

JOHN CASSAVETES' LAST SCENE

By Michael Ventura

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How and why I came to stand in the darkness of John Cassavetes' living room beside the camera that filmed his last scene as an actor -- isn't the story I'm telling. Suffice it to say that John wanted me on the set of *Love Streams* that spring and summer of 1983 because, in the courage with which he met his increasing frailty, he wanted someone on the set who was neither actor nor crew, neither family nor old friend; someone whom he trusted but who was without past associations; someone whom he could take aside and talk to, or rather talk at. (Aside from asking questions, I said very little.) He needed to hear his thoughts spoken aloud but apart -- apart from anyone, that is, actually *working* on his film. Though, as was his way, he also discussed the picture with everyone from the grips to visiting Peter Bogdanovich, he also needed to hear himself think, as it were, in private; but he was so completely an actor, a performer, that he could think better with an audience -- even an audience of one.

As for me, it was the honor of my life to be of service to him. But the two or three times I ventured that sentiment he brushed it off, gruff and impatient. Partly because he wasn't good at accepting praise, and partly because he wouldn't be distracted from the urgency of the moment: namely, his film -- which he knew would probably be his last.

Days before he shot its final scene we were in a Hollywood screening room watching dailies. The chamber slowly filled with the haze of our cigarettes. He would watch intently, the cigarette between his lips would burn a long ash as he forgot it was there, the ash would fall on his shirt, he'd absently brush it away. He liked what he saw that day. When the lights went up he stood and said, "This is a sweet film -- if I die, this is a sweet last film."

Though aware that death might be near, John didn't seem much concerned with artistic immortality. In 1983 the VHS revolution was just beginning. A member of the *Love Streams* cast was enthusiastic about how John's work on VHS could finally be available to everybody. John shook his head with a firm and furious "no." Why? "They didn't come to see the pictures in the theatres so -- fuck 'em." (Either he relented later or the wisdom of his wife and collaborator, Gena Rowlands, prevailed. Now all his films are available.)

Viewing dailies later that week, he wasn't happy with what he saw. He puffed furiously, grumbling to himself so softly I couldn't hear the words, and shook his head. When the lights went up, he let out a long sigh full of smoke. Then those eyes of his hardened, glinted: "Well -- if it was easy anyone could do it."

In the same way, cutting his rough assembly on an ancient rattling movieola, he would try one version, nix it, then go for a more daring version, saying: "God hates a coward -- mightily."

Love Streams was mostly shot in John and Gena's house in the Hollywood Hills, where much of their work had been filmed. If you knew John's films, then to be in his home was to step into the screen. Here were the bedrooms and bathrooms of the harrowing scenes in *Faces*, and that stairwell where the picture ends -- as though to say these characters, however exhausted they may be, still have the choice to go up or down. Here was the dining room where the fortune teller (played by John's mother) speaks to

the actress (Gena) in *Opening Night*. We all spent that summer at their house, where it functioned both as home and set. And bar. We'd make coffee in their kitchen, get loaded in their bar, sit around their living room and breakfast nook -- we were guests as much as employees, and (usually) treated with the graciousness due to guests. He brought us into not only his home but his state of mind, in which the humble awkwardness of daily life was magnified into spectacle on the big screen. John would have agreed with the poet Czeslaw Milosz: "the most ordinary human dramas glow with the glare of ultimate things."

In the last scene of *Love Streams*, John's character Robert Harmon, a talented writer who's wasted his gift as a hack, is at the end of his rope if not his life. Harmon's way of being in the world hasn't worked for him in a long time, and the film ends at the moment when he must face that -- or rather, when none of the devices he's used to escape himself are available or feasible. What Robert Harmon will do with this new existential dilemma we're left to guess. Cassavetes takes Harmon to the moment when he breaks, and leaves him there. The implication is that such a breakage, in such a man, is the best thing that could happen to him. At least it would now be much harder for Harmon to live his lies. John would say that's a good thing, a moment worth achieving -- no matter what brings you to it. Which is why this especially crazy scene is so strangely gentle.

John Cassavetes may not have been certain that these were his last moments as an actor. (He was, after all, only 54.) But he was aware that it was a strong possibility. He'd been ill all summer, the symptoms were visible and serious, his face and frame were wasting away while his midsection was bulging horribly.

In the scene, the living room is very dark. Outside, there's a furious rain storm (wind machines and rainmakers roaring). John sits, soaking wet, in a trenchcoat, wearing a dripping wide-brimmed hat. On film he sits opposite a beautiful dog. Suddenly the dog turns into a solemn-looking almost naked man. Then back into a dog again. Then a man, then a dog. And at this hallucination or vision, John's Robert Harmon begins to laugh, laughing as John never laughed in any other scene in his life, a maniacal joy-crazy laugh of utter and ultimate surprise that bursts out of a character who had been dead to surprise for a long time.

The vision fades. Robert Harmon rises from his chair, goes to the rain-swept window, and (this is shot through the window from outside) waves goodbye. In the context of the film, he's waving to his departing sister, played by Gena. But he keeps waving after she's driven off, wearing that crumpled hat, waving with vague gestures. He waves for moments that seem not connected to clock-time, moments that may never be over.

But the crew wasn't privy to how John was going to cut the scene, for he'd gone beyond the script (though I can testify that he'd been composing this scene in his head for days). What he shot first was Robert Harmon sitting in his chair, seeming to see something which (for the crew) was not there, and then laughing that unsettling, unforgettable laugh.

In the middle of the first take an AD yelled "Cut!" John was furious. Nobody calls *cut* but John. The AD stuttered, trying to explain that he thought there's been a mistake and that's why John was laughing. Take two. The laugh again. John yells *Cut*. I'm standing in the shadows by the camera. He almost runs to me. Says close to my face, "They hate it! They've been working their asses off all summer for *this*?!" He laughs. "This picture, *this* picture -- I don't give a FUCK what anybody says. If you don't have

time to see it, don't. If you don't like it, don't. If it doesn't give you an answer, FUCK you. I didn't make it for you anyway."

Then he sits back down and calls "Action" and does it all again.

I didn't visit John much in the five years it took him to die. My Sicilian sense of privacy, especially in family matters of life and death, made me shy of intruding. But I curated the Sundance retrospective of his work (January, 1989), and met with him to speak of it. He said that he saw his films as soldiers silhouetted against the horizon, each film a soldier marching -- where, he did not say. Returning from the festival, I called to tell him how young people who'd never seen his films packed the theatres and were sitting in the aisles. I told him that when I'd seen *Husbands* I was a kid; now, my first marriage falling apart, it got to me in another way. His voice was choked with phlegm but he said gently:

"I love men -- we're so stupid."

And he laughed. I did too. That was a Tuesday. He died that Friday.

Some time after his death Gena and I spoke of the final scene in *Love Streams*. She related our conversation last fall in an interview with Chuck Wilson of *LA Weekly*:

"That shot where John waves goodbye out the window with that strange hat on, that's a killer. Michael was the first one who pointed it out, because I couldn't even look at it again. He said, 'You know, Gena, when John waves out the window?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'I think he was saying goodbye to us.' And I said, 'Oh, shit.'" ■

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