideas come from having no answer – from *not* knowing. You never know the truth of the matter until you do it. And just when you think you know a picture everything starts to be something else. And you have to understand that's not going wrong. That's just the way things are.

Cassavetes' talk about not knowing where *Love Streams* was going was not mere rhetoric. He completely changed the end of the film part-way through the shoot – omitting a long, concluding party scene in which Sarah and Robert are reconciled and Robert proposes marriage to Susan – because he ceased to believe in its truthfulness. (The precise moment Cassavetes changed his mind was the scene in which Robert lifts Sarah from the floor and takes her in his arms. As he played it, he said he suddenly discovered something he hadn't realized when he wrote the film.)

I've got seventy-five beginnings, no ending! Endings are critical. They create a lot of a film's meaning. I think that the audience expects at the end of the film to find a meaning for all its mad, elliptical movements. Actors generally give their best performances at the end of a film because they are aware of that. They're more receptive to fantasies and dreams at the end of a film than they are at the beginning of the movie. Endings are where I get into trouble with the studios. They want a finished script, and I don't want to give them one. I want to work my way, which is to write only half or three-quarters of the film in advance. Then I see what the actors do to it. I think it's a much more intelligent way to work. I generally write the ending just a few days before shooting it. Not before I have to – at the very last minute. Of course, I may have an idea of an ending, but it won't be the one that we use because the way we work everyone brings something new to the script, to the film, and it takes the movie further than we planned. There is a sort of indefinable quality to an ending. When you deliberate about it, you don't think, 'OK. Good. I've finally got an ending. That's the ending.' You think, 'What does it mean to all the characters?' You really don't think about the things critics talk about – whether it makes the story positive or negative, optimistic or unhappy. The end reflects what actors felt about the film and what it meant to them. And I try to notice what the actors feel during the filming – even if they're not able to express it in words – within the scenes and shots and emotions of the film. Then I think about it and try to draw a meaningful conclusion from it.

He scrapped many other scenes as he shot.

For instance, there was a scene that worked very, very well. It was one where Gena, we had an argument in the hallway, and then I went into the room and then she came into the room, and it was written down, the lines were written, where she got into the bed with me and rubbed my shoulder and my head and kissed me and said, 'You're my baby.' And so at the time everybody was *crazy* about this scene, you know, and I kept on reading it and I thought, 'How could anybody play that shit?' It just seemed to be that I wouldn't know anything about the people if they'd done this. I mean, if you were making simple entertainment you might say, 'Well, let's do this because the audience will like this and therefore it's correct to do.' I always feel quite awful when a scene works like that, because then I feel that we missed what we were talking about.

He was acutely conscious of the ways his work defeated viewers' expectations and of how important it was not to let the plot limit the possible directions the film could go in.

I love motion, motion, change, and I hate answers because they stop change. Who wants it to work smoothly? You want it to work rough. You want to come in and change pace. Otherwise, you get bored to death. At the beginning of a picture, you're always on sure ground. Then you get ten pages in, and that's when the movie starts, the phoni-ness, the plot. So I try to be always at the beginning of a picture. That's why my pictures are so long! Hours of beginnings, no endings. Making a film is not about events and narrative and continuity but how do you keep straight with the theme. Every time that someone thinks that something is gonna happen in this film, something else happens. Now, it could have had a much greater narrative flow, but you make a film and you think, 'This could be my last film. Why would I want to make a narrative flow, you know? And die right away, you know?' What happens is I get this impulse to do something deliberately perverse or unexpected. I got tickled the minute Gena walked in and I left for Las Vegas. I thought that was funny. I thought, 'What a funny film that is!' You wait the whole picture for these two people to get together, then he leaves! [Laughs.] So I thought, 'Gee, that's really interesting. What are we going to do the *next* time we meet?' So we meet and we dance and then I say, 'Go to bed.' And she doesn't want to go to bed! And I leave. Now, I have no place to go! So I go someplace. And she has no place to go, and *she* goes someplace.

And then in the kitchen scene I think I'm with her at last. But she isn't with *me*! When I see the film I think, 'Isn't that interesting that I was with *her*, but she wasn't with *me*!' [Laughs.] She wasn't *mad*. She was going out and having a nice time. And she wasn't with me. She comes in and bullshits me in the kitchen and says, 'Ha, ha, ha, ha,' you know? And she's been out with this guy! And I get very personal about that because I think we started talking, and a lot of lies took place – not in what was said, but in the recognition that you can't really talk to somebody and you can't communicate with them. And the stopping of communication was because we really didn't have any right to involve ourselves in each other's lives. Real communication from one mind to another takes place so rarely and it only lasts for an instant, even with people who are close to you, who are intimate with you. All the rest of life is superficial encounters. That's what life is. It's hard to make a film that gets around that, that digs into life.

Cassavetes told me that Robert and Sarah's encounter in the kitchen was his favorite scene because of the subtlety of the two figures' non-communication.

Now, a brother and sister are together in the kitchen. She comes in. She knows that I've seen her with this guy. Now, that's very difficult. Now anybody, any fool can say, 'I know exactly what to do.' Well, you don't. So the actor walks in, she comes in, she sees me, I don't know what to do. I'm an actor. I'm also the director of the film – I don't know what to do. I see my sister, I've seen her making a fool of herself, but very happily – I don't know what to think. Somebody might say, 'You're supposed to be jealous' or 'You're supposed to feel *this*' – I really don't feel those things. I feel nothing or something, or whatever, whatever comes up. She feels nothing or something, whatever comes up. Out of it, we have to follow the lines of that script. You know? And we also have to do it for the camera; it just can't be an accident. I'm not interested in the *scene*. I'm just interested in what happens between people. So, we worked on a very simple scene a whole night. If you were in an ordinary movie, someone would say, '*Pick up the dialogue*' or '*Let's go here,*' or '*This is what you should do; we need a little pizzazz here,*' and all that stuff. And that would be disastrous, I think, for a scene like that. So when it gets out to a movie theater, somebody might say, 'It's dull.' Somebody else might say, 'That's the most devastating scene I've ever seen.' Somebody else might say, 'What was *that* all about?'

My feeling is, to make a perfect film would be: shoot for ten weeks and then throw it all out and start from that point. That's the point where you really start rolling and it's usually the point where the film is over, where everything is so easy.

The last two days of filming were devoted to the opera sequence, which was shot at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium (the same location part of *Opening Night* had been filmed at six years earlier). For the music, Cassavetes had insisted on Elmer Bernstein, whom he had enjoyed working with during his *Staccato* days; and Bernstein had agreed. When he dropped out less than ten days before the scene was to be filmed, Bo Harwood inherited the job. After being paralyzed by terror at the idea of writing opera music for a few days, he sat down and did it in an afternoon.

After a total of sixty-one shooting days, Cassavetes finished two days ahead of schedule, on 11 August. Post-production took place at Cannon's facilities in New York. Cassavetes' most frequent complaint, from

his first film to his last, was that he had ‘spent his life in editing rooms’. He always said that his fondest dream as a filmmaker would be to have had a professional editor to whom he could merely hand his footage when he was done shooting it and never look at it again until it was on a big screen; but the contradiction was that every time he gave his footage to anyone else to edit, he was unhappy with the result and ended up redoing it himself. *Love Streams* was the closest he ever came to letting someone else do the work. He hand-picked George Villaseñor, whom he had worked with on *Gloria*, as his editor and turned most of the actual editing work over to him (though he did supervise each day’s assembly). His remarks to Villaseñor as he edits the scene in which Harmon gets out of a cab:

JC: Let him go a little more. Let him go a couple of steps. There’s something very free and nice about that walk, you know?

GV: . . . but there’s a little match problem there.

JC: It doesn’t bother me. It’s the walk that is important.

On Albie and Harmon in the Vegas hotel room:

I don’t want it to be too smoothly cut. Because it’s such a disturbing scene, it should upset you. If it gets too well-timed then it starts to look like a *movie*, not a moment.

To Bo Harwood, in charge of music:

Don’t make it easy to make the scene work, because then there’s no scene.

Menahem Golan was known for micromanaging productions by involving himself with the day-to-day details of a shoot; however, in this case, he only came to the set a few times and generally left Cassavetes alone for most of the shooting and editing process. When Golan and his partner saw the 141-minute assembly, they asked Cassavetes to cut twenty-one minutes to bring the film down to a two-hour running-time. When he stood his ground, they were forced to give him his cut (which he was legally entitled to by his contract); but they got their revenge by cutting nineteen minutes from the video release without telling him (which he was powerless to prevent them from doing).

They kept their bargain with us. They let us alone. They didn’t cut the picture. They felt it would make much more money than it did. They came to us and they said, ‘Look, if you make this picture two hours or

one-fifty, the picture will make a fortune, and people will like the picture. If you keep it at two-twenty or two-twenty-one, whatever it is, then the people will hate the picture. But it's up to you. Whatever you want. I won't cut the picture.' We *have* to see the *whole* painful awkward emotional thing; otherwise, it's just a movie.

Just as the 'Six months later' card in *A Woman Under the Influence* had upset everyone Cassavetes asked for advice, he was advised by many people who saw rough assemblies that he should reveal Robert and Sarah's brother-sister relationship earlier in the film, but he went his own way.

Despite many people objecting to my not stating it at the start, I was adamant. These people don't have to be pigeonholed. They're individuals.

In post-release interviews, he talked about *Love Streams* as a picture about the search for love.

To have a philosophy is to know *how* to love. And to know where to put it. And to know the importance of friendships and the importance of continuity. And all the other philosophies, negative philosophies, seem to be a more modern bastardization of what philosophy is. And I don't think a person can live without a philosophy. That is, where can you love? What's the important place that you can *put* that thing because you can't put it everywhere. You'd walk around, you gotta be a minister or priest saying, 'Yes, my son' or 'Yes, my daughter, bless you.' But people don't live that way. They live with anger and hostility and problems and lack of money and lack of . . . with tremendous disappointments in their life. So what they need is a philosophy. What I think everybody needs in a way is to say, '*Where and how can I love? Can I be in love so that I can live? So that I can live with some degree of peace?*' You know? And I guess every picture we've ever done has been, in a way, to try to find some kind of philosophy for the characters in the film. And so that's why I have a need for the characters to really analyze love, discuss it, kill it, destroy it, hurt each other, do all that stuff – in that war, in that word-polemic and picture-polemic of what life is. And the rest of the stuff doesn't really interest me. It may interest other people, but I have a one-track mind. That's all I'm interested in, is *love*. And the lack of it. When it stops. And the pain that's caused by loss or things taken away from us that we really need. So *Love Streams* is just . . . another picture in search of that grail . . . or whatever.

Cassavetes celebrating his birthday at home. Zoe is on the left and Xan is holding the cake. © *Sam Shaw*

In September, October and November 1983, Cassavetes took a partial break from post-production to do a favor for Meade Roberts. In an attempt to jump-start Roberts' career, Cassavetes bankrolled a Wesbeth workshop production of Roberts' *Thornhill*, loosely based on the life of Eugene O'Neill. Cassavetes told Roberts he would direct the play and then proceeded to assemble an all-star cast that included Ben Gazzara, Patti LuPone, Carol Kane and Murray Hamilton. Everyone agreed to act in it for almost nothing (\$175/week), strictly as a favor to Cassavetes.

As an illustration of how persistent Cassavetes could be when he wanted something from someone, Ben Gazzara tells how in early 1983 he twice turned down Cassavetes' request that he star in the play. But when Cassavetes asked him again when he attended the funeral of Cassavetes' mother, in early April, Gazzara couldn't say no a third time.

The entire project was vintage Cassavetes quixotism – crazy, loving, wonderful, impractical, doomed: he spent approximately \$40,000 of his own money, and for ten weeks, he and the cast ate breakfast together at the Plaza, then took limos downtown to rehearse in a lower West Side loft. (Meanwhile, he continued to work on the edit of *Love Streams* in the evenings and on weekends at Cannon's New York offices.)

The final production ran more than four hours (with a two-hour first act) and was put on a total of three times. Cassavetes had persuaded Fran and Barry Weissler, who represented the Shubert Organization, to

consider the play for a Broadway run, but the length alone made it out of the question. Undaunted, Cassavetes approached Joseph Papp. Cassavetes later told the story, probably exaggerated for dramatic effect, about how, after he made his pitch, Papp looked at him incredulously and said, 'I can't believe my ears. You're asking me to put up \$600,000 just like that? That's ridiculous.' Cassavetes replied, 'You cheap bastard. I do that every time I make a movie.' In Ben Gazzara's opinion, it was all done just so Roberts could see his work on stage.

Even with an established distributor behind *Love Streams*, Cassavetes had screening woes. The film was ready to be released in the United States in the early spring of 1984, and a number of theaters and festivals expressed interest in showing it, but MGM/UA (who distributed Cannon's pictures) refused to give permission for any American screenings. Cannon and the distributor were committed to opening the film in Europe and not playing it in the United States until it had run its course abroad. Cassavetes personally requested that *Love Streams* be provided for a four-film mini-retrospective of his work that was to be conducted by the San Francisco Film Festival in April which he would be attending, but was turned down. *Love Streams* played at the Berlin Film Festival at the end of February, winning the Golden Bear for Best Picture. But when it opened the next month in London, it was ignored by reviewers and died at the box-office, and Cannon became nervous. They were seriously reconsidering the American release, mentally scaling it back, deciding how they could keep their losses to a minimum. Cassavetes knew what was going on and wondered if it would be a repeat of the *Minnie and Moskowitz* 'dumping'. Meade Roberts tells of spending time with the filmmaker after he returned from the European openings and of Cassavetes taking out a suitcase filled to overflowing with German, French and Italian clippings (all of which were highly favorable) and asking Roberts to read them to him. Roberts protested that he spoke none of these languages but went through with the charade anyway, comically stumbling over the words and feeling that in some strange way he was comforting Cassavetes.

The film received a late summer American release. It opened in New York on 24 August 1984 and in Los Angeles on 14 September. The timing was strange, since the Labor Day period is traditionally one of the worst possible opening dates due to conflicts with end-of-summer family gatherings, the start of sporting seasons and back-to-school travel for college students. Perhaps the fate of the film would have been the same no matter when it was released.

The film garnered only mediocre or mixed reviews. (*The New York*

'Everybody says they want to work the way I do, but they don't really want to. They don't want to go all the way to work this way. They want to protect themselves. They are afraid. They don't really want to take a chance.' © *Sam Shaw*

Times used the release of the filmmaker's eleventh work as an occasion to offer this critical summation: 'Mr. Cassavetes' work, in *Love Streams* as in his earlier films, is as overflowing with emotional constructs as it is barren of all other forms of thought.') *Love Streams* did poorly at the box-office and closed after playing only a few weeks in a handful of cities. Cassavetes personally felt that Cannon didn't get behind the movie in terms of promotion and publicity and had secretly written it off as a loss after he had refused to cut the running time to less than two hours.

However, he was past caring about his film's commercial reception. What he had not told anyone throughout the production was that sometime before he began filming he had felt ill, gone to a doctor and been given six months to live. (The doctor reportedly took one look at his swollen abdomen and touchingly said, 'Oh, John. Not you.') The date of the warning is not clear, since Cassavetes kept it to himself. Perhaps it was what motivated the crazy rush to mount the three plays at the beginning of the decade. Perhaps he got the news only days before he began filming *Love Streams*. It's hard to know. What is clear is that the entire

time he worked on the movie he must have been unsure if he would live to finish editing it. The final shot, in which he waves goodbye, was his lonely, secret farewell to his viewers and his art. *Love Streams* was his *Tempest*.

I didn't tell anyone. No one knew. But I knew before I began. I had been given six months to live. This is a sweet film. If I die, this is a sweet last film.

The Final Years (1985–9)

In May 1984, while *Love Streams* was playing in Europe, but before it had been released in the United States, Cassavetes' former agent and close friend Guy MacElwaine called. In the early 1980s, MacElwaine had gone from being an agent at International Creative Management to head of Columbia's Film Division to CEO (a post which he only briefly held). About a month into the filming of *Big Trouble*, Peter Falk had an artistic disagreement with writer-director Andrew Bergman, and MacElwaine asked Cassavetes if he would step in to finish the shoot. It was chiefly a goodwill gesture to his former client, an attempt to put a little money in Cassavetes' pocket. MacElwaine (who knew Cassavetes' pride) was surprised not only that the filmmaker said he would be glad to do it but that he was willing to start immediately. The phone call was on a Friday; Cassavetes asked where they were scheduled to film Monday morning and said he'd be there. Falk says he was so astonished when Cassavetes agreed that he called him back to make clear that the idea had been MacElwaine's, not his, and to insist that Cassavetes did not owe it to him as a personal favor. What Falk didn't know was that Cassavetes wanted the \$500,000 payday to bankroll a final film – though he would die without succeeding in making it.

At the point Cassavetes took over, *Big Trouble* had already been scripted, cast and about one-third shot. When he began, he thought the job would only last a couple months. He spent almost a year on the film, attempting to make something of the mess he had inherited – reshooting a number of scenes, rewriting others and spending weeks in post-production looping new dialogue into scenes that had already been filmed. Even at that, he always regarded the project as an unmitigated disaster. The studio vetoed most of the changes he wanted to make and, in the end, edited the material in ways he didn't agree with. The only scene that Cassavetes felt reflected his personal input is the sardine-flavored liqueur moment. When he was done, he asked to have his name removed from

the credits (as Bergman had done with his writing credit). The request was denied. Columbia judged the film so weak that it shelved it for nearly a year and debated whether to release it theatrically at all.

I call it ‘the aptly titled *Big Trouble*’! [Laughs.] If working on that comedy didn’t permanently kill my sense of humor, nothing will! I’m embarrassed to have my name on it, and even more embarrassed that people will think it’s my final film.

It was fitting that when *Big Trouble* was finally released, in 1986, most American critics pronounced it Cassavetes’ best work – *The New York Times*’ Vincent Canby opining that it ‘displays a level of comic intelligence that’s very rare in any movies these days’.

Around this time Cassavetes received another call asking him if he would head an office at Columbia ‘to attract new talent’. The studio executive reportedly told the filmmaker, ‘John, you are the idol of the colleges and young filmmakers. Recommend some young directors and we will give them \$50,000 each to direct a movie.’ In best Cassavetes manner, the filmmaker unleashed a blistering attack on the executive and the studio – accusing them of trying to use him to further their cheapness, fee-cutting and commercial exploitation. No doubt memories of his nine months with the ‘New Concepts’ office at Screen Gems twenty years earlier hovered in the background.

In the spring and summer of 1984, attempting to capitalize on the European success of *Love Streams*, prior to its American opening Cassavetes threw himself into attempting to persuade Cannon to finance another of the ‘Three Plays of Love and Hate’ – Ted Allan’s *The Third Day Comes*. He announced that Sam Shaw would be producing the project, and began location scouting.

The Third Day Comes shows you these characters as kids and how they came to be this way. You see Robert and Sarah as children, when they break away from the tradition of the family. And you see the emotions grow stronger in that breaking away, through individuality and leaping out into the street – which I consider to be less warm, certainly, than the family tradition. We hope to do it as a film in 1985, which is a little backwards since we did the characters as adults already in *Love Streams*. But it is such a devastatingly non-commercial film that it is very difficult to walk up to people and say, ‘Look, this film is not going to make any money; but it’s quite beautiful, and we love it.’ I won’t make it unless it can be three hours long. It *has* to be, and I won’t do it shorter to suit commercial demands.

Cannon briefly expressed interest in the project, but following Cassavetes' intransigence about the length and the American commercial failure of *Love Streams* a couple of months later, the deal was dead. In an attempt to get commercial backing for one final project, he circulated a number of other scripts, both old and new. *Knives, Friends and Enemies* and *Caruso Sings Again* made the rounds of the studios in 1984 and 1985, but no one was interested.

Although he had been blessed with what he himself once described as 'boundless energy and an iron constitution', Cassavetes' health completely broke down in the second half of 1985. The hepatitis he had contracted on the *Sol Madrid* shoot in 1967 came back to haunt him, exacerbated by forty years of too much drinking, too much smoking, too little eating and no sleep at all for long stretches. (With a sense of humor to the end, he described his health to me as the consequence of 'too much artistic living'.)

Though he outlived his doctor's initial 'six months to live' prognosis by six or seven years, Cassavetes was seriously ill for most of the rest of his life and extremely limited in the projects he was able to undertake. He gave up smoking and drinking in July 1984, but the damage had been done. His liver almost stopped functioning. His body swelled up as a result of gout, retaining between a hundred and a hundred and seventy-five pounds of excess fluid. (At the worst of it, in 1986, he was unable to get out of bed for almost a year.)

Given the situation, it was amazing what he was able to accomplish. Though his energy level went down, the creative flow was undiminished. He was as much a workaholic as ever: planning possible films, mounting a play and writing or revising more than ten scripts. At his death he left behind more than forty unproduced screenplays – many from this period (in addition to the unpublished *Husbands* novel from 1970).

Long after I was dead, I'd like to have some script – or scroll! – to be working on up there, or down there, or wherever.

Throughout his life, Cassavetes had been a dedicated letter-writer. Notwithstanding his reputation for being difficult, he was unusually conscientious about thanking people for sending him things and expressing his gratitude to journalists for reviews or essays they had written that he enjoyed. In his last decade, Cassavetes wrote hundreds of letters, surprisingly witty, playful and upbeat, given the circumstances. As an illustration of his state of mind, I include a brief note to a close friend written about a year before he died:

My cirrhosis is the same, my gout improved. I have grown extremely used to carrying my misshapen body around with me.

I, too, have been writing and enjoy the solitude and the thought processes – playing with characters and finding a way to love them. What I am trying to say is that you are very special to us and we think of you often. You have encouraged me personally to get on and I will always remember that.

However, my wonderful family – not only Gena, but the kids, our granddaughter, and friends (all of them pushy, individual, fun, electric) – keeps me busier than I would like to be.

Don't be surprised if one day you go to some theater and one of our new films is playing.

Cassavetes continued two long-standing home traditions: the first was Sunday brunches with as many guests as his dining room or yard could hold. (The photos that begin *Husbands* which were taken at Don Siegel's home provide a taste of one of the weekend gatherings at Cassavetes' house.) The second was the series of dramatic readings on weekend evenings that Cassavetes had begun in the seventies. It was all part of his 'one big happy family' vision of life, summed up by phrases that he said to practically everyone he knew during those years: 'Come join us. Come be part of us. You don't have to do anything, just come. I want to have you.' It didn't matter what you did or who you were. Everyone was welcome, no matter who you were or what you did.

He also continued to help out friends in a variety of ways – for example, backing and acting in a brief production of one of Tim Carey's plays, similar to what he had previously done for Meade Roberts and Everett Chambers. As evidence of Cassavetes' fundamentally non-judgmental stance, it is worth mentioning that prior to this, needing money, Carey had stolen a Movieola from Cassavetes and sold it. To the people in Cassavetes' circle, it was the lowest crime imaginable. In their view, Carey had taken not just a piece of equipment but the means to conduct their livelihood. Everyone turned on him, excommunicating him, refusing to have anything to do with him from that point on (in the end, even refusing to let him speak at Cassavetes' memorial service). Everyone but one person. Cassavetes himself defended Carey and apparently never held the theft against him.

At various points in this period, Cassavetes was seriously interested in pursuing four different film projects: *Son*, *Begin the Beguine*, *She's Delovely* and *Gloria II*.

Son was written in 1985, revised in May 1986 (the third draft) and

revised again in June 1986 (the fourth draft). It was the story of a contemporary Messiah who attempts to tell the truth to people, but nobody wants to hear it. When Cassavetes described the premise to me, it seemed obvious that the main character was an *alter ego* for the filmmaker, so I wasn't too surprised when he laughingly responded to my observation by joking, 'Well, I have the right initials for the part!'

Unlike Woody Allen, Cassavetes' work is thoroughly 'dramatic' in that he almost never ventriloquizes his characters to have them directly express his own personal views. However, there are fleeting moments in all of the films when one can briefly hear Cassavetes' 'voice' (in a deeper sense than the lines he reads in the 'reading-machine scene' in *A Child Is Waiting* or the lines he delivers as an actor in *Husbands*, *Minnie and Moskowitz*, *Opening Night* and *Love Streams*). One hears Cassavetes in the speech in *Shadows* in which David talks about the importance of 'breaking your patterns'; in *Faces* when Chettie delivers his 'mechanical man' speech; in *A Woman Under the Influence* when Mabel proclaims, 'I can do that. I can do anything!'; and in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* when Cosmo utters his 'I'm amazing' self-description. The screenplay of *Son* has several passages in which Cassavetes comes as close as he ever did to summarizing his own feelings and beliefs.

In one passage, Son talks about the tyranny of social and moral conventions to keep people 'in line':

SON: Morality [and] religion [are forms] of structure. Disapproval is a form of structure. So here's a line. When you get off the line, you hear a little beep. And you don't know why you get back on the line, but if you don't get back on the line, something's going to beep at you, and most people get back on the line. And the people that don't, hear the beep all the time. So that's probably why they take drugs. To open up their minds to a place where there is no beep.

In another passage, Son and his mother talk about love in a world without God, and about the importance of beauty, grace and 'class' in life and art:

SON: Your husband, my Father, God Almighty, either he has messed up the world, or we don't deserve anything but pain and suffering. Maybe there is no God. Maybe there's nobody. Do you see what I'm saying? Maybe there's just you and me, Mom. Do you understand? And there's enough love there. We don't have to make somebody else up in order to love more. Do you see what I'm saying?

MOTHER: I agree with you. Your father's a very stubborn man. Intellec-

tual, you know? But it's still a beautiful world. So maybe he likes it messy. And, you know, because of the brain power that He has, he doesn't realize that other people are not as smart, so when they see pain, it's too painful. I told Him, You can't be too stiff. Too important. You gotta have more Marilyn Monroes and Jack Bennys. And Charlie McCarthys. And Tallulah Bankheads and Roosevelts. Hemingways. A few more people like Katharine Hepburn. You know? Charlie Chaplins. People that are higher class. You can't have all low class, so that everybody's low. Put more high class in there, you know, with graceful people like Garbo, so that people can look up a little bit instead of looking down all the time.

But there was more to life than art. Cassavetes couldn't rise above the day-to-day squabbles of the world. In April 1986, he was forced to give a deposition in a lawsuit in which he was named as a defendant. Back in 1976, he had invited actress Meg Whitner to a preview screening of *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. She claimed she had been injured when a theater door slammed into her during the event and was suing Cassavetes for \$500,000 for 'not providing protection for his guests'.

Cassavetes spent much of 1986 in bed, too weak to leave his house, and then, in seclusion, not wanting to go out, embarrassed by how he looked. At the end of the year, his health improved slightly. He made peace with his appearance and began occasionally appearing in public again. The friends he ran into were shocked by the gauntness of his face, distension of his belly ('as big as a pregnant woman', as he once put it) and thinness of his arms but did their best to conceal their concern from him. He decided that he needed to get back to work. In January 1986, he wrote a three-act play entitled *Woman of Mystery* and made arrangements to stage it at Los Angeles' recently opened Court Theater on North LaCienega Boulevard, during the months of May and June. (In his typical manner, he kept revising the script up until the day before the first preview on 30 April.) The production was produced by Richard Kaye, designed by James Eric and had sound by Bo Harwood. It starred Gena Rowlands, Carol Kane, Charles Durning, Roy Brocksmith, Carol Arthur and Alan Stock. Cassavetes had wanted Woody Harrelson (whom he had also asked to be in *Thornhill*) and Rosa Palfrey in the cast, but they were unavailable.

As with the earlier *Three Plays of Love and Hate*, the production was more about love than money. The Court was a forty-seat theater, and although the work played to standing-room only audiences every night, Cassavetes refused to extend it or add a single performance.

The play explored issues of love, memory and human relationships by

shifting from reality to fantasy, from present events to past memories, in the mind of a homeless woman (Rowlands) struggling unsuccessfully to make emotional connections with the people around her.

I have noticed that people who were loved or felt they were loved seemed to lead fuller, happier lives. All of my own work in theater and film has been concerned with varying themes of this love. *A Woman of Mystery* has to do with an unexplored segment of our society, referred to as the homeless, bag ladies, winos, bums – labels that are much easier for the public to deal with than the individual. Our heroine is not only homeless (if homeless means without the comfort of love), but she is nameless, without the practical application of social security or any other identity. Alone, she clings to her baggage on the street. She enters into a series of encounters that challenge her isolation, her inability to communicate. But, in the end, normal feelings of affection are too difficult to return to. The woman has been permanently disabled by the long discontinuance of feelings of love.

Cassavetes deliberately kept the production rough and included many non-actors in it. To break down the fourth wall, he instructed members of the crew to go out at intermission to invite street people into the theater to panhandle – one fellow would play the spoons and another would whistle while both held out their hats for spare change. The homeless men and women would sit on the stage interspersed among the actors (revisiting the blending of art and life in one of the films that made a strong impression on Cassavetes when he was just starting out as a filmmaker – Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery*).

With typical self-deprecation, Cassavetes said:

The writing was not so hot. In fact, the play was terrible. But the actors made it good. They were terrific, especially the street people. Some of them were much better actors than the actors! It was the actors' work, not mine, that made it interesting.

A second project Cassavetes meditated filming was a script called *Begin the Beguine*. It is another illustration of how *Husbands* continued to stimulate his imagination even at this point, almost two decades later. *Begin the Beguine* takes place entirely on one set, a bedroom. An optimist and a pessimist, Morris and his friend, Gito, rent a motel room for a weekend and spend the whole time calling hookers. Rather than making love to them, they get into long philosophical talks with them about the meaning of life. (It is as if Cassavetes revisited *Husbands'* London

hotel-room scenes, so much of which he had to cut out when he edited the film, with one fewer couple.) Cassavetes wrote the work for Gazzara and Falk to play, and conducted several readings at his house. He wanted to turn it into a movie, but Falk and Gazzara felt that a film production would have been too much for him at that point in his life and declined involvement. Cassavetes then asked a number of other actor friends to read it, including Rob Reiner and Richard Dreyfus, who by all accounts did a delightfully 'Jewish' interpretation of the roles.

Even if he couldn't get a film going, Cassavetes couldn't stay away from a camera. He made many audio- and videotape recordings of readings and scenes that interested him – including one of Falk and Gazzara in *Begin the Beguine*.

The third film project involved a script titled *She's Delovely*, which Cassavetes had written in June and July of 1980. The story might be summarized as dealing with the turbulent relationship of a young Nick and Mabel Longhetti or the working-class couple in *Opening Night* before they had children. (Cassavetes' script is fairly different from the version of the film his son directed for Miramax ten years later.) Cassavetes asked Sean Penn to act in it, and when Penn expressed interest in October 1987, Cassavetes rewrote the script, did some location scouting and began planning a film. He had a very high opinion of Penn's work.

Penn is the best actor of his generation. I saw him in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *The Falcon and the Snowman*. He cares about his art. I'm not a drug person, I'm a real antidrug person, but I can appreciate the fact that he'll even take drugs to help him. He wants to get somewhere. And he's willing to do *anything* to do it.

The final lines which Cassavetes added to the 5 November 1987 revision (which are spoken by Eddie about his wife Maureen) can stand as a summary of many of the wacky, wonderful relationships between the man and woman in the script.

Diseased. A freak. Totally screwed, put together with spit and shit and honey. Impossible to figure, nutty, mean, selfish, crazy, creepy, sick, weak. On a scale of ten million, she's last. And she's mine. I can't believe how lucky we are to find each other.

The filmmaker spent a full year, from the fall of 1987 to the fall of 1988, trying to put the production together, but it was not destined to be. Money, as always, was a problem. Cassavetes was having financial difficulties (at one point being presented with a bill for \$500,000 and being

In the final decade of Cassavetes' life, Peter Falk and Ben Gazzara were two of his staunchest supporters and friends. He is shown here talking with Falk in 1981. © *Steven Reisch*

threatened with legal action by the New York State Department of Revenue for unpaid taxes on alleged profits from *A Woman Under the Influence*). Cassavetes privately told friends that another stumbling block was that Penn insisted on bringing in lawyers and agents to draw up a formal contract with terms and conditions for his employment and profit participation. It was standard Hollywood practice, but it just wasn't the way Cassavetes worked. He hated lawyers, deals and contracts.

Everyone says they want to work the way I do or work with me; but they don't really want to. They don't want to go all the way to work this way. In the end, they want to protect themselves. They are afraid. They don't really want to take a chance.

Another less publicized issue also came between them.

Sean wanted Madonna in the movie. It was out of the question. I've worked with lots of non-professionals, but I have to draw the line somewhere!

After months of negotiations that got nowhere, Penn went on location to Southeast Asia to act in *Casualties of War* and incurred Cassavetes'

wrath in a memorable phone call in which the filmmaker blasted him for abandoning the project. It was the last time the two men ever spoke.

In October 1988, with his health failing, Cassavetes proposed turning the rights to the script jointly over to Penn and Seymour Cassel for a production to be directed by Hal Ashby. The deal was never completed.

*

At the point Cassavetes died, none of his films was available on video. (*Love Streams* had had a limited video release in its cut print coinciding with the release of the film but was long out of stock.) But when Sony made him a very handsome financial offer to bring his films out on video in the mid-1980s, Cassavetes turned them down. When I asked why, he said:

You think I *want* to be popular? You think I *want* them out on video? I want *millions* of people to see my movies? Why would I?

Cassavetes never believed that the value of an artist's work could be measured financially.

It's a very dangerous territory to be in where you can only make a film if your grosses reflect a large gross. I've been making films for twenty-five years and none of them has really made a lot of money. But there's nobody in the world who can tell me we didn't succeed. And that's the greatest feeling that I've ever had in my life.

Eighteen months before his death, he joked about how successful his filmmaking career had been by saying that, due to the mortgages he had to take out over the years to make his movies, he still owed the same amount on his house as the day he bought it.

When I bought this house, I owed \$50,000; and now, thirty years later, I still owe \$50,000. What does that tell you about my career?!

He thought of himself more as an actor than as a director. With complete sincerity, he said the same thing to me that he said to scores of others in the final years of his life:

I think I'll be remembered as an actor. Not as a director. Though I think my work has influenced a few television commercials.

Three months before he died, Cassavetes began the final project he actu-

ally dreamed of filming – a sequel to *Gloria* titled *Gloria II* (dated 21 November 1988 on the title page of the script). In the story it is ten years later, and Gloria is now married to a psychiatrist in Portland, Oregon, and goes on a quest to find the sixteen-year-old Phil.

When Cassavetes wasn't working on scripts or making plans to produce them, he imaginatively returned to the days of his youth when he had spent so much time outdoors helping his father garden. He planted trees and flowers. When he had moved into his Laurel Canyon home at the beginning of the 1960s, most of the eight acres around his house were sandy and barren. Over the years, he slowly turned the desert into a little Eden. He planted olive trees, an avocado tree, fruit trees of all sorts and roses – scores upon scores of rose bushes in every direction – telling Sam Shaw, 'When it's all filled in, it will be time to go.'

*

Almost everyone who saw Cassavetes in the last year of his life noticed a new serenity in his demeanor, a new gentleness and acceptance in his attitude. The fury and ferociousness were calmed. The zany impulsiveness was muted. The impatience and rush were eased. The maddening, game-playing, 'con-man hustler' side of his personality was abated. Cassavetes seemed to have come to some sort of peace with himself and the world. The word 'saintly' was used to describe him by more than one person who visited him (though the impish laugh and cackle, the sparkle in his eye and the outrageous jokes – even about his own death – were present to the very end). And he still did not suffer fools easily; there were many flashes of anger at the boundless idiocies of Hollywood in his conversation.

As Cassavetes grew weaker at the end of 1988, and word spread of his impending death, Sundance (which had never invited him to visit) put together a retrospective of his work. It ran two weeks before he died. The Rotterdam Film Festival mounted a similar tribute at around the same time. The American Film Institute continued their regular schedule of programming and events.

Though he had consulted several doctors early on about his condition, Cassavetes generally distrusted them and underwent only minimal medical treatment. He resisted going to the hospital for as long as possible, saying he knew once he went in, he'd never come out – but finally needed emergency treatment at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles on 31 January 1989. He never left. He died at the age of fifty-nine of cirrhosis of the liver before daybreak on 3 February 1989.

Although his work had achieved a certain amount of recognition in Europe by this point, Cassavetes the director was still almost completely unknown in his native country. In thirty-two years, only two of his movies, *Faces* and *A Woman Under the Influence*, had made money or received any degree of critical acclaim. The other nine had failed, both with reviewers and at the box-office. The brief mentions on American television news reports that evening memorialized him as a 'character actor'. If a film was mentioned or a brief clip was shown, it was *The Dirty Dozen* or *Rosemary's Baby*.

*

It is appropriate to end with some of Cassavetes' statements about life and art. Most are from his final years.

I *love* my films! They are everything that is in my children, they're everything that is in my family, they're everything that is in me, they're everything that is in my wife, everything that is in my friends. Yes, I *love* the movies. And they're *honest* movies. Whether they're good or bad is another story. But at least they're movies that tell what I know. And if I don't know anything, *then* you're in trouble! *Then* you might not like the movies! But they're expressions. Now, I can't compare them with the slickness of a political movie, because I hate political movies; and I can't compare them with the pretensions of an art movie, because I hate art movies. These are just straight on, straightforward movies about things we don't know about. But they're questions that I think people ask themselves all the time.

Gena and I are freaks. We are. We're absolutely freakishly obsessed with wanting to convey something that is very hard for us to express in our life. To dig deeply into the way things are, through people, is what I like and what the people who work with me like also. To find out the delicate balance between living and dying. I mean, I think that's the only subject there is.

Directors have to realize that they must become like The Beatles: they must write their own material. It's really incredible that directors would allow someone else to write their scripts for them. I can understand that happening when a guy starts out, I suppose, but to make a career out of directing other people's work is just all wrong. A director should create his own films.

*

People are crazy, you know? They really are. Because they think that it's good enough to make a movie that you don't like as long as it makes money. It's much *more* interesting to find out whether you're going to live or die. Whether you're going to have a good time or not. Whether the children will be content with their life – not *content*, but content with their *life*, you know? Not feel they have to be like everybody else. If you find something you like to do, you think that's a beautiful thing. I like to act in films. I like to shoot 'em. I like to direct 'em. I like to be around them. I like the feel of it, and it's something I respect. A lot. It doesn't make any difference whether it's a crappy film or a good film. *Anybody* who can make a film, I *already* love – but I feel sorry for them if they didn't put any thoughts in it. Because then they missed the boat.

What people *like* is different from what they *want*. You have to give them what they *want*, not what they *like*. They see insincerity and they hate it – but they don't say what they *really* feel. Why do people throw away all their mentality, all of what they really feel, in lieu of a promise – *fake* – made by the *society* – of how everybody's *supposed* to live? There's something about seeing an audience when they really do *get* it. I mean, they may not *like* it, but they *get* it. I don't want to make a movie like a meal that evaporates quickly. But it's always difficult to find a language when people don't want to hear what you're saying. That's what's called a tough audience. But, once you crack them, you've won them.

*

As an artist I feel that we must try different things – but above all we must dare to fail. You can fail in films because you don't have talent, or you have too much humility, or you lack ferociousness. I'm a *gangster*! If I want something I'll *grab* it. I think I probably have the philosophy of a poor man. You know, like maybe I'd steal the pennies off a dead man's eyes. The people who get things done are not the ones who stand back and ask permission, but who plunge in. The only thing young film-makers can do is get some money and make films – *any way* they can do it.

In my later life I've become more successful with other people because I don't give a damn about personal ambition. At my age, that's fruitless. I don't want recognition. Recognition is a pain in the ass. But having a *good time* is not fruitless. Or having a *bad time* is not fruitless. Making something indelible is what I want. Something concrete. There

are no rules. Just get together with good, decent, artistic people and value *them* – because *they're* the only ones who will help you.

*

I'm lost by life. I don't know anything about life. If I make a movie, I don't even understand why I'm making the movie. I just know that there's something there. Later on, we all get to know what it's about through the opinions of others. If you make a film, it might as well be important as be nonsense. You can't go for ten cents and expect to come up with a million. You have to go for everything. Whether you fail or don't fail, you have to go for what will make us better when we're finished. I like to work with friends and for friends on something that might *help* somebody. Something with humor, sadness; simple things.

The artist is really a magical figure whom we would all like to be like and don't have the courage to be, because we don't have the strength to be obsessive. Film *is* an art, a beautiful art. It's a madness that overcomes all of us. We're in love with it. Money is really not that important to us. We can work thirty-six, forty-eight hours straight and feel elated at the end of that time. I think film is *magic*! With the tools we have at hand, we really try to *convert people's lives*! The idea of making a film is to package a lifetime of emotion and ideas into a two-hour capsule form, two hours where some images flash across the screen and in that two hours the hope is that the audience will forget everything and that celluloid will change lives. Now that's insane, that's a preposterously presumptuous assumption, and yet that's the hope.

*

It's really for the young to make films. The only reason that young people can't make them is because there's an economic structure, not even a political structure, that forbids such a very fascinating and important hobby. There's just the wrong kind of respect and the wrong kind of homage paid to business rather than to an art.

The important thing is to realize that there are different ways of making films and different approaches to making them according to what *you* are. I mean, I don't want *anyone* to imitate *me*!

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been completed without the encouragement and assistance of a large number of people over many years:

Sam Shaw, Cassavetes' close friend, artistic advisor and the set photographer and producer of many of his works, is the spiritual father of the entire project. He proposed the idea to me shortly after the filmmaker's death (as a book which at that point was to be titled *John Cassavetes: Behind the Scenes*) and encouraged me with his support and enthusiasm. He typed or dictated dozens of pages of recollections for my use describing the making of the films and quoting things Cassavetes said to him over more than thirty years of friendship and spent uncounted hours answering my questions. After his death in 1999, his daughters Edie Shaw (who did office work and publicity layouts for *Faces*, *Husbands* and *Love Streams*) and Meta Shaw (who was a member of the Cassavetes-Lane Drama Workshop and who acted in *Shadows*, *Husbands* and *Gloria*) kindly continued to answer questions and help me in various ways.

Ted Allan, another of the filmmaker's oldest friends, donated his collection of screenplays (including manuscripts of *I've Seen You Cut Lemons*, *Brother/Sister* and *Love Streams*). He also gave me the original cassettes of a series of audiotaped interviews he and Sam Shaw conducted with actors and crew members involved with *Husbands* and *Love Streams*. (In June 1969, Allan was commissioned to write a book – unfortunately never completed – about the making of *Husbands*, and he and Shaw conducted lengthy interviews with every important member of the production.) He also provided me with tapes and transcripts of unpublished interviews he conducted with Cassavetes and Rowlands.

Lelia Goldoni, the star of *Shadows*, answered many questions about the making of that film and Cassavetes' teaching at the Variety Arts Workshop. Maurice McEndree, the producer of *Shadows* and *Faces*, answered questions about both films and wrote a personal account of

the making of the two versions of *Shadows* for my use. Though I established contact with Hugh Hurd only a few years before his death and with Burton Lane late in the course of my research, they contributed significantly to my understanding of Cassavetes' early years and were unfailingly generous in their responses. Each of these four individuals answered scores of questions and spent dozens of hours clarifying my understandings.

Larry Shaw detailed his impressions of Cassavetes the man. He also sent me scores of items connected with Cassavetes' life and work – from copies of shooting scripts with revisions in Cassavetes' own hand, to drafts of unproduced works, to press kits. His wife, Susan, kindly located additional material for me.

Seymour Cassel, who acted in some of the films, Michael Ferris, who photographed some of them, and Al Ruban, cameraman, producer or co-producer on some of them, answered questions about the works of which they had knowledge. All three provided many candid descriptions of Cassavetes' personal interactions with his actors and uncensored accounts of behind-the-scenes events.

The individuals named above were the key figures in roughing out the account. I communicated with each of them in face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations and e-mails between twenty and a hundred times. Many of them became close friends in the course of conducting long-running conversations extending over periods of years about Cassavetes the artist and human being.

However, there were specific facts and events of which they simply did not have knowledge, and I drew upon supplementary interviews and conversations with others, including: Gena Rowlands; Peter Falk; Ben Gazzara; Sean Penn; Anthony Quinn; Peter Bogdanovich; Bo Harwood; Nancy Bishop; Elaine Kagan; Tom Bower; Richard Kaye; Robert Fieldsteel; Val Avery; Lynn Carlin; Tim Carey; Charles Durning; Noelle Kao; Jenny Lee Wright; Jenny Runacre; Leola Harlow; Matthew Cassel; Jakob Shaw; Anthony Ray; David Pokotilow; George O'Halloran; Erich Kollmar; Jay Cocks; Jeremy Gee; Terry Pierce; Tom Noonan; Michael Ventura; Elaine May; Amos Vogel; Jonas Mekas; Laurence Kardish; Jon Voight; Jo Lustig; Laurence Linderman; Kenneth Mays; Orin Borsten; Charlotte and Lewis Harmon; Paul McIsaac; Tristram Powell; Russell AuWerter; Walter Reuben; and Rob Nilsson.

Each of the above individuals was interviewed at least once, and most were interviewed two, three or more times. I conducted most of the interviews (as noted in the Introduction, many took the form of panel

discussions or question-and-answer sessions I moderated at film festivals); but, in a few instances, one of my research assistants, Diane Cherkerzian or Ara Corbett, conducted them. In particular cases, the interviews were done by four close friends: Nicola Eller, a Belgian exchange student with a special interest in Cassavetes' work who studied with me at Boston University; Hiroko Matsuda and Masahiro Yoshikawa, formerly associated with Tokyo's *Switch* magazine; and Maria Viera, Professor and Associate Dean at Chapman University.

A final source of interview material was provided by Charles Kiselyak. I served as the scholarly advisor and wrote the voice-over narration for a documentary film he produced, in which Cassavetes (in the voice of an actor) talks about his life and work. In exchange for the use of my text, he provided me with unedited transcripts of the interviews he conducted. (I would note that although the voice-over narration in his film was based on an early draft of this book, the text was highly edited and abridged to fit into the film, so that the text in this book and not the one in the film should be regarded as the only correct record of the filmmaker's actual words.)

The following people contributed briefer notes and observations about interactions with Cassavetes, either in telephone conversations, e-mails or letters: Caleb Deschanel; Haskell Wexler; Victor Kemper; Gideon Bachmann; Doe Siegel; Esmé Chandlee; Helen Caldwell; Patricia Bosworth; Julian Schlossberg; and Anthony Loeb.

The following individuals assisted my research in other important ways: completely on his own initiative, out of devotion to Cassavetes' work, Paul Cronin (an independent researcher who was at that point a student at the London School of Economics, and is now working on his own book about Werner Herzog) combed through a variety of British sources and located many obscure interviews with and articles about the filmmaker. When he subsequently learned of this project, he generously placed all of his research at my disposal.

Meg McSweeney, the Archivist for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, provided copies of Cassavetes' audition book and graduation photograph, tapes of Cassavetes' and Rowlands' remarks during visits to the Academy, and tapes of Gena Rowlands' visits to the Pasadena branch of the Academy. She answered many questions about the history of the Academy, gave me contact information for Cassavetes' classmates and described her father's professional involvement with *Gloria*.

Reference librarians Jane Klain at the Museum of Television and

Radio in New York and Rosemary Hanes at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. both went far above and beyond the call of duty to track down information about Cassavetes' television and film work and to provide contact information with individuals who knew or worked with him.

Aysen Mustafa, Librarian at the Research and Information Centre of the Australian Film Institute in Melbourne, Australia, spent time assisting my research during my visit there and located several important sources of information.

Meredith Kirkpatrick and Ben Hood, of the reference staff at Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library, and Rhoda Bilansky and Tiffany Ellis, of the Interlibrary Loan Office, resourcefully assisted my research. Earlier, Joan Allen, at the Interlibrary Loan Office of the Middlebury College Library, located many important documents.

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*

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