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The killing of a Chinese bookie, Cassavetes, John, 1976

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Too late blues, Cassavetes, John, 1961

John Cassavetes



John Cassavetes may well be one of the most original and important talents in contemporary cinema but the fact remains that for some filmgoers their favourite Cassavetes screen moment remains his explosive demise at the end of Brian De Palma's *The Fury*. The rewards of fierce independence have been less than overwhelming, but in one respect at least his films have never failed. Either love them or hate them, but cold indifference, never.

John Cassavetes was born in New York in 1929, the son of a Greek born businessman. He went through the mill of theatre stock companies before establishing himself as a fine actor in many live television dramas in the early 1950s. The money he earned from a private-eye TV series, *Johnny Staccato*, helped set up *Shadows* which was based around his own Actors' Workshop. The combination of experimental techniques coupled with commercial success inspired that development of New American Cinema whose film-makers were described by their leader Jonas Mekas as 'the new American film poets, not giving a damn about art, critics or anybody.' Cassavetes never became part of the movement, and he chose instead to work for Paramount Pictures. That experience was disillusioning, and for the last twenty years he has, like Orson Welles,

combined acting jobs with the setting up of his own independent productions. The examples of his acting roles included in this season put into perspective the extent of his divergence from mainstream Hollywood traditions.

His style of film-making has always been a collaborative one, and over the years he has built up a stock company of like-minded actors, producers and technicians. Actors are the single most important element in any Cassavetes movie and he has been well served by Peter Falk, Ben Gazzara, Seymour Cassel and his wife Gena Rowlands, but the collaborative set-up has extended equal improvisational freedom to everyone involved. Yet they still remain Cassavetes movies, each reflecting his developing and changing thoughts, ideas and observations on the human condition. In recent years he has also successfully bridged the extremes of American underground cinema and mainstream Hollywood, but although there is now some common ground Cassavetes has never compromised his representation of the raw emotional intensity that he sees is at the heart of any situation. His films can be both engrossing and rewarding, even though they offer their characters a lot of problems and few easy answers.

—Peter Howden.

A fast-paced drama of juvenile delinquency which gave Cassavetes his first major screen appearance in a role already familiar from his numerous appearances in television drama. He is the leader of the street gang determined not to be understood by social worker James Whitmore. Director Don Siegel builds up the tension and atmosphere on a shoe-string budget and Cassavetes makes a definitive young hoodlum: wide-eyed, surly, with just a touch of the psychopath in that he cannot bear to be touched. USA 1956/Dir Don Siegel. With Sal Mineo.

Tue 7 Apr
8.45

Crime in the Streets



This early landmark in Hollywood's treatment of racial issues has Cassavetes again playing a crazy mixed-up kid, this time befriended and sheltered by fellow dock worker Sidney Poitier. Sensitive direction overcomes the clichés until the melodramatic climax, and the character's collection of classic psychiatric hang-ups (troubled childhood, army desertion, guilt feelings over his brother's death) are convincingly and intelligently portrayed. USA 1957/Dir Martin Ritt. With Jack Warden.

Wed 8 Apr
6.30

A Man Is Ten Feet Tall

(Edge of the City)



Shadows, still Cassavetes' favourite film, is his only completely improvised movie, and in 1959 its *cinéma vérité* techniques caused a sensation. Although it combined the dramatic ingredients of such films as *Crime in the Streets* and *Edge of the City*, the treatment is uniquely different. The simple everyday story of two negro brothers and their sister set against a background of sleazy bars and back alleys of New York still has the ring of truth. Music by Charles Mingus. USA 1959/Dir John Cassavetes. With Ben Carruthers.

Wed 8 Apr
8.45

Shadows



This more neatly constructed white version of *Shadows*, made for Paramount, centres on the varying fortunes of a group of West Coast jazzmen. Despite studio interference, the movie superbly captures the ever-changing patterns of love and hate amongst a small group of people and there are some powerful moments of casual improvisation between the dramatics. Bobby Darin is unexpectedly excellent as the combo leader who almost destroys himself, his band and the girl he loves, and so is David Raksin's music score. USA 1961/Dir John Cassavetes.

Thu 9 Apr
6.30

Too Late Blues



Although in Cassavetes' view it was over-sentimentalised by producer Stanley Kramer's interference, this powerful depiction of the difficulties faced by mentally retarded children has much to offer. In the basic conflict between the rule book world of children's home superintendent Burt Lancaster, and the more emotional response of new music teacher Judy Garland, Cassavetes gives the movie a directness, honesty and compassion that make superfluous all the interpolated information. USA 1963/Dir John Cassavetes. With Gena Rowlands.

Thu 9 Apr
8.45

A Child Is Waiting





Fri 10 Apr
6.30
The Killers

Don Siegel's complex and exciting reworking of Hemingway's short story is now renowned both as the television movie that was deemed to be too violent for the small screen, and for Ronald Reagan's final acting role. Cassavetes is the victim, murdered in the opening sequence but facing death so fearlessly that hired assassin Lee Marvin decides to investigate further. As he probes deeper, the movie provides Cassavetes with some excellent scenes with everybody's *femme fatale*, Angie Dickinson. USA 1964/Dir Don Siegel.



Fri 10 Apr
8.25
The Dirty Dozen

Cassavetes updates his earlier teenage hoodlum roles to become one of the bunch of murderers, rapists and psychopaths picked to undertake a suicide mission during World War II. For the first two-thirds, as Major Lee Marvin knocks his misfits into shape, it is an uncompromising look at the violence of human nature and society. When the action starts, it is simply exciting. Aldrich has said: 'This is not really a joke, but it's not *All Quiet on the Western Front* either.' USA 1967/Dir Robert Aldrich. 149 mins.



Mon 13 Apr
6.10 8.40
Rosemary's Baby

All the ambiguities of Polanski's seminal tale of the supernatural in modern Manhattan are neatly concentrated in Cassavetes' performance as Guy Woodhouse, the devoted husband who then gives his unborn child to the devil. He plays an actor, but gives a totally naturalistic performance nicely balanced against the theatricalities of Ruth Gordon as the witch next door, and it is largely due to him that Polanski is so successfully able to blur the shifting boundaries between hallucination and reality. USA 1968/Dir Roman Polanski. With Mia Farrow. 137 mins



Wed 15 Apr
6.30 8.45
Faces

The first of Cassavetes' studies of middle-aged, middle-class Americans is an uncompromising dissection of a stagnant 14-year-old marriage, shot in the grainy improvisational style of *Shadows*. The conventions of a lifetime (the 'faces' of the title) are shattered by husband John Marley's affair with a prostitute (Gena Rowlands) and wife Lynn Carlin's meeting with a solitary nomad (Seymour Cassel). Comedy and tragedy intertwine in a movie that may well be Cassavetes' masterpiece. USA 1968/Dir John Cassavetes.



Fri 17 Apr
6.30/
Sat 18 Apr
2.00
Husbands

After the funeral of their buddy, three middle-aged friends go off on a 48-hour spree, and explore the alternative to confined domesticity that their wives represent. They plunge into a world of male camaraderie characterised by sex, drink, sport and gambling, but it is an impossible freedom. Cassavetes again charts an indifferent world which provides no easy answers for loneliness and disappointment in an unforgettable tragi-comedy superbly improvised by Ben Gazzara, Peter Falk, and the director himself. USA 1970/Dir John Cassavetes.

Cassavetes' most conventional movie traces the seemingly mismatched romance between an ageing hippy (Seymour Cassel) and a middle-aged museum employee (Gena Rowlands). It is also his clearest statement of belief that movies are never as real as people, and real life is certainly less glamorous than any celluloid depiction. Nevertheless, there are moments of rosy optimism among the emotional soul-searching, and the result is both comic and heartwarming. USA 1971/Dir John Cassavetes.

Fri 17 Apr
8.45/
Sat 18 Apr
4.15

Minnie and Moskowitz



Gena Rowlands is the wife under the influence of seemingly unsympathetic husband Peter Falk. Again no easy solutions, but there are pointers as to why loneliness and confusion on a domestic level parallel the uncertainties of the outside world to become an inner emotional state of mind that leads to madness. The central performances are intense but at the same time distance the spectator into a doubt about who is really mad. USA 1976/Dir John Cassavetes. 146 mins.

Sat 18 Apr
6.20/
Mon 20 Apr
5.45

A Woman Under the Influence



The dream world of Cosmo Vitelli (Ben Gazzara) is the tawdry night club, populated by sequinned strippers and bad comics, that he just about owns. He is a survivor, until the non-payment of a gambling debt forces him into the employ of the mob as an assassin. The movie works both as a fine thriller (one of the most original of recent years), and as a character study of a born loser who can only be a winner if the world goes away. USA 1976/Dir John Cassavetes. 135 mins.

Sat 18 Apr
9.00/
Mon 20 Apr
3.15 8.30

The Killing of a Chinese Bookie



Cassavetes' self-examination of his own collaborative techniques and the slim dividing line that separates art and artifice is the back-stage story of actress Minnie Moore (Gena Rowlands), troubled by personal and professional doubts during the pre-Broadway tour of a new play. The movie examines her relationships with co-actors, director and playwright, as she examines them herself. The result is never less than fascinating. USA 1977/Dir John Cassavetes. With Ben Gazzara, Joan Blondell, Cassavetes. 144 mins.

Sat 25 Apr
3.00 5.45 8.30
Opening Night



Cassavetes' latest film and his most commercially successful movie to date. Gloria (Gena Rowlands), who prefers cats to almost everything else, is on the run from both the cops and the mob with a 7-year-old boy, keeper of his father's Mafia secrets. It may be, as she says, only a dream, but her gradual transformation is a constant delight, as too is the performance of John Adames as the boy who plays it like Cagney with the voice of Peter Lorre. USA 1980/Dir John Cassavetes. With Buck Henry. (Unconfirmed).

Sun 26 Apr
6.30 8.45
Gloria

