

Faces

By Ray Carney

“Faces” had its origins in the summer of 1964. After his fights with Stanley Kramer over the editing of “A Child Is Waiting,” the only jobs Cassavetes could get were working in a development office at Screen Gems and playing a string of minor acting roles, but after working there for eighteen months he decided he needed to do something more creative with his life. He wrote a three-act play and began plans to mount it. The production was to have been a play because Cassavetes had no expectations that a studio would back his work after his very public blow-out with Kramer; but he discovered that securing backing for a play was as difficult as securing it for a film and in mid-October decided to go back to the “Shadows” days and make a movie financed completely out of his own pocket—going for broke not only metaphorically but literally. The sets would be his house and the house of his mother-in-law, and the actors would be more or less anyone willing to work for free.

He ended up with a 175-page film script that went under a variety of working titles, from “The American Marriage” to “The Dynosaurs” — the last an evocation of the idea that a hide-bound older generation was being replaced by a more vital, authentic, younger one, and gave it to his actors the week before Christmas. Shooting occupied a six-month period between early January and early July 1965, with everything done on a bare-bones budget to save money. The film was shot in 16mm, using borrowed, second-hand, and rental equipment and was rehearsed and filmed almost entirely at night since a number of the principals had to hold jobs in the days. The initial “final edits” ran between 220 and 390 minutes, with Cassavetes seriously considering releasing the film at that length, but audience response at test screenings was so vehemently negative that he abandoned the idea, and ended up going with a 129-minute edit. (A copy of a 147-minute edit survives in the Library of Congress holdings, discovered, previously unrecognized, by the present writer in October 2001. It was most likely part of a large deposit of Cassavetes material the author made arrangements to have donated to the Library several years earlier. More information is



John Marley as Richard embraces Jeannie (Gena Rowlands), the current object of his affections. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

available at: <http://people.bu.edu/rcarney/discoveries/discfaces.shtml>.)

The masterplot of all of Cassavetes’ work involves the differences between and interactions of “free” and “trapped” characters, though Cassavetes’ understandings of those categories are not the normal or expected ones. To start with, the categories have nothing to do with external, physical, or social situations; they are defined more or less entirely in emotional, psychological, and spiritual terms, even as the conditions of freedom and entrapment manifest themselves not in states of subjectivity but in characters’ capacities of performance. Equally importantly, “freedom” represents an extreme state. It involves performative extravagance, imaginative inappeasibility, and expressive outrageousness and zaniness that borders on what would normally constitute craziness and irresponsibility, and the affronting, violating, or ignoring of expressive norms and social expectations. To be “trapped” is to conform to the expressive and imaginative values the “free” characters violate and affront—to be emotionally and expressively careful, cautious, and conservative.

“Faces” doubles the free and trapped presentation. In one strand of the narrative, the zany, fun-loving, irresponsible Chet (Seymour Cassel) stands as the alternative to the fearfulness, timidity, caution, and conservatism of Maria (Lynn Carlin) and her suburban housewife friends, Louise (Joanne Moore

Jordan) and Billy Mae (Darlene Conley); in another strand, caring, tender, sensitive Jeannie Rapp (Gena Rowlands) functions as an alternative to the bullying narcissism and testosterone-poisoned braggadocio of Freddie (Fred Draper), Richard (John Marley), and McCarthy (Val Avery). As different as Chet and Jeannie are (and it is a brilliant choice on Cassavetes' part to make them so different) they embody similar states of emotional openness and performative freedom unavailable to the other characters, even as they themselves, a gigolo and a call girl respectively, function outside the bounds of social acceptability.

Character is less a fixity in Cassavetes' work than a state of energy in motion, a capacity for change, a flow that resists every sort of psychological stabilization and emotional codification. In fact, to the extent that a character in a Cassavetes film has "a character," he or she is doomed. To stand still is to be one of the "trapped." Even many of the most limited figures in Cassavetes' films (and Richard, Freddie, Maria, Louise, Billy Mae, and McCarthy are, emotionally and imaginatively speaking, as limited as human beings can be) are endowed with the capacity to swerve away from their own "characters," away from each successive understanding a viewer imposes on them.

This ontological flow and experiential openness was precisely what critics interpreted as "improvisation." More important than its factual falsity, the improvisation canard represented a conceptual error. What the films' critics couldn't deal with was the very innovativeness of Cassavetes' presentation. The slipperiness of the characters' relationships, the mercuriality of their tones, the performative eccentricity of their interactions, and the zig-zagginess of their scenes was not evidence that Cassavetes was filming improvised lines but improvised lives. Personal identity, the relationships of characters to each other, and their relationships to their own experiences were *improvised*, not as an acting strategy but as a depic-

tion of life being lived at its most creative, exciting, daring, and precarious. Chet, Jeannie, and Florence show what that relationship to experience looks like. It is nimble, fluxional, and creative. It is open and responsive. It leaves ontological definitions and imaginative fixities behind. While figures like Richard, Freddie, McCarthy, Maria, Louise, and Billy Mae attempt to control the course of events and hold on to their ideas of themselves at the cost of nothing less than self-destruction, Chet, Jeannie, and Florence open themselves to the unpredictable flow of experience. That is the path of creativity, but as Cassavetes knew from his own life, and as Mabel Longhetti would demonstrate in even greater detail in "A Woman Under the Influence," it is also the path of insecurity, misunderstanding, and pain. The closed ones, the ontologically frozen ones, may be "dinosaurs," but they are the ones who rule the world, even as they race toward their own extinction. "Faces" embraces the same dream that underpinned much of 1960s artistic expression—the dream of the passing of the old guard. If only it had actually come to pass.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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