CASSAVETES: "SHOW ME THE MAGIC" - AN INTERVIEW

by Michael Ventura

August 20, 1982

"Sonofabitch -- what I wouldn't give for a different nightmare."
-- Cassavetes playing Phillip in Paul Mazursky's *Tempest*

The people who did the trailers for Paul Mazursky's new film, *Tempest,* knew what they were doing: John Cassavetes, amidst flashes of lightning, saying with all the intensity at that intense man's command, "Show me the magic. Come on. *Come on,* show me the magic."

As actor, writer, and especially director, it has been the work of Cassavetes' life to show us the magic -- and it has been the discipline of his life to look for that magic not in special effects that can only take place on movie-screens, or in the often easy outs of fantasies, but in the look on a woman's face between the time she puts her kids on the bus to school and the time she goes crazy; or the look on a man's face, after he's vomited in a bathroom in a bar, when he can look up from his humiliation into the eyes of a friend. It's the magic that happens when all the layers are peeled off, no defenses, no tricks -- nothing but the great trickster, the human heart, quickened for a moment into honesty.

He is deeply committed in grounding his philosophic points in what he calls "real things." "Because," as he told me, "I too am a member of this age -- this age of nihilistic positivity, or whatever the hell it is."

The Age of Nihilistic Positivity -- as good a name for our era as I've heard. For twenty years now his films have taken the side of those who must earn their baffled living in the Age of Nihilistic Positivity: *Shadows, Faces, Husbands, Minnie and Moskowitz, A Woman Under the Influence, The Killing of a Chinese Bookie, Opening Night, Gloria.* I've written elsewhere and at length about the tremendous influence of his direction, and how moments and filmic styles we take for granted in many films were first explored and given form in his. And as an actor, Cassavetes has stood for a style that can be popular without being homogenous, without ironing out the natural quirks and flaws and fissures of the psyche.

In Mazursky's *Tempest* he gives us his best performance in a decade, a fiery, funny, feisty portrait of a man who decides the only way to stay is to leave, the only way to safety is to risk everything, the only laughter worth laughing is the laugh that brings tears to your eyes.

VENTURA: What was it like to work with Mazursky in *Tempest* as an actor?

CASSAVETES: Well, when I first saw the script, my mind flashed back to all the incredible double-crosses people perform, particularly when they're working on an expensive picture. So the first thing I wanted was not to be double-crossed. And the only way you can not be double-crossed, is to say up front what you feel. Straightforward. A lot of people thought the script was very good. I frankly didn't understand the script.

I understood that the guy was an architect and that he was having troubles with his wife and his way of life and job, and that's simple, that's everybody. It could be a workman just as easily as being an architect. But I didn't understand his reactions to the feeling that

he was in -- the change-of-life period, or whatever you want to call it. Somebody trying to be young, trying to be vital the way they used to be. And finding himself in a position where everyone surrounding him is as dead as he is. And all the things you try to accomplish in your life suddenly come back on you and you realize you don't have that much time. So, when I read it, I didn't know if the struggle to get out of that was going to be handled honestly, movie-wise. I knew it was a comedy, because everyone said that. But I didn't know if Paul wanted me to do jokes, or act funny -- which I can't do anyway -- or if he'd let it be straight. And so I said, "I take this very seriously, this script."

I went into that meeting angry. And I didn't know why I was so angry, but I was angry. I think I wanted to let Paul know that there is a certain amount of bitterness that comes into the constant boredom of meeting people who don't connect with you -- I mean, chemically, or just what they're doing. You get crazy, you just don't want to do it.

But Paul is very interesting. Because he's a man who doesn't really say a lot about what he's gonna do. He's always alive and vital and making statements that you can challenge. I mean, he's a dynamo! Dynamic man. Laughs in the middle of what actors would deem important scenes. And clowns around during rehearsals. And he prefers somebody to challenge his thoughts.

A lot of directors -- not good ones -- but a lot of directors let their script-girl tell them that you didn't say the line, that you left out a "But, I --," or something like that. You do a take over again. And the feeling is that it doesn't matter what's on the screen, it only matters that you left out a "But, I --." But with Paul -- I very rarely work with a director, like him, who doesn't really challenge every specific comment, and yet watches every specific moment.

You know, sometimes everyone second-guesses the director. It's very simple to do and it's very normal. I'm sure when Mazursky acts he does the same thing. You know, you think, "My god, why do they have to push it in this direction, when it could be so lovely in *this* direction. That happens all the time. But Paul really likes that. He likes it in the sense that if you really know so much, *do* it. Don't sit and talk about it and conspire about it and fret about it. Put it on the screen. Who's stopping you?

And then he *might* stop you. But Paul's whole thing, not nly in front of the camera, was a nice rapport between the actors.

And working with Paul wasn't, "This is the scene about the girl whom you meet for the first time," there's none of that. It's "Oh! There's Susan! [Susan Sarandon] Gah! She looks great. Susan, you look great! Fantastic! Oh my God!" And Susan gets all embarrassed, she says, "Ok, Paul, let's do the scene," and he says, "Ok, the car is coming, *I'll* play the guy, I'll play the guy!" And off-scene Paul will play me, and he'll say, "There's no room for you, John, you get outta here!" And I found it, for everybody there, maddening, because it's a strange different kind of direction. But now I miss it. And I don't want to go back to the other.

I mean, he'd never say, "This is what it's about," "This is funny," "This is not." It's, "Look at that daughter [Molly Ringwald, in her first role], isn't she *wonderful*, God, she's better than you! She's better than Gena [playing John's wife]! She's better than anybody! God! She's marvelous!" Then he cries. Hugs her. Embraces her. Then you do the scene.

Or in Greece, in the Peloponnesus, he might storm into the bedroom and say, "Are you going to the party?! We have the boat tonight!" And Gena and I would be asleep. And he'd say, "I can only stay a minute, John. John, don't ask me what the dailies are like,

‘What are the dailies like,’ don’t ask me, you’re gonna drive me crazy.” “Would you like a drink, Paul?” “A drink?! No, I don’t wanna drink. I toldja I can only stay a minute. Are you going to the party or not? Oh, God, the dailies were really great, the dailies were…” and *then* he’d talk about them.

I’ve heard a lot of people talk about magic in films. I think, from my standpoint, that Paul was Phillip [the soul-searcher of *Tempest*], and so was I. But so was he. Not only was he, but then he insisted that the whole crew make magic! And if the weather turned and it was all just beautiful blue sky and *he* wanted it gray, then he’d go into the water and actually be doing these chants! So it was a delight.

VENTURA: You said you walked into that first meeting angry?

CASSAVETES: I think, like everybody, nobody trusts anybody. I’m not different. And actors are particularly distrustful, and mean. Simply because they feel that no one is really going to be able to help them. Or be able to understand what the story is -- that the author himself has written, but actors just feel that they know it. Your tendency as an actor is to create your own story immediately. Out of panic. And that’s what happens in the beginning. And Paul just wanted that short period out.

VENTURA: When you’re directing, what’s your approach to that period?

CASSAVETES: I’m a totally intuitive person. I mean, I think about things that human beings would do, but I just am 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 do it. But that’s because I really am more an actor than a director. And I appreciate that there might be some secrets in people. And that that might be more interesting than a “plot.”

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 defense, and what is a real irregularity in somebody’s behavioral pattern. And then 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?

VENTURA: A shared world?

CASSAVETES: That they can patrol certain streets, patrol their house, and -- that’s what I feel people do, they know their way home. And when they cease to know the way home, things go wrong.

VENTURA: How do you mean, know the way home?

CASSAVETES: You somehow, drunk or sober or any other way, you always find your way back to where you live. 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. ‘Cause *that’s* interesting. People are interested in people that are *really* in trouble. Not pretending to be.

VENTURA: Did you discover that first as an actor?

CASSAVETES: I think I discovered it on the streets. I think I discovered it 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.

And I think women probably -- I don't know -- I don't really know anything about women. I try to deal with women in films a lot differently than I would deal with men.

VENTURA: How?

CASSAVETES: I look at women much, much more fairly, because I'm not a woman. And I don't really know very much about them. So I try to make their life a little more straight-line, so that we won't be taking some opinionated view of a man taking an opinionated view of a woman -- rather deal with it on a line of activity. Of what they do. And then their behavior comes out in their activity.

With men I don't do that. Because I feel I know men. I know men very well. I know all their hypocrisies, and the fact that they don't have babies, and how important that is, and what a pregnant woman means to a man, and what sports or non-sports mean, or philosophy, or culture, or when it happens, and when it's interesting to talk about, when it brings tears to the eyes, and when it means nothing. All the complexities of men I'm sure are like the complexities of women, but they're definitely in my opinion not the same. I don't care what the legislation says.

I feel that women are more receptive by nature than a man is. I don't know whether it's conditioning, or whatever -- it's an actuality, anyway. I've seen my daughter, when she was very young, 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. It's just, most men don't go around worrying if they're good enough. And women do. And their whole life is a challenge.

VENTURA: How did that view figure in *A Woman Under the Influence?*

CASSAVETES: I only knew one thing about *Woman Under the Influence* when we started: that it was a difficult time for today's woman to be left alone while somebody goes out and -- lives. And it's *fine* for a housewife to get her kids off to school. As irritating and annoying and boring as that may be, it's not the same as, later in the day, being totally alone with nothing to do, nothing you're supposed to do, except maybe darn a sock or something like that. So it becomes a very tough existence. So you look to get out. And what place do you have to go? Because when they all come back you're happy.

And I think that probably happens to every woman. I know when I was not working, and Gena was working for me -- because I was really in trouble in this business, I'd done

a lot of things where it really looked like I wasn't going to be able to work again -- and I stayed home and took care of the baby, and I was a pretty good housewife and everything else, and I didn't have really much time to think about what was wrong and all, but I didn't really have 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?

All those things are much more interesting than what they're making movies out of -- taking a figure like Begelman [a studio executive]. 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 just 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.* Not feel they have to be like everybody else.

VENTURA: When you were in trouble with the movie industry, how were you in trouble?

CASSAVETES: Well, I -- I was young. And I felt that everybody had talent. And that for some reason they were being arbitrary and not employing that talent. 'Cause 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, she said, "Look, a lot of people just don't have the same drive, the same desires, the same gun that sparks them, as you do. You're acting like these people all understand you; nobody understands you. *I* don't understand you, who the hell can understand you?! You're nuts!"

I would think *she* was crazy. And I would go in, and I would think, "Naw, this sonofabitch 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!" But I'd 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?"

I mean, *Husbands* was *Husbands.* I was in love with that picture, in love with Bennie [Ben Gazzara] and Peter [Peter Falk] and New York and London and hotel rooms and beautiful women and the whole adventure, behind the camera and in front o fit, and it was one of the most romantic things that ever happened in my life. *A Woman Under the Influence* was a wonderful experience -- but it was hard.

VENTURA: How?

CASSAVETES: It was hard work. It was disciplined work. Something that made me feel good, the discipline, but it wasn't free-wheeling, you didn't feel like going out after shooting. I usually like a lot of noise on the set. I didn't like any noise on *that* set. I felt

the people who were doing it should be respected, because it's so embarrassing to relive moments that are private and delicate. And it was also not totally real. It was a concept. Of love. A concept of how much you have to pay for it.

That's kind of pretentious, but I was interested in it. And didn't know how to do it, and none of the other people knew how either, so we had to work extremely hard.

VENTURA: You said it wasn't totally real? How would it have been?

CASSAVETES: Well, it would have been nastier. I think in the whole picture the defensiveness was just removed. No one there is defensive in the whole film. There isn't one shield on anybody's psyche, or anybody's heart. It's just open. So you just to have to work on a different level. You have to work on a higher level, and deal with philosophic points in terms of real things.

VENTURA: How do you mean, in terms of real things?

CASSAVETES: 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 of somebody's self. And that personal side says, "Hey, what about *me*? Yeah, you can do this to *me* but, uh…" If you're in the audience, the audience is saying, "Hey, what about ME?" All the way through the picture, the characters are not -- and therefore the audience is allowed to ask that, because the characters can't. And that's why it was unreal. Because in life people stop and ask "What about me?" every three seconds.

VENTURA: That accounts for the reaction that many women I know had to that picture, leaving it with this deep yet not bitter conviction that they had to change their situations *now* -- the picture made them say "What about me?" for the character, and so for themselves.

CASSAVETES: And Gena is the kind of person -- I don't mean she's an actress -- I mean, I'm sure she's an actress, but I don't see her that way; I see her as an incredibly gentle and kind person with this vision of what life could be.

I remember one time in the picture, 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?"

You know, ignorance is astounding, particularly when it's your own. And all through the 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. 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 to far?” And I said, “I didn’t like it, I just didn’t like it at all.” I mean, I found it really so embarrassing. To watch. It was such a horrible thing to do to somebody, to take her into a household with all those other 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 that Gena was so willing to get rid of them, and at the same time not insult them -- but then I thought: what Gena did, it was like poetry. I thought the film really achieved something really remarkable *through the actors’ performances, not giving way to situations but giving way to their own personalities.* So it altered the narrative of the piece, but it really made it. I would grow to love those scenes very, very much, but the first time I didn’t.

VENTURA: When you say “altered the experience,” you mean --

CASSAVETES: The dialogue was the same.

VENTURA: But the performances changed the meaning of the scene.

CASSAVETES: Sure.

VENTURA: So because they didn’t succumb to what was obvious in the situation, but played from a deeper level, they came out with something entirely new and liberating. But your scripts expose intimacies, privacies, in a way that’s very tense as far as the audience is concerned. It’s why European filmmakers, especially, look at your films as landmarks in film history. You let the act of performance, on the set, determine a great deal, but you do write the script as intuitively as you direct? When I interviewed Gena, she told me there were no improvised lines in *Woman.*

CASSAVETES: The preparations for the scripts I’ve written are really long, hard, boring, intense studies. I don’t just enter 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?”

In replacing narrative, you need an idea. And the idea in *Woman Under the Influence* was, could love exist? Then, in 1974, ‘75. Could it exist? Society had already changed. Is it possible that two people could really be in love with each other under the conditions of the new world, where love is really a sideline? It’s just a word. And it’s even offensive -- like the word “art” in Los Angeles.

So it was interesting to see, whether that could be done. And it’s impossible to determine the result when you start. You *know* it’s going to be painful, to begin with, but you hope that the love will be strong enough that you can take the picture as far as it has to go. The adventure of making films is to say, “Can we do it? I mean, is it possible to do it?”

VENTURA: The process of “doing it” is getting more and more interminable. What would you say to a young director who asks you, “What is the most important thing that I should think about?”

CASSAVETES: I would probably say, “Love the artists, and -- screw the rest of the people!”

VENTURA: Would you say the same thing to an actor?

CASSAVETES: An actor? Performing artists are different from anybody. 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.”

It’s a very hard job, being an actor. Because the camera slate comes down in front of your face in the movies, 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, and 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 actors, which all actors have done. But in films like Mazursky’s or mine, we have a different view of what you are.

VENTURA: To say the least, it’s hard to get that view across in this business.

CASSAVETES: The business stinks. It always has. It’s always been a crappy business with crappy people in it. *I’m* one of those crappy people, too. I’m one of them! I negotiate for anything I can get. And take advantage. Just the way everybody else does. I’m just as dumb as everybody else. I think that we’re all barbarians, basically. Occasionally, we come up with an idea -- like, we pray for rain and it rains. And we think that’s gonna do it.

VENTURA: You don’t make films as though you think people are all barbarians.

CASSAVETES: I don’t see anything wrong with barbarians. I *don’t* really see anything wrong with barbarians. I mean, occasionally we feel poetic. I’ve seen a lot of drunken sailors. But most of the time it’s just dog eat dog -- our truth is what’s convenient for us. All of us. What’s wrong with that? You can’t be an idealist 24 hours a day. You’ve got to pick something that’s important to you and stick with it. The rest of it is your own personality, saying, “Shithead, go ahead! But you’re gonna suffer for it!”

But 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 smell of it, 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. ‘Cause then they missed the point.

There is no great film. There’s just something that touches you for a moment. And the

only mistake the barbarians, which is us, make, is not giving people hope. That they could have that moment in the sun.