

GENA ON JOHN AND GENA
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“Tell me what you want me to be. I can be that. I can be anything.”
Gena Rowland’s ‘Mabel’ to Peter Falk’s ‘Nick,’
A Woman Under the Influence

It should be comparatively easy to convey in words the presence of someone as well known as Gena Rowlands, but in fact it’s not. Sitting with her at a restaurant, or standing speaking with her at an after-dinner party, the impression is... quietly kaleidoscopic. The phrase is awkward but accurate. The clothes are *Gloria* -- the dress, the shows, even the ring (which Cassavetes gave her with the first profits from *A Woman Under the Influence*). The sense of assurance is *Gloria*’s, too. When she reaches into her handbag for a cigarette lighter, the gesture is *Gloria* -- the savvy, streetwise, can’t-be-pushed-around gun moll -- reaching for her gun, and I literally flinched just the a little, the first time she did it. Some of us, after all, take our fantasies very seriously.

But there is certainly nothing tough in Gena. Resilient, yes. On the contrary, I’ve rarely met anyone as gentle. She speaks with the sincerity and directness of Mabel, the vulnerable, intense housewife in *A Woman Under the Influence* -- and often with Mabel’s hesitancy, as though testing what she’s about to say with the tip of her tongue. But she turns to include someone else in the conversation, and without a noticeable flicker of gears there is the famous, high-tuned, consummate actress of *Opening Night*, being quietly and skillfully gracious, and accepting the praise that is certainly her due. Then, smiling with the sadness that was always in Mabel’s smile, she turns to you to resume the subject, and there is again the many leveled effect -- which could be very disconcerting in some people, but her gentleness shines, most literally shines, through all the people she is capable of being, and the effect is lovely.

I’ve known several others with this effect, most of them artists. In Rowlands one can admire the art of acting itself, the person who charges herself with the task of knowing what and who is within her, and summons that knowledge from herself to perform on its own as art.

In our era no American actress equals Gena Rowlands in depth and range of work achieved: from the terrible complexities underlying the simplicity of the housewife in *A Woman Under the Influence*; to the acute awarenesses, the high-pitched emotional mind, of the actress in *Opening Night*; to the worldly survivor forced to become a warrior in *Gloria*. Even in Europe, only Liv Ullman during these years has matched this depth, and even she has not worked to so wide a range.

Mentioning Ullman bring sup another point: the obvious parallel between Bergman and Ullman, Fellini and Guilletta Masina, and Cassavetes and Rowlands. It seems no accident that these fine, two-headed fire-breathing director-actress dragons have been married. “The marriage of true minds,” as Shakespeare once had it. Only a novel of the first order could hope to probe the resonances of the mutual inspiration that evidently takes place with these people -- how their arts grew into each other, and sometimes seem inseparable.

At any rate, it heightens the kaleidoscopic way Ms. Rowlands can affect you. Not only is it the Gena Rowlands you are calling “Gena” affecting you, and the characters present

in her; it is also the presence of John Cassavetes, whom she has so thoroughly inspired, and who in turn has given her what so few artists ever get: the perfect material and setting.

Meeting her, I thought of something James Baldwin wrote, and which may contain the secret of great acting: "One can only face in others what one can face in oneself."

A portentous sentence for anyone. But for an actress, an actor, a sentence full of the responsibility, the cost and the joy of the art.

VENTURA: When mainstream Hollywood folk talk about your work with John Cassavetes, they invariably mention what they call your "improvising." I think, frankly, that they're being ignorant. It doesn't look like improvising to me. What do you say?

ROWLANDS: All of our scripts really are very heavily scripted. I really can't remember any improvisation in, say, *A Woman Under the Influence*. Maybe the construction guys talking on the mountain, maybe there was something there, but I don't even consider that improvisation.

For instances, *Faces* was interestingly presented in, I think, *Black Sparrow Magazine*, where they showed the written screenplay and then what had turned out actually on film. It was very interesting for me to see as an artist. You could see that it was totally scripted. The difference between the script and what was on film was mostly just scenes that had been cut or didn't work.

We do use improvisation when we want it and need it. Something's not working, well, we'll stop and improvise. And talk about it. But then *re-write* it.

Here Gena's press-agent, accompanying the interview, added: I remember in *Woman*, I went over when they were shooting the scene when Gena has just come back from the sanitarium -- and that was a very crucial scene. They were going over and over and over it, and it wasn't working. And everything stopped, and John went upstairs. And he came down, a few minutes later, with a changed thing -- and that was it, it was written.

VENTURA: What I think people get confused by, is that here's a man with the finest ear for American speech, the way it's *really* spoken, that any American writer has. And he's the only filmmaker with the courage to use American speech instead of contrived speech, the way the rest of us do. And so it sounds improvised, because it sounds to the audience like, "That's how *I* talk! If that's how I talk, it couldn't possibly be written."

ROWLANDS: I notice that so many things start from the very first story done on you somewhere. And John's very first film he directed was *Shadows*, which was entirely improvised. I was in a show, and he was doing very well in live television, and he had a workshop, not a class, that he was teaching. He was doing scenes, improvisations, because we all liked improvisation. So they improvised, and then they decided that what they were doing was good, and they started putting some scenes together from their improvs and they said, "Well, let's shoot it." Someone -- Shirley Clarke -- had a camera, and there was some 16mm film, and they raised a little bit of money and they shot this movie without any intention really of releasing it. Nobody even thought of that. And then the film turned out better than expected. And then it became known that it was

improvised, and from that point on a great many people think that everything is improvised.

VENTURA: When you're delivering a line, how much is the moment to come just after the line *there* in your world? How much are you consciously building up to the point?

ROWLANDS: You ask hard questions. I think about it -- and think about it -- until I'm sure I don't have to think about it anymore. So by that time you're actually seeing me do that moment, I'm not thinking what's coming next. *But* -- I don't do *that* until I'm sure I can get from here to there. Because getting from here to there is the whole thing.

VENTURA: Do you find that Cassavetes writes lines into scripts that you've actually said in other contexts?

ROWLANDS: Not to my knowledge. He might answer that differently. I don't recognize anything when I get there, but then you're a writer and you know how deceptive they can be. He'll often laugh or something when I say, "Oh, I see." He'll laugh and he'll say, "Well, you ought to." But I usually don't go into that then because it's not pertinent at the time. What I do notice is that afterwards you find mysterious conversations that go on that you'll suddenly hear three lines from your script -- that you aren't saying, that somebody else is saying. And you think, "Am I hearing things?" But you often do hear those things afterwards.

VENTURA: Do you take the film home?

ROWLANDS: Well, we try not to. You get rid of it a little bit when you first get home because the children are there, and you have your life, and you're so relieved to get back to life problems. It's wonderful, that first part of the evening. And then I like to go to bed early when I'm shooting because I have to get up at four o'clock.

John never sleeps that I know of. I'm sure he must sleep sometime, but you can't catch him. But finally he'll come to bed, and then we'll wake up about three o'clock or something -- your mind just wakes you up about whatever you're doing, and then we'll go down and talk about it and drink some coffee. I'm not sure they're particularly creative conversations, as far as what people would think a writer and an actress would be saying. Usually, if I get to thinking about it, I'm sure that I did the scene wrong, because if you thought about a scene you would add something to it every day of your life. Anything you look at behind you is already lacking something.

So I might wake up with the terrible nightmare that [in *Gloria*] I hadn't run the child far enough up the street to really convince you I wanted to get rid of him -- that I might have, in some terrible way, anticipated coming back, which would fairly just kill me if I did that. And he'll say, "No, no, no, because if you had I would have made you, so don't worry about it." So a lot of it's reassurance. And he never asks anything.

VENTURA: Is working on a John Cassavetes picture as radically different from mainstream pictures as seeing a John Cassavetes picture is? And did I ask that question in English?

ROWLANDS: I would say the most important difference is that the actor's first. There's always a list of priorities, and on a normal set, if you're very, very lucky, the actor's about fifth. And if you're not, you're farther down. But with John, the performer is first, so things automatically change a little bit. If you move, the cameraman is *expected* to follow you and the focus man is *expected* to follow you. That doesn't mean you can just run wildly through the meadows, surprising them, but everyone is in a way very alert, and you get a very close crew, a close artists' group relationship.

John regards his performers so highly that you always feel you have all the time in the world. The affection is there, with John. He really prefers actors to anyone in the world, and it gives you a certain amount of confidence. I'm not the only one who feels that way. I've never known anyone who's worked as an actor for John who didn't feel that it had been -- well, it's an experience that you think everything is going to be when you first get into acting.

I would say that the world has moved more towards the way John directs now -- there's a lot less difference than there was, say, ten years ago.

VENTURA: Did working with a child in *Gloria* make it harder for you to act?

ROWLANDS: Children are always harder in a wonderful way because they say wild things, their reactions are different, they laugh in serious parts, they roll their eyes. you know, they do all kinds of things they just feel like doing. Which is what I like about them. You have to keep your eye on them as an actress, but they just keep you honest there.

I loved that child. He was this macho little kid, too. He walked in the strange way that he walks in the movie -- that wasn't put on, the hunched shoulders and the grave expression. He also does speak in rather adult terms.

I didn't talk with him much in between scenes because I didn't feel that would be fair, to be running around playing with him and then, in the scene, be mean to him. Because, you know, even though people explain what's supposed to happen, it's still -- psychologically, I was afraid it would be damaging to him. I was just afraid I would plain hurt his feelings, which is the worst thing in the world.

When John asked him if he wanted the part, he said, "I don't know, I don't wanna cry." So John said, "Well, this boy doesn't want to cry either, so I don't think there will be any problem." This, to him, wasn't the chance of a lifetime to be a movie star; there were qualifications. So John said, "Now, look, think about this, because you're not going to be able to swim and be with your friends, it's going to take all summer. If you really want to do it, I'd really like to have you, but take the time to think about it a couple of days, because if you're just doing it to make your mom or dad happy, don't do it to yourself. Enjoy your summer vacation, and we'll still be friends."

So they were getting ready to go home, since John expected them to talk the next day, and the kid said, "May I ask you something? How many words?" John said, "That you have to memorize?" He said, "How many new words would I know from the script, afterwards?" John said, "Three hundred," just like that. And he said, "Three hundred words -- three hundred words. I'll take it."

Now, if you wrote a script, in a million years could you possibly think of those

reactions?

VENTURA: Do you study your performance when a picture's finished?

ROWLANDS: Once the picture is finished it sort of just... makes a lock in my mind. I only see it usually once at the end, or maybe twice. I don't want to remember it that way. I still remember it from the inside looking out. It's very difficult for me to be an audience to it *ever*. It's sort of disturbing to me so I don't usually see it except just to see how the whole thing turned out. But that's the last of it.

VENTURA: Disturbing how?

ROWLANDS: Changing sides, I guess. It's as if you would be asked to suddenly step out and observe your life. Something unnerving about it. Also, it's sort of frightening to see yourself in that size. That's a giant version of you walking through the doors.

It doesn't bother me at all when I see my friends. I make a simple adjustment to it all. The actors seem perfectly in proportion, it doesn't bother me. But when I see this great *huge* version of myself, it's like some sort of big giant. I'd rather not deal with it, I guess. I don't feel that it's necessary for me to be an audience, so I don't see why I have to if it disturbs me. Because I like to think... I guess, I wish to think of it on the other side, I wish not to lose the character, the private, specific character to *me*.

VENTURA: A last question. What advice would you give to young actresses and actors?

ROWLANDS: I would say not to take anybody's advice, including mine. You should just try to find your own feeling about something, because that's the only thing that separates one actor from another: how she or he feels about character. Not to copy anyone or to hold anybody too high in your estimation that it might intimidate you. Just to think about it until you know it's yours.