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Special Report

The Director-Actor

THE DIRECTOR-ACTOR has been a tradition since the earliest days of the American film, as witness such names as Griffith, Sennett, DeMille, Chaplin, Von Stroheim, etc. Today many Directors Guild members are carrying on that tradition, and this Special Report is concerned with actors who direct, or vice versa. The photo shows John Cassavetes directing himself and Peter Falk in a scene for *Husbands*.

Special Report

The Director-Actor

A talk with John Cassavetes

by Russell AuWerter

John Cassavetes recently completed *Husbands*, his fifth film as director. In three of his films, *Shadows*, *Faces* and *Husbands*, he has had complete artistic control from story selection through promotion. He wrote the screenplays for his two most recent films, *Faces* and *Husbands*. In *Husbands*, the story of three middle-age, middle-class Americans on a spree in London, Cassavetes stars along with Ben Gazzara and Peter Falk. Cassavetes' highly personal style of direction resulted in his first film, *Shadows*, winning the Critics Award at the Venice Film Festival. *Faces* won five awards at the Venice Film Festival and received three Academy Award nominations. Cassavetes has acted in 90 television dramas, including his own series *Staccato*, and has acted in ten feature films—winning high critical praise for his role of the husband in *Rosemary's Baby* and an Oscar nomination for his role in *The Dirty Dozen*.

Born in New York of Greek immigrant parents, Cassavetes attended Colgate University and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. He now lives in Los Angeles with his wife, the actress Gena Rowlands, and his two children. He was interviewed by Russell AuWerter, who writes on film topics for many publications.

AuWerter: What were the circumstances of your decision to become a director?

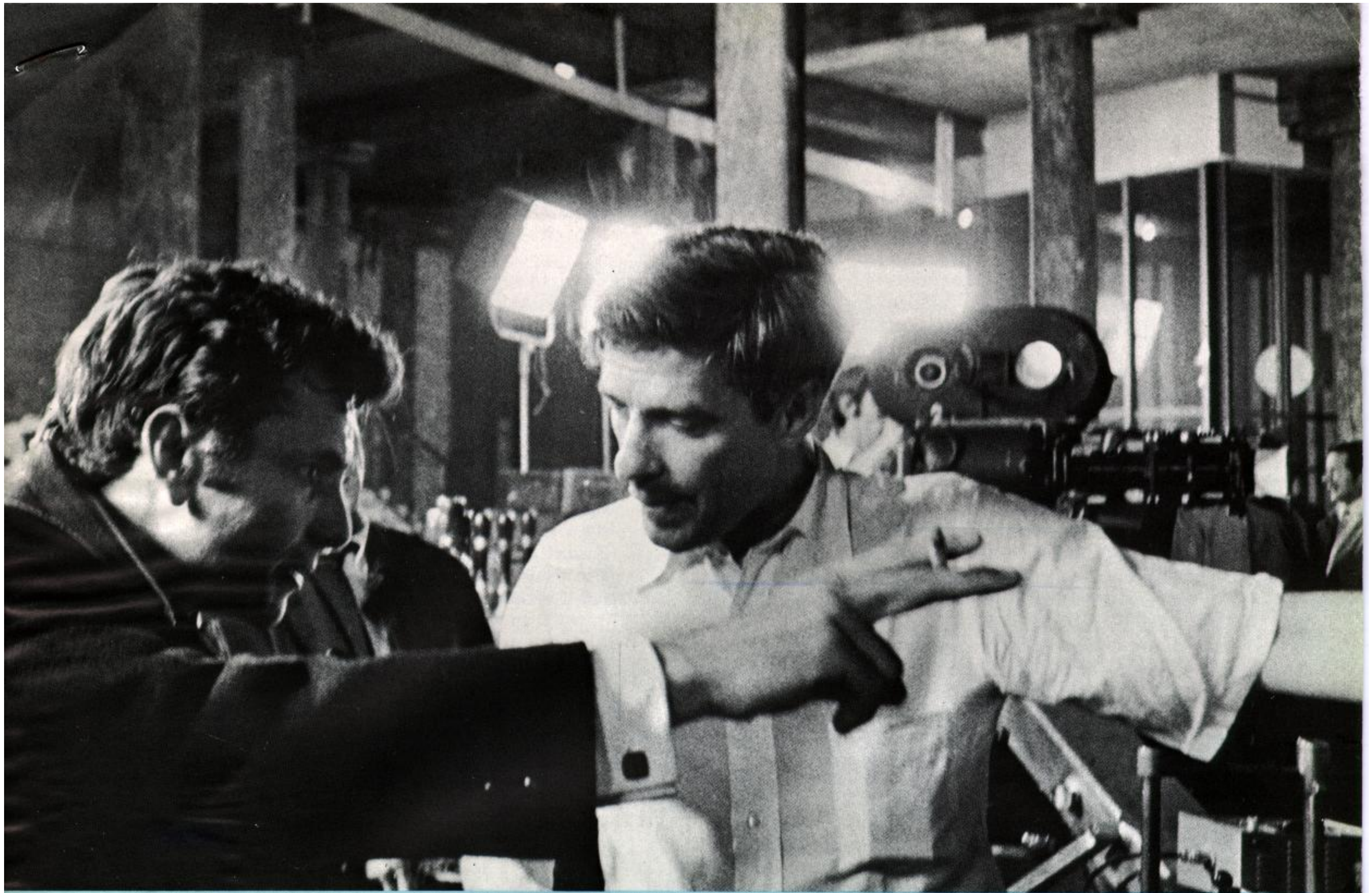
Cassavetes: I never really decided to become a director. I had a lot of very talented actor friends who were out of work in New York. I was working and actors help each other. You can't recommend an actor to a director or a producer or a writer—they have to discover for themselves what kind of an actor he is. So we got together and thought we would open a workshop. I found space on West 48th Street—the old Malin Studios. 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 to see these actors perform. Well, as it turned out, the actors were offended by this and no one showed up. I had rented the place for a year at quite a bit of money, so I thought I'd better take an ad in the paper. I took ads in *Show Business*, in *The New York Times*, *Daily News* and *Mirror*. People started coming in. Many, many people came in—from all walks of life—all wanting to be actors. I wasn't a teacher or a 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



Ben Gazzara, Peter Falk, Cassavetes in a Go-Go Bar

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 that I couldn't go on. I found out that my study had to be deeper. As we made these discoveries, we started throwing away scripts and working more in an improvisational capacity. About that time we came upon a very good improvisation. And out of that improvisation, I said 'that would make a heck of a movie.' I went on a radio program that night with a friend of mine, Jean Shepherd. While I was there I said I was going to make a movie and that all these people were going to make a movie—wouldn't it be terrific if it could be sponsored by just people. The next day \$2,000 in dollar bills came in. People from the Army came in and people with equipment came in. Shirley Clarke left some equipment for us. Other people brought in stuff. And they all contributed to this thing. We had \$2,000, some equipment, a stage and actors. As soon as that came in the people started building sets. The picture that came out of this was *Shadows*. So it was, more or less, the desire of a group of people who wanted to accomplish something that started me off in directing, rather than my own personal desires.

AuWerter: Why did you continue to direct?



Peter Falk, Cassavetes on location

Cassavetes: I enjoy it because I can write and because I can keep a certain promise to an actor. And because I haven't stopped acting. We made a picture called *Husbands* and I'm in it too. So, it isn't really what kind of a part you have, it's important how well you play it. If you please yourself and you express something—good. As a director you have a responsibility to the picture; there's no doubt that *Husbands* is my picture. But if you ask Ben and Peter, *Husbands* is their picture individually. If you ask Al Ruban or Sam Shaw, the producers—it's their picture. We all make the film. The making of a film means that people go out and do the best they can to keep a rapport and an understanding and a feeling that what they have to say is more important than the way it's said by any individual.

AuWerter: *Husbands* was the first film in which you directed yourself. Where there any special problems that resulted from this?

Cassavetes: Sure, a lot of special problems. It is very hard to see the scene when you're in it. But it was harder, I think on Peter and Ben, my being in the scene, because I could decide how I was going to play that scene and not worry about the direction of that scene, and they couldn't. The three of us are peers one moment then suddenly they have to turn to me and say 'What do you think?' And they know goddam well I don't know anything more about the scene than they do because I was in it, too. So we learned how to use our instincts. I would say to Peter 'how did it go for you?' and he'd say 'fine' and then I'd ask Ben and he'd say 'fine' and I'd say 'fine' and that's the way we'd know.

AuWerter: Would you direct yourself in another picture?



Cassavettes: I never say 'never'. I thought it was difficult and very strenuous, but I enjoyed it. In *Husbands*, Peter, Ben and I were the idea of the film—the three of us acting together.

AuWerter: You have written the scripts for the last two pictures you have directed. Is this a pattern that will continue?

Cassavettes: I wouldn't do a picture unless I could write the script. The reason for this is that making a picture or acting in a picture is a very personal thing. 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.

AuWerter: There isn't a writer, that you know of, who you would like to collaborate with on a picture?

Cassavettes: There are a lot of writers I would love to collaborate with on a picture, but I don't think they would want to collaborate with me. It's a very difficult thing—to say a writer is not important. Somebody writes a good screenplay—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—re-write it, do it again, re-write it, OK let's improvise it. After improvisation, let's re-write 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.

AuWerter: How involved do you get in the editing process?

Cassavettes: I think that's a very standard situation. Most editors are very good. On a picture like ours, with editors Peter Tanner and Tom Cornwall—the two English editors that we had here—it was just a matter of their getting used to the material and seeing it. 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 then they learn that 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.

AuWerter: Does the same apply to your cameraman, your art-director and all the other production people?

Cassavettes: That's right. 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. It's an idea. Either life or death is important to you or it's not. Either the film is life and death to you or it's not. And if it's not, then you're no help. We're saying to ourselves, and this has its own pitfalls too, that we have no limitations on the film. We can say whatever we want to say, what ever pleases us. Now, obviously if nothing pleases you, you ought to get the hell out. But, if something pleases you that can only enhance what we're working on.

AuWerter: Ideally, then, you would like to be able to just concentrate on the acting and the actor?

Cassavettes: In the making of *Husbands*, yes. It's a story about three men, so it would be silly to concentrate on the landscape. It isn't earth's relationship to men that we're

talking about, it's men's behavior in terms of themselves.

AuWerter: Do you direct a non-professional actor differently from a professional actor?

Cassavettes: No.

AuWerter: When you combine the two in a scene does this create special problems?

Cassavettes: No. I think it's a stimulant.

AuWerter: How do you use improvisation as a part of your directing technique?

Cassavettes: I think you have to define what improvisation does—not what it is. 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.

AuWerter: How important is high energy for you as a director?

Cassavettes: I think it's extremely important. For me it's everything. I gain energy by being comfortable. I get drained when I'm uncomfortable. I believe, and I think everyone else around *Husbands* does too, that it's impossible to fail if people are given their head, if people are allowed to do what they know how to do and to do it with some kind of fun. I hate discipline. I despise it. If I walk on a quiet, polite set, I go crazy—I know there's something wrong because somebody has lessened himself in his own estimation and put either me or some actor above himself.

AuWerter: Is taste in any way comparable to energy as a requisite for directing?

Cassavettes: You know, that's a word that's just evaded me all these years.

AuWerter: How much of your directing is therapy?

Cassavettes: Therapy? For whom?

AuWerter: For you or your actors.

Cassavettes: For me, it's all the way. For the actors, I hope it is. It's better than staying home.

AuWerter: Is there any type of picture you wouldn't make?

Cassavettes: Yes, I think probably a musical or a situation comedy.

AuWerter: *Husbands* is your first color picture. Did the change to color affect your directing in any major way?

Cassavettes: It caused me a lot of pain, because I see things in black and white, but Sam Shaw (associate producer of *Husbands*) assured me that the color, if we shot it in a certain way, would look as 'hack' as anything else I've ever done.

AuWerter: Did being an actor before being a director have any advantages?

Cassavettes: It makes it easier.

AuWerter: Did being an actor before being a director have any disadvantages?

Cassavettes: No. But, being an actor after you're a director has some disadvantages.

AuWerter: Do you see yourself changing with each picture you direct?

Cassavettes: Sure. 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.

AuWerter: What would you say to young directors who are just starting out?

Cassavettes: 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.

AuWerter: Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?

Cassavettes: I see myself alive. □