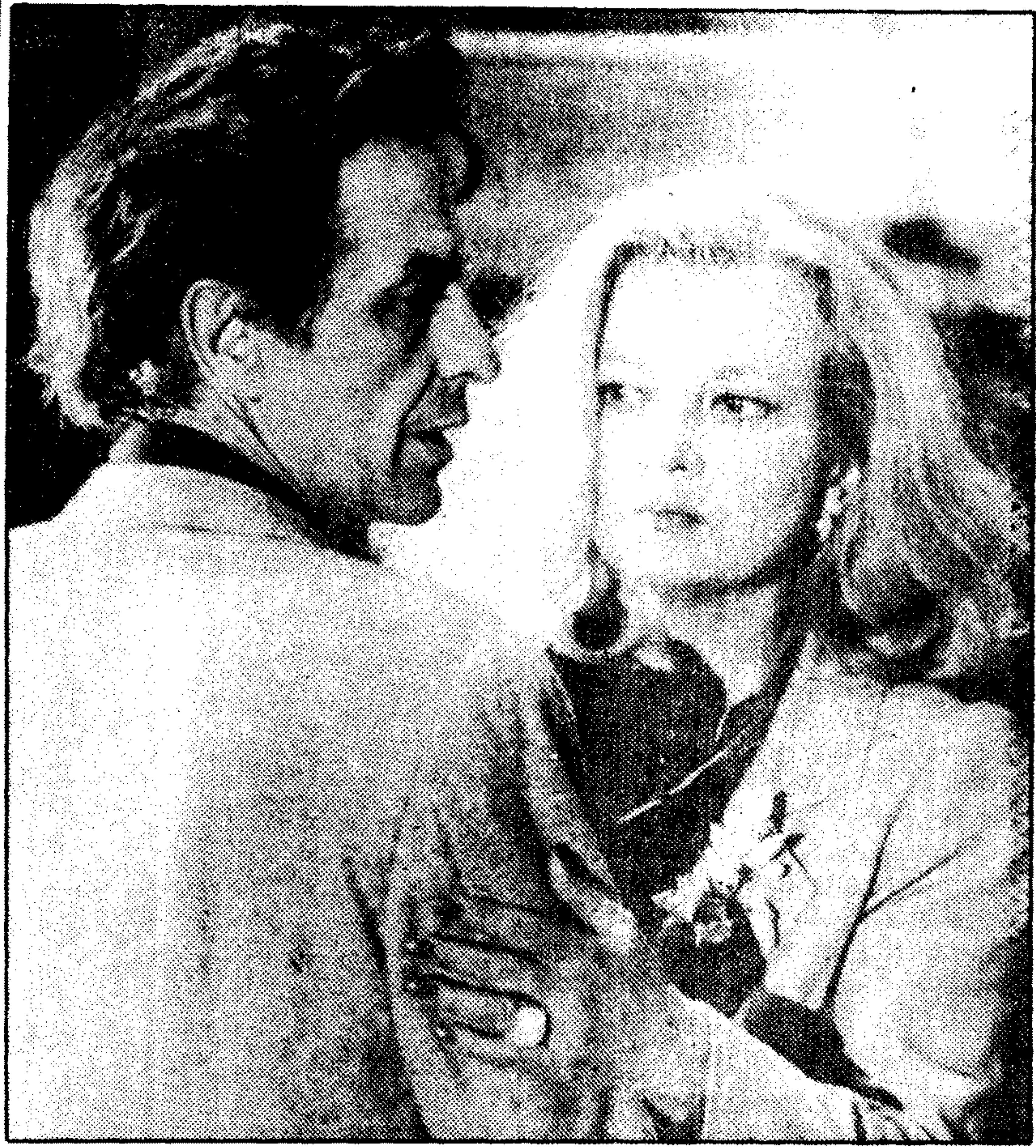


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John Cassavetes and Gena Rowlands in *'Love Streams.'*

## MOVIE REVIEW

# EMOTIONS RUN DEEP IN CASSAVETES' 'STREAMS'

By SHEILA BENSON,  
*Times Film Critic*

**L**ove is a stream; it doesn't stop," Sarah Lawson (Gena Rowlands) insists fervently. "Life is a series of divorces, suicides, promises broken, children smashed," Robert Harmon (John Cassavetes) says in blandly bitter autobiography.

In "Love Streams" (Friday at the Fine Arts), director Cassavetes plunges us headlong into both Sarah's and Robert's lives, giving us bang-up, firsthand examples of why, very possibly, each of them is right. This is quintessential Cassavetes (who also co-wrote the screenplay with Ted Allan, from Allan's play). It is emotion-full, irritating, sad, hilarious, forceful and horrifying. And it is exquisitely played by these two actors who seem incapable of an emotional untruth.

The trick of the film is the point at which Sarah's and Robert's lives intersect; they are not, as Cassavetes lets us suspect for almost half the picture, husband and wife. As the film's own ads disclose, they

are brother and sister, and they are also each other's only safe harbor in the world.

We meet them quite separately, in the film's most accessible sections. Sarah has, for 15 years, channeled her unconditional, obsessive love for the world and its every creature to her husband (Seymour Cassel, a Cassavetes film regular) and daughter (Risa Blewitt).

And there has still been enough left over for Sarah to keep a chirpy vigil at the bedside of every mortally ill relative on both sides of the family, and to drag her daughter with her. "People *like* Debbie and me to be with them because we're cheerful," she explains during a damning session with a stony-faced custody judge.

Unsurprisingly, it has not been her 13-year-old's idea of a great time. Upsetting an earlier court decision, she chooses to live with her father, who has long since exhausted his patience with the outrageous, erratic Sarah. (Sarah's most endearing gesture is to flop down, flat on her back—wherev-

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# CASSAVETES' 'STREAMS'

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er—the moment she feels completely thwarted.) Abruptly, Sarah is cast adrift, her every emotional anchor gone.

Robert, burning-eyed and haggard, his hair an unconvincing jet brown, has the haunted look of a mid-years satyr, a man who "finds it very hard to sleep alone." A writer of "books on night life," he has used women for his livelihood and his environment, but we're not even sure he likes them.

Currently, he has about six pretty teen-age hookers stabled at his huge, paneled house; he listens uncomplainingly to their banalities and keeps the champagne flowing at all hours. From the way he announces his name, as though it were commonplace on talk shows and best-seller lists, and from his inexhaustible supply of money, we gather that Robert is a successful writer, although he never works and his few stock lines are mortifying: "I like the way you move"; "A beautiful woman has to offer a man her secrets." He has one son, now 8, whom he abandoned at birth; he is borderline alcoholic, moody and dangerous when drunk.

Finally, after several encounters with a preternaturally patient nightclub singer (Diahnne Abbott) and her splendid mother (Margaret Abbott) and a glancing, painful reunion with his son Albie (Jakob Shaw), Robert is visited by Sarah. She brings her overflowing love, and enough luggage to see Camille through the social season in Paris.

The film's tone shifts here into fantasy, dreams and odd little opera/ballet/visions. One of these, Sarah's desperate bet with her family by the swimming pool, is puckishly wonderful, but the braiding of these two eccentrics' lives is not as compelling as their separate stories, especially since almost all the (interesting) auxiliary characters are allowed to drift away.

If you have seen even a couple of Cassavetes' films, "Love Streams" will feel like a roll call or a family album, a notion that Cassavetes seconds in his press notes. "Opening Night" also dealt with an artist's emotional isolation; Sarah's "madness" is not far from Mabel Longhetti's in "A Woman Under

the Influence"; we have already seen her marry Cassel in "Minnie and Moskowitz" and face divorce in "Faces." The dangerous pull of Los Angeles night life that Ben Gazzara pursued in "The Killing of a Chinese Bookie" has the same attraction for Robert Harmon, and certainly a complex brother/sister relationship was the basis for "Shadows."

"Love Streams" may be a tour guide to the combined careers of Cassavetes and Rowlands, and it may also fray the patience dangerously at times. But like the very best moments of each one of his earlier films, "Love Streams" strikes notes—not all of them pleasant—that give back a pure ring of emotional truth.