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Cassavetes Sets A Killing Pace

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In a television acting career which has included more than 90 roles, embracing a wide range of characterizations, John Cassavetes has somehow managed to etch himself into the public image in only one of them—as the brooding, sensitive, juvenile delinquent killer.



Freeman

This is a curious state of affairs and Mr. Cassavetes, one of our more gifted and versatile young actors, resignedly traces its source to an intensely dramatic television play entitled "Crime in the Streets."

In it, Cassavetes played his first youthful tough and scored a rocking success. It was also the beginning of a series of television crimes, mostly murders, probably unequalled in number by any other TV actor—excluding westerns, where life is cheap.

"I've got to be TV's top killer," surmised Mr. Cassavetes, a floorpacer and a chain-smoker, at a CBS rehearsal hall while preparing for "The Kurishiki Incident," in which he'll star on "Studio One" next Monday.

"I have done in just a little under 100 persons on TV. I'm happy to say the writers have given me variety, too, my victims ranging from grandma types to little 10-year-old boys, and my weapons from zip guns to my own two hands."

Recalling that Peter Lorre, after a villainous performance in the movie, 'M,' was stoned by moviegoers in Berlin, I asked Mr. Cassavetes if his public ever recognizes him off-camera and if—well, was there any problem in that department?

"Yes," Cassavetes said. "After 'Crime in the Streets,' I was walking alone in New York when I realized that four or five young hoodlums were following me. One of them called out, 'We seen ya on TV—ya ain't so tough.'"

"I stopped in my tracks. Then I whirled around and snapped back, 'All right, which one o' you guys said that?' They hesitated and then they got scared and took off. When I started to walk again my knees were shaking. I gave a better performance for those punks than I did on the show."

"Another time," Cassavetes went on, "I was going to play ball in Central Park. I'm wearing jeans and an old sweatshirt—and I'm carrying a baseball bat."

"A cop stopped me. 'All right, boy. Drop the weapon,' he said. So I said, 'What weapon? Are you kidding? This is a baseball bat.' The cop said, 'Yeah, kid. I know it is. Drop it. I know you from someplace, from our files, I think.'"

"So I said, 'Look, officer, I'm just a harmless actor. My name's Cassavetes. Honest. I'm on TV.' The cop took a closer look. Then he smiled and said, 'Ah, now, that's it. Cassavetes, eh? Now I know you. You're the chap my wife likes to watch on the TV when I want to watch the fights instead. I ought to run you in just for that!'"

For the last few years, Cassavetes has been married to Gena Rowlands, who is also an extremely talented performer.

"When we were first married, Gena would get letters from her mother out in Wisconsin," Cassavetes said. "She'd open 'em, read 'em and then hide 'em. 'What's the idea?' I asked her one day."

"She finally had to explain that her mother, who hadn't met me yet and knew me only from TV, was always warning her to watch her step when I'm around, that I was probably dangerous. My own mother-in-law!"

Still, there are rays of sunshine here and there. "It's heartening," Cassavetes said, "when I get letters from people saying, 'Don't play a killer. Play a nice guy for a change.' Perhaps underneath all that killing they feel I may have some slim thread of decency."

"But, alas, to what end? As I get older—and I seem inescapably to do just that every day—I become convinced that what will happen to me is, I shall advance steadily in my career from a juvenile killer to, naturally, an adult killer."