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# PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: JOHN CASSAVETES

*a candid conversation with the consummate actor and fiercely independent writer-director of "shadows," "faces" and "husbands"*

In a year when the success of "Love Story" has shown signs of persuading the ailing American film industry to grind out a plethora of mawkish romances, John Cassavetes has singlehandedly scored a major victory for realism. In "Husbands," which he wrote, directed and starred in, Cassavetes limned an evocative portrait of three suburban executives confronted, upon the death of a close friend, by their own mortality. After the funeral, the three husbands, Cassavetes and co-stars Ben Gazzara and Peter Falk, get drunk and run off for a richly seriocomic weekend of gambling and gamboling in London; in the end, each in his own way, they come soberly to grips with the fact of middle age. The innovative, improvisatory style of the film inspired some reviewers to call it a self-indulgent cinematic conceit and others—most prominently Time—to overpraise it as "one of the best movies anyone will ever see . . . certainly the best movie anyone will ever live through." For Cassavetes, "Husbands" marked his first fully overground triumph in a stormy acting and directing career that has spanned nearly 20 years.

Born to Greek immigrant parents in New York City on December 9, 1929, Cassavetes grew up in more than a dozen Manhattan neighborhoods. "We

didn't have any money, but we never worried about it," he recently recalled. "We would move every 30 days—landlords were so anxious for tenants that they'd offer a month rent-free for moving in. When the month ran out, so did we." By the time Cassavetes was a teenager, his father was doing well enough in the travel business to move the family to Port Washington, New York. After a short-lived fling at college and a year of acting school, Cassavetes worked as a movie extra and then as a Broadway assistant stage manager before landing his first featured role in 1954—as a bullfighter in Budd Schulberg's teleplay "Paso Doble." His well-received performance quickly led to steady TV employment; during the next two years, Cassavetes acted in more than 80 video dramas, usually portraying a juvenile delinquent as introspective as James Dean and as mumbly as Marlon Brando. As those two superstars began bringing their legions of followers into movie theaters, Hollywood called on Cassavetes to re-create his TV hood roles, beginning with "The Night Holds Terror." He never got the right parts to make him a star, however, and he never went out of his way to make—or keep—friends in the front office.

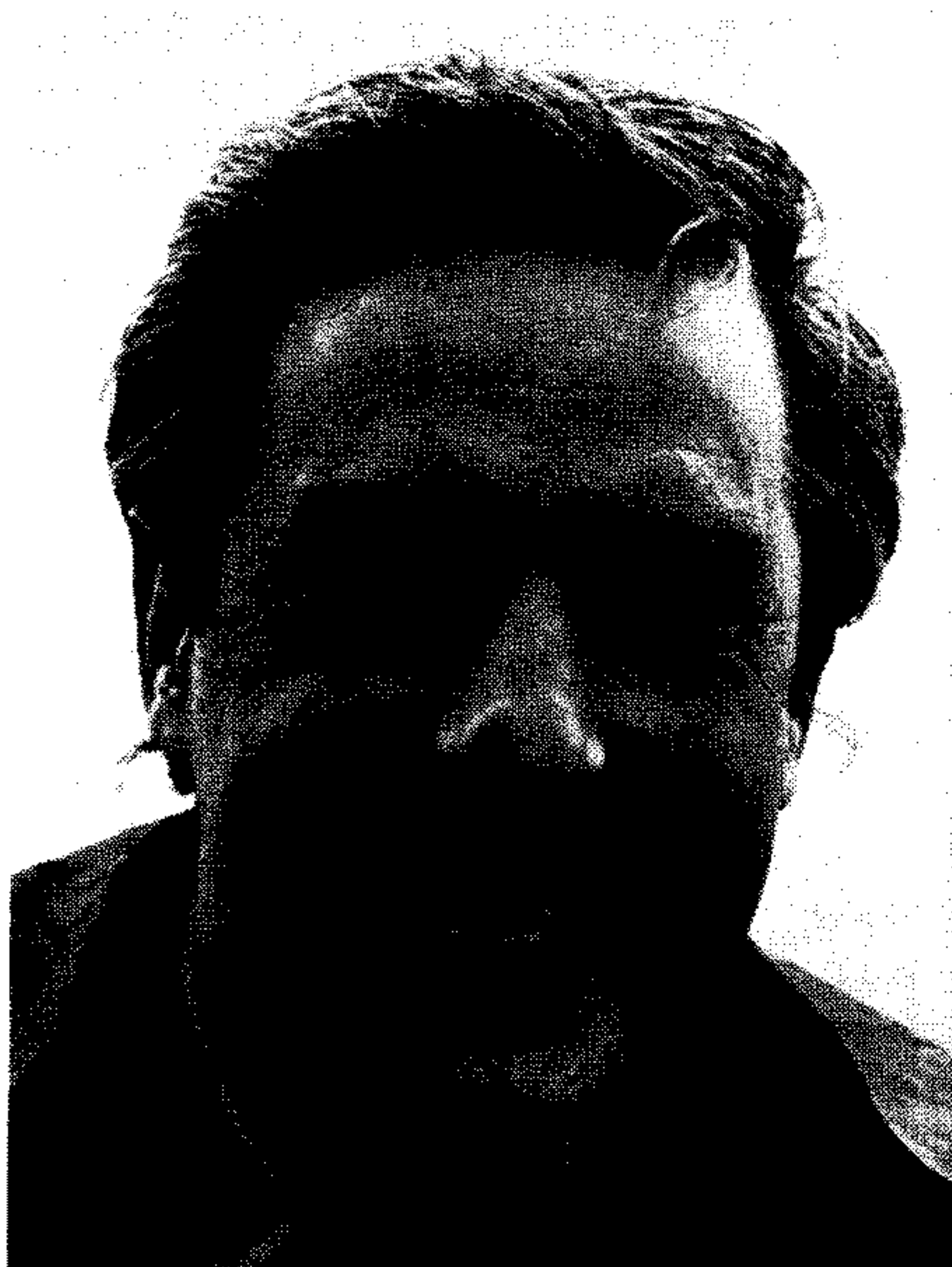
Then, in 1954, he married Gena Row-

lands, a beautiful and accomplished young actress who, much to his surprise, was able to stabilize her mercurial husband. "I used to walk around angry all the time," Cassavetes remembers. "One night many years ago, we were backstage at a play and Gena said, 'You can't go around looking mad and not saying hello to people. There's Ben Gazzara—say hello to Ben.' She was talking to me as if I were a child, but she was right. That's how I met Gazzara. Gena got me to be civilized."

Not quite. On sets of television plays and movies, Cassavetes argued constantly with producers, directors and writers—and earned a well-deserved reputation for being difficult to work with. "Aside from cameramen," he once said, "everyone else on a set is the actor's natural enemy, because they just don't give a damn about what they're doing. You've got to go to war with people like that." Fed up with acting in other people's movies, Cassavetes embarked in 1957 on one of his own: "Shadows," a black-and-white film he made on a shoestring budget by shooting in 16mm and blowing it up to 35mm, which accounted for the film's graininess. Although it fared well in Europe, "Shadows" was a monumental bust in the U.S., despite favorable comments from such critics as The



"It's bullshit when people say that ego is a bad trip. It's the only trip. You are who you are because of your ego, and without it nothing counts. My sense of self makes me competitive."



"I think sex is dirty. I like it dirty. And the thing that makes it dirty is to grab something clean and defile it. Yeah! Most movies can't convey that illicit kind of thing, even though they try."



"Being short is a great character builder, even though it sure as hell doesn't seem that way when you first start out. You have to compensate for it: You become funnier, more outgoing."



New York Times's Bosley Crowther, who called it "fitfully dynamic and endowed with a raw but vibrant strength." The major studios also liked what they saw and Cassavetes was summoned to California to direct "Too Late Blues" and "A Child Is Waiting"—both eminently forgettable. "You can do well in Hollywood as long as you don't kid yourself that they want creative ventures—and I kidded myself," he said afterward. "You cannot work for a studio and make a personal film."

After these two abortive directorial efforts, Cassavetes acted in several undistinguished movies (such as "The Killers"), bided his time and saved his money. Then, he began shooting "Faces"; when the film was released almost four years later, it earned critical praise—and more than \$7,000,000. Cassavetes, however, remained as abrasive as ever. When a magazine interviewer congratulated him on the complex optical effects achieved in both "Shadows" and "Faces" through the use of hand-held cameras, Cassavetes snapped, "You stupid bastard. I couldn't afford a tripod." If he has often been rude to directors, producers and reporters, the actors he's directed swear by him. Says Seymour Cassel, who co-starred in "Faces," "John's totally dedicated to his films, to giving 100 percent of himself. When people give him less, he gets annoyed. Wouldn't you?" Peter Falk and Ben Gazzara are no less lavish in their praise. "Few people have an instinctive understanding of what is fake and what is real and immediate," says Falk. "John is one of them, maybe the only one." Gazzara goes even further. "John creates an atmosphere in which the actor can do no wrong," he says. "'Husbands' was a labor of love, the greatest, most creative experience I've ever had."

Having written and directed two profitable pictures in a row, Cassavetes now has the financial footing to launch several new film projects. This fall he'll direct Gazzara in "Two Days in Rochester"; he's searching for a story for his other "Husbands" co-star, Peter Falk; and as we went to press, he had just begun shooting his newest movie, "Minnie and Moscovitz," starring his wife and Seymour Cassel. While it was in rehearsal, PLAYBOY assigned former Associate Editor Lawrence Linderman to interview the fiercely independent film maker.

Reports Linderman: "I met Cassavetes in his office at L. A.'s Universal City—he has three connecting rooms in an old, converted motel. When I entered, he was on the telephone noting box-office receipts for 'Husbands,' talking to a production assistant about shooting locations for 'Minnie and Moscovitz' and also casting for 'Two Days in Rochester.' At least two inches shorter than the five feet, nine inches listed in his studio biography, he rose to greet me—with enthusiasm. That's how John Cassavetes

does everything in life. He's an animated man who delights in clowning and doing imitations of his friends; when Peter Falk dropped by the office late that afternoon, Cassavetes entertained a roomful of people—and Falk most of all—by imitating Peter's speech at a banquet they'd both attended. Although his thick black hair has begun to sprout slivers of silver, Cassavetes looks younger than his 41 years, probably because he keeps himself in shape by playing as much softball, basketball, tennis and touch football as he has time for.

"As we got to know each other, it became apparent that Cassavetes prefers to go through life either up or down—nothing in between—and he probably loves being angry almost as much as he dotes on his own goofiness. He also loves to argue. Since I'd arrived at noon, he invited me to lunch at a bar nearby; and while we guzzled beer and ate meatball sandwiches, Cassavetes debated politics, mostly in an effort to force me to challenge him. He had several meetings planned for the afternoon and asked me to stop by later on, just before that day's rehearsal for 'Minnie and Moscovitz.'

"When I returned several hours later, Cassavetes' wife had already shown up—ahead of time. Gena Rowlands is a lushly beautiful blonde in her mid-30s and is almost as shy as her husband is extroverted; they complement each other perfectly. Cassavetes had spent some of the afternoon rewriting a scene in which Minnie, a single girl who's anxious to settle down, goes to dinner with a blind date. The table talk is uncomfortable and sinks to new lows as the scene unfolds. Cassavetes wanted to see how it played and, since no one else was around, he suggested I read it with Gena. I declined as politely as I could, but the pair of them shamed me into it. Cassavetes, of course, was as interested in putting me on the spot as he was in seeing how the scene played. I don't know whether he was being entertained by what he had written or by my delivery of it, but he kept snickering throughout my reading.

"Because the rehearsal lasted late into the evening, we weren't able to begin the interview until the next afternoon. Before we started, Cassavetes had been talking about direction. So, with the tape recorder switched on, I did my best to get even for the lousy trick he'd pulled on me the night before."

**PLAYBOY:** Before you became a director, didn't you once say, "On a film set, the only person less important than a director is a talent agent"?

**CASSAVETES:** When I said that, I was a giggling young actor; but I don't really take it back: I loathe directors.

**PLAYBOY:** Why?

**CASSAVETES:** Mainly because they decide. They decide this must be this, that must

be that, and they have set images of everything—and most directors don't allow for anyone else's images. God knows, there's no reason to be in the business except to express something, and directors are the only people who disallow that.

**PLAYBOY:** As a director, do you allow for other points of view?

**CASSAVETES:** I think I do; at least I try to. I'm always aware that somebody else on the set may have some good ideas. For instance, I sincerely think that Ben Gazzara knows a lot of things about acting and film making that I don't know, and I want them if he's got them. When we were working on *Husbands*, I wanted to know what he was thinking, because I wanted him at his best. Maybe what he knew made the movie a little better, and the same was true of Peter Falk. You have to work that way if you're worth anything as a director. Godard and Bergman work that way, but they're the exception.

**PLAYBOY:** Why?

**CASSAVETES:** Most directors are full of shit. They're concerned with nothing more than their own ambitions and pleasing a studio and an audience. And if it's not an audience they're concerned with, it's some personal problem that really has nothing to do with their work.

**PLAYBOY:** Which directors do you have in mind?

**CASSAVETES:** Look, this isn't a cop-out—at least I don't think it is—but I tune out directors that I hate until I forget their names. I remember all the directors I've ever liked working with as an actor—guys like Don Siegel and Robert Aldrich. The thing I feel directors have to realize today is that they must become like the Beatles: They must write their own material. It's really incredible that directors would allow someone else to write their scripts for them. I can understand that happening when a guy starts out, I suppose, but to make a career out of directing other people's work is just all wrong.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think screen adaptations of novels and plays are bad per se?

**CASSAVETES:** Yes. A director should create his own films.

**PLAYBOY:** Would you have refused an invitation to direct, say, *The Godfather*?

**CASSAVETES:** Absolutely. Why make *The Godfather*? It's an entertainment? Terrific. I consider myself an artist, and whether I'm a good artist or a bad one is beside the point. I address myself to the art of film, and making a best-selling book into a best-selling movie is in no way art to me. Francis Ford Coppola is a great young guy and a terrific artist, but it's obviously going to cause him a lot of pain to direct *The Godfather*.

**PLAYBOY:** Why should that necessarily be the case—and why is it obvious?

**CASSAVETES:** I have one answer to both questions: Bob Evans, Paramount's head of production. When he got his job,



Evans said he was going to give directors working with Paramount total creative control of their movies. That never really happened, of course, and to understand why, you'd have to understand the pure bullshit involved in dealing with major studios. At any rate, about \$150,000,000 after Evans became head of production, Paramount had made some winners, some losers, some pictures like *Catch-22*—God knows what that film was about; I still don't—and some pictures that were just lost in the shuffle. And then they make *Love Story* under tight studio control and it becomes a fantastic hit and Evans suddenly says he's a creative film maker. Did Evans direct it, write it, act in it, film it? He contributed his wife as the star. And when it turned out to be a winner, he announced that he's never going to give away creative control again. Give away? Who the hell gave him the right to give anything away? Evans is nothing! He's a hanger that was put in a closet and grew into a boy. The only thing he ever did was to manufacture a line of clothes. How dare he compare himself with an artist!

**PLAYBOY:** You sound as if you've had unfortunate business dealings with Evans.

**CASSAVETES:** No. In fact, I haven't had any dealings with him. As a person, Bob Evans is probably a very nice guy—but as an artist, you wouldn't even let him into the room. It's a wonderful thing for the film industry when it has a big picture, but the fact of the matter is that *Love Story* didn't have anything to do with Bobby Evans—any more than Paramount's failures had to do with him. Or with Charles Bluhdorn, head of Gulf & Western, which owns Paramount. Those people don't have anything to do with the making of a picture. They just say go ahead or don't go ahead; you can have the money to make a film or you can't have the money. If they were to tell the truth, studio executives would say, "We panic when they spend too much and we feel elated when movie-makers finish a picture on time and don't spend a lot of our money on it. Then we sit down and look at the picture and we like it or we don't like it. But we really don't know if the public will like it or not and we get worried because there's a lot of money at stake." That's the truth about those people.

**PLAYBOY:** By "those people" do you mean not merely Bob Evans and Paramount but all the major studios and their top executives?

**CASSAVETES:** It's true about everybody who's not involved in making a movie but only in financing one. No head of any major studio today has ever made a film himself, has ever sweated through the ordeal a moviemaker has to go through to get a picture filmed. They've only dealt with money, and anyone who says otherwise is a goddamned liar. Robert Evans is the laughingstock of Hollywood,

and I'm just using him as an example, because he said about the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you as outspoken in your dealings with studio executives as you're being with us?

**CASSAVETES:** I don't edit what I say for anybody, but not all studio executives are dumb. Studios should have no pretense about what they are: moviemakers. They should stick with what they know how to do; and some of them do. But by the same token, an artist shouldn't interfere with a studio on money matters. If he does, he's stupid; because if he gets concerned with money matters, it's going to drain energy from his films, maybe even make him a little nuts. I'm probably a genius at business, but I have two producers to take care of that end of a film for me, because if I get too involved in the finances, I'll be distracted from my real work, which is moviemaking, not bookkeeping. In *Husbands*, if I had devoted more time to the budget, it would have taken away from the time I spent off the set with Benny and Peter, which would have affected my directing, writing and acting.

**PLAYBOY:** Why did you choose Falk and Gazzara to co-star with you in *Husbands*?

**CASSAVETES:** No special reason except that I thought they'd be right for it and that the three of us would work together well.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you?

**CASSAVETES:** We worked well together. And we became friends on a level that's unqualified by duty or loyalty; those things don't count. The only thing that counts is that you're all doing the same thing, you're testing each other, testing yourself. In that situation, each actor is thinking, "How far up can I reach?" That's selfish—and honest. I don't think Peter and Benny were too concerned about how far I could go as a director; they were thinking about how far they could go as actors. And, in a realistic sense, Benny couldn't go anyplace unless Peter was good and unless I was good. So we knew we had to work on that level, and in order to do that, we had to get tight with each other.

**PLAYBOY:** Did the three of you hit it off personally from the beginning?

**CASSAVETES:** No, we were very wary of each other. We were all terrified that the three of us would get into a boring conversation and cease to be friends, which would make it impossible as actors to assume the friendship we needed as a background for our characters. One of the first nights we got together, we went to a bar and the table talk dipped, really got bad. Our characters' names at that point were Benny, John and Peter, because it's difficult for me to write for anonymous identities. To break what was getting to be a desperate silence, I said, "Look, since we have to come up with names sooner or later, why don't we each think of some? Let's all choose

the names for our characters—and whatever names we want, we'll have in the movie." We started to talk about them, and it reminded me of a bunch of pregnant women talking about their children.

Anyway, the first thing Peter said was, "I like Archie." And I answered, "C'mon, Peter, you can't be an Archie." To which he replied, "Jesus Christ, John, first you tell us to choose our own names, then when we do it, you say we can't. This is freedom?" Benny, not listening to Peter at all, said, "I'd like to be called Harold, after Harold's Show Spot," a New York bar he used to frequent. Then he thought for a second and said, "Or we could call me Harry—Harold will know who I mean." So he became Harry; Peter was Archie; and I always liked the name Gus, because it was Greek and a good name. By the end of the evening, we were really able to talk to each other, and when the picture began shooting, we were buddies. You need friends to function better; but that was our problem with the picture. When *Husbands* was finished, we all had a terribly empty feeling. The main reason we did so much press stuff together afterward—talk shows and interviews—was that we didn't want to give it up.

**PLAYBOY:** Is your relationship with Falk and Gazzara similar to the relationship of the three characters in the movie?

**CASSAVETES:** We lapsed into that once in a while after the film, but more infrequently as time went by. Certain parts of Peter and Benny are close to Archie and Harry, but it's really impossible to say which parts those are.

**PLAYBOY:** Were there any times on camera when you or Gazzara or Falk was being put down by the other two guys and reacted personally?

**CASSAVETES:** Sure, it was all personal—which is the point actors try to get to, where they can genuinely react to what you're saying. In *Husbands*, Gazzara's character was continually frozen out by me and Falk—and Benny was really getting personally paranoid about it. In a three-person relationship, there's always one guy on the outside, and during the picture, Benny was usually it.

**PLAYBOY:** When the three of you get together today, is Gazzara still the odd man out?

**CASSAVETES:** No, not at all. I would say that Benny's the motivating force in our friendship; he's probably the most articulate of the three of us. Not that Peter isn't articulate, but often he chooses not to be; he tends to be a little more contained. But when something displeases him, he'll come out of that container in a split second.

**PLAYBOY:** Though you were more or less an equal acting partner with them, you had final authority over Falk and Gazzara as the director. Did you have any



difficulties playing that dual role?

**CASSAVETES:** I don't ever have trouble with authority. I don't relate like that to the position, mainly because I'm not *aware* of the position. The title of director or actor is only to establish continuity in our business. Ben and Peter couldn't *make* me a director. Either I'm a director or I'm not. Either they would have respect for me or they wouldn't, and that's not something you get on demand. So I didn't worry about it. Instead, we addressed ourselves to the problems at hand, and sometimes Benny solved them, sometimes Peter solved them and sometimes I did. As a director, I don't have any conditions except to enjoy myself while filming and to have the people I'm working with do the same. But I wouldn't want you to think the three of us made the movie without any disputes. We still have some violent disagreements about the film today; Benny and Peter disagree with me on a lot of things.

**PLAYBOY:** Like what?

**CASSAVETES:** I can't really tell you, because if I understood them, I would have found a way to resolve them. Our biggest point of dispute had to do with the film's length; we were under a lot of pressure to make it shorter than 139 minutes, which the studio felt would result in bigger audiences. They may have been right. I could see Benny's and Peter's anxiety about that, but I could feel my own stubbornness, and I still say that our bargain was with purity and not with success.

Look, many people walked out on *Husbands*; I'm aware of that because Columbia would call me up to report that 52 people had stormed out of one theater in one day. Well, *Husbands* is an extremely entertaining film in spots, just as I think life is extremely entertaining in spots. Like life, it's also very slow and depressing in areas. The one thing it's not is a shorthand film. I won't make shorthand films, because I don't want to manipulate audiences into assuming quick, manufactured truths. If I had my way, *Husbands* would be twice as long as it is and *everyone* could walk out if they wanted to. Maybe I'll get better, but I can't change a movie merely to pacify people.

A lot of people got uptight about the scene in which Peter and I vomit in the men's room of a bar. The characters weren't vomiting just because they happened to be drunk; they got drunk so they could vomit—vomit for their dead friend. Some people may find that disgusting, but that's their problem. When somebody dies, I want to feel something. I want to be so upset that I could cry, throw up, feel the loss deeply. If that offends some people, then let them be offended.

**PLAYBOY:** Had Gazzara and Falk ever

approached moviemaking in that way before *Husbands*?

**CASSAVETES:** Peter says no, that this was the first experience he's had where working was really fun, where he was really creating a character and much of the character's dialog. I think that in Benny's first film—*The Strange One*, which he also did on Broadway—he probably worked in a freer way than usual. All of us were affected—most of it very positive—by making *Husbands*. Only time will tell if their good feelings about the film will hold, but at least it was an experience the three of us will never discount. I don't think three guys could get much closer to each other than we did.

**PLAYBOY:** Was all the physical touching among the three of you intentional?

**CASSAVETES:** No, not at all. Benny, for instance, is a thoroughly outgoing man, the kind of person who sees you, throws his arms around you, hugs and kisses you, and there's absolutely no feeling of self-consciousness about it; it's just his greeting, a very Mediterranean greeting. I guess. I always hugged my family and kissed them and still do with my son, who's 11. Peter's just a little bit more reserved than Benny and me—and he's a *very* exuberant person. Our backgrounds really show up in our friendship—Benny's Sicilian, I'm Greek and Peter's Jewish. I suppose we did touch a lot, but I'm not defensive about it.

**PLAYBOY:** It didn't seem that way in the film. After Gazzara has informed you and Falk that except for sex, he loves the two of you more than his wife, he delivers his self-kidding "fairy Harry" line, lest anyone think he's homosexual. Did you think such a disclaimer was necessary?

**CASSAVETES:** When Benny dropped that "fairy Harry" line on us, we all thought it was funny, because he was saying that maybe he'd be better off if he *was* queer, an absurd thought, something a million miles away from the characters. That was an improvised line; in fact, the whole moment was improvised. I don't know if the cold reality would be all that humorous for the character, but the feeling was comical.

**PLAYBOY:** *Husbands*—and *Faces* before it—deals with many sexual matters, yet there was no nudity in either film. Why?

**CASSAVETES:** Probably because I only like to see beautiful people nude, and in *Husbands*, neither myself, Falk or Gazzara is too much to look at naked. Peter and Benny might disagree. In *Husbands*, the girl I rolled around in bed with was tall and slim and looked terrific in her clothes, but I don't think she would have looked all that good undressed. I don't know, it just seemed that we could do the movie without it. I really think nudity in films is being overdone anyway.

**PLAYBOY:** Yet you've played nude scenes in other films, haven't you?

**CASSAVETES:** Don't remind me. I don't think there's anything morally wrong with seeing a nude body on the screen, but it offends me to watch people kiss without genuine love or passion. I don't think I've ever seen a good picture helped or hurt by nudity, but I've seen lots of pictures where nudity was self-conscious, where it was apparent that the actors were uncomfortable. Maybe I just can't handle the idea of seeing something on screen that's so personal—and dirty.

**PLAYBOY:** Dirty?

**CASSAVETES:** I think sex *is* dirty. I *like* it dirty. And the thing that makes it dirty is to grab something clean and *defile* it! Yeah! Most movies can't convey that illicit kind of thing, even though they try. I thought the nudity in *Rosemary's Baby* was called for. It didn't offend me as an actor.

**PLAYBOY:** Why do you think nude scenes have become almost obligatory?

**CASSAVETES:** The reason there's so much nudity in movies today is that we're becoming a voyeuristic society, and producers are responding to that demand with a great big supply. Not only are we becoming more voyeuristic, but I also think we're starting to lose faith in the idea that one man and one woman can totally please each other in bed. Sex is becoming something of a community activity; more and more people have to hop into the sack together in order for all of them to achieve sexual satisfaction. I wouldn't want to interfere with anyone's right to conduct orgies, you understand, but I personally think that kind of thing finally robs sex of all its delicious and very private pleasures. When sex becomes commonplace, when the girl you want is trying out half your suburban community and the same is true of you, where are the romantic and secret pleasures you need out of sex? I don't like sex to be ordinary and rational and organized and sane. But I don't like sex in groups and I believe in—and practice—fidelity in marriage. Maybe I should have gotten some of that into the movie, but *Husbands* dealt with the problems of three men facing middle age and all terribly affected by the death of their friend.

**PLAYBOY:** Is that what you were trying to say in the movie?

**CASSAVETES:** I don't know if the movie *tried* to make a statement; it either said something or it didn't. I'm really unable to interpret it. I've talked to people who've liked *Husbands* and some who think it's the saddest movie they've ever seen. I find that hard to understand. In the last scene in the movie, for instance, a lot of people think that when I return home and my two kids come out to see me—those were my own children, Nick and Xan—I'm kind of resigned to my lousy life and my lousy marriage. But that wasn't the case at all. The fact that Gus was about to get some heat from his wife because he'd gone off for a weekend in



London isn't unpleasant to me. It's kind of flattering, really, when a man goes home to his wife and gets some static that way. You don't want too much of it, but you actually *need* a little bit—it's an indication that there's something there, that we're living, that people care, that our silly endeavors have some meaning.

Which is why I can't see that scene as sad. Anyway, *Husbands* is over and done with and I'm now in the middle of the next movie, *Minnie and Moscovitz*.

**PLAYBOY:** What's it about?

**CASSAVETES:** It's a film about why two people get married, starring Gena Rowlands and Seymour Cassel, who did such a great job in *Faces*. Also appearing in the film will be my entire family on both sides and Seymour's entire family. As the casting might indicate, I believe totally in nepotism.

**PLAYBOY:** Why?

**CASSAVETES:** Because it impresses the hell out of my family and friends. Anyway, I conceived of *Minnie and Moscovitz* in early February and got the company, cast and script together within a couple of weeks. It didn't take long to write, because the idea has been around in my head for a while: how and why people get married. It's funny, I've always been against the institution of marriage, even though I've been at it—with Gena—for quite a while. And rewarded by it. But I don't really approve of a lot of marriages, because they seem to be false and lacking in spirit and individuality. I'm troubled by the idea that so many people get divorced and married again, and the idea that they have to say "I love you" and go through all the adjustment stuff again. I think the best way to examine a man and a woman and their singularity is through the institution of marriage. And both Minnie and Moscovitz are very singular people.

**PLAYBOY:** In what way?

**CASSAVETES:** Gena plays Minnie, a girl whose love affairs have all been with married men, and who's tried to fill her life up with work and hobbies. At the point you meet her in the movie, she's just decided to get married, so that she can fulfill herself as a woman; before it's too late, she wants to have a home and children, build her future and find a way to take care of her mother. Women have a tendency, when they get married, to say, "All right, I will now set my life in order," which is what Gena's character does. Seymour plays Moscovitz, a funny long-haired drifter who meets Gena at his place of business; he parks cars at a restaurant she wanders into. Like any guy, his instinct is to just go with the marriage thing; if you love a woman, you don't think marriage will change the relationship. The shock is that it does. Depending on the girl, sometimes it's for the better, sometimes it's for the worse. But it's always a

problem, because when a woman gets married, she insists on a new maturity while still holding onto the fun; a man doesn't usually know how to balance that combination very well, so either he tries to keep the fun or he gets terribly serious about being mature; he's usually unable to do both things.

**PLAYBOY:** Does directing your wife in a film—as you did in *Faces*—put strains on your marriage?

**CASSAVETES:** No, we've never had any problems that way. Gena is an actress and, therefore, is always looking to better her part or at least protect it; that's the only problem actors and directors ever have. Actors—and Gena is no exception—always worry that some dumb director will come along with a theory, tear up the script and, in the process, ruin their part. As a director, I have to reassure Gena that I won't do that and ask her to have confidence in me not to do that. We really have no problems on that score. As a matter of fact, because of the very personal nature of the way I work, directing my wife is probably easier than directing a woman I don't know.

**PLAYBOY:** You seem to be a happily married man, but two of the three pictures you've written and directed independently—*Faces* and *Husbands*—depict marriage as an excruciating state of male incarceration. Do you feel that way?

**CASSAVETES:** No, I don't feel like a prisoner at all. I just couldn't compare bachelorhood with marriage. The only things I remember about bachelorhood are loneliness, tiredness, sleeplessness and a certain camaraderie—based on a mutual solitude—that I shared with a lot of other young guys at the time. But I couldn't go back to that now. I look at my three kids and they're terrific; they give me a lot of pleasure, a lot of pain and a lot of concern—but I love them all. I love them on their own terms, not just because they're kids or because they're *my* kids; life is just better with them around. I enjoy Gena because she enjoys some of the same things I do, because she hates some of the things I like and because I hate some of the things *she* likes. We keep learning how to play together, so that I can step on her toes gently and she can step on mine gently and we can make a lot of noise. Our kids understand it to the point where we've all become some sort of a team, a group of people who really enjoy each other.

I don't think of our house as a prison, either, and I enjoy going back to it. That's a result of a hard struggle by my wife to make my home life as good as my outside life—and I have a terrific outside life. I enjoy my work, my friends, putting things together, being clever, being stupid, creating things, not creating things, losing and winning. And then I go home, and what has my

house got in it? It's got a way of life much more than it has people. I can feel the walls coming in on me when it's bad; but I can also feel a marvelous joy, a joy that means some kids tumbling down the stairs and almost breaking their necks, and me seeing where my kids are at and knowing that in order for them to really gain something from us, we have to give them something of ourselves. And I don't have to do it in a rush, because it's cool, it's going to be there for a long time. It's the same thing with my wife.

**PLAYBOY:** Tell us more about her.

**CASSAVETES:** She has a terrific sense of humor. And she's beautiful, a woman I'm always attracted to. But I really don't think of her when I'm away from her, and I hope she doesn't think of me when she's away from me. I don't think about my children when I'm away from them, either. I think about them and her when we're together. At the end of the day, though, when it's time to go home, I want to go home. I know a lot of people who don't like their families and who don't like going home. There are a lot of reasons for it, and most of them are sexual—and lead to withdrawal. I know that the people I see who don't get along at home don't get along in their lives. Oh, they can be socially acceptable and they can be polite, but they don't like to go to work and they don't like to go home. I don't say I have a great life, but I just don't know any better. If it's bad, I'm certainly not feeling any pain from it. I'm feeling joy from it, so I don't question it.

**PLAYBOY:** Don't you and Gena ever argue?

**CASSAVETES:** Yeah, we fight. I believe that any two people who disagree should really go as far as they can, and I think we do: screaming, yelling, petty acts of hostility and cruelty—but it's all meaningless. It's always meaningless if that essential love is there. Like a rubber band that you stretch out, no matter how far you pull it—and even if it stings snapping back—it returns, the love reappears.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you try to do things as a couple?

**CASSAVETES:** No, I hate that. I only want to be with my wife when I want to be, and I hope she only likes to be with me when she wants to be. It would be disastrous to have to do a lot of things you don't really want to do. I think we both try to consider the other person's true feelings. For instance, I'm not introverted, but when I go home, I like some private breathing time. It takes a while for a woman to get used to that, and not to feel something is wrong with her if her man wants five minutes alone just to go upstairs and wash and maybe smoke a cigarette. It's a serene pleasure: Don't bring me a drink, don't bring me anything, I just want to be left alone, and then, when I come down, I feel



great, refreshed. Just because you're married doesn't mean you have to cease being an individual and stop doing the things you like to do.

**PLAYBOY:** Didn't Gena virtually give up her acting career to be your wife?

**CASSAVETES:** I don't know—only she would know that. I'm sure that if we were split up for long periods of time, our marriage wouldn't be as good as it is. We both considered that and made a pact that we'd always avoid long separations. When we first got married and were both acting, she would go with me if a job took me out of town. And if Gena got a job, I would go with her. We worked it out so that the jobs never took precedence over something more real—us.

**PLAYBOY:** Have you and Gena always gotten along so well?

**CASSAVETES:** Hell, no! The first time I saw her, I was with an actor, John Ericson, and I said, "That's the girl I'm going to marry." Well, it was a hard struggle to convince her. From my point of view, if I was going to give my precious self to a woman, she was going to have to love me unconditionally. I kept Gena under constant scrutiny, I was enormously jealous, filled with suspicions about other men and with the terror that those suspicions might be correct. She wouldn't put up with that. And finally I relaxed.

**PLAYBOY:** Is it important for you to be dominant in your marriage?

**CASSAVETES:** No. The important thing is that I am not her and she is not me, and that we remain individuals. It takes a long time to come to those conclusions, and that's the best way for us to work it.

**PLAYBOY:** Have you made any films you've never seen?

**CASSAVETES:** No, I've eventually seen them all, thanks to television. Some night I'll have nothing to do, the tube will be on about two in the morning and some cruddy film I did will start showing. Ah, what a wonderful feeling it was to see *Crime in the Streets* again recently. It was one of my first movies and I played a juvenile delinquent and my usual prop was a switchblade knife. I also watched *Edge of the City* on TV not long ago. In it, Sidney Poitier and I played two longshoremen who kept getting pushed around by Jack Warden—who eventually killed Sidney in a cargo-hook duel, and who I somehow managed to beat up at the end of the movie.

**PLAYBOY:** There's even more violence in films today than there was then. Why?

**CASSAVETES:** I don't know why it's escalated, but there's always been an appetite for that sort of thing, and I think there always will be. We all secretly crave it, for whatever reasons. And I'm no exception. I'll never forget the violence of *Public Enemy*, with James Cagney. I loved it. I didn't care *how* many people

got killed. But Cagney played a man you didn't want to see die. Whether he was right or wrong, he was a guy who could stand up to life and to as many gangsters as would come up against him; he was the toughest guy I'd ever seen. I'm sure Cagney's height didn't make any difference; you'd never believe he couldn't win any fight he got into. He was my childhood idol, the guy most responsible, I suppose, for getting me into films; I loved him. I love everything I've ever heard or seen about the man—especially his retirement. He stopped acting because he felt he just couldn't cut it anymore and he didn't want to louse up what people thought of him. He got old and content and he knew he no longer had the drive that had made him a great star. Cagney was an original. He set up a terrific force on screen; he always portrayed an average guy who could somehow knock down giants. He was almost like a savior to all the short guys in the world, of whom I am one. As a kid, I idolized him just because he was short—and tough.

**PLAYBOY:** Did your shortness cause you any grief while you were growing up?

**CASSAVETES:** I guess it did. When I was 14 years old, I think I was just about five feet tall, which meant that I had enormous problems getting dates with girls. So you have to compensate for it: You become funnier, more outgoing. Being short is a great character builder, even though it sure as hell doesn't seem that way when you first start out. It was a hell of a handicap, but it didn't louse up my childhood, because I had—and still have—a very rich family life. My mother is a warm and wonderful woman and my father is an extraordinary man.

**PLAYBOY:** In what way?

**CASSAVETES:** That's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?

**PLAYBOY:** Why not?

**CASSAVETES:** You asked for it. My father came over to America with his kid brother when he was 11 years old. He was born in Piraeus, Greece, and heard about this country when a missionary came through town one day, saying there was brotherhood in America, that if you wanted to work and learn, the American people would open their arms and hearts to you. Soon afterward, my father, his younger brother and sister began their trek here, going first to Bulgaria—where they deposited my aunt with relatives—and then to Constantinople, where they worked until they saved up boat fare. When my dad and his brother arrived at Ellis Island and were asked who they knew in America, my father, who'd heard of Providence, Rhode Island, said he knew someone there. He was asked for written proof of this and he said he didn't have any because the man, a very wealthy man, had arrived in New York on the boat before theirs. And then my dad pulled out his big line: "I want to work and I want to learn."

**PLAYBOY:** Did it produce results?

**CASSAVETES:** Absolutely; an immigration officer gave my father and my uncle five dollars for bus fare to Providence, and when they arrived, they didn't know a soul. My dad began looking for Greeks all over town, searching for that familiar dark-olive skin tone, until he found fellow immigrants who gave him work. Shortly after that, he got a job just outside Boston, working in an ice-cream parlor. And five years after he'd come here—at the age of 16—he'd really put it all together: He'd learned English to add to the Greek and French he already knew, he'd gone through the Mount Hermon School, near Boston, in six months on a scholarship, and he'd won a partial scholarship to Harvard University, where he worked his way through school. And every time he'd run into money difficulties, he'd say to someone, "I want to work and I want to learn," and somehow he'd get the money he needed to continue his studies. And he *did* work and learn.

The man is older now and he still works close to 18 hours a day. He won't stop; he's in travel and immigration, and he has plans to make millions. He's probably responsible for bringing in most of the Greeks who now live in America. My mother calls him the champion of lost causes; he's one of those Greek-American patriots who tries to move mountains. Right now, he's fighting an archbishop because the archbishop wants to replace Greek with English as the language in church services. A few months ago, I was having dinner with my mother and I asked her where my dad was. He was out on the street picketing the archbishop.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you feel a strong Greek identity?

**CASSAVETES:** I think of it as a great club to belong to. I speak Greek a little bit and, like any member of an ethnic group, I derive a good deal of pride from belonging. But I don't really carry it further than that.

**PLAYBOY:** How did you feel about the overthrow of the Greek government by the military junta?

**CASSAVETES:** Bad. Most Greeks are really insane about it, because their whole cultural background is freedom, and when somebody destroys that freedom, they become a little hot on the subject. My father's more philosophical and fatalistic about it. When I asked him what he thought about the military coup, he told me that governments are only people and that, like people, they rise and fall. But the junta, he said, is never going to starve to death—only poor Greeks, who will go hungry in the name of freedom, will starve. Of course, he also said that poor Greeks weren't much better off under the more liberal regime. The country still feeds off tourism, though, and with tourism falling off because of the political situation, the poor won't survive as well



as they used to. Basically, my dad feels that violence is terrible and that politics is always temporary. But at the same time—and I share this with him—he would die for what he believes in. One day, in fact, he called me up and told me, “Listen, these young people of America are wonderful, and if you want to get involved with them and die for them, I just want you to know it’s all right, I’ll be proud of you. But don’t tell your mother I said so.”

**PLAYBOY:** Would you get involved in radical politics to the point of endangering your life?

**CASSAVETES:** No, I wouldn’t. I agree with a lot of what the kids are saying, but two things throw me off. It really disgusts me that most white militants hate middle-class people—and are middle-class themselves. That really makes me ill, because those kids ought to understand *why* their parents are middle-class, know about their parents’ fears; but instead of caring, they’d rather hate. These kids are so ashamed of their backgrounds that they go to all kinds of lengths to deny the fact that they’re middle-class; what makes them *not* middle-class now—sandals and jeans? An even more disturbing point to me is that the kids’ revolution began with peace and love, full of laughter and a real commitment to nonviolence. That’s all over now. It seems they’re only responding to establishment violence—and maybe they’re right—but by doing that, they make themselves no better than what they hate. And besides that, it won’t work. There’s no way the kids can take on the military.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think a successful revolution is impossible, then?

**CASSAVETES:** No, ideas don’t die, only movements die. The ideas that came out of the youth revolution—fairness, love and a feeling for all of humanity rather than for the flag—are important ideas and I don’t think they will die. For my money, Martin Luther King will live far longer than any militant. King was killed, but his ideas may live on for thousands of years.

**PLAYBOY:** If you had a chance to talk to him, what would you say to a revolutionary such as Jerry Rubin?

**CASSAVETES:** I think Rubin’s terrific. God knows, Jerry Rubin might have been President of the United States—and *still* might be someday. He knows that you can’t listen to politicians too logically, because logic is ridiculous; logic has convinced everybody to do wrong things for centuries. But the truth is that people all want peace—peace of mind. And they need it as much as, if not more than, money. Ideals must be achieved by *caring*, not by force of any kind. It’s got to be done that way. The only response to violent revolution is violent repression. It’s an evolutionary process to get government changed; but it’s worth the wait, because

the quick way usually winds up costing a lot more than it gains. It takes courage to stick with ideals that change things slowly, but the whole idea of youth politics came out of love, and the kids shouldn’t desert it now; using force would make a lie out of everything they say they stand for. With Nixon in the White House, they may lose for now; but they’ll win in the end.

**PLAYBOY:** What kind of influence do you think Nixon has had on the country?

**CASSAVETES:** A miserable one. People who hate the militants and militancy but who don’t have the balls to go up against radicals themselves love this man, who says—through linguistic subterfuge—“I’m going to get rid of all these troublemakers.” He doesn’t come right out and say it; he has his Vice-President do it behind a cloak of euphemisms. And that’s the way most Americans like it. They don’t want to call it by its right name, but they fear and hate the radical young and they’d like to see them dead. But I don’t think Nixon will ever act on that impulse; it would alienate too many people he needs to vote for him in ’72.

**PLAYBOY:** We gather you won’t be among those who do.

**CASSAVETES:** He never should have been President in the first place; but I wasn’t enthusiastic about Humphrey, either. They killed the guy *I* wanted. I think Bobby Kennedy would have helped this country turn away from the things that have been ruining it since World War Two.

**PLAYBOY:** What sorts of things?

**CASSAVETES:** Before that war, America was a country of great innocence and idealism. Since then, it’s been completely undermined by its people’s hunger for profits. And that hunger is not limited to any ethnic group. I see it in everyone—Italian-, English- and German-Americans, Irish Catholics and, yes, even Greeks. *Everybody’s* been going for the money and saying the hell with society. I see people just throwing away their values, all the things that their ancestors and fathers always treasured. They’ve put money up as the goal of life, but money is no measure of the value of a man—*any* man. I know a lot of millionaires who do nothing but sit alone in their houses and wish they could have a friend to drink with or a woman they could truly love. All they have is their money. But they’re not really greedy for money; they’re interested in the zeros—in the game of making two dollars into \$20 into \$2,000,000 into \$20,000,000; *nothing* is enough.

The only people really interested in money are those who don’t have any or who don’t have enough. People plunge their careers and their lives headlong into making money and when they get it, they don’t like it, they don’t need it and they don’t know what to do with it.

I think money is the last refuge of people who’ve been scared by life, whose only way to survive is to acquire as much money and power as they can—to protect themselves. But from what? We’ve got to realize that money is *useless* beyond whatever it takes to feed, clothe and house yourself. As a matter of fact, the more you have beyond that—whatever it takes to free you from those basic concerns—the more difficult it is to find out what really matters and to get it for yourself. That’s one of the things I want to say in my films. I’m not going to be able to change humanity all by myself, but I’m going to do my part of the work, even though it may make no dent on anybody. It may not work, it may even be stupid, but I have to try.

**PLAYBOY:** What are some of the other things you want to say in your films?

**CASSAVETES:** Well, I can’t influence anyone not to blow up the world and I can’t teach anyone to stop killing other people; even if I could, I think we should all know that by now. But it’s been eating at me that the same people who hate kids and blacks also hate Jews.

Anyone who can’t love will hate. It has no direction. It’s just there. But make that hater love—even for a moment. That’s what I’m trying to do. That’s what a lot of the young people are trying to do. But the odds are overwhelming. There’s too much hate and killing. The tragedy I feel now is that our 18- and 19-year-olds think about death. That’s an awful waste; it makes them old before their time. What we have today is a generation of young people who are already ancient—deadly serious and deadly dull. At 41, I’ve felt all the pain, smiled all my big smiles, proved myself to myself; what I have or haven’t got as a man isn’t going to change. But a young guy has a life to live, women to find, adventures to fly to. And if he doesn’t do it, he’s a fool, because by the time you’re 30, it’s marrying time.

**PLAYBOY:** Who says so?

**CASSAVETES:** I do. At that point, you’re ready to meet a woman—a woman who wants the same things women have always wanted: security and a place to put that baby. That’s part of the mystery of living, and when you get caught, remember we’re all little fish in the same sea and we really *want* to get caught, even though our tails are going to stop fluttering and we’re going to get eaten up for good. But if we’ve spent our youth living life to the hilt, we won’t mind it too much. In fact, we may even enjoy it.

**PLAYBOY:** Does it disturb you to realize you’re middle-aged?

**CASSAVETES:** No, but at 20, you would never have caught me getting overly serious for too long, because I was into living and not into talking. Looking back on it now, I can see that my parents just opened themselves up to me and didn’t



worry. I've come to the conclusion that the only thing you can give your child is love—and if you do, there's no way to be wrong. You can be old-fashioned, new-fashioned, interfashioned or whatever, but if you really care, the kid will feel it. I get mad when I hear guys knocking parents who love them. The insensitivity that a kid has toward his parents is a natural thing, but it should never take the form of hostility and it shouldn't last beyond adolescence. A young man shouldn't worry about being suckled, he should just go out and be a man. Go into a diner and sit down with a bunch of hard-hats. Sit there and drink coffee with them and feel your manhood with them. Go to all the places you're uncomfortable in and prove yourself, because someday you're going to *have* to prove yourself. Do it while you're young and you'll never regret it. Take the word of a college dropout.

**PLAYBOY:** What school did you drop out of?

**CASSAVETES:** *Schools.* I was a totally uninterested student in high school. I didn't want to go to college, because college in the Fifties was just a way of getting a diploma, that I. D. card which would permit you to get a job after graduation. But it was important to my family that I go to school, and when my brother got out of the Army, he enrolled at Mohawk College, a veterans' school in Upstate New York; I went along. I stayed there for a year and then Mohawk was closed down and I went to Champlain, another New York State veterans' college. But I got kicked out of there pretty quick, mainly because I didn't want to be there. Classes were held in huge assembly rooms seating more than 200 students; the teachers would shout into microphones, and I wasn't getting anything out of it.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you give it a fair chance?

**CASSAVETES:** I didn't like the feel of school, so I split. I hitchhiked down to Florida for a few weeks and when I got back home, I bumped into some friends of mine—funny, funny guys, who said, "Hey, John, we just signed up at the American Academy to become *actors*, man. Come with us—the school is *packed* with girls!" So I went home to ask my family for some loot to go to the American Academy. I told my father—who was very disappointed about my leaving college—"Dad, I want to be an actor." That was a lie, of course; I just wanted to be near all those girls. My mother said, "An actor?!" But my father said, "At least it's something, let him be *something*." He finally gave me permission to go, provided I paid my way through, so I did some part-time work for a few months and then I asked him for some money and he gave it to me. Up until then, all I'd ever done was play basketball and run out with girls. I'd never studied or applied myself or



been anything but completely lazy—and I'd never felt guilty about it. I couldn't wait for the next day to come, so I could get involved with some new girl and promise to marry her and then stop seeing her. In those days, I promised to marry just about every girl I took out. I felt if that's what they wanted to hear, that's what I'd tell them. Maybe it was dishonest, but at the time, it didn't seem so. And then I enrolled at the American Academy and I loved it.

**PLAYBOY:** Why?

**CASSAVETES:** Because it was women—all kinds of girls—and showing off. I'd get up on stage and shout; a couple of the teachers liked that, because it showed enthusiasm. For a long time, that's all I thought acting was about—to show a lot of emotion. The louder I screamed, the better I thought I was. I really didn't get involved with acting except through osmosis, absorbing the life we led, learning from people I was lucky enough to meet. I attended the academy for a year and then spent two years making the rounds. I thought I was brilliant when I finally got my first acting job. I was an extra on a *Lux Video Theater* show. When it was over, I raced from the TV studio to where all my friends had met to watch the show and I said, "Did you see me?" They said they hadn't, even though they'd looked for me. I got indignant. "You morons," I shouted, "I was the guy in the iron mask who ran on and said 'Halt!' I was magnificent!"

**PLAYBOY:** Did you begin getting work regularly after that?

**CASSAVETES:** Yes, but not as an actor; I was hired by Gregory Ratoff—first as an extra in a film, then as an assistant stage manager on a play. My next acting job didn't come until months later, when I got a part on *Omnibus*. It was a Budd Schulberg script about a bullfighter and very easy to read. I weighed about 128 pounds in those days and really looked a little like a bullfighter; I was skinny and dark. And I'd been around New York enough to pick up on a Mexican accent.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you good in the role?

**CASSAVETES:** Very. The day after the show, as a matter of fact, 20th Century-Fox called my agent and asked, "Who was that Mexican guy? Does he speak any English? We may have a part for him." And a few days later, I was on my way to Hollywood for a screen test. I was up for the lead in Michael Curtiz' *The Egyptian*, a picture budgeted at \$5,000,000, which in those days was enormous. Marlon Brando had just walked out on the production and Curtiz had decided he wanted to go with an unknown. Edmund Purdom finally got it, but I had my shot.

Anyway, after the *Omnibus* show, I went into a bar to bask in my great reviews and I bumped into a director named Carter Blake, who'd been one of

my teachers at the American Academy. Carter said, "You really did a good job." And I said, "Why, thank you, Carter," really feeling and acting like a contemporary. And then he said, "You know, you're not going to do another job like that for a long, long time. You'll probably never work that hard again." I thought, "Hey, this guy's a dope," but he turned out to be right. There's something about the motivation of fear that makes you work terribly hard. That's why I like to mix professionals with amateurs in my films: Amateurs work amazingly hard. What professionals can give amateurs in the way of help, amateurs can give professionals in the way of inspiration. So everything I use as a director, I learned along the way by making all the errors myself.

**PLAYBOY:** What turned you on to directing?

**CASSAVETES:** As an actor, you don't get the freedom to function the way you'd like to; I know I never got the lines I wanted under other directors. I also wanted to direct because I wanted to revel in my individuality—to find out everything I'm capable of and to make the most of it, whether people like it or not. As a matter of fact, I even like it when they don't like my work. A lot of people absolutely hate my films, but that's fine, because I make films that *won't* please everyone, that actually cause a lot of pain to many people. I feel I've succeeded if I make them feel something—anything. Maybe I'm deceiving myself, but so what? I want to feel that I'm winning. I know that I don't function as a loser very well, and I didn't come into this world to be a loser. I want to win every game I can. I'm a complete egotist that way.

**PLAYBOY:** Does your ego ever interfere with your judgment?

**CASSAVETES:** My ego *determines* my judgment. I think it's bullshit when people say that ego is a bad trip. It's the *only* trip. You are who you are because of your ego, and without it, nothing counts. My sense of self makes me competitive, not with guys who are less talented than me but with people who are my equals or better. That's the kick for me.

**PLAYBOY:** Couldn't you be fulfilled as an artist by being competitive with yourself?

**CASSAVETES:** No, that's not good enough for me. I would feel a lot better if there were 90,000 fantastic artists in the movie business and I was one of them than if I was the only one. I once heard an actor friend of mine say, "God, I'm working with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn and they're so great it's frightening." That turned my stomach; I would want to act with Tracy and Hepburn and tear them to pieces! And I hope they'd have wanted to tear *me* to pieces. I wouldn't want them to be bad, either; I would want them to be terrific—but I

would want to be *more* terrific. There is no actor in the world, no *person* in the world, who doesn't want to be the best at his profession. I think the basic thing wrong with a lot of current social philosophy is that this simple fact is denied. The reward itself isn't important, but knowing you're the best is.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you, perhaps, more interested in being number one than in the art of film making?

**CASSAVETES:** Even though I want to be the best, I don't think the only reason I make films is to be the best at it. In being creative, you just have to find out what you're trying to say and then say it. That's what I do in my films and that's why I make films. After being an actor for a few years, you really don't care about money, fame or glory anymore; those things are good, but you need something more. That something more happened to me, like all good things in life seem to, through a lot of crazy circumstances and sheer luck. I'm a great believer in spontaneity, because I think planning is the most destructive thing in the world.

**PLAYBOY:** Why?

**CASSAVETES:** Because it kills the human spirit. So does too much discipline, because then you can't get caught up in the moment, and if you can't get caught up in the moment, life has no magic. Without the magic, we might as well all give up and admit we're going to be dead in a few years. Maybe we won't be able to breathe the cruddy air or we'll die in a car accident or some nut will shoot us or some asshole will drop the bomb. I think we need magic in our lives to take us away from those realities. That's what *Shadows*, my first picture as a director, did for me.

**PLAYBOY:** What were the "crazy circumstances" you mentioned?

**CASSAVETES:** I was waiting at a bus stop in New York when I saw an old friend of mine named Burt Lane. A few years before, we had spent about 30 weekends writing a script based on a book about Belmonte, the bullfighter. The characters had come alive for us; but when we finished it, Burt and I disagreed about one scene, and nothing—screaming, fistfights, you name it—could get us to resolve the situation. So, to show our manhood, we threw the script away: We both felt it would demonstrate that we had the confidence and ability to write again. Anyway, the next time I met Burt, he told me he was about to take a job at an advertising agency and I was stunned. "You can't do that, Burt," I told him. "I won't *let* a friend of mine do that. Why don't you teach? You know more about acting and writing than anybody in the world." So I got about 19 young actors to form a class and everybody paid two dollars a head, including me. We formed a workshop, I



started teaching one of the classes and I liked it.

*Shadows*  began as an improvisation the class was working on. I dreamed up some characters that were close to the people in the class, and then I kept changing the situations and ages of the characters until we all began to function as those characters at any given moment. During one class, I was so impressed by a particular improvisation that I said, "Hey, that would make a terrific movie." It was about a black girl who passes for white; she loses her white boyfriend when he meets her black brother. That night I was going on Jean Shepherd's *Night People* radio show, because he had plugged *Edge of the City*, which had just been released, and I wanted to thank him for it. I told Jean about the piece we had done in class and how it could be a good film and he asked if I thought I'd be able to raise the money for it. "If people really want to see a movie about people," I answered, "they should just contribute money." And the next day, \$2000 in dollar bills came in to Shepherd.

One soldier showed up with five dollars after hitchhiking 300 miles to give it to us. And some really weird girl came in off the street; she had a mustache and hair on her legs and the hair on her head was matted with dirt and she wore a filthy polka-dot dress; she was really bad. After walking into the workshop, this girl got down on her knees, grabbed my pants and said, "You are the Messiah." I had to look that one up. Anyway, she became our sound editor and soon straightened out her life. In fact, a lot of the people who worked on the film were people who were screwed up—and got straightened out working with the rest of us. From that point on, it didn't matter to me whether or not  *Shadows*  would be any good; it just became a way of life where you got close to people and where you could hear ideas that weren't full of shit.

**PLAYBOY:** How long did it take to complete the film?

**CASSAVETES:** When I started, I thought it would only take me a few months; it took three years. I made every mistake known to man; I can't even remember all the mistakes I made. I was so dumb! Having acted in movies, I kinda knew how they were made, so after doing some shooting, I'd shout out something like "Print take three!" I'd neglected to hire a script girl, however, so no one wrote down which take I wanted—with the astounding result that *all* the film was printed. It was really the height of ignorance in film making. But we just loved what we were doing; we thought we were the cat's nuts. I think  *Shadows*  was the first truly independent film ever made in New York, and by

that I mean we made it without having to be beholden to any investors.

**PLAYBOY:** How was  *Shadows*  received?

**CASSAVETES:** When we finished it, we had two midnight screenings at the Paris Theater in New York and they were both absolutely disastrous. There was only one person in the theater who liked the picture and it wasn't me—it was my father, who thought it was "pure." Not necessarily good, but pure. All our really close friends had shown up, people who had helped us, who had contributed to the film in dozens of ways and who really wanted  *Shadows*  to be good. But no one tried to phony up their reaction to it; one friend of mine patted me on the shoulder and said, "That's OK, John, you're still a good actor." I could see the flaws in  *Shadows*  myself: It was a totally intellectual film—and therefore less than human. I had fallen in love with the camera, with technique, with beautiful shots, with experimentation for its own sake.

After watching the screenings, I saw all that and I wanted to fix it up. I thought if I could shoot for ten more days, I'd be able to make it into what I'd originally visualized. So I went out to raise \$15,000 and three sources quickly promised \$5000 apiece. I got the cast together and started shooting, and then two of the investors decided they had better things to do with their dough. But by that time, I didn't mind their pulling out. I was really proud of the film.

**PLAYBOY:** Did the new version meet with success?

**CASSAVETES:** Nope, just a lot of indifference. And since the investors had pulled out, I was responsible for the film's debts. I had all kinds of bill collectors after me. Gena was pregnant at the time, and I was so busy with the movie that not until the day I finished reshooting did I become aware that within a week she was going to give birth to our first child. A couple of days before our son Nick was born, I got a telephone call from Universal. This guy told me he had a TV series for me called *Johnny Staccato*, all about this night-club piano player who caught crooks. I said "Bullshit!" and hung up. I looked at my wife and she said, "You're absolutely right, John, you can't do that stuff." Then I looked at her belly and called the guy right back. "I'm sorry, I didn't know who you were," I said. "I thought it was a put-on or something. Tell me more about this piano player." I signed to do the series, I paid off the bill collectors and I was able to cut and complete  *Shadows* .

**PLAYBOY:** Did you enjoy being Johnny Staccato?

**CASSAVETES:** No. I didn't. There were a lot of other things I wanted to do instead. But it wasn't a total bore. I directed five of the shows and tried to do each one differently, hoping to develop some

kind of style and technique. It was a pretty successful series, but after I finished paying off my bills, I used every possible method to get out of the show. I even went to the sponsors and told them their commercials were in bad taste. One of the sponsors was a deodorant company, and one of the commercials showed their product beneath a Greek statue while an announcer talked about "the mature male." I told them it was offensive to me as a Greek to put armpit soup under a masterpiece of Greek art.

**PLAYBOY:** Did they let you out of your contract?

**CASSAVETES:** No, it wasn't until I started criticizing them publicly that they let me leave; I can be a despicable person. I then called my agent and said, "Look, I think I'm dead in this town for a while. Can you get me a job in Europe?" I was given a part in *Middle of Nowhere*, a movie being made in Ireland. Gena was going to join me later, so I asked Seymour Cassel, who'd been associate producer on  *Shadows* , to go with me. Seymour did, and even got himself a role in the film. We had a ball in Ireland and, after the movie was finished, we went to London for a few days. While we were there, one of the directors of England's National Film Theater told me he'd heard of  *Shadows*  and he wanted to screen it. We made a date and I promptly forgot about it and returned to New York. A few weeks later, I got a frantic call, collect, from Seymour, who had decided to stay on in London. "Where's the film?" he screamed. "My God, they're holding this thing the day after tomorrow, it's a big event, everybody's gonna be in tuxes." He was talking about The Beat, Square and Cool Festival, a kind of underground-film competition. I sent the film over.

**PLAYBOY:** Did it win any awards?

**CASSAVETES:** All I heard was that the film arrived on time. Months went by, and I was about to buy a house in California, settle down and work as an actor again; I had long since forgotten about being a director. Then the phone rings and it's Seymour calling collect again. "Listen, John," he says, " *Shadows*  was a great success at the festival and the critics are still going crazy over it. You've got to come over here and we've got to sell the movie to a distributor—it's either now or never." I couldn't figure out why people were still going crazy over the picture, since it wasn't being shown anywhere, but I didn't question it; I arrived in London at six the next morning and called Seymour from the airport. He didn't want to see me just then—he was in bed with a girl. Seeing that I had come millions of miles at his request, I called him a son of a bitch and told him I was on my way over.

When I arrived, he was saying goodbye to his girl in the street, and when we went upstairs, I asked to see the

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## PLAYBOY INTERVIEW

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reviews he'd told me about. Well, Seymour looked around until he found an old sock in a drawer and in the sock was a tattered little piece of paper. It was a London *Times* clipping which stated that *Shadows* deserved a West End booking. That was the great review. "Are there any more?" I asked. Seymour couldn't remember any more, so, after calming down, I decided that since I was already in London, I might as well see if anything could be done for *Shadows*. *Johnny Staccato* had just started out on the BBC and was a big hit, so I was interviewed a lot and all kinds of people suddenly wanted to see *Shadows*.

Our timing couldn't have been better. There was a tremendous social and film revolution going on in England—the angry-young-man thing—and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was just

about to be made. The people who were part of that revolution saw that if *Shadows* were to be a success, they would have an opportunity to make the films they wanted. So all kinds of people got behind us and *Shadows* got reviews that were way beyond expectations. We became enormously successful in London; one night Seymour and I stood embracing and crying when we saw lines around the block outside the Academy Theater, where we'd opened. It was a thrilling experience, and the same thing happened when we played the Cinéma-thèque in Paris, and we also did well in Sweden.

Then Seymour took *Shadows* to the Venice Film Festival and we won the Critics' Award. British Lion bought the film; it was the first time a foreign company had ever acquired an Ameri-

can film and then released it in the U. S. But all that tremendous hoopla stayed on the other side of the Atlantic, I'm sorry to say. In America, we had what we started out with—a 16mm black-and-white, grainy, rule-breaking, nonimportant film that got shown only when someone was willing to do us a favor.

**PLAYBOY:** Then what did you do?

**CASSAVETES:** Aside from trying to get the picture exhibited, nothing. I played a lot of football with my friends; I tried to get acting jobs; but mostly, I just sat on my ass.

**PLAYBOY:** When did your career begin picking up again?

**CASSAVETES:** About a year later. Marty Rackin of Paramount had seen *Shadows* in London and liked it. He wanted me to fly out to California with a script and if he liked it, I could do it for Paramount. I immediately got hold of Dick Carr, a writer on the *Staccato* series, and we stayed up two days and two nights working on a script for *Too Late Blues*. We presented it to Rackin the morning after we finished it and that night Marty called to say that he loved it and that he wanted me to start on the film in two weeks. Just like that, Paramount had made me a producer-director. Well, what I didn't know then about producing I still don't know, but I was happy to get the job. Unfortunately, I also didn't know anything about directing at a major studio, so *Too Late Blues* never had a chance. I should have made the film my own way—in New York instead of California and not on an impossibly tight schedule. To do the film right, I needed six months, and I agreed to make it in 30 days—working with people who didn't like me, didn't trust me and didn't care about the film. I couldn't believe that anybody would put up money and not care about their own product.

I also blew it because I was so naïve. I would walk into the office to see Rackin and he'd say, "John, take off your director's hat, I want to talk to you as a producer." I would actually put my hand on my head, looking for a hat—a perfect moron. I didn't even know which departments to go to for what and how to get things done. Not only that, but I did a disgusting thing: Halfway through, I knew I wasn't making a good movie, so I did the best I could without really exerting myself. And all because I didn't know how to fight. I didn't even know you were supposed to fight.

**PLAYBOY:** What were you supposed to fight for—and with whom?

**CASSAVETES:** You're supposed to be a man. If you want to shoot a film in New

MALE THING





York because that's the best place to shoot it, then you fight for that, and if you lose, you don't make the movie. You're supposed to pick your own cast and how much you want to pay them, or else you quit. I'd learned all that by the end of *Too Late Blues*. Strangely enough, Marty Rackin still liked me and Paramount upped my salary to \$125,000 a picture. I told them I wouldn't do another film unless I wanted to do it and unless I could do it my own way.

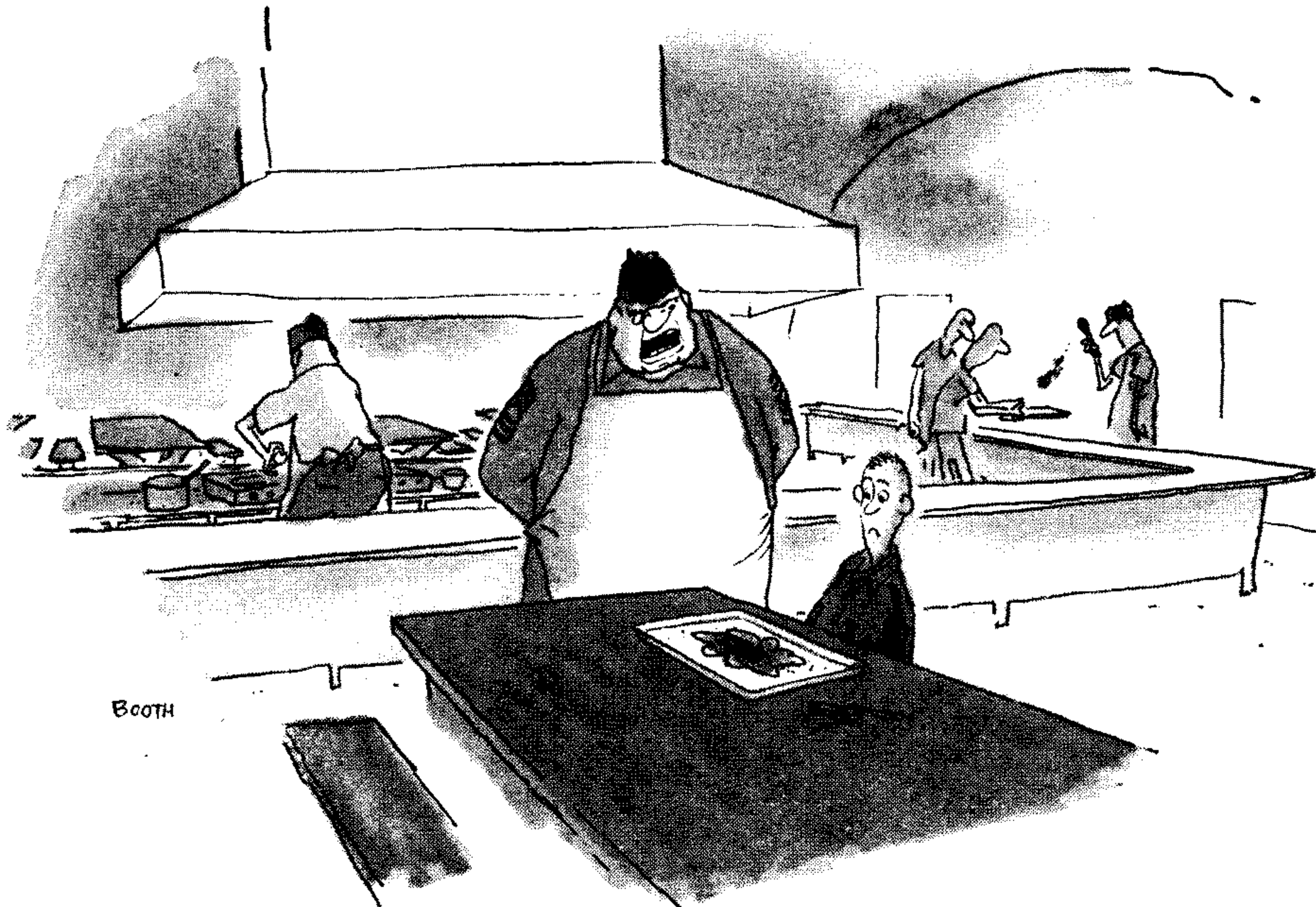
**PLAYBOY:** How did they take that?

**CASSAVETES:** They said OK. I was now a big-time director; because of the studio's endorsement, I had become a hot property—despite the fact that all I'd done in Hollywood was make one lousy picture. I subsequently learned that Rackin had to go to his stockholders and tell them I was a bright guy. He'd built me up, taken a gamble on a guy who wasn't turning out very well, and he had no real option but to go with me and hope I was smart enough to learn. And I did learn. I learned all the tricks: to get a big office and to ask for anything and everything and *insist* on it.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you make any other pictures for Paramount?

**CASSAVETES:** I began working on a picture called *The Iron Men*, which I wrote with Dick Carr. But when we gave the script to the producer—I wasn't going to play producer again—he began going through it with a pencil and muttering, "This is too long, far too long." While he was having himself a good time, I went straight to Rackin and told him what was happening—and that I wouldn't have anything to do with the movie. Rackin said, "John, please, you've got to do it." So, like a jerk, I stumbled through, trying to make it. *The Iron Men* was about an all-Negro air squadron during World War Two; Sidney Poitier was cast to play the lead. Anyway, next thing I know, I got a telephone call, asking me if I want Burt Lancaster, who was set to play a blow-hard war correspondent in the film. We got to like each other a lot; we talked about the film—I was privately convinced it was going to be a botched-up picture—and also about the fact that Burt was scheduled to do a movie for United Artists called *A Child Is Waiting*. Then Stanley Kramer called me and asked if I could leave *The Iron Men* to direct *A Child Is Waiting*, which he was producing. I told him that our movie was coming along fine and that I couldn't quit it.

**PLAYBOY:** Since you did direct *A Child Is Waiting*, you obviously got out of *The*



*"It's a blend of ground meats and tasty gravies appetizingly poured over a shingle."*

*Iron Men*. How did you manage it?

**CASSAVETES:** I didn't really manage it. Luckily—or unluckily, as it turned out—*The Iron Men* just fell through. And I was very glad to have the chance to do *A Child Is Waiting*. I wanted to work with Lancaster and both of us really believed it would be a great film; it was about retarded children. I spent three and a half months doing research on the subject with the writer, Abby Mann, visiting retarded children and their parents, talking to their teachers and learning about their lives. Getting to know those children was a moving and really beautiful experience. But not so the picture.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you run into problems with the studio again?

**CASSAVETES:** No, with Kramer. The picture was not beautiful because I again discovered something about myself, something I should have found out earlier: I could no longer compromise. I wasn't about to make another film where we didn't say something real. I found the kids funny and human and sad. But mainly funny—and real. But the picture wasn't geared that way at all. I wanted to make the kids funny, to show that they were human and warm—not "cases" but *kids*.

**PLAYBOY:** Kramer fired you at the completion of shooting and didn't allow you to work on the final cut. Why?

**CASSAVETES:** I can't blame him for taking the picture away, because it didn't fit his small, narrow viewpoint—and Stanley Kramer is a small, narrow man. He

doesn't understand that you can laugh at someone you love. So when he saw the film, he was incensed; I was fired, the picture was recut and it finally didn't say anything about the people we were talking about. The difference in the two versions is that Stanley's picture said retarded children belong in institutions and the picture I shot said retarded children are better in their own way than supposedly healthy adults. I don't really hate Kramer anymore, though. If I'd been open enough with myself, I would have known he and I never could have dealt on the same level.

**PLAYBOY:** You say you don't hate Kramer anymore; did you then?

**CASSAVETES:** Sure I did. *A Child Is Waiting* wasn't about a fictitious world; it's a reality for a lot of people. I had seen the great difficulty adults have in facing their children's retardation, but the kids' problems are very different. Their difficulty is finding acceptance, acceptance to do the same things normal adults do. The picture as released seemed to me a betrayal of those kids and also of their parents, who let us *use* their kids. At first I wasn't going to make a scene about it, because I didn't want to hurt anybody. But then I realized that truth is important; I needed to know that if I made a film about a sensitive subject like mental retardation, the people I made the film about would know I had done it to the best of my ability, with no copping out. So I really let Kramer have it; I got into a tremendous fight with him—one that



was really more violent than I had anticipated.

**PLAYBOY:** Were fists involved?

**CASSAVETES:** Let's just say it was violent—a lot of bitterness, hostility, screaming, yelling, cursing and even some pushing. I knew I didn't have to take it in that direction, but I finally chose to, because I didn't want to let him get away with what he had done to that film. I wanted him to feel the pain of my hatred for him, and I'm sure he did. But I also knew that it would cost me; in Hollywood you don't go around publicly bad-mouthing colleagues, especially big producers like Stanley Kramer. It cost me two years of work; after the noise I made, I couldn't have gotten a job with Looney Tunes. So Gena became the breadwinner of the family and I learned to write.

**PLAYBOY:** Did it bother you to have your wife supporting your family?

**CASSAVETES:** No, I loved it. And so did she. Two years of it was just about perfect for both of us at that point. Gena worked a lot on television, she was happy and I was writing; I wrote for two solid years. And I played with my kids and enjoyed myself and re-evaluated my life, or at least examined the shit out of it. I did a couple of novels I didn't really care for, so I threw them out. I did a few scripts and one of them, which took me the better part of the two years to do, was really good. I don't want to talk about it, but I've kept it and one day I'll make it. I also did a lot of half-completed things. The fact is that I grew to consider my somewhat enforced leisure a natural state until one Christmas, when I was out walking in Beverly Hills and met Steve Blauner, who was working at Screen Gems. He said that he thought it was time I got up off my ass and made some money. He asked me to come to work there. I went home and told Gena about it and she said that whatever I wanted to do would be OK with her as long as it was what I wanted to do. Well, I told her it was time for me to venture back into the real world again, so I went to work for Screen Gems.

**PLAYBOY:** Doing what?

**CASSAVETES:** I got hold of Mo McEndree, who had produced *Shadows*, and together we formed a production company at Screen Gems and we began creating some television shows, none of which got off the ground. I stayed there for about six months—until I felt that the fuss over *A Child Is Waiting* was finally over and that I wasn't on too many shit lists anymore. I sat down with Mo and said, "Listen, it's about time we made another movie like *Shadows*. I don't know about you, but there's just no percent-

age in this surreal world for me." Mo agreed and we started thinking about what kind of picture we would make. He remembered a ten-page piece of dialog I had written during my two-year exile, a thing about two men talking about the good old days; he suggested I develop it. So I got on a typewriter for a month and I wound up with 175 pages of script—which I thought was going to be a play. We got actors to look at it; Val Avery and John Marley read it and liked it and both asked to be in it. There was a secretary in an office across the hall named Lynn Carlin, who I knew would be great for the part of the wife. I lined Gena up to play a prostitute and Seymour Cassel told me he wanted to play the beach bum. We got into rehearsals and they were going so well that I said, "Ah, the hell with the play, let's make it into a movie." And that's how I got started on *Faces*.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you have difficulty raising money for the film?

**CASSAVETES:** That's an understatement; I had to pay for it myself. To keep some kind of money coming in, I stayed on as long as I could at Screen Gems, and after they kicked me out, I went over to Universal—my bank—and acted in two lousy TV pilots, which bought me a movie camera and film. I then had enough to start the picture, and we shot for six and a half months. We wound up with an awful lot of footage.

**PLAYBOY:** How long did it take you to edit?

**CASSAVETES:** Three years—during which time I channeled every penny I earned back into the picture. I acted in five films during those three years; I did *The Dirty Dozen*, *Rosemary's Baby*, two Italian films and a motorcycle movie.

**PLAYBOY:** How much did you make from all those parts?

**CASSAVETES:** Well, when *Faces* was done, it cost \$225,000. I just about broke even.

**PLAYBOY:** Was there any time during those years when you doubted that *Faces* was worth all the effort?

**CASSAVETES:** Never. You know, we always try to think about what was the very best time of our lives. Usually it's college or childhood or something like that. Making *Faces* was the very best time of my life—because of the people. I'd never met people like that, and I'm talking about every single member of that company and cast, people who made my life really worth living. I never thought *once* during the whole time we were making that film that there was anything else in the world except those people; they were that devoted and pure.

**PLAYBOY:** Was *Faces* an immediate hit?

**CASSAVETES:** No, we had our share of

disasters—disasters very similar to the ones we went through with *Shadows*. We had a couple of midnight screenings in California and the picture bombed. People just didn't respond to it. The whole cast came to the first screening and I didn't want to let down in front of them; afterward, you're supposed to shake hands with all the people who've come to the screening and who are going to say insincere things like, "My, that's such an *interesting* movie." So what I did was sort of hide when the lights went on; I went to the john. But there was no escape: It was loaded with friends of mine saying things like, "Jesus, John wasted four years of his life on that piece of shit." For some reason, that gave me strength to go downstairs and pump hands. The actors were depressed by the lack of response, but no one really crumbled or felt terribly bad.

After that, we took *Faces* to Montreal and Toronto, where it did well, and then screened it for the Venice Film Festival committee. We got admitted to the festival—and walked out with five awards. We then sold the film to the Walter Reade Organization, which released it here and in Canada. And, surprise of surprises: I had an artistic and financial hit on my hands—this time in my own country. Proving to me that it was worth all the nonsense I went through. Proving to me that moviemakers don't have to spend their time doing garbage they hate. And when *Husbands* performed the same way *Faces* did, it gave me the opportunity to line up just about whatever projects I may want to do without having to sweat the money. Unbelievable as this may sound and for whatever it's worth, I'm doing just what I want to with my life and on my own terms, without any hassling whatsoever. And never have I felt so correct about myself, so secure in myself. I believe in miracles.

**PLAYBOY:** What kind of miracles?

**CASSAVETES:** In 1951, "The Miracle of Coogan's Bluff" was a phrase sportswriters used to describe the incredible way the New York Giants caught up with the Brooklyn Dodgers to win the National League pennant. When Bobby Thomson hit that home run to beat the Dodgers, that was a miracle. It might not have been my miracle, but at the time I thought it was. That's how I've lived. Films have been miracles in my life; Gena has been a miracle; my children have been miracles. Finding tears coming into my eyes during stupid conversations is a miracle. And after so much of my life has been difficult, repellent and a turnoff, I find that still being able to love is a miracle.

