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Crazy love

by Owen Gleiberman

LOVE STREAMS. Directed by John Cassavetes. Written by Cassavetes and Ted Allen, from a play by Allen. With John Cassavetes, Gena Rowlands, Seymour Cassel, and Diahnne Abbott. A Cannon release. At Copley Place.

Nobody has a mouth like John Cassavetes's. His full lips are pulled back into a half-grin, half-grimace, and what's striking about the expression is that it rarely tilts one way or the other. There's pain in his smile and delight in his frown; his face is a perpetual billboard of Complex Emotion. So is his new film, *Love Streams*. Cassavetes plays a popular Los Angeles writer named Robert Harmon who specializes in journalistic novels about "women" (it never gets any more specific than that). Robert likes to spend his time boozing it up and hanging out with whores; he's a swank, talented bum — Charles Bukowski with a bank account. It isn't clear, at first, that the half-dozen ladies who've been staying at his house have been hired to do so. They're so cuddly and flirtatious with their little Robert, and the guy himself is so, you know, *mysterioso*, that you may think they're hanging out just 'cause they like his company. But Robert pays for it, all right; he's a slave to his checkbook as much as the next fellow. The one thing he does have — it's what separates Cassavetes's heroes from those in conventional movies — is his aura. The man is *intense*.

If Cassavetes had just relaxed and gone with a hang-loose story about the adventures of a hipster scoundrel, he might have fashioned a penetrating slice of life. But the director of *Husbands* and *A Woman Under the Influence* is up to meatier things: he wants to do nothing less than define the nature of love. And since Robert is one of those desperate, emotionally distant souls who (as they might say in a self-help book) is terrified of human contact, Cassavetes has provided him with a saintly redemptress — a sister, Sarah (Gena Rowlands), who's half crazy, but only because she gives herself over to the love that others deny. *Love Streams* turns out to be a two-hour-and-20-minute psychodrama about the cataclysmic forces underlying our patchy modern lives, and about what a cold and painful world this is — especially if you're one of the pure ones. As always, Cassavetes mixes a scattershot, quasi-documentary style with his brand of lugubrious Method acting, providing neither the giddy fun of an improvisatory tragicomedy like Andy Warhol's *Trash* nor the head-on theatricality of an Ingmar Bergman picture. His film is a string of actors' bits stretched over a void.

You know the old saw about laughing at someone rather than with him? I think there's an analogous sort of distance when people are watching a mad person on screen. Books can take us inside a character's dementia, and sometimes a voiceover narration can (witness Travis Bickle's moribund confessions in *Taxi Driver*), but when you've got to watch someone cracking up and you're expected to understand — experience — what it is that's driving him bats, the drama is usually so inaccessible that it's dead on arrival. And so it is here with Gena Rowlands, who emotes all over the place in that noble tremor of hers but never finds a way to make her cosmic suffering tangible, immediate; the pain comes with quotes around it. In the first part of the movie, Sarah, who's been in and out of institutions for years, gets to make a schizoid spectacle of herself at several divorce hearings. It seems that she spends her time going to hospitals and visiting sick people she doesn't even know, and her barely pubescent daughter, who's been dragged along on these missions, wants no further part of it. Cassavetes brings out the infatuation with death that underlies Sarah's seemingly beneficent hobby, and you may find yourself recoiling right along with the daughter.

But no — we're expected to love Sarah, the maternal innocent. After taking the advice of her portly shrink and jetting off to Europe, she returns to pay an open-ended visit to her brother, with whom she shares a bond of almost mystical purity. With the real love story under way, the movie turns didactic and slightly fanciful, as Sarah brings Robert a small menagerie — including two miniature horses and a donkey — as a way of showing him what it means to care for a creature other than himself. Essentially, Cassavetes is doing a highbrow variation on *Harold and Maude*. He gets the full measure of wacky comedy out of Sarah's bringing the animals over (she's turned into a lovable loony), and then he has to show Robert devoting himself to the beasts with a fervor unknown since the days of Noah. Meanwhile, Sarah has been stranded, literally and emotionally, by her ex-husband (Seymour Cassel, looking like a younger Richard Farnsworth), a sympathetic do-gooder who can no longer keep up with her whims. Sarah's shrink tells her that her love is smothering her family. He's right, but then Sarah explains that love is continuous, like a stream — "it never stops" — and it's clear that she's speaking for Cassavetes. The director wants us to understand that obsessive, overpowering love is the most authentic kind of love; he's saying the problem with the world today is that there's no way to fit this sort of love into our tidy, compartmentalized lives, and so we turn it into a stigma, into craziness.

Structurally, *Love Streams* doesn't just ramble — it goes nowhere. And by now, I guess, that's exactly the sort of thing one expects of Cassavetes. He's the kind of poetic, ever-probing artiste who creates by the maxim "I don't know the answers — I'm just looking for the questions," and after more than two hours of psy-

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choanalytical diddling you may want an answer or two. But the talents Cassavetes lacks as a director — the ability to shape a scene, to bring a character's malaise into focus or simply let it explode — are, paradoxically, his strengths as an actor; his juicy performance as Robert Harmon almost makes *Love Streams* worth seeing. Robert doesn't have any Oscar-bid breakdown scenes, but Cassavetes, letting the camera probe every nook and cranny of his middle-aged face, reveals unexpected layers of tenderness and narcissism. In one of the movie's few fully rounded episodes, an ex-wife of Robert's drops by with their eight-year-old son — the son he's managed to avoid seeing since birth. Robert is righteous as hell about having shunned his duty as a parent, yet when he pours out a beer for the kid (who's a doe-eyed softie) and explains to him why he's never been around, a fatherly affection comes through in his sparkling eyes; we see what Robert's had to suppress in order to turn himself into an icy degenerate. For a few scenes, the movie looks like a seedier *Kramer vs. Kramer*, but the mood chills when Robert takes the kid to Las Vegas and locks him in the hotel room so Dad can go out and chase whores. The way parental games doom children to suffering emerges as a secondary theme of the movie, and it's effective, perhaps because Cassavetes has to put his usual arty dramaturgy on hold where preteen actors are concerned.

He's at his stagiest in the crucial scenes depicting Robert with his women. As an actor, Cassavetes is capable of playing romantic scenes with a maturity that's rare in Hollywood, but as a director he's undermined by his fondness for the grand gesture. Instead of scripting believable encounters, he's let himself lapse into corny shameless-old-lech routines (complete with fits of hysterical laughter), so it's hard to get a fix on what Robert wants — or gets — from the female company he keeps. When a man goes around dropping Mailer-esque bromides like "all beautiful women have a secret," we need to get beneath his cool-cat mask or we haven't gotten anywhere. Cassavetes's big insight into Robert is that he likes sex but fears intimacy. All that huffing and puffing for a *Cosmopolitan* cliché. □