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To some extent, The Killing of a

Chinese Bookie builds around Ben

Gazzara as Cosmo, his presence as

much as his performance—since I

am not convinced that at any given

moment he is altogether sure of

what he is going to say. Gazzara

seems all method, just as the film

seems all method, and he is re-

markable to watch groping inward

stronger in the end.

## Death in Fragments

ROGER GREENSPUN

The Killing of a Chinese Bookie Columbia I & II

Perhaps an hour, perhaps more into John Cassavetes' 131-minute sense for me. Not the story, which I don't wholly understand yet—but



Virginia Carrington

the style, and the less focused



**Timothy Carey** performances, and the talk, and the feeling for a world at once intimate and utterly impersonal in its demands. The Killing of a Chinese Bookie is Cassavetes' -toughest movie, and his most interesting, the first to my mind in which method and meaning totally agree. Even the title gives some idea. After Shadows, Faces, Husbands, A Woman Under the Influence, after so many films suggesting a quality or attempting a portrait, this one openly proclaims an action. It is a nutty action to be sure, bizarre from the edges right into the center, but it the movie with a middle and an end—though I'm not so confident I can locate a beginning. That's true in a philosophic sense only. Cassevetes' actual technique goes the other way round—to cut from a sequence before it's ended, sometimes just after it's begun; so the characters

of events we've never been made privy to. That, together with the elliptical, largely improvised dialogue; and a camera that occasionally seems to have only a passing interest in what's going on; makes for more practical difficulties in following the movie new movie, things began making than you may find necessary. I begin to find them necessary, and the discovery of such necessity—a discovery common to all art—is one of the handsomest rewards for putting up with The Killing of a Chinese Bookie.

> The bookie—clearly a crime-lord much bigger than that—we see just for a moment, on the occasion of his death. An old man, rich, vulnerable, sybaritic, he is shot in his bath by one Cosmo Vitelli, who owns a club on Sunset Strip, and who kills only to erase a ruinous gambling debt. The movie is Cosmo's story, from the few days before to his few hours after the killing—Cosmo with his contacts and his club girls and his appealing, none too lucid, philosophy of life. What saves his story—and will kill him—is that he has a task that





Seymour Cassel

helps define him and the time he wastes or puts to use, and that determines his doom. With any Cassavetes movie you have to stay loose—with this one, the loosest of all. It makes all the difference to have a fate more specific than merely growing old, or bored, or crazy, to hang some of that looseness on.

During some passages everything tightens up—the actual killing; Cosmo's later struggle to escape the gang that now wants to eliminate its amateur hit man. These passages are valuable not only because they are good in a fairly conventional suspense-movie way, but also because they help crystallize, re-define, and justify the main interests of Cassavetes' method. Thus the hit, which begins with the virtual kidnapping of Cosmo, and continues as the hot car the gang provides him develops will often be living in terms of a lot a flat on the Freeway (and because

the thing runs on crossed ignition wires he has no key to open the trunk for the jack and the spare tire), literally builds its excitement on feeling for a improvisation, which is Cosmo's style and the film's main way of understanding him. Much of that killing is brilliantly photographed, the action caught in intermittent pools of light on the grounds of the bookie's dark, well-guarded estate. But it



Ben Gazzara



Alice Friedland

Donna Marie Gordon

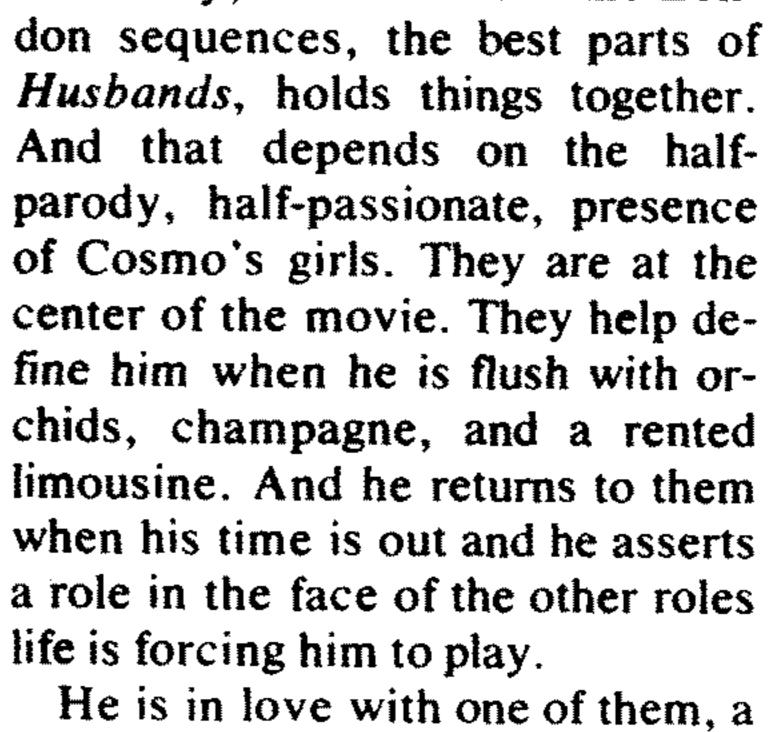
takes such a sequence in a sense to no explanations, but rather a certify the way so much else is photographed—rather casually in relation to the camera frame—and suggest some reasons you might grow to like it.

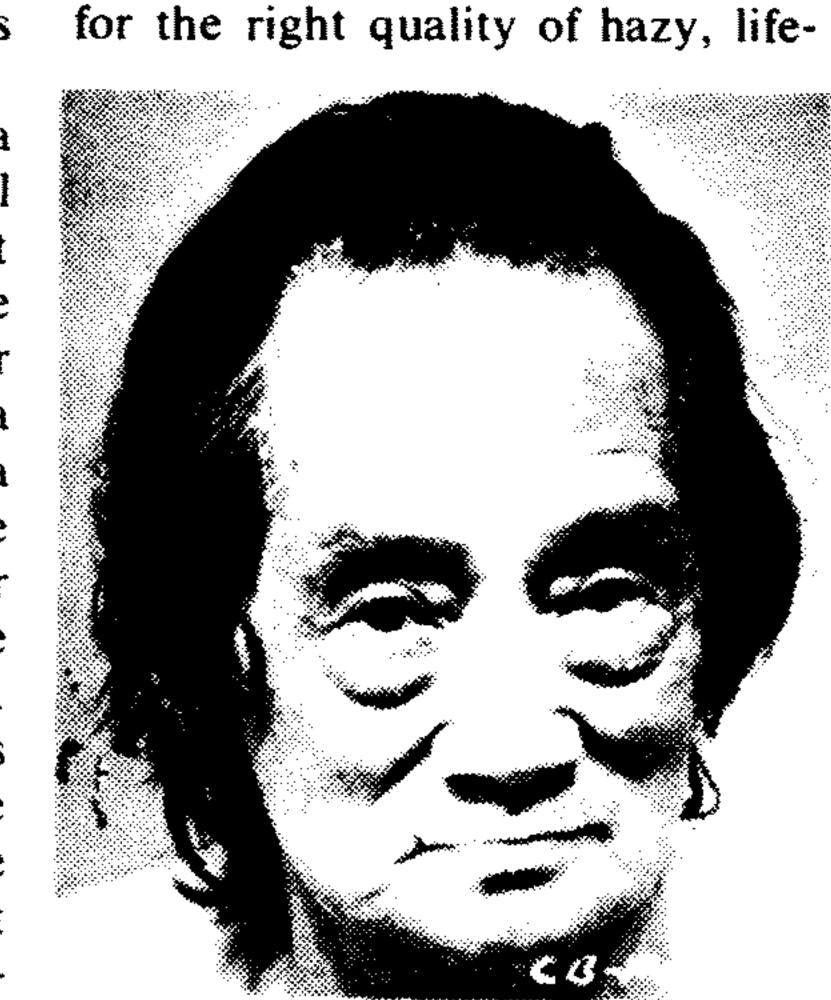
lot on faith until he found out. He doesn't really find out, and given shambles. Only the sexual his club and his people, turns out

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chemistry, reminiscent of the Lon-Husbands, holds things together. parody, half-passionate, presence of Cosmo's girls. They are at the fine him when he is flush with ora role in the face of the other roles life is forcing him to play.

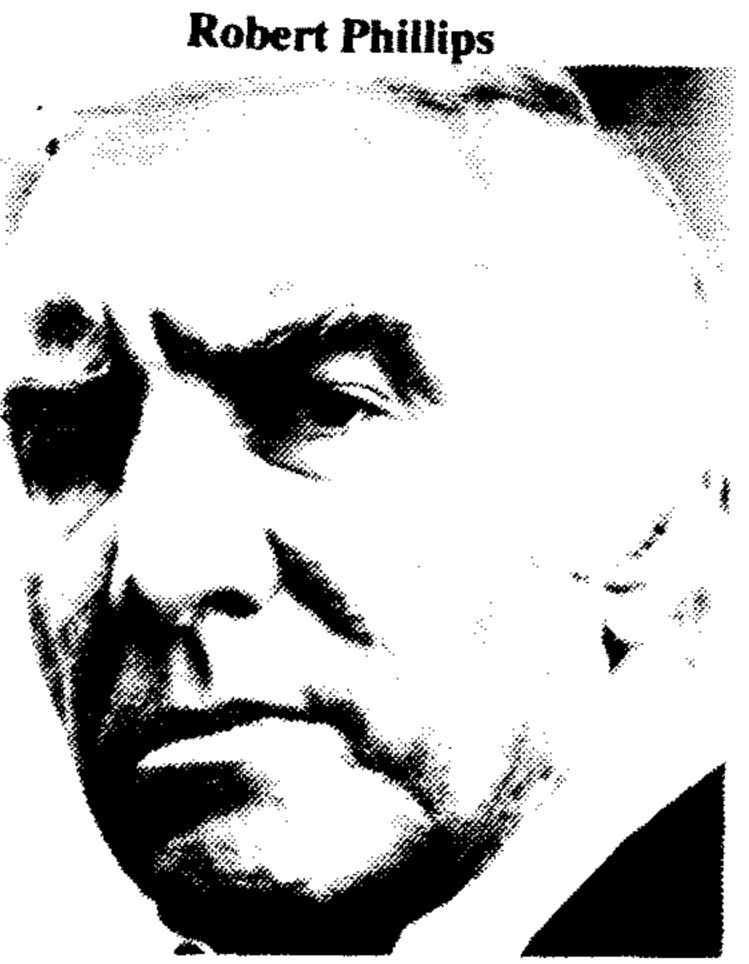
beautiful black girl named Rachel (Azizi Johari), who doesn't trust him. But all of them, Sherry (Alice Friedland), with the spectacular and Margo (Donna breasts, Gordon), who's too short to get a job in a fancier club, and the others, become a frieze for Cosmo's actions. Indeed, they are the only context for him we know. Knowledge comes hard, and in bits and pieces—which is a rationale for Cassavetes' camera, a rationale that doesn't always work, but works often enough to whet the appetite for more. All personality suggests mystery, even the least complicated. Cassavetes insists on



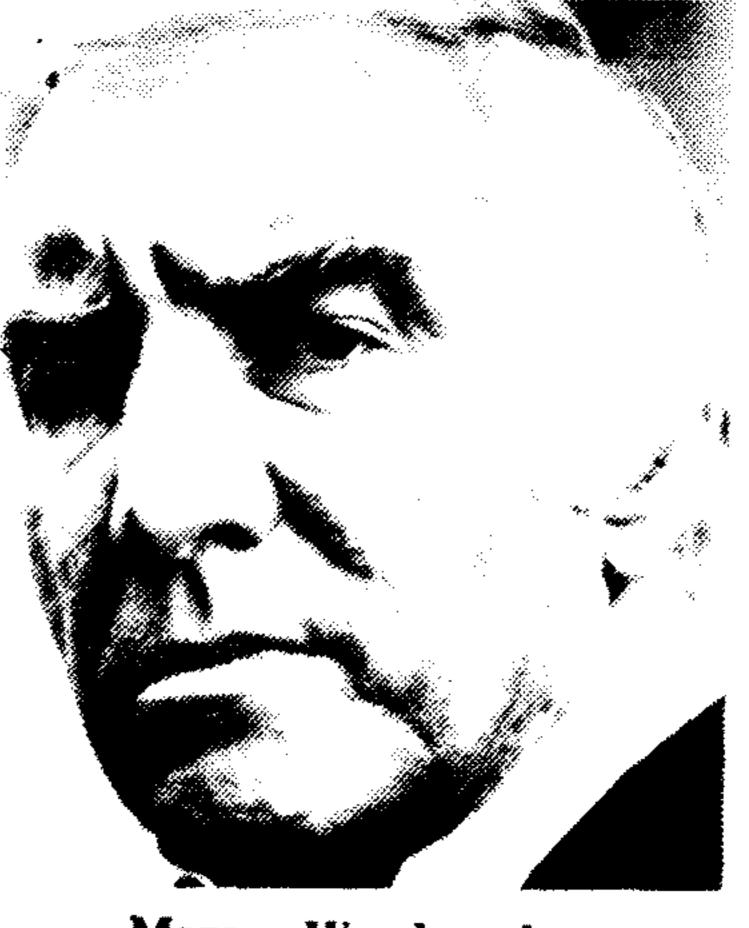


Soto Joe Hugh

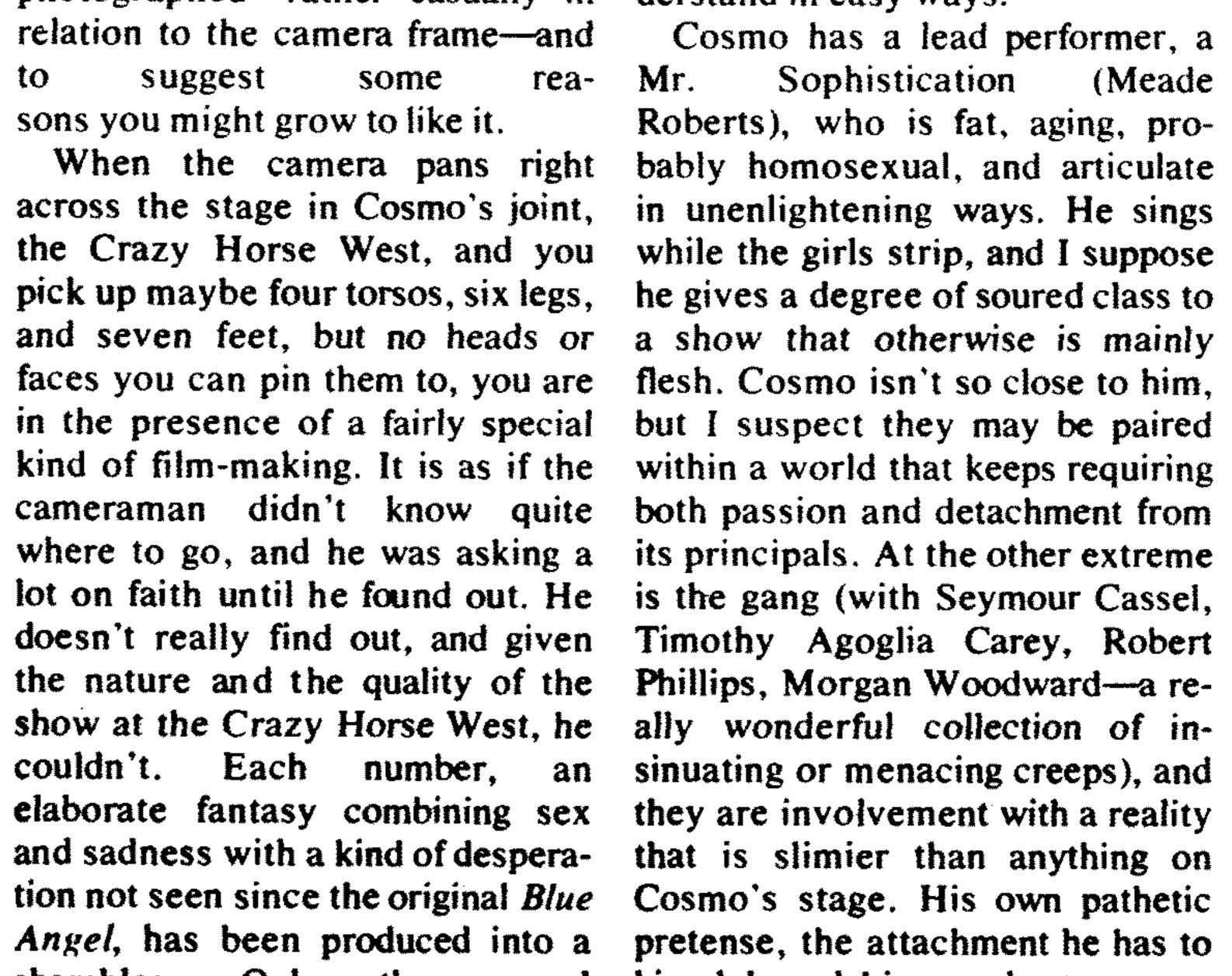




Morgan Woodward



celebration of what you can't understand in easy ways.





John Red Kullers



Al Ruban

sustaining cliche. I like his way of being in the film—as I like Meade Roberts, or Seymour Cassel's, or Donna Gordon's, or all the others. He is engaged in more than two almost unstructured of gesture, which seems difficult, and beautiful when it works, as it frequently does. A lot is wasted, but enough is saved to establish a character and his fate along all the points with which he last makes contact. As for fading out of life, this could be how it looks and feels. I am caught by its pathos and even its glamor.

I assume that The Killing of a Chinese Bookie won't be very popular, and I doubt that many critics will think it's very good. I do, almost in spite of myself. Even its confusions—a feature of any Cassavetes movie—seem valuable. And I think they are worth the time and the patience to let them have their way.