

## ***FOR CASSAVETES: A PROMISE KEPT LATE***

**By Michael Ventura**

**June 8, 2007**

*March 17, 1983.* It's after 10 at night, the phone rings, I pick up, and the caller announces, "Michael! This is John!" Then he launches into a monologue I can barely follow, while I'm trying to figure who "John" might be. I don't know any Johns very well. It takes a few moments to realize that this is Cassavetes speaking. Surprised – no, stunned – I wish I'd listened harder to his initial barrage of sentences. The man is very enthusiastic about something. I'm trying to get my bearings while he's praising me for an interview we'd done six months before, the last time we'd spoken. During the interview he'd stopped suddenly and said, "This isn't going well," and I said, "Trust me, I see your words as printed sentences as you're saying them, and this is going very well." Now it seems he agrees and that I know my business is something he respects. Of course this pleases me very much, but still his rap tonight doesn't compute – my impression of the man is that it's not like him to make conversation, and, at the moment, that's what he's doing. The thought occurs: Maybe he's drunk. In his circles, as in mine, people often are. Now he's saying that he's gotten a deal to direct *Love Streams*. Do I remember the play?

Yes, but more vaguely than I admit. A year, no, it was two years ago, John produced a trilogy of plays written by himself and Ted Allan. *Love Streams* was Allan's, and what, if I am honest, do I retain of it? An airy Jon Voight never quite connecting with the material, while Gena Rowlands played with that same material as a child plays in fresh-fallen snow, totally involved, utterly captivating. What I remembered most painfully, however, was how after the play John took about 20 of us to Ma Maison, where I drank too much and made an ass of myself, *really* made an ass of myself, conversing with two famous women. I wasn't used to dining with stars, and I proved it. And, now that I think of it, I remember very well another play of the trilogy (though not its title), written by Cassavetes, where Peter Falk is being questioned on the witness stand about killing his wife. The lawyer asks, "Did you love your wife?" Falk looks at the lawyer, looks away, thinks, looks at him again, and says, "On which day?"

Meanwhile, on the phone, Cassavetes is saying of *Love Streams*, "Every bit of it there's no melodrama; it's just misplaced sincerity all the way through." He is in the midst of his thought while I'm faking my half of the call, trying to catch up. He describes what he thinks will be the last shot of the film: a dog barking in the rain. "So it's the dog's picture! He has the last word!"

Now Cassavetes comes round to why he's called. He's always thought it would be interesting to have a book written on the day-to-day making of a film. To his knowledge, it's never been done. He wants not a book about filmmaking but about "the play between the people who make the film and the ideas within the film."

"It would be a daring book and a tough book," he says. Would I be interested in writing it?

Quickly I say yes. And stammer about how honored I feel to be invited, a subject in which John is not much interested. He talks on while I'm kind of weirded out, as we used to say. Cassavetes is an inclusive man, he'll talk and listen to anybody high or low; but he's also a deeply private man. It doesn't seem like Cassavetes to want somebody staring at him, taking down his every word, making a book of the quicksilver ups and downs of his days. Yet he wants this book very much, he's talking now about its

possibilities as enthusiastically as he's talked about his film, while I'm wondering if it's possible to catch what some people call "the creative process." Even if you watch its actions, can it be truly seen? Also ... I suspect John Cassavetes is not the easiest man to be around on a daily basis.

I make the mistake of saying the word "genius." That is, calling him one. His response is sharp: "There are no geniuses. It's just a lot of fucking hard work and trying to get it."

March 24, 1983. It is always a surprise to see Cassavetes, because he is never quite the way you left him, especially these days – at 53, the intensity of his life is catching up with him. To be honest, half the time he looks awful ... as though the skin of his face has lost all life of its own and only his eyes are keeping him alive. No one has eyes like him. Everything fierce, everything streetwise, every mockery and irony, everything that makes men laugh or long for tenderness, every anger, everything that cannot lie and everything that wants to, everything angelic or demonic in his soul – at one time or another in the course of a day, his eyes give it all away. Like any man he tries to protect himself, but his eyes don't participate in that. Yet, for all their frankness, you sense in John's eyes the presence of a terrible secret. Terrible, I mean, to him. I doubt anyone, except perhaps Gena [John's wife], knows what that secret may be. He himself may not know. Whatever it is, you sense that it's driving him and that, through his eyes, it's looking at you. Some find him difficult to talk to, because even the gentlest of his looks can be uncomfortably direct. When Cassavetes looks at you, he looks at you – not your function, not your salary, not your contract, not your credits, and certainly not your pose. You. And he's interested. In the midst of his most hectic days he'll take the time to talk a little with – anybody. If he wasn't sincerely interested, it would be difficult for the timid to bear those eyes at all. In fact, considering how volatile he can be, if John didn't have a profound respect for human beings just because they're human beings, he might be, well, hard to take. His enormous charm isn't quite enough to overcome the impression that he's kind of scary – not in a sinister way, but in the sense that even at his most relaxed, you feel he might at any moment quite literally blow up. I don't mean blow up emotionally. I mean blow up like he does at the end of *The Fury*, when his whole body explodes and his head flies through the air. I am not being hyperbolic. There's that much concentrated energy in the man. And it all streams out of his eyes.

Those eyes don't change. The eyes of 26-year-old John Cassavetes in *Edge of the City* and his eyes today have the same force, frankness, and strange secrecy. But the rest of him changes drastically – partly because so many images of Cassavetes live in one's mind. The skinny maddened street kid of *Crime in the Streets* ... the incredibly handsome and svelte piano-playing detective of *Johnny Staccato* ... the ugly, wiry, cackling soldier of *The Dirty Dozen*, sporting the first punk haircut ... the unctuous sinister husband of *Rosemary's Baby* ... puffy, happy, good-hearted Gus of *Husbands* ... the doomed low-life hustler of *Mikey and Nicky* ... the intellectual, mystic, spookily frail Prospero of *Tempest* ... too many Johns to keep track of. But all have the same eyes. All of which is to venture the hypothesis that John Cassavetes is not a man who can be known. I'd better just try to see him, clear, and hope for the best.

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The above passages are from *Cassavetes Directs* (Kamera Books), to be published next week in England. Long story short: Three weeks into shooting *Love Streams*, John found out he was dying. Then, while acting and directing, the ailing Cassavetes reconceived his film, rewriting two-thirds of it so that *Love Streams* might serve as his

final statement. For John, it was a heroic last stand. For me, it was an indelible time, but I wasn't yet enough of a writer to do it justice.

When the shoot ended, I wrote a bad book. In love with the sound of my own voice, I'd interpret, not describe, leaving out wonderful detail in the process. Nor was I as tough as John hoped; to spare feelings (including my own), I left other stuff out. A final sin: I was arty, moved some events out of their sequence, omitted others entirely. I couldn't yet see my mistakes, but I knew that book was "off." I never submitted it for publication. As John weakened and died, it was too painful to return to my notes, relive that time, try again. But I promised myself that one day I'd write the book John asked for. I'd done nothing on John's set but take notes, notes on everything I saw and heard, a goodly portion of which never found their way into that failed book; the raw experience was preserved in notes filling two boxes that moved with me from one address to the next for more than two decades. Then last year, finally, I kept my promise. Opened the boxes. Wrote from my notes a day-by-day and shot-by-shot account of a heroic moment in the life of a great artist who chose me to be his witness. I believe that *Cassavetes Directs* is the tough and daring book John wanted, but since I failed do it when he wanted it, I'll never know.

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