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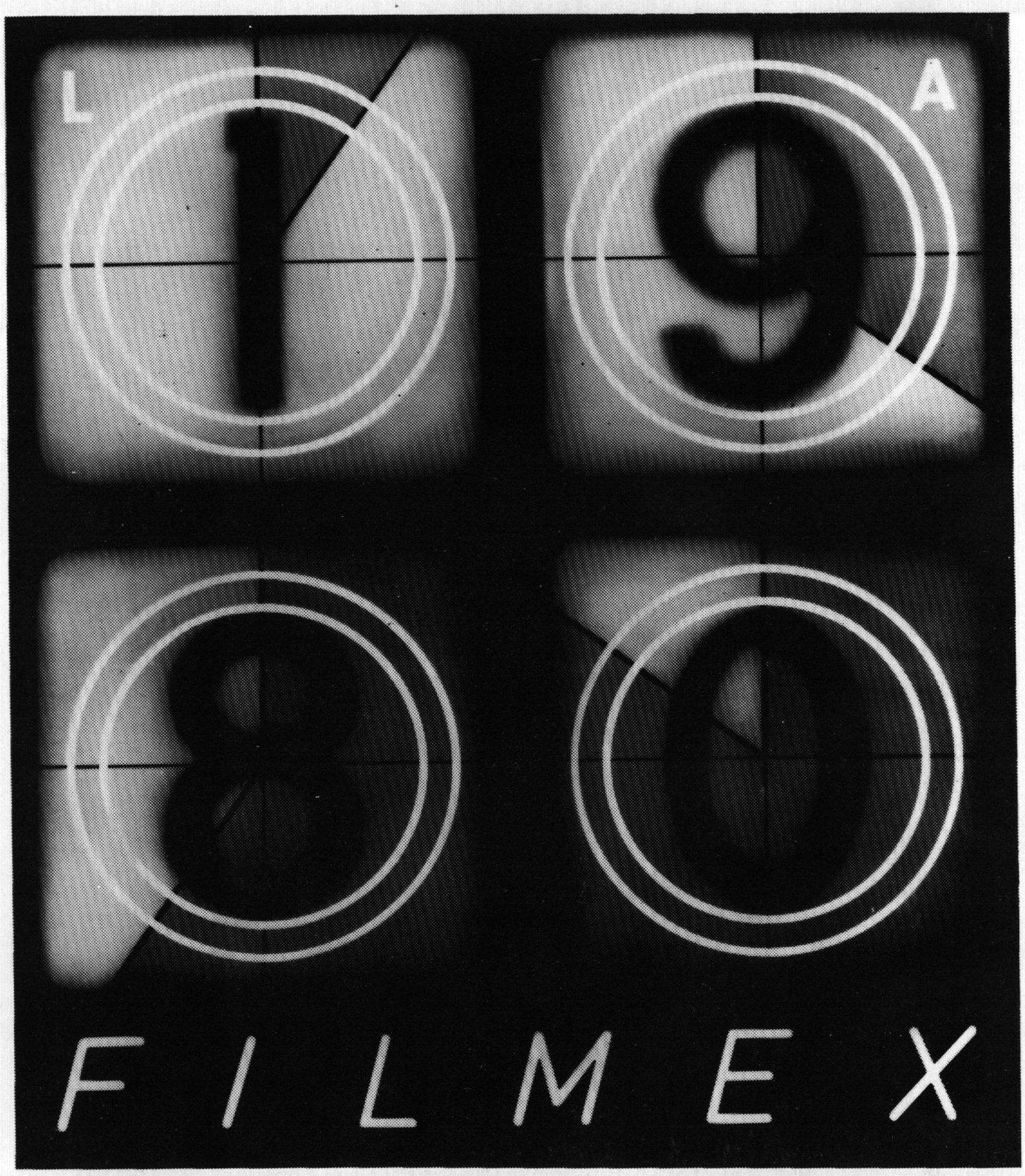

John Cassavetes: American Filmmaker

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John Cassavetes: American Filmmaker

A Five Hour Program of "Nine Endings"

honoring -- in person -- the actor/director

and

Four Programs of Seven Feature Films

Moderated by Albert Johnson
Film Critic and Historian
Director, San Francisco Film Festival

Program Notes
compiled by Christopher Adcock
with selections from "John Cassavetes" by Myron Meisel ©1980
which appeared in the Chicago Reader and Daily Variety and from
articles by Albert Johnson

The 1980 Los Angeles International Film Exposition
Plitt Century Plaza Theatres
ABC Entertainment Center
Century City

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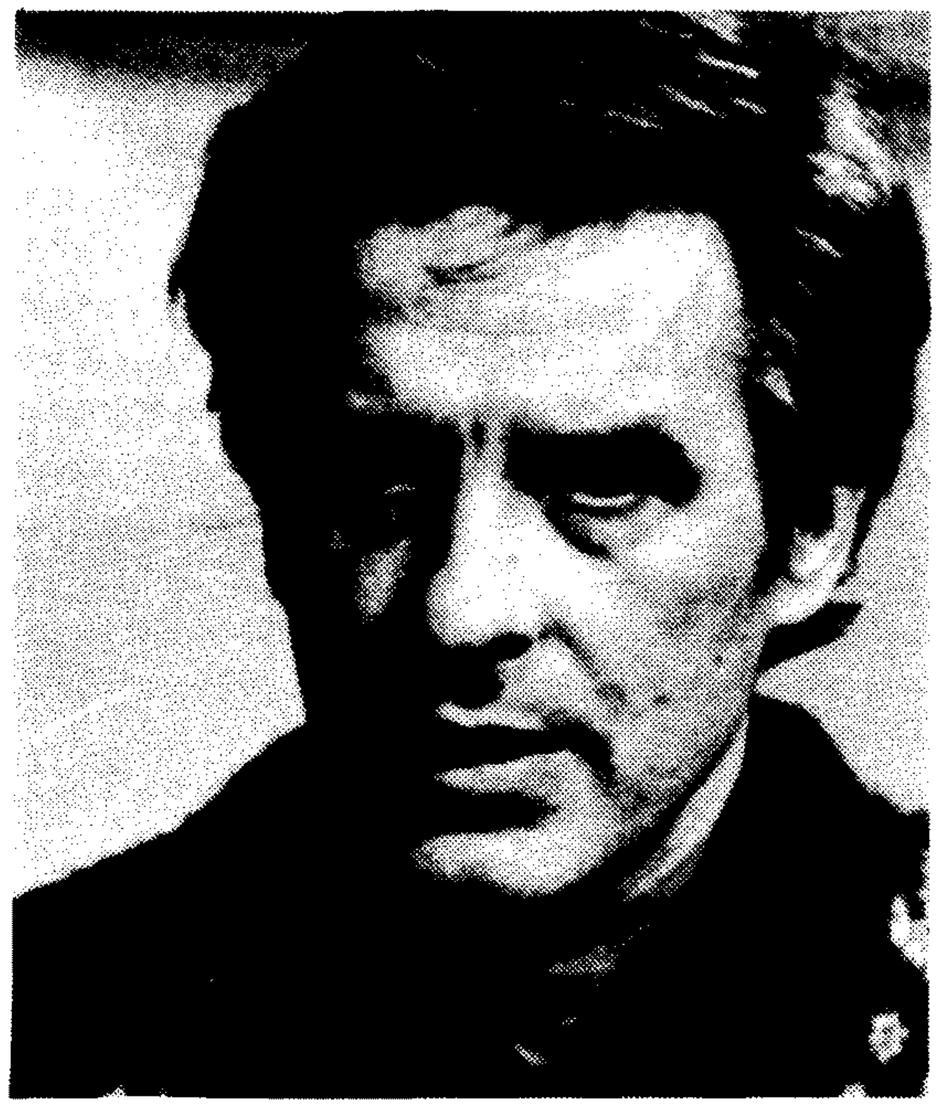
"NINE ENDINGS"

2:00 pm, Sunday, March 16

From his first feature, SHADOWS, John Cassavetes' movies have inspired violent reactions from both poles, with the critical debate cast largely in terms of Cassavetes' supposed "realism." In spite of the irrelevance of this concern, Cassavetes' attackers paradoxically scored better points than his defenders. Critical comment devolved largely upon the crude edges of the technique, the affected artiness of the one-word titles and the small-bracket production values, and Cassavetes was taken to account for glaring gaffes in his accumulation of realistic detail. Similarly, because of the extreme improvisatory veneer to his staging, it was assumed that he was not a careful screenwriter, although all of his later pictures were scrupulously scripted even when they developed from improvisatory exercises.



Cassavetes' expressive talent resides fundamentally in the cumulative power of his images--and in his case, the images happen to be almost exclusively images of actors. The emotional support he bestows upon his players enables the deepest feelings to come directly from them, and what his directorial method accomplishes is to unify his expressive objectives with those of the actors themselves.

Typically, with Cassavetes, this unity has been accomplished by expressing his basic theme--the strain for self-definition--through the mode of comedy, in that all his films skirt the tragedy inherent in their hysteric plots, as much because as in spite of their intensity and melodramatic gesturing. Cassavetes' underlying comic strategy remained largely subterranean in the earlier films. SHADOWS parlayed the beat atmosphere of the late 50's into a model for low-budget narrative films bursting with personal expression. Cassavetes examined imperfect relationships--tentative, fervent, and cruel--with skeptical compassion. He also set the rudiments of what came to be recognized as Cassavetes' style: long scenes, frequently shot in the master takes; raw edges; home movie tics and emotional extravagance; all lurching to an elaboration of the beauties of truth. But the truth as Cassavetes saw it was not a naturalistic one, however so it may have appeared, but rather lay in his direct apprehension of the elaborate emotional evasions of his characters.

Film Quarterly (Spring, 1960) called SHADOWS "the best American film about racial relations yet made," also hoping that this film "heralds the beginning of a tradition of cinematic vitality and honesty dealing with the experiences of ordinary human beings in the United States." The initial idea for the film came from several sessions at the Variety Arts Studio in New York City: "The theme is loneliness, the chief cause of frustration among the young, but strengthened by counter-themes of color prejudice, the lack of artistic values in this country, and the casual cheapening of ideals."

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Following the success of SHADOWS, Cassavetes was contracted by Paramount to make a series of artistic, low-budget films, but this partnership came swiftly to a halt with the failure of TOO LATE BLUES. Stanley Kramer produced Cassavetes' third film, an underestimated picture starring Judy Garland and Burt Lancaster in a semi-documentary work on afflicted children, told with classical Hollywood pans and zooms and a steadied camera. A CHILD IS WAITING is a moving and provocative statement, suggesting much more than the traumas of the retarded child. These two Hollywood films represent uneasy compromises between Cassavetes' independent approach to filmmaking and the norms in commercial production. A CHILD IS WAITING marked the end of Cassavetes' accommodation to distributors, and with the exception of MINNIE AND MOSKOWITZ, all his other films have been independent projects, for which the finances were gathered from friends, unsalaried actors, and predominantly his own resources. Even with MINNIE AND MOSKOWITZ, Cassavetes remained independent--when he disapproved of Universal's publicity campaign, he held his own press screenings.

Cassavetes followed his "Hollywood" films by returning to his home-movie production methods. Over a period of years, he shot FACES, using many of the actors with whom he had previously worked. FACES was a flat-out, raw, nervy comedy of marital breakup that finally launched Cassavetes on the main stream of his career. Cassavetes exploded his novel vision on a surprised audience via the communicated agony of unknown performers. The audience received a rough treatment in FACES, as Cassavetes made sure that the quantity of his actors' expressiveness became as much the point as the quality of that expressiveness. The characters in FACES laugh hollowly at their own jokes even as their world collapses about them. Characters continually confront one another in the name of honesty and truth, but it is not until the very end, when the consequences of their actions have been made plain by the unraveling of events, that any real honesty or awareness becomes evident. It is the first moment of stasis and of silence in the picture.

in FACES, the camera obsessively watches its subjects crowded in the frame as they hassle out their existences, straining to escape from the bondage of social mannerisms on which they have always depended for their own survival. Yet only Cassavetes could have taken the despairing final shot of the exhausted couple collapsed together on the stairs at the conclusion of FACES and then elaborated it to a comedy of destiny desperately delayed. That elaboration was HUSBANDS.

In that film, Cassavetes joins Ben Gazzara and Peter Falk in a tale of three suburbanites who take off on a four-day binge after the funeral of their fourth buddy. Like FACES, HUSBANDS is both fully scripted and highly improvisational. Though it focuses on the narcissism of three men-children in search of an inaccessible freedom, it contains a wealth of feeling on many levels. These threee characters talk and talk and talk, generally in a state of low dudgeon and high volume. They have to make themselves heard, after all, and on the emotional

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battleground, the characters seem to know instinctively that they must hold the floor or be wiped up on it. Talk is a means of putting off the consequences they feel approaching and encroaching, without ever acknowledging them. The three simply cannot go home to their wives. For all their demands of honesty in human relationships, in the group therapy-style high-jinks, honesty is exactly what they never manage. Once again, Cassavetes examines what people feel about their relationships and how they act at cross-purposes to those feelings, an examination so intense and concentrated that his concerns demand the tight focal length, the discomfort of his composition, and the rambling, almost associative structure of his long, long scenes.

MINNIE AND MOSKOWITZ is perhaps the most direct expression of Cassavetes' style: an unmistakable comedy cum fairy tale in which the lovers have nothing in common and connect by shouting at one another incessantly. Like all of the films, it is bottomed on notions of liberation without really being about liberation. It prefers instead to be about the glories of characters gleefully at contradictory purposes. MINNIE AND MOSKOWITZ blows up behavioral detail into extravagant gesture, the better to make plain the accommodations of the heart to the necessities of human intractibility.

Diane Jacobs writes that MINNIE AND MOSKOWITZ "is an hommage to the sentiment of old Hollywood, updated and surprisingly up-beat ... [It] comes complete with Humphrey Bogart clips, nostalgic tunes ... and happy ending ... MINNIE AND MOSKOWITZ is replete with darker undertones (the eccentric blind date, the withering bridesmaid, the suicidal wife); but it marks a momentary relenting of the intransigence of Cassavetes' universe, and the result is a picaresque comedy, rooted in anything but realism." In many ways, it stands as a rough draft of the masterpiece to come.

In A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE, Cassavetes consolidated his artistic method into a work of unqualified success that validated all that had gone before. Mabel Longhetti is a lower-middle-class wife and mother, devoted to her family, loving, tender, funny, perceptive, sensitive. She is also mad as a loon. Mabel has developed the horrible, delightful talent for being just the woman everyone else needs. The only problem is that now, as the film begins, she is nuts, and needing the love of her family more desperately than they could possibly offer. They are, like the audience, sympathetic, but they don't understand. They couldn't. Cassavetes demonstrates that people do try to love the very best they can, and that while it may never be enough, it has to go a long way because it may be all they have.

A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE was originally conceived as a series of plays that proved too strenuous to perform. Formally, then, the film was organized in a manner most appropriate for Cassavetes' established shooting schedule. The tight focal lengths and discomfiting compositions sustain cadenza-length master scenes that achieve an intensity both theatrical and cinematic.

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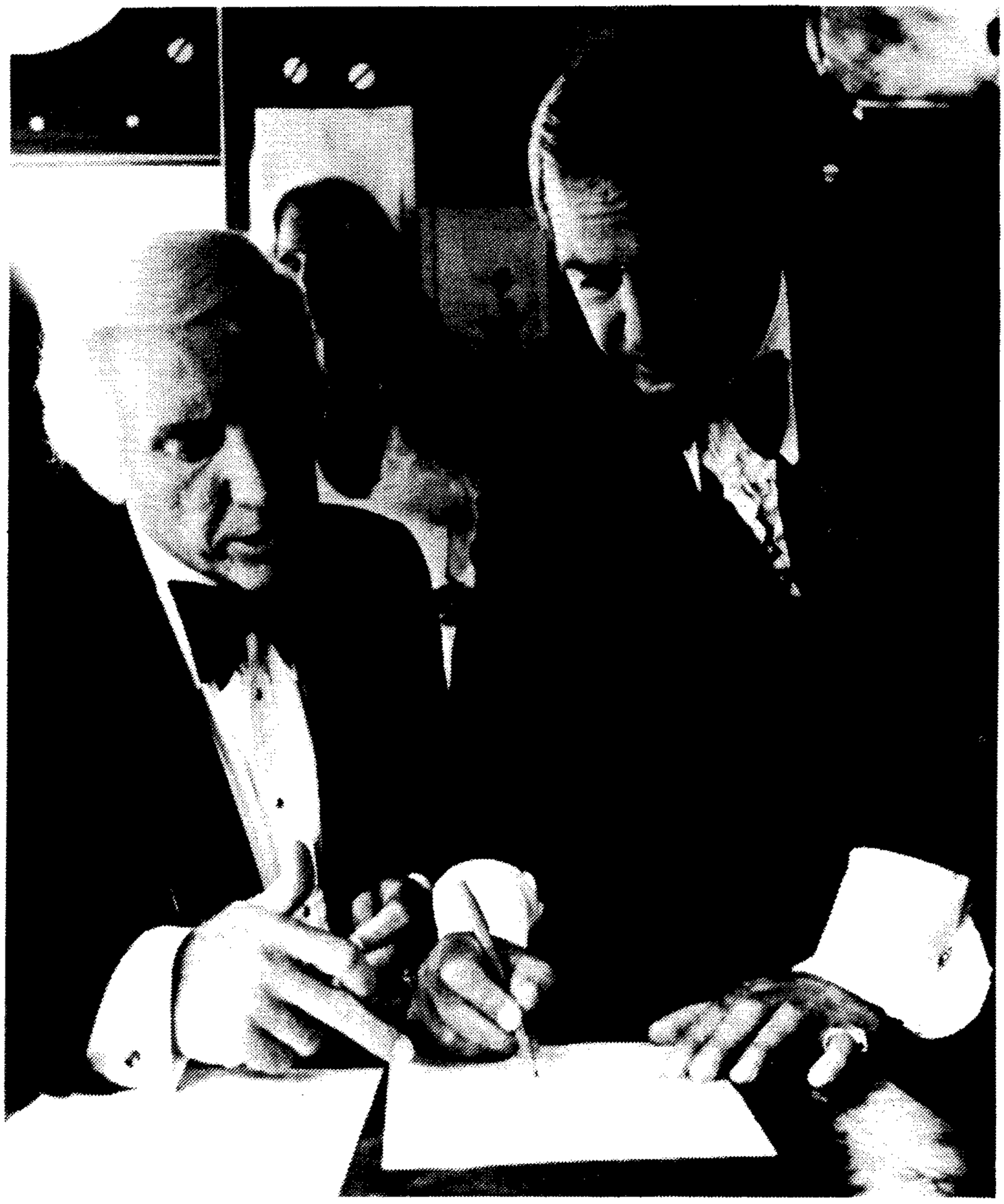

THE KILLING OF A CHINESE BOOKIE plays rather like a collage of Cassavetes materials, indiscernible as an artistic whole. The superficial trappings of gangster melodrama do not command Cassavetes' primary attention, but the diffidence of their execution seriously undermines the emotional thrust of the work. While thematically of a piece with the remainder of his work, THE KILLING OF A CHINESE BOOKIE presents some novel dramatic strategies for Cassavetes that ultimately sidetrack the drama from its thematic path. Probably the most desperate of Cassavetes' films, it fails to vindicate its low-key approach by ending up a tragedy so muffled as to be indistinct.

OPENING NIGHT explores the inner turmoil of a famous actress on the brink of a breakdown as she prepares for a difficult role in a Broadway play. She witnesses the death of a devoted fan, and this traumatic event causes her to reexamine her personal and professional relationships. The performances are excellent, notably that of Joan Blondell as the writer of the play being performed. This is a demanding work, for the audience as well as for the filmmaker. The film places a slice of life under the microscope, and the virtuoso performance of Gena Rowlands brings to life the backstage world of the troubled actress.

The first principle in a Cassavetes film is acting--not the actor, but acting--and his preoccupation with human behavior as performance is acutely realized in his best work. Everyone performs, whether the leads, supporting players, or even bits. It is apparent in his most recent work that Cassavetes is seeking directions in which to grow as an artist. What's dispiriting is that after two false starts, his considerable virtues tend to recede in the face of his disorganized plotting. But as ever, he is true to his rhythm, his aesthetic, himself. Discipline is less necessary at this juncture than that he formulate an attitude toward what discipline means, and either accept, reject, or confront the implications of his cool yet strung-out character analysis. Compassion and objectivity aren't enough. The talent is too prodigious to regulate, but it is also too powerful to scatter. What makes the absurdities in Cassavetes endearing is the contradition between his ability to share the consciousness of his characters without sacrificing his awarness of their limitations. He approaches his criticisms from the inside, and the agony of realization is rich and deeply felt. His great achievement is his ability to meld compassion with criticism without ever compromising the unique ability to link his own artistic concerns in direct relationship with the very different, yet highly relevant feelings of his characters.

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Seven Cassavetes Features

Saturday, March 8, Noon — DOUBLE FEATURE

SHADOWS (John Cassavetes, 1960)

SHADOWS was the first film directed by John Cassavetes. The idea for the film was conceived in improvisatory sessions at the Variety Arts Theatre in New York City. Cassavetes first mentioned the possibility of making this film of that improvisation on the radio program "Night People," hosted by Jean Shepherd. It was an off-handed remark, but it struck a chord with late-night radio listeners, and they sent in a total of $20,000 for the project. Cassavetes gambled his own money and scrounged further funds from show business friends to produce the 16mm film on a budget of $40,000. SHADOWS received the Critics Award at the 1960 Venice Film Festival. It acquired an art-house reputation in the United States, and critics began talking of an American New Wave. The background music is jazz by Charles Mingus and Shafi Hadi, complementing the syncopated rhythm of the improvisation itself.

THE NIGHT HOLDS TERROR (Andrew L. Stone, 1955)

Cassavetes had his first starring role in THE NIGHT HOLDS TERROR, a tense drama concerning a family held hostage for ransom. The film was directed by Andrew L. Stone, noted for his refusal to shoot on sound stages since the mid-forties. Stone's fondness for locations was often carried through as a very literal approach to filmmaking. Andrew Sarris writes of the productions of Stone and his wife Virginia: "If they want to blow up a train, they blow up a real train. If they want to sink an ocean liner, they sink a real ocean liner." Cassavetes has always referred to himself as a "professional" actor and an "amateur" director, for his work as an actor has financed his films.

Sunday, March 9, Noon — DOUBLE FEATURE

HUSBANDS (John Cassavetes, 1970)

HUSBANDS was Cassavetes' fifth film as a director, and it tells the story of three aging suburbanite males on a binge after the funeral of the fourth member of their group. These men are haunted by feelings that are never articulated, but always held just below the surface. In spite of the focus remaining on the narcissism of these three characters, the film contains such a wealth of feeling on so many levels that no less a feminist than Betty Friedan has hailed it for its liberated viewpoint. HUSBANDS reinvestigates the validity of the nuclear family, and though only one wife is portrayed (and she in an unfavorable light), the presence of all three is keenly sensed.

ROSEMARY'S BABY (Roman Polanski, 1968)

The Devil came to the movies in ROSEMARY'S BABY, and he has been a hot property at the box office ever since. Cassavetes is the actor-husband who delivers his wife to the devil cult in order to further his own ambitions. In his review of the film, Andrew Sarris finds some fault with the casting but not the actor: "Cassavetes is too intelligent and off-beat an actor to project self-absorption. Above all, he lacks the beautiful self-sacrifice mask of an actor capable of selling his wife to the devil for a good part. Cassavetes is simply more than his character calls for, but he too has his moments in an almost flawless entertainment."

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Saturday, March 15, Noon DOUBLE FEATURE

CRIME IN THE STREETS (Don Siegel, 1956)

John Cassavetes, Sal Mineo and Mark Rydell make up the trio of disturbed slum adolescents in CRIME IN THE STREETS. Cassavetes provides the focus of the film as he carries out the execution of a common foe. The sets are mean, dirty and claustrophobic, offering no relief from the overcrowding and the problems of poverty, neglect and egocentrism. Some critics have found the reliance on indoor sets a detriment in this film, feeling that director Siegel is best at choosing locations and integrating them into the film. Others feel that the sets augment the feeling of a neighborhood without neighbors. Siegel was himself happy with the film, but it was not very successful, and he attributed this to the problem the audience had in identifying with these three delinquents.

THE KILLERS (Don Siegel, 1964)

Universal produced THE KILLERS as the first movie made expressly for television, but the violence was thought too strong for TV in the wake of the Kennedy assassination. The film was therefore released to theatres. Cassavetes plays the victim of hired killers Lee Marvin and Clu Gulager, and the resignation with which he accepts his fate causes them to search for answers about who hired them and why. The film is deeply pessimistic, violent and carefully wrought to intensify the action and the thematic content. Everyone is motivated by self interest, and all meet tragedy. Siegel wanted the film to be brutal and sensual, with the coldness and cynicism of the killers--and the intelligence--evident from the first. He shot it in what he rightfully considers his best style--very taut and lean, with great economy

Sunday, March 16, Noon

MINNIE AND MOSKOWITZ (John Cassavetes, 1972)

Cassavetes' "entertainment" film is neither realistic nor credible as to plot, and though far from a masterpiece, MINNIE AND MOSKOWITZ may be seen as a bouyant, back-handed tribute to Hollywood in general and romance in particular. In the background may be heard the repeated humming and singing of "I Love You Truly," a fitting salute to Frank Capra's IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE, which Cassavetes greatly admires.

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