7

A Woman Under the Influence (1972–4)

One of the distant sources of *A Woman Under the Influence* was Cassavetes' experience of 'staying home with the baby' for a couple years after the Stanley Kramer imbroglio.

I know when I was not working, and Gena was working for me, I was a pretty good housewife and everything else. But I didn't have really the same reactions as a woman would have. Mainly because I didn't *have* to be a housewife the rest of my life. I didn't have to think into the future of when I'd get older or when my attractiveness would fade, or when the kids would grow up or when the baby would cease to cling to you, and you're not really a mother then, and you have to think, well, should I be the friend or should I be the mother?

Another was his off-camera relationship with Gena Rowlands and questions he had about maintaining love in the face of differences of personality, temperament and background.

Gena and I were speaking about the pictures we were going to make, how the roles are so thin and everything is made so a narrative can work. We were talking about how difficult love was and how tough it could be to make a love story about two people who were totally different culturally, coming from two different family groups that were diametrically opposed and yet still regarded each other very highly. I kept thinking about that. Gena and I are absolutely dissimilar in everything we think, do and feel. Beyond that, men and women are totally different. When I started writing the scripts, I kept these things in mind and didn't want the love story easy. I made a lot of discoveries about my own life.

As with *Faces* and *Love Streams*, *A Woman Under the Influence* began life as a stage-work, to feature Gena Rowlands and Ben Gazzara. Rowlands had requested a starring-vehicle, and Cassavetes accommodated

her by writing three interrelated plays to be performed on successive nights. The first was written in the summer of 1971, while he was still engaged with post-production on *Minnie and Moskowitz*; the second was written in September; the third was written in the winter; and all three were revised in the spring of 1972.

In retelling the events, Cassavetes plays a little free and loose with the facts: first, by suggesting that the idea of doing three plays was merely a response to Rowlands' objections, when in fact the three-part narrative was part of his initial vision of the work (with each play presenting the story from a different character's point of view); second, by implying that he succeeded in obtaining financing for a Broadway production, when in fact, he was not able to.

I absolutely wrote *A Woman Under the Influence* to try to write a terrific part for my wife. Gena wanted to do a play. She was always complaining we're living in California, she loves the theater and everything. Gena really wanted to do a play on Broadway. And I had always fancied that I could write a play. She wanted something big. She said, 'Now look, deal with it from a *woman's* point of view. I mean deal with it so that *I have a part* in this thing!' And I said, 'OK,' and I went off and had been thinking about it for a year anyway. And I had taken seven or eight tries at bad plays and came up with this play, which was not the play that the movie was, but it was based on the same characters.

And Gena read it and said, no, she wouldn't do it. And I'm very stubborn so I didn't realize that she liked the part but that on the stage, to play that every night, would kill her. I had no concept of that because we're all obsessed, everyone's obsessed, that is, in this stupid thing. And so I wrote another play on the same subject with the same characters, deepening the characters and making it even more difficult to play. And I gave it to Gena and she said, 'I like that tremendously. I like the first one too, but I don't think I could do that on Broadway.' So I wrote another play, and so now there were three plays! And I took them to New York and I got a producer to produce the plays on Broadway and I thought it was a terrific idea to do these three plays on consecutive nights with matinees, see? [Laughs.] And Gena's not a particularly ambitious woman in the trade, as it goes. Although, if she sees a good part, she'll kill herself for it, but I mean kill herself performing it, but not getting it. I mean, it's either *given* to her, or she'll play with the kids or do something else or go out. When Gena read the plays she said, '*No one* could do this every night!' She feared they would take her to a sanitarium if she became that keyed up over a long

period of time! So then I said, well, all right, let's try to make it a movie.

Although narratively connected works have been presented on Broadway a few times subsequently, at the time Cassavetes proposed it, his idea was rejected out of hand by every backer he approached as being commercially untenable. In March, he began thinking of recasting the three full-length plays as three one-acters to be performed in a single evening but was unable to get financial backing for that idea either.

If the plays were to be made at all, they would have to be recast as a single film. In late July 1972, Cassavetes took 'Play #1' and added eleven pages of new material at the start and twenty-one pages at the end to create the first draft of the filmscript. (The manuscript shows its double origins: the bulk of the material in the middle is clearly written as a play, but the additions, with revision dates between 26 and 28 July 1972, have camera directions indicated on them.) The hybrid text begins quite similarly to the film but ends with Nick committing Mabel, taking the kids to the beach and returning home alone with them afterwards. In August, Cassavetes added material from 'Play #2' and 'Play #3' which presents Mabel's return from the hospital and the events that comprise the final third of the film. This draft, which is very close to the final text of the film, is dated 23 August 1972.

The decision to make a film didn't solve Cassavetes' financial problems; it simply shifted them to a new arena. Though he later denied it in interviews, he did approach several studios for financing, but none would touch the project. Cassavetes was told not only that the narrative seemed too 'down-beat' and the confinement of the characters to a single set was 'uncinematic', but that his refusal to use a studio-approved union crew (not only for financial reasons but because of his experiences on *Husbands* and *Minnie and Moskowitz*) made support absolutely impossible.

I can't just go out and make what I want. I have to go through a whole big process of crap, talking to people and talking to people, proving to them that whatever we are going to do is going to make money. If I can prove it to them that my intentions are to make money, then they will let me make any film I want. But it becomes increasingly more difficult to tell them that since I'm not concerned with making money. You con people and you lie to them. You try to keep a little part of yourself when somebody says to you, 'You figure it's the greatest picture ever made?' You try to keep a little part of yourself alive. So I went through all the

processes of calling people in Wisconsin and Idaho and, you know, big industrialists, and trying to find out how to raise the money. And we couldn't raise anything, not *anything*!

What made the situation even more difficult was that in the year Cassavetes had devoted to attempting to get the plays financed, Ben Gazzara had become involved with another project and Cassavetes was now without a 'bankable' male lead. But it was his personality to forge full-speed ahead – even if he didn't know exactly where he was headed. By early fall 1972, he had assembled a crew and told them the production would start on 1 November, though he had neither the money to make the film nor an actor for the lead at that point. (Cassavetes briefly considered casting Val Avery in the Nick role, Elaine May in the Mama Longhetti part and Nick Dennis in a supporting role.)

Peter Falk said he never knew whether what followed was an accident or a carefully calculated strategy on Cassavetes' part. The two men had become close friends as a result of the *Husbands* publicity tour, and only a few months prior to this meeting Cassavetes had acted in the 'Etude in Black' episode of *Columbo* – turning in a superb performance which, in the final five minutes, transformed a routine 'whodunit' into a deep psychological study of a man undone by his embarrassment at being humiliated in front of his wife. (French critics and the Internet Movie Database have popularized the notion that Cassavetes directed this episode and did other television work under the pseudonym Nick Colasanto. It is not true.) In private, Cassavetes had been warning Falk about the dangers of being pigeonholed as a 'charming comical klutz' (*à la* Columbo) and had been encouraging him to tackle serious dramatic roles. The two men were at Elaine May's house, meeting about her upcoming *Mikey and Nicky*, and when the conversation flagged, Cassavetes pulled out a copy of his script.

When Elaine May and Peter and Gena and myself and people get together at a party, we always read – instead of just sitting around drinking and talking about the business and what's wrong and all: 'What have you written?' 'What have *you* written?' And it's an excitement for us. So, in September 1972, Peter and Elaine May and I were in New York and we were about to make another movie, *Mikey and Nicky*. And Elaine said, 'Let's read your plays.' And this one day Peter read *A Woman Under the Influence*, and I had no idea that he could play the part; it was a lousy part – I thought it was a terrible part – there was a lot of work to be done. And at that point it was a very small part.

He said, 'I've gotta play that husband.' And I said, 'Peter, I don't know if you could play that. What kind of a part is that for you to play, a heavy? You're the most loved character in the world.' *Lying!* I *wanted* him to play it! [Laughs.] I *wanted* him, but if you say, 'Please, Peter, play this,' he won't play it. So you gotta say, 'Peter, you *don't* play it. You *can't* play it' – and then he wants to play. 'What do you mean I can't play? I can play anything!' So it's not all lying, but –! [Laughs.] So that's the way that thing came about; he *insisted* on doing it.

Cassavetes had a lead but still no financing. Though he had money from a couple of quickie television acting jobs and could mortgage his house one more time, the grand total he could raise came to less than half of the $250,000 he estimated he needed to start. Falk would have to provide the other half. Fortunately, *Columbo* had been launched the preceding year, and Falk was willing to contribute four episodes' worth, or $125,000, but didn't think a 35mm feature could be done for that amount of money. He also told Cassavetes that it was ridiculous to think the shoot could start in November, since that was only about six weeks off at this point. Cassavetes typically argued that as long as they had enough money to start they shouldn't worry about how they were going to finish the movie. The point was to begin – and the sooner the better. (In fact, Falk's financial calculations were right: when post-production and lab costs were factored in, *A Woman Under the Influence* eventually cost more than four times the amount Cassavetes started with.)

I said, 'We have a November date and Gena's in it and you're in it, and we're gonna have a reading and we're gonna get all these people, gonna read it now.' He says, 'What do you mean? You can't start – you don't have the money.' So I made him put up half the money [laughs] and we just started to make the picture. By that point I knew that I couldn't tolerate any interference from a studio or even from an independent financial backer. So I mortgaged my house to raise half of the $250,000 budget I needed, and Peter provided the other half out of his earnings from *Columbo*. Everything in my whole life has been propelled by panic. The shoot was only a couple months off, and we didn't have much to go on, but we had ourselves and some enthusiasm.

Once it was resolved that Falk would be playing the part of Nick, a certain amount of rewriting was necessary. Cassavetes' scripts were always written with particular actors in mind.

We had some readings of the play and started to work on the script and

got involved in it. I have a definite person in mind when I write, which is why I like to work with people who are very close to me. I know the way they think, so I try – *presume*, if you will – to put down some of those thoughts, not in their own terms but in the character's terms. I often get extremely close to someone's real personal problems, but that's our hope – no *fictitious* emotion. Knowing who the two central actors would be, I revised the screenplay. I wrote it for Peter, as he would expect me to. I study his speech patterns and study the way he works, and how he really feels about it, and then start to write off that.

One of the sources of dialogue material was tapes and notes Cassavetes made of things he heard at home.

Gena tells everyone that it's hard to live with me because there is nothing she can say that I don't write down. I see Gena around the house and with the kids and I tape record what I see. I do tape record things and exaggerate them and blow them up and the incidents are not the same. I mean, I'm not a *writer* at all! I just record what I hear. As prattle. What people are concerned with in a day's living. I have a good ear for prattle. Every line in your life is eaten up by the movies you do.

Cassavetes got great pleasure from writing.

When I first start writing there's a sense of discovery. In some way it's not work, it's finding some romance in the lives of people. You get fascinated with their lives. If they stay with you, then you want to do something – make it into a movie, put it on in some way. It was that which propelled us to keep on working at *A Woman Under the Influence*. The words kind of spell out the story in a mysterious way. I deal with the characters as any writer would deal with a character. There are certain characters that you like, that you have feeling for, and other characters stand still. So you work until you have all the people in some kind of motion.

Making a film is a mystery. If I knew anything about men and women to begin with, I wouldn't make it, because it would bore me. I really feel that the script is written by what you can *get out of it* and how much it *means* to you. What the film is about is not deliberate in the original intention. I mean, I know that the subject is going to be a family. But I don't know what my initial motivations are. You're interested in where you're going. The idea of taking a laborer and having him married to a wife whom he can't capture is really exciting. I don't know how you work on that. So I *write* – I'll do it any way I can. I'll hammer it out; I'll

kick it out; I'll beat it to death – any way you can *get it*. I don't think there are any rules. The only rules are that you do the best you can. And when you're not doing the best you can then you don't like yourself. And that's very individual with everyone.

There was a lot of thought behind even small details. Cassavetes and his actors would brainstorm many things that never made it into the movie: the background of the characters, where they went to school, how they met, etc.

The preparations for the scripts I've written are really long, hard, intense studies. I don't just enter into a film and say, 'That's the film we're going to do.' I think, 'Why make it?' For a long time. I think, 'Well, could the people be themselves, does this really happen to people, do they really dream this, do they think this?' There were weeks of wrestling to get the script right. I knew hard-hat workers like Nick, and Gena knew women like Mabel, and although I wrote everything myself, we would discuss lines and situations with Peter Falk, to get his opinion, to see if he thought they were really true, really honest. The actors discussed the clothes the characters would be wearing, the influence of money on their lives, the lives of the children, why they sleep on the ground floor, etc. Everything was discussed, nothing came from me alone. We write a lot of things that aren't in the movie, as background. So that when we got to the scene, you might rewrite on the spot, but we might have already gone in three, four, five, seven, eight, nineteen different versions of the scene.

Rehearsals for *A Woman Under the Influence* consisted of ten or twelve readings with the actors around a table. This was not only an opportunity for the actors to get to know each other's rhythms and pacings but for Cassavetes to rethink the script. The scripts were not collaborations – Cassavetes was very much in control – but these readings would suggest new directions to pursue or places that needed work.

I do a full and total screenplay and then the actors come to me and tell me what they don't like. We get together for several weeks, in the evenings, for example, and read the script together. We get on well together, we've known each other and worked together for a long time. The actors come up with various suggestions and I ask them to write them down because sometimes I don't understand what they are trying to say. Gena, for example, read the finished script and said, 'I hate this woman. What does she do? What clothes does she wear?' I replied that,

at this stage, I didn't care what she wore. But for her this is important; and she's right, I had given a superficial response.

I try to get deeper into the characters and find out what the actors want to play. In what they want to play, somehow they're adding to the film. They're adding their own sense of reality and perceptions I wouldn't know from my relatively limited point of view. It's a necessary part of the process for me. If for me a line is right, I won't let the actors change it, but will allow them latitude in interpretation.

Questioning the meaning of his life.

After *Minnie and Moskowitz*, I thought, 'All right, I would like to make a picture to really *say* something.' The most important thing in my life, in Gena's life and in the lives of our intimate friends was the idea of marriage. We were deeply concerned with the change in illusions that marriage engenders over a period of years and the overwhelming need to understand the problems of retaining the family. Out of that came the characters, the feelings for the characters and, in a more specific sense, the complex delineation of the woman in the film.

The film was born out of my despair and questioning of the meaning of my life. As I thought about this, and, later, during the filming, I became very conscious of certain problems that were unknown and foreign to me. I'll use anything I can to straighten out a problem – even write a movie about it. When I finally saw the finished film, I was shocked by the reality of these problems.

Usually we put film in such simple terms while being endlessly involved in talking about our personal experience. We admit how complex *it* is. But it's as though we never look into a mirror and see what *we* are. So the films I make really are trying to mirror *that* emotion so we can understand what *our* impulses are; why *we* do things that get us into trouble; when to worry about it; when to let them go. And maybe we can find something in *ourselves* that is worthwhile. Look at it this way: if I were writing a picture and I used a situation which none of us were involved in or interested in, then I'd feel ashamed about doing it – and so would everybody else. So I use absolutely everything I can find in our own lives, in our friends' lives, to make what we're doing interesting. But you'd better do it honestly, and you'd better cure all those personal problems that might be holding back something you want to say.

I don't think audiences are satisfied any longer with just touching the surface of people's lives; I think they really want to get into a subject.

Love within a family is a universal subject, but one that's always treated lightly. We've learned to gossip about life instead of living it. A woman is either a married housewife who is happy or a married housewife who is unhappy. It's not that simple. It is possible to be married and in love and unhappy too. And love fluctuates. Marriage, like any partnership, is a rather difficult thing. It has been taken rather lightly in the movies. Family life is so different than what has been fed into us through the tube and through radio and through the casual, inadvertent greed that surrounds us. Films today show only a dream world and have lost touch with the way people really are. For me the Longhetti family is the first real family I've ever seen on screen. Idealized screen families generally don't interest me because they have nothing to say to me about my own life.

I spend months and years working out the philosophical intent of each picture. We create such problems in making a film by being so nuts as to say, 'What's *underneath* these characters? What are we *really* trying to say? Why are most movies so exploitative? Why don't we go in and try to find out what people are *really* thinking? Even if we don't know how to answer the question.' The idea was to take all the experiences that I've had, all the family and love that's been given, all the bitterness – to take all that and say, 'OK, we've had all this,' and put it all together.

In replacing narrative, *you need an idea*. What you do is take an idea that you have about a situation and then translate it into a dramatic situation that seems as normal as everyday life so the audience doesn't see the idea. So it doesn't show. Of course the idea itself has to be good – it really has to be first-rate. And the idea in *A Woman Under the Influence* was a concept of how much you have to pay for love. That's kind of pretentious, but I was interested in it. And I didn't know how to do it, and none of the other people knew how either, so we had to work extremely hard. But you have to deal with philosophic points in terms of *real* things. Children are real. Food is real. A roof over your head is real. Taking the children to the bus is real. Trying to entertain them is real. Trying to find some way to be a good mother, a good wife – I think all those things are real. And they are usually interfered with by the other side of one's self – which is the personal side, not the profound, wonderful side. And that personal side says, 'Hey, what about *me*? Yeah, you can't do this *to me*.' But if you're in the audience, the audience is saying, 'Hey, what about *me*?' All the way through *A Woman Under the Influence* the characters are *not* thinking about themselves – and therefore the audience is allowed to ask that because the characters

can't. In that way, the film was a little unreal. Because in life people stop and say, 'What about me?' every three seconds.

I knew that love created at once great moments of beauty and that on the other hand it makes you a prisoner. It just seems to me that women are alone and they are made prisoner by their own love. If they commit to something then they have committed to it and it's a torture. And it's true. I mean, I see it in my relationship to Gena. Within such a system men have always been in a more favorable position – they are allowed to test themselves against the rest of the world since they are in contact with it. But I feel it too. A man feels that also. And nobody knows how to handle it. Nobody knows how to handle it.

This is complicated in turn by other characters and their lifestyles that come and go within the structure of the film. The interrelations between the characters must not be made too easy; like people in life, each presents unique problems, so that even though they come from the same class background and share similar experiences, problems still arise. To make sure it wouldn't be sentimental, when I finished the script I crossed out all the references to love except one.

I think we're just reporters, all of us basically. We report from a certain editorial point of view on what we feel, on what we see and on what is important to us. A story like this is not newsworthy really – it's not Watergate, it's not war; it's a man and woman relationship, which is always interesting to me.

Filmmaking as an alternative to life's humiliations.

There's a very small part of all of us that has any kind of value. I think there's a small part of us that says we'd like to say something better than what is usually said, on the purest level. And the rest of it is con-men and struggling people just like everyone else – where you're constantly humiliated and go through your life, even if you're not humiliated, *thinking* you are. And then you get very lucky and you meet a group of creative people that are very much like you who are locked up in their own selves, trying to come out, trying in some way to express something that is very personal to them. And then suddenly one thing develops and another thing develops, and *Gena* has a fantastic day and we respond to it and *Peter* has a fantastic day, and the rest of the actors come in and they want to do something, and it all happens out of a day-by-day situation and a commitment. The commitment comes and grows more and more into something, that little part of you that isn't a con-man, and all of us get better as a result of making that picture and the

picture then has no importance really until you then see it or someone sees it and says, 'Yeah, that's all right. That was good.' Or somebody's very touched or somebody's bitter, and then ideas that we never even had seen, collectively, suddenly someone sees.

We don't know what we're doing. There's no way of knowing what you're doing. It's more of a *community* effort at the community situation of creativity. You just have to deal with people on their own level one to one and not feel you're *making* anything, not feel you're *doing* anything. But suddenly you find that everybody is working toward one regard not because we all got together and said, 'Let's go ahead and make a movie,' but because the questions that are asked are worthy of your time. I don't feel that it's a movie at all. I feel that it *does* connect with the mystery of a family and mother-in-laws and the fact that we all are living in this crazy world where we hate and love at the same time. And that is more important to me than seeing somebody shoot somebody in the eye and seeing the effect of the eye popping, you know? It may not be as entertaining always! It may not be the mood that you want to see. But it's enough to keep us going for two and a half years.

Seymour Cassel and other friends worked on the crew or acted. Cassavetes had confidence that almost anyone could act. In the final days of the New York shoot of *Husbands*, when he was stuck for a wife for Ben Gazzara's character to return home to and had no money to hire even a day-player, Cassavetes had producer Sam Shaw call up his daughter, Meta, to ask her to play the part. Although she had been a student at the Cassavetes–Lane Drama Workshop in her teens in the late 1950s, she had gotten married and been a New Jersey housewife for the past ten years. She told me how nervous she was about acting and how embarrassed she was about her matronly figure and the fact that she had to wear a nightgown on-camera; but she also told me how Cassavetes' and her father's faith that she would do a great job carried her through.

It was an intensely cooperative effort. Everyone worked on deferred salaries. One of my kids – Alexandra – played a neighborhood kid. One of the Longhetti kids was Seymour Cassel's son, the oldest boy, Tony. And then one was an actor and the other was the daughter of Grimaldi, Maria, the girl that fell on the beach. Other relatives and friends helped out by acting or by working on the crew. Like, somebody said, 'I'd like to do the music.' People came off the streets and those that hit me as people that would just – would be fun to work with – I chose and then we started working. I *love* them, the people who work with me, and I

guess they see things in the material and the way of working that makes them want to do it.

I was stuck for a mother for Peter Falk. I knew my mother would understand the basic values of protection of the son and not be afraid to take the brunt of criticism from the audience. She didn't do that easily. She would rather be funny and liked, like any other actress. She was absolutely terrified, as an actress, that something she had done would hurt the movie because she played a woman so defensive of her son. But she did it with such authority that I don't think an actress of thirty years' experience would have her purity of intention. I really believe almost anyone can act. How *well* they can act depends on how free they are and whether the circumstances are such that they can reveal what they feel. I don't think there's any great trick to my directing: I just get people I like, people I'm interested in, and talk to them on the basis of their being people rather than actors.

Gena Rowlands had casting input.

Gena and I talk it over. I take note of all our conversations. We discuss who will play the doctor, but since that bears no relation to her I don't worry about it. On the other hand, the choice of actress for another female role concerns her directly and I wouldn't choose anyone without discussing it with her. Otherwise it could affect her inspiration.

But even with friends and relatives working for free, Cassavetes still didn't have enough money or resources to get started. A few months before filming began, he came up with an idea to get additional support. He went to the American Film Institute and made them an offer he was sure they couldn't refuse. If they appointed him filmmaker-in-residence and gave him access to their equipment and facilities, he would give their students on-the-job training by letting them sit in on his film as he made it. What he didn't tell them, of course, was that he was desperately in need of free offices, equipment and crew, and the AFI wouldn't merely be assisting an existing project, but partially underwriting a movie that probably couldn't have been made otherwise.

I found out that there are Fellows there. And they give Fellowships. And we didn't have any money. So I thought, Well, I'm an American. This is an *American* Film Institute! I'm a student! No one's ever accused me of being professional! [Laughs.] I'm a filmmaker, hell. So a friend of mine got me introduced to a woman who said, 'Oh yes, we'd love to have you here,' and we had a very formal lunch and got a little

The Longhetti house, located on Taft Avenue in Hollywood, was much larger than it appears to be in the movie. Cassavetes had production offices and equipment rooms upstairs. He deliberately minimizes its size in the film. © *Michael Ferris*

stiff and they said, 'Well, would you like to come here?' And I said, 'Yes, I'd like to come here. I'd like to get as much out of the place as possible, and you can have anyone audit, come see how a film is made.'

Though Cassavetes thanks the AFI in the credits, in many different respects the relationship was not an entirely comfortable one. In general, Cassavetes had a fairly low opinion of the Institute's activities.

It made me sick to watch those businessmen applaud Welles during the 1975 AFI tribute, when you know that the next day if he asked any one of them for money, they'd say, 'We'll let you know.'

***A Woman Under the Influence* would be plagued by financial problems for the entire shoot. At a pre-production meeting a week before the start of filming, a visibly upset production supervisor, Michael Lally Jr., began yelling at Cassavetes that there was no money in the budget for film stock and suggested that they delay the start of shooting. Cassavetes' reply is revealing:**

On 1 November we will have actors, we will have a crew, we will have

lights and we will have a camera on a tripod, and I don't give a shit if there's no film. We *will* begin shooting this movie!

On Halloween night, the day before the shoot was to get underway, 10,000 feet (two hours) of film mysteriously showed up. Where it came from has never been satisfactorily explained, but one theory is that Seymour Cassel or someone else went to a porno house in the San Fernando Valley and obtained two hours of 'short ends' (unused footage from already shot magazines). It didn't really matter where it came from. It would be enough to begin. It was not the last time a Cassavetes movie would be filmed, at least in part, on short ends.

Cassavetes used every trick in the book to save a dollar during the shoot. Everything that could possibly be solicited as a donation was taken advantage of: from 110 free boxes of pasta and free Chianti Brolio for the spaghetti breakfast scene (Cassavetes was supposed to show the brand name but didn't); to a new Chevy truck for the construction site scenes (which Cassavetes accepted but didn't use because he felt it looked too fancy). Necessity was the mother of invention. He used his own car for Martha Mortensen's car. In the location scenes at the beach, Cassavetes didn't have the money for a generator truck so Mitch Breit tapped into a local city power line – without permission, needless to say. Gena Rowlands tells the story of how much Cassavetes wanted rain for Mabel's homecoming scene but couldn't possibly afford a rain machine. The day before the scene was to be filmed was a typically beautiful, cloudless Southern California day. Cassavetes only half-jokingly suggested, 'Let's sell a piano and call the fire department.' When it rained the next morning, she knew there was something magic in the air.

As usual, the actors worked for nothing (or for points, if there were any profits to be shared once the film was released) and the crew volunteered their services. Cassavetes made no promises of pay, and no one was paid for the first few weeks, but by the third week, Cassavetes started giving the crew paychecks of $60/week, which increased to $75/week by the end of the shoot.

Cassavetes had already made arrangements to rent a house at 1741 Taft Avenue off Hollywood Boulevard from an old couple (whom he moved into another house). The house was actually far larger than it appears to be, with more rooms downstairs and a spacious second floor, which Cassavetes converted into production offices and equipment-storage rooms. He deliberately minimized its size in the film. It was important that Falk and Rowlands believed in it, so a backstory about its history and how it was acquired was worked out. In October 1972,

while the actors were doing script readings, Cassavetes sent the crew in to clean, paint and decorate it. The point was not only to get the set into shape, but to help the crew get comfortable with each other by working together.

We looked at maybe 150 houses in Los Angeles. It was really hard to find something in the right price range that would make you feel you were in a real house and also depict the kind of blue-collar existence we had in mind. Some of the houses we scouted had plastic covers on everything, plastic pictures on the walls, and most of the family's money went into electrical appliances. That's a very real thing, but we didn't want it. So we decided we needed a hand-me-down house and finally found one that had been given to the Nick character and still had all the old furniture and old woodwork. We decorated to correspond with the characters: sporting trophies, photos of the children. Everyone brings their own ideas. For instance, should the house be painted? We painted the front but not the back, which could have been painted by some friends in exchange for a couple of beers but was left as it was. We decided Nick was too busy worrying about his family.

The location could have been a serious problem. At first everyone said, 'How can you do a picture where eighty per cent of it happens in the same house?' I think that's one reason why we had such difficulty financing the picture; it didn't seem to have enough movement, enough openness. But we decided we wouldn't try to exploit the house or make a 'thing' of it.

After the union crews and schedules of *Husbands* and *Minnie and Moskowitz*, *A Woman Under the Influence* represented a return to amateur filmmaking. The production manager kept things highly organized from day to day, providing call-sheets with scenes and locations specified, but there were no artificial deadlines by which something had to be done, no punch-the-clock mentality on the set and no specified number of shots that had to be made on a given day. If a scene took three days to get right rather than one, there was no sense of panic or rush as there is on a commercial shoot. Cassavetes had the house for as long as he wanted and was committed to taking as long as it took.

The intimacy of the working conditions was important to the effect. Rowlands said that since the cast and crew worked together in such a small space for such long hours, almost living together as a kind of big happy family, by the second week of shooting she felt that she actually lived there – that it really *was* her house. She moved through the spaces,

from room to room, naturally. For moments she forgot that the children were *not* really hers. She got used to the locations of the furniture. (She says her one fictional liberty was the desire to put on a bit of mascara or make-up on occasion to improve her appearance, which Cassavetes would instantly spot and make her remove. In the spaghetti breakfast, for example, she manages to sneak both eye shadow and lipstick past her director-husband; but, in this scene at least, it isn't necessarily a betrayal of her character. Rowlands' desire to look 'pretty' for strangers would undoubtedly be shared by Mabel.)

Cassavetes' preproduction schedule broke the script down into a sixty-one-day shoot, running from 1 November through 24 January, working five days a week with single days off for Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's. (In interviews he later exaggerated by saying that the crew shot six days a week.) To save time and money (including the cost of hiring a welfare worker for the children's scenes), he abrogated his normal practice of shooting in strict chronological sequence. At the end of January he added four more days of shooting at the construction site, to make a grand total of sixty-five days of work. Dailies were screened two or three times a week and on weekends. Cassavetes stopped at the end of January and did some preliminary editing to see what the film looked like. Then, in March 1973, he shot a few weeks of additional footage, including the beach and the truck scenes.

Though the shoot was relaxed in terms of its schedule, it was one of the most emotionally demanding of Cassavetes' career.

Making the picture was tough. Once we began shooting, it was hell. The emotional strain was so great that we never went out, socially, for thirteen weeks. No movies, no parties, no home entertaining, nothing. At night we'd collapse, make coffee, then start talking about the work. Yesterday's work, last week's, last month's, next week's, next month's. We'd wake up in the night and talk some more. It was that kind of total commitment. Sometimes the tension on the set was so great we could taste it. We'd quarrel and somebody would say, 'No, that scene isn't true, it isn't honest, let's do it again.' We sat around the Longhetti house and again talked out every scene until it seemed right, seemed right *in this particular environment*. It was hard work. It was disciplined work. It wasn't freewheeling, you didn't feel like going out after the shooting. Every time we make a movie it's always going to be fun and it never is. In the ultimate finish of our relationship on that film it never is fun. It's always, you look back on it with a great feeling of what a grueling adventure that has been.

Notwithstanding his reputation as the 'wild home-movie man', Cassavetes' sets were surprisingly disciplined (albeit occasionally noisy) places. When the actors came onto the set they were expected to leave their ordinary identities behind and become the strangers they are in the film. Actors were to stay in character, or at least not to blatantly come out of character. That meant that they were forbidden to discuss their characters and roles with each other; and were not allowed to indulge in chit-chat. That is why when Cassavetes was asked by interviewers about his actors' personal lives, as he frequently was, he invariably said that, with the exception of collaborators like Rowlands, Cassel, Falk and Gazzara, he really didn't know his actors as people; the character was all he saw, and presumably all they saw of each other.

We didn't allow chit-chat. I set some ground rules when we work that are impersonal rules: (1) *No one knows anyone.* (2) *And no one must be subjected to the penalties of social conduct during the filming.* That's a little difficult at first for everyone. People do want to be social. That goes for all actors. They've known each other a long time, but now you must be selfish and you must be temperamental and you must fight for what your instincts tell you. The relationship between a director and an actor has to be cold. You can't be sympathetic to their personal problems. I don't want to hear if they didn't get any sleep last night or have some other problem. After the shooting, that's different. I don't expect them to eat and sleep the movie. But I don't like small talk on the set. I won't tolerate gossip. I won't tolerate anyone talking about anything but the film, anything but *these* people, because we're working in such a condensed period of time that there's no time to be lackadaisical about what we're doing. You waste your energy, mainly. You could talk about what happened last night forever. And I think it's a psychological escape from putting yourself up, from really committing to something. I can feel the commitment of our people on the screen. I felt the people who were doing it should be respected, because it's so embarrassing to relive moments that are private and delicate.

Mabel hosts parties; Cassavetes does the same.

In directing you're really like a host, that everyone's going to your party, and it's very difficult for the crew to help you get glory. Once they trust that you really are interested in the work and not in your own perfection, they will work very hard for you. The actors are the same. They don't want to be second fiddle to a camera. When people begin to feel a little upset, there begin to be mysteries about filmmaking. There are no

mysteries to making films. There is no mystery to writing. I try to make it comfortable for the actor by realizing what they're doing is so personal. If you're doing a movie and somebody slaps a slate in front of you and everybody stands around expecting you to be brilliant, then it's gonna be like a contest. I like to develop an atmosphere where that doesn't exist; where nobody is looking at you to see how good you are; where people can function. It's very hard to let the technical processes of film take over and then expect the actors to reveal themselves. I mean, you can't take a shower at a dinner party. You make a movie to tell what you know about life – about your life. But after waiting around for eight hours, for set-ups, for lights, all of it, when it comes time to shoot, you're thinking, 'I don't *wanna* tell you about my life anymore! Why should I tell *you* about my life!' On a set there's really a lot that can hamper the actors. For example, in this film, here's maybe the most important moment in two people's lives: a guy is committing his wife to a mental hospital. In a normal movie, while this is going on someone is also fiddling with your hair, putting lipstick on you, placing lights above you, sitting you down, marking your feet, moving cameras, yelling, 'Hey, she doesn't look good; her skin is out of focus.' Now, I ask you, how can the actors concentrate? So we do all this *before* the actors come on stage. We all work quietly, and hopefully efficiently, and get it done.

On rare occasions, if an actor was having trouble playing something, Cassavetes might surreptitiously film a walkthrough of a scene – whispering to the operator 'start filming' when the actor thought he was just working something out. But the impression that events and relationships are evolving spontaneously and that the actors are genuinely reacting to events was more commonly achieved by not having movements and blockings completely worked out in advance. The actors were allowed to experiment with ways of playing as the scene was being filmed, and by the same virtue, forced to think on their feet.

Rehearsals are tiresome, boring, and the whole crew becomes a kind of audience. If the crew gets bored, the actors feel that it's bad. That is why I want everything to go fast and use long focal lenses and a set that has some depth. What's important to me is just that you convince the audience and yourself that what's on the screen is really happening. People ask me, 'Doesn't the crew need a rehearsal?' But they really don't, because they watch all of the preparation. In other words, everyone is *always* rehearsing. They're rehearsing for hours. They're doing the scene for hours. The only way a crew member wouldn't know what's

going on is if they're out playing cards, if they're out talking or making points with the producer, or Elaine May comes on the set and they want to get her coffee. *Then* you'll blow the scene, you know? If you *really* are interested, you have lots of time to know what's happening.

As he did with *Faces*, Cassavetes introduced a degree of spontaneity by calling out directions during the filming and then taking the sound out in editing.

I certainly give some specific directions – but I'm not aware of it. And hopefully the people I give them to are not aware of taking them. So I know, for example, Peter and the kids went up the stairs and I must have said something about it, but I tried to do it within the framework of the action so it didn't become a set direction. I might have said, 'Take them up the stairs, Pete,' and then eliminated that from the soundtrack and that was his function, to take them up there, but they'd run down by themselves. So in that sense I guess it's improvisational because it's what happens.

Since new gestures, movements and moods came out in the actual take, actors and crew could be surprised by the results. Peter Falk said he was taken aback by the unexpected intensity and unpredictability of Mabel's breakdown scene when it was first played. It was almost as shocking and frightening as it would have been to experience in real life. In a similar vein, it sometimes was hard for an actor or crew member to tell what was 'really happening' and what was 'acted'. Since Cassavetes believed that awkwardnesses and hesitations contributed to the truth of the work, his long-standing rule was never under any circumstances to stop a take – no matter what happened. (Rowlands said that if someone knocked over a glass, you went to the kitchen, got a broom and cleaned it up; and, to prove her point, there actually is a moment in the final family gathering scene where someone does knock over a glass and the take goes on.) In one of the takes of the moment in which Mabel jumps out when Mr. Jenson comes to the front door, Rowlands jumped up too rapidly and fainted, passing out in front of Mario Gallo. He continued to play the scene without missing a beat, assuming it was part of her performance. The moment when Mabel misses the chair sitting down in the living room is an example of an on-camera accident being used in the final edit. As a complementary illustration of acting being mistaken for reality, Cassavetes himself thought Gena Rowlands actually was 'losing it' during the first take of the scene where she is begging not to

be separated from her children. He got so upset he called cut, threw down his camera and ran to her side.

On the other hand, Cassavetes readily admitted that there were certain scenes that required extensive rehearsal and careful planning to come off at all.

Certain times we rehearse extremely hard, for long periods of time. Maybe two days. The spaghetti scene was rehearsed for a couple of days before we shot it – and without the spaghetti! That was a carefully rehearsed scene which came out of a lot of pre-rehearsing, pre-talking the picture. The end scene, where Gena came home followed by the sitting around the table, was rehearsed for two solid days. Some things can be loose, some things cannot be. It all depends on what they are and what the degree of difficulty is in performing them.

The spaghetti scene was added during the shoot. Some of its dialogue (Nick's 'it's in the air' speech, for example) was lifted from other scenes in the film that were not being used; other parts of it were written by Cassavetes on the spot. (Mabel's looking into Hugh Hurd's mouth while he sings *Aida*, for example, was something Cassavetes remembered from the shoot of *A Child Is Waiting*, when a retarded boy looked into Judy Garland's mouth to see where the sound was coming from while she was singing.)

When it came time to shoot, Cassavetes had to have the men go through the scene approximately thirty times to get enough usable material for the film. As Falk later reported, 'A lot of spaghetti got eaten.' For three days, Carole Smith, Elaine Goren (who doubled as 'script girl' on the film) and two other assistants cooked the donated pasta, producer Sam Shaw (who was a fine cook) simmered the sauce and helpers shuttled plateload after plateload of spaghetti downstairs. Cassavetes worked with the actors (many of whom, like football player Leon Wagner, were non-actors) in his customary ways to relax them so that their real personalities would come out rather than some idea they had of how they wanted to look.

Cassavetes never drew a hard line between events in his films and events outside the films. Since, as an actor, he found it nerve-racking and distracting for a director to call 'Take' or 'Action' to start a shot or 'Cut' or 'Wrap' to end one, as a director he almost never emphatically proclaimed when a scene began or ended. To paraphrase something Rowlands once said about the difference between her husband's set and a Hollywood set, on most shoots they shout 'Silence' and give you two

The overlap of life and art. Actors John Finnegan and Vince Barbi helping Cassavetes set up and block the spaghetti breakfast scene. Nick Spaulding stands in the background. © *Sam Shaw*

minutes to tighten up and get ready to act before each take, but the very point of Cassavetes' method was to prevent the actor from 'tightening up' and 'acting' in this way. He wanted the actor to react in a more authentic way than that. The same point was made by someone on the set of *Minnie and Moskowitz*, who told me that after one of Elsie Ames' (Florence's) takes the sound man asked her to speak up a little. Cassavetes went bananas: 'Don't say that! That's *your* job. That's why we have rehearsals. I don't want to change her rhythm. I *want* her to talk the way she talks.' It was the same attitude that drove cameramen wild. The point was, as much as possible, *not* to turn the person into an actor; *not* to change reality in the process of recording it – to keep life as loose and disorganized (and mumbled) as it actually is. (Using non-professionals, people who didn't have a bag of actorly tricks to reach into, was another way of doing the same thing.)

When necessary, Cassavetes would do almost anything to break the tension or relax an actor (or the crew) at a difficult time. If he was filming at his house, it was not at all uncommon for him suddenly to call a break and have everyone go outside for a quick game of basketball. Or he would take an actor or a member of the crew aside and take a brief walk (or jog) with him or her.

Another zany technique he employed during an actual take was to run into a shot and say something to one of the actors or do something nutty, and then dart out of the shot, while the camera rolled the whole time. In action scenes, he would move along with the actors – sometimes with a camera on his shoulder, more frequently without, simply out of empathy, the way a football coach's body-language mirrors the movements of his players or a choreographer pantomimes his dancers. He might tell a joke to get a laugh during a scene to change the mood or call out a redirection in the middle of a scene and take the sound out later. In the spaghetti breakfast scene, he might sit down at the table and strike up a conversation with the actors in the middle of a scene. As a result (as was the case on other shoots as well), it was difficult or impossible to tell the difference between what was being filmed and what was not; where off-camera pleasantries ended and on-camera acting began. Was your laugh at his joke going to be in the film? Was your lunch break going to be part of the spaghetti breakfast? Were Falk's nutty comments his own conversational filler or something in the script? When *A Woman Under the Influence* was done, many of the actors in this scene, including Falk, reported that they felt it was one of their favorite parts of the shoot, since they had had so much fun doing it.

When we rehearsed the breakfast scene with Mabel and Nick's co-workers the first time, it was terrible, absolutely terrible. No one knew what to do. They thought they had to tell stories and be funny. I didn't want to tell them what to do. My only instructions were, 'Do what you would normally do and take all the time you need. This woman's invited you, she's got up to cook you spaghetti. These are your friends. You can be at ease. Don't talk shop at the table. Come on, we'll do a ton of takes. Just remember who you are. If you want to be a jerk, go ahead.' But they were pleasant and told stories. We had to do the scene about thirty times to get usable material. The reason it seems improvised is that everything was ordinary, and there was no clever dialogue.

The suicide scene also took a lot of work. To begin with, there was the problem of getting the children to come in at exactly the right points. Rowlands and Falk also had individual problems with the scene. Rowlands disagreed with Cassavetes' decision to have the children present. She felt that they took dramatic attention away from her situation, were hard for her to act with (since their movements were unpredictable) and broke the mood of the scene. Cassavetes' response was:

Explaining without providing shortcuts; dealing with a problem without providing answers. Talking to O. G. Dunn about his role. Note the look on Cassavetes' face in the second and fourth photos. © *Michael Ferris*

Do you think in such a small house, if they heard this stuff going on, the kids wouldn't be in the middle of it?

Falk, for his part, had trouble with the transition from getting the razor blade out of Mabel's hand to dealing with her on the sofa. The problem was accentuated by Cassavetes' technique of playing and shooting scenes whole rather than breaking them down into short shots: as Cassavetes' staged and shot it, Falk really had to wrestle with Rowlands and the kids, and then, in real time, compose himself enough to return to the sofa and deal with the situation more calmly. He couldn't make the shift work. In this case, going against his general policy of non-directive direction, Cassavetes gave Falk a specific action to perform to help him out. He told him, 'Go up three stairs and turn. Stop what you're doing and take a breath before returning to the living room.' Falk reported that the pause to compose himself – both as an actor and a character – was just what he needed.

Cassavetes handled the children in the suicide scene the same way he handled the adults. It was not about him telling them to do something but about them originating their own actions.

They just caught on. They just caught on to the spirit. They were out playing whenever they could. Whenever they came in we shot them

individually until the homecoming and suicide scene. And that scene, somehow they just accepted the fact that it was a game and they were having fun – while we weren't – but they were having a lot of fun. And when they came in and they saw Peter attacking their mother, whom they accepted as their mother, they instantaneously reacted in the way you saw them. I mean, there was no direction. There was no staging, there was no anything. Just the fact that those kids accepted the fact that Gena was their mother and that Peter Falk was their father, the kids *automatically* attacked the father. I never said for them to do that, they just did it – and in an exquisite way.

You don't quite know how much the children can comprehend or how good they're going to be, so you're always terribly afraid they're going to be little snot-nosed cute kids. The delicacy with which they approached their own intervention and the taking of sides was something that could never have been *told* to them. You just try not to put any pressure on the children so they can listen and do things their own way. And I think they did. And they behaved in that manner. You can do as many takes as you want as long as the situation is the same, because the kids didn't hear you say, 'Let's do it again,' they just know that it's still happening. We must have done five or six takes on that.

In the same scene, Peter Falk felt so much for his part that he reacted

the same way he would have reacted in his own life with his own children. The important thing is to work with actors who like their work and who are willing to explore with me something that we don't know yet.

One of the sources of the power of the acting was that the actor was forced to actually look and listen during a take; he experienced the events the way he would in life.

We deal with thoughts and emotions and I hope that the actors don't feel that the material is scripted. So they don't think of the script. They take their time until the text seems to belong *to them*. Everything must find its inspiration in the moment at hand. The words are there but two very good actors must want to express more of their love than by just reading the script. Only in this way can they really believe in their characters and express them. It really is a product of a group of people coming in and interpreting their roles. Really, truthfully interpreting their roles. Everything that Gena did she did herself. Everything that Peter did he did himself. Everything that all those other actors did they did themselves. I give a lot of room. I would never tell an actor that he is doing it wrong or that it doesn't connect with my interpretation.

Almost every actor who worked with Cassavetes felt frustrated some of the time during the shoot. They felt they desperately needed an explanation of some fact or motivation; they craved a piece of information about their character; they pleaded with him to tell them something they needed to know; and, in almost every case, he refused to give them an answer. He would double-talk them; he would give a meaninglessly vague response; he would stand silent and look them deep in the eyes; but he would not give them a direct answer.

O. G. Dunn (who plays Garson Cross) was uncertain how he was supposed to play his scenes. He practically begged Cassavetes to give him an action or a feeling to play. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for Cassavetes to have said something like, 'You're a gentle, polite man; you're not a brute, so you're not going to force it; but you would like to sleep with this woman; and she did invite you home, so you think she probably wants to do it; but she is a woman, and you have had woman problems in the past. So you are not sure what she expects . . .' That's the explanation a thousand other directors would have given to actors in similar situations. But it was the sort of answer Cassavetes almost never gave. According to a crew member who watched the whole exchange, what happened was closer to the following:

OGD: How should I play this?
JC: Look. You're here. She's there. You see? (*Followed by a long, intense look, which was the way Cassavetes often ended this sort of explanation.*)
OGD: Well, yeah, John, but . . .
JC: No, no, no. Don't! Don't! Just. You know? (*Followed by another deep, soulful look.*)

Thus it went, four or five times in a row, until Dunn gave up in frustration and bewilderment. It's the same sort of apparent inarticulateness that drove Peter Falk crazy during the filming of *Husbands*. It's not that Cassavetes could not have given a long, articulate explanation. It's that he knew that if he wanted Dunn to act convincingly hesitant and uncertain, the last thing he could ever do was to tell him to act that way.

Actors always want to know, how is it all going to work out? I don't know. Where does it lead? I don't know that either. The actor has to make a decision. I hate control. I'm not a leader. I'm only happy where there's total confusion, where people function on their own level. You don't know what's gonna happen. You're meeting twelve strangers and you see a bunch of people standing behind the camera and there are lights all over the place and obviously it's being lit for one specific area because all the lights are there. So you see that and you don't know what you're gonna do! So the question is, at what point do I reveal what's going to happen? My system is *never* to reveal it! My system is to create as much confusion as I possibly can so the actors have the full knowledge that they're on their own, that there is nothing I'm ever going to tell them, ever, at any point in the thing. Except if somebody would say, 'I think I'm going too far,' I would disagree with them. Or if somebody would say, 'Let's take a break,' I would disagree with them, you know? Or if somebody would small talk. In other words, 'You are now to reveal your life and parts of your life that you don't even know exist.' I refuse to let myself or my characters seek refuge in psychology either for purposes of motivation or character analysis.

Cassavetes deliberately created a state of insecurity in certain actors for certain scenes. Dr. Zepp was played by Eddie Shaw, Sam Shaw's brother. Eddie was a sweet and gentle man, but as a novice non-actor he was extremely insecure about what he was doing. He barraged Cassavetes and everyone else on the shoot with demands for reassurance – 'How was I?' 'Do you think that was right?' 'I didn't know if you could see my face since I was turned away.' 'Was it good enough?' 'Tell me exactly

what you want me to do in the next scene.' Cassavetes was annoyed by the questions and was quite stern with him (as he was with many of the non-professionals on the shoot); but he knew better than to attempt to stop them by answering them. He realized that the actor's tentativeness could enrich the characterization.

I don't want big, long discussions; I don't want to know what they're thinking. If an actor tells me, 'Look, I'm going to be this,' and then tries to do it, he's putting untold pressure on himself. Eddie Shaw, he's the producer's brother, came in, and we didn't have anyone to play the thing, and he said he'd play it. It was the greatest thrill in his life to play this doctor, so when he came in he kept on saying, 'What do I do?' I thought, 'That's *wonderful*! That's a *great* kind of a doctor to have! That's the doctors *I've* known!' [Laughs.] This guy says, 'Where does it hurt?' Why should I *tell* him?

Mario Gallo (who plays Mr. Jensen) was another friend whose personal feelings became part of his performance. Gallo was not entirely comfortable with Cassavetes' direction and was fairly awkward or tentative in his playing, but Cassavetes realized that his 'nervousness' should not be eliminated, but should be 'used' in his performance.

These are fairly minor cases. Cassavetes' treatment of Rowlands and Falk is a textbook example of the use of psychology to massage souls and spirits. His relationship with Rowlands was extremely rocky at times (to the extent that at one point he told her he would never work with her again). Rowlands on her part felt lost at moments and desperately in need of help, which Cassavetes seemed at times deliberately to withhold. Prior to shooting the homecoming scene, Rowlands pleaded with her husband for guidance. It was months into the shoot; she was tired and confused; more than information, what she probably needed was a little reassurance. Cassavetes not only refused to provide it but undermined what little confidence she had left with the coldness and distance of his response. She wanted to be calmed down; he did everything possible to work her up.

GR: What do you want me to do?
JC: I don't want to *tell* you. What would Mabel do?
GR: I don't know. Help me. Please! Come on! You could help me! Take me outside. I don't know what she's . . .
JC: Gena, that's enough! I *refuse* to talk to you. No more!

By this point Rowlands was glaring at him, really irritated and upset.

She was no longer pleading but angry, and started yelling at him, protesting at the way he was treating her. Instead of trying to calm her down, he then started taunting and mocking her back. The moment built with exchanged charges and countercharges. Then Cassavetes suddenly turned on his heels and walked away, leaving Rowlands alone in front of the actors and crew. A few minutes after that, without saying anything else, he gave the order to shoot the scene.

If the result was not one of the greatest performances ever captured on film, Cassavetes' treatment of Rowlands could be called heartless and brutal. What is even more interesting is that when the cameras rolled Rowlands gave Cassavetes something he never expected. It seems clear in retrospect that he was deliberately winding her up to get anger, resentment or bitterness out of her in the scene; but in response she gave innocence and vulnerability. Just as he was shocked into dropping the camera during the breakdown scene, Cassavetes later confessed that he was bewildered by the choices that ensued.

When Gena was committed by Peter and she went to an institution, and as the film says, six months later she comes out – I would have thought that she would be so hostile against her husband. But she comes in the house and she never even acknowledges his presence. She's only considering her children. And we did a take, and I thought, 'Should I stop this? I mean, she never looked at Peter.' She walks in the house and everyone greets her and she never looks at her husband – I mean, she looks at him, but she never sees him, yet she's not avoiding him. And I thought, 'Well, that's that defenseless thing carrying itself too far here! What are we doing?'

All through that homecoming scene I was astounded by what was underneath people, what these actors had gathered in the course of this movie. And I was *way* behind them. I was staggered because Gena was so quiet and mild. She wasn't hostile at all. I started yelling because I thought she was acting so the audience would like her, but I was wrong. She was expressing fear, which separated her from the people she loved. At the moment when Nick's mother, Mabel's enemy, subtly changes her approach in the most malicious way, just at the moment when the audience is hoping that Mabel is going to get out of there, Mabel stays so tender. She wants to stick with her family to the very end. If she'd come back from the asylum with hate in her heart, the film couldn't finish the way it does.

Gena's interpretation showed me how frightened Mabel was. As a matter of fact, when we looked at the dailies, Gena said, 'What do you

think? I'm at a loss, did we go too far?' And I said, 'I didn't like it, I just didn't like it at all.' I mean, I found it really embarrassing to watch. It was such a horrible thing to do to somebody, to take her into a household with all those people after she'd been in an institution, and their inability to speak to this woman could put her right back in an institution, and yet they *were* speaking to her, and Gena wanted to get rid of them and at the same time not insult them. But then I thought what Gena did was like poetry. It altered the narrative of the piece. The dialogue was the same, but it really made it different. I would grow to love those scenes very, very much, but the first time I didn't. The film really achieved something really remarkable through the actors' performances, not giving way to situations but giving way to their own personalities.

Gena had taken away the pettiness of women as a weapon. The woman in a sense became idealized; you took the purity of a woman minus pettiness. One of the things we had worked out in the beginning of the movie was that these characters could not be petty because you would lose the whole intention of what the film was about. Gena wasn't a hostile person and didn't use a weapon. Taking that weapon away made the woman extremely vulnerable. No one is defensive in the whole film. There isn't one shield on anybody's psyche, or anybody's heart. It's just open.

It would be hard to find a clearer illustration of how Cassavetes' 'non-directive directing' allowed his actors to give him things he couldn't anticipate. He learned things about his characters and their situations. He changed his mind as he went along.

As the shoot goes on all these things that are happening are revelations to me also. I'm seeing Gena do this, and Gena as my wife now suddenly is becoming Mabel Longhetti and those pink socks are becoming something that you see on something. Those nice legs are becoming Mabel's nice legs and her manner of insanity is recognizable and suddenly she's not insane. These discoveries are happening to me, to the crew and to the characters.

There's *a lot* I don't understand. If I say we're gonna make a picture and we don't know what we're doing, I'm absolutely straight when I say that. I don't think that Gena has any idea when she comes on the set that she's going to be able to break down, have a commitment scene, be frightened when she comes in. I see her when I come home at night and I see her on the bed with the script and I see her going over it and thinking about it and relating to everything and preparing herself and asking

me questions. I mean, Gena reads this script and she takes and interprets that woman as someone that is innocent. That's not *my* interpretation. That's *not* in the script. *You* could interpret it as a person that fights it. *She* interprets it as someone that's innocent. She's crazy, but she's shy, too, really. She's not an outward person really. She's outward because she thinks she's supposed to be. She wants to please somebody. Gena has a lot of consideration for the character and the woman behind the character. She tries never to vulgarize or caricature people she's playing. She really resisted turning Mabel into a 'victim' or a 'case' or a 'feminist'. That was her insight.

I'm totally an intuitive person. I mean, I think about things that human beings would do, but I am just guessing – so I don't really have a preconceived vision of the way a performer should perform. Or, quote, the character, unquote. I don't believe in 'the character'. Once the actor's playing that part, *that's* the person. And it's up to that person to go in and do anything he can. If it takes the script this way and that, I let it. But that's because I really am more an actor than a director. I appreciate that there might be some secrets in people that might be more interesting than a 'plot'. All people are really private – as a writer and a director, you understand that that's the ground rule: people are private.

There were also more benign and playful instances of manipulating Rowlands' (and other actors') feelings. Rowlands and her mother were extremely close in life; but Cassavetes tried to pit them against each other at moments, as in the scene when the mother is dragged onto the bed.

Gena's mother played Gena's mother, and it was difficult because that was a committed part. It was difficult because she had to *be* something. It was difficult because she had to not like her. She had to love her but not *like* her, so it was very difficult, because the relationship is both like and love. And it was difficult for Gena, because for Gena anything her mother does is terrific. I enjoyed terribly much making them not like each other! I enjoyed the double-cross that existed between these two people. I enjoyed it. I had a terrific time watching Gena's mother not do that and yet in her way she found some understanding. She found terrific understanding of the character getting on the bed, of not liking somebody and loving them and having the privilege of doing that so that that becomes a discovery, and then you have to catch that whichever way you can. And all these people sit there and they have to

trust that whatever they're doing, all these individuals, they're doing all *individual* things and they're doing to the fullest of their ability. They gotta trust that somehow at the end of it it's gonna be a movie. So, all I can tell you is what I did. All I can tell you is that I made that so impossible for it to be a good movie that they just had to address themselves to the problem that they had, because there's no possibility that the way we were working anything could ever come out in a movie theater.

Though tempers may have flared on occasion, Rowlands clearly understood the subtlety of the method when she later reflected back on the shoot. As she put it: 'John encouraged you to the point that you pushed yourself into areas you feared with other directors.' One positive direction she says that Cassavetes did give her more than once during the shoot was, 'Go all out in your playing, because Mabel is someone without inhibitions. She's freer than "normal" people; she doesn't have restrictions on what she may do.'

Peter Falk's performance not only illustrates the conflation of the personality of the actor and the character he plays, but is another instance of an actor being left so free in his interpretation that his performance initially shocked and confused his director.

Peter was a struggle. A little like Nick, he's a tremendously introverted, closed-in man. I never saw a guy capable of so much, restraining himself and containing himself to that point where Nick gets to, when his wife is gonna be committed and his own mother says to her, 'Your children are funny.' As an actor Peter became very passive. Those were peculiar choices that he made. When the doctor came in, he had the freedom to throw him out. But he chose to let him in. Peter also had the freedom not to stand by and let his wife go crazy, but he chose to let her go crazy. When he finally came up to her and tried to stop her, it was too late and he knew it was too late and why did he wait that long? Now in talking with Peter afterwards, Peter said, 'She was doing great. I didn't want to stop her. I didn't want to step on her performance. I didn't know what to do.' That was a lie. Peter is a tremendously internal man, and I think he *wanted* her to be committed. I think he *wanted* her to go away. I don't think he recognized her worth because to him at that moment she was worthless. She wasn't behaving like he would behave so he didn't want her anymore. That is what *I* saw.

Now within the values of his getting upset, within the values of his being too loud, too boisterous, whatever these actions were by a man who was not used to functioning outside himself, outside the bound-

aries, without his control. When he went out to the work area the day after she was committed, I really felt he was shocked that anyone would give a shit that Mabel went to an institution. Who was *she* that anyone would care? Why would anyone like *her*? Who was *she*? She was a product of his imagination. She wasn't a *person*. She was a person who did exactly what he said. She was a *kook*. She was known as a nut. So he didn't like to be discovered. He didn't like it when the guys said something because he felt enormously guilty for it. Now it is very complicated to structure that. The emotions are complicated. It is hard to explain because they are hard messages to get over to anybody. So you have to allow the actor total freedom. Not a little freedom. Don't say, 'Improvise your emotions,' and then stop and say, 'Wait a minute, buddy, if you could do this it would be good, and by the way, go back to what you were doing before.' It won't work. So what you do is you let that actor run with it. He grows with the part. He is making a fool of himself and he is making a jerk of himself and he is becoming more transparent.

So by the time you get him to the beach – the beach scene, I think, is wonderful, and Peter is wonderful because he absolutely has no idea what he is doing there. I had the camera down there and they just started walking. I never went near them and they are walking and Peter has some lines and he says the lines and then they don't know what to do. Now I could *tell* them, but that would kill it. What difference does it make what he does? *He* has to do it. *I* can't do it. The camera can move. It can follow, you know. So where they play that scene and what they do has to be in their own timing. And when Peter gets there at the beach and he pushes the little girl down, there was a wonderful moment. I see him trying to communicate with his children. I see him trying to touch. I see him not caring. I see so many things that developed that wouldn't have if you formalized a view of the character through your own mind and didn't allow room for interpretation. I wrote it and as soon as I wrote it I killed the writer. There is no writer because the writer can only make the actor feel insecure. I have been in a lot of movies and as soon as the writer would come on the set everyone died. Because the writer knows exactly how everyone should be played, exactly what the intentions are. But writing is one medium and film is another medium.

Cassavetes later said that he was completely taken aback when Falk taunted Mama Longhetti by making the 'ba-ba' sounds (which were not in the script or the other takes) at the height of Mabel's breakdown scene.

The conflation of actor and character in the beach scene: 'Peter is wonderful because he absolutely has no idea what he is doing there.' © *Sam Shaw*

The actors occasionally get carried away and go off in their own direction. To have a sense, to be able to have the same kind of sense of humor about his mother even in the most terrible situation, to go 'ba-ba-ba-ba'. When I saw Peter go like this I almost fainted! And I really I *want* people to do what they want to do, but I . . . I almost fainted! I had to hide it. I thought, 'What the hell is he doing? Click-click-click.' [Laughs.] I can't figure it out and yet Peter's a person. He's behaving like a person. *Strange* – you know? He came to me afterwards and he said, 'You think that's too much? I went like that to the mother. Maybe I should be more sensitive to Gena.' And I said, 'No, I thought it was fine.' Because you can't, you can't really control a scene. You can't control life.

Another directing technique Cassavetes employed in all of his work was to act out scenes himself. He would play the parts, prior to the shoot or even while the scene was being filmed – mugging facial expressions and gestures, momentarily becoming one of the children greeting Mabel, Mabel entering a room, Mr. Jenson fighting Nick. The beauty of his method was that it was non-verbal, non-analytical, non-intellectual. It gave the actor a suggestive gesture or movement without dictating a particular motivation or feeling or interpretation. (A comical side-effect of the pantomime process is that someone familiar with Cassavetes' personal gestures or tones of voice can see and hear them in many of his actors' performances – e.g. the times in *Shadows* when Ben holds his nose, shakes his head and giggles as Cassavetes frequently did; the times in this film when Mabel waves her arms or makes punching gestures, which Cassavetes, a born gesticulator, sometimes did.)

The point was for the acting to come from a deeper place than language, and for an actor not to focus on mere words. It is interesting in this context that when Cassavetes ran the drama workshop with Burt Lane, he had wanted to bring in Jean Shepherd to teach a class on memory (since Shepherd claimed to have had a photographic memory which he relied on to construct his elaborate monologues) – not because remembering lines was important, but so that the actors could become so comfortable with their lines that they could, in effect, forget them and focus on the feelings instead. Cassavetes gave the same advice to dozens of actors over the years:

Don't worry about the words! I don't care about the words. I don't care if there is not one word right. Go through your mind what the attitude would be if there were *no* lines.

Life imitating art or art imitating life? Cassavetes and Vince Barbi singing a duet on the sidewalk between takes.
© Michael Ferris

There is a characteristic indirection to Cassavetes' characters' dialogue and interactions. Characters almost never simply say what they desire or need. They don't verbalize their goals, intentions or feelings. Cassavetes was upset when reviewers criticized this aspect of his work.

I get hot. I resent the idea that someone says about the film, 'If only the dialogue had been more concise, if only the dialogue could have reached some conclusion.' Some critic said that, and I laughed when I looked at it, because I feel those kinds of scenes are very corny and boring to watch, when the words are right on the nose and they're no fun for an actor to play.

What happens in family relationships, if you were really to ever put a tape recorder to your emotions – forget about what's being *said*! Most of the arguments between men and women are based upon somebody's *inability* to express what they *really* mean. When a man and a woman get together, they fight about the television – turn it on, turn it low, turn it up – drinking, etc. The things that really count are very rarely expressed, no

matter how long a marriage goes on, no matter how long the love goes on.

People have such a belief in the 'written' word. When they don't hear a 'written' word, particularly in my movies, they think it's improvised. It's not. Only two lines in *A Woman Under the Influence* were actually improvised [Falk's 'ba-ba-ba' and Rowlands' driving instructions to her mother]. I try to make things believable and natural and seem like they're happening. I do write differently. I write looser dialogue. The words are there, but they don't necessarily have to come to a conclusion. Do you know what I mean? It's just what you hear in life. Very few places in the script do words have any clear or definite significance. I've had many fights with Elaine May on this, who says, 'John, you must understand that people do listen to what the character says.' Her view is that the word is gospel and my view is that it isn't gospel – and that the intention of the character cannot be simplified by having that character *verbally* commit to sadness, to laughter. Dialogue should be tied up so heavily with the incident that you don't feel dialogue and you don't feel talk, rather you feel the emotions of the people. I'm more interested in the *intention* of the dialogue, in the emotion expressed by the moment, than in the right words.

The point was not to reduce complex events to simple psychological motivations. Cassavetes allowed multiple, oblique, indirect, contradictory meanings to coexist at any one moment.

Within the framework of the writing all that's there is the words. And the rest of it is how it is played. That's where improvisation comes in. Somebody tells a joke within the framework of a scene. In most pictures you are committed to laugh because the words say there is laughter there. I want to give that actor the freedom to be a person, not to have to act like an idiot. Not to have to act like a buffoon, if it's not his own buffoonery, you know? So that you don't have to tell a joke well. You don't have to be good. You don't have to be anything. If somebody tells you that you're supposed to cry at something, and you have some other reaction, I want you to have it – don't want you to say that, 'This is all. Everything hinges upon a tear falling down my eyes.' I saw that movie. I don't want to see that again. Because I know that that's in a way the greatest form of manipulation. I don't like things that are neat. I'm very superstitious: this is *life*.

He illustrated the point by citing the scene in the driveway between Mabel and her mother.

Because the people have done some homework and come in with something, and that's why when Gena comes off the porch on her very first line she says, 'Get over there,' you know something interesting is going on. And you can smell it. It's *true*. And I can smell it as I see it, that it's true. The line is still there, you know. The lines of Lady [Gena's mother] are there when she comes out of the house and says, 'Your mother's very nervous.' But how that's played could be played farcically, terribly, wonderfully – a million different ways. It's all *interpretation*. In that sense it's improvised. After Gena sends the kids away from her house so she can be alone with her husband, we all know how to make something lonely. You go far away and you light it very dimly here and there and very sketchily and very beautifully depending on how you want to do it, and you shoot wide-angle and you let a woman wander through a house. It's easy to make a woman lonely. But there isn't one line in there that says, 'I want to be alone with my husband.' She's going about the task of getting her kids off to her mother's house, as I know it would really happen. I didn't know there would be laughter there. I'm delighted that there's laughter there, but the laughter came out of Gena's mother – who has a delightful and delicious sense of humor. And so when the kids were there, she allowed you to laugh, because she allowed herself to be martyred for a minute. As to backing out of the driveway, she can't drive worth a damn, so Gena *does* give her instructions when she's backing out of our driveway. [Laughs.] So it's lovely that she does this in the film. When that happens, I have a clue that it is right.

Just as he had added the sound of the beeps in post-production in the parking lot scene in *Minnie and Moskowitz*, Cassavetes added the sound of the car stalling and being restarted in this scene to make the moment even more comical. The sound of the ringing telephone in the film's final seconds – which was not in the screenplay – is another of Cassavetes' editorial additions in terms of his sound design.

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Since he didn't have the resources of a studio to draw on, Cassavetes used fairly old equipment, a big Mitchell BNC in this case.

We were shooting in regular 35mm with a Mitchell BNC. We used an Arri for a second camera – for the hand-held work and for exteriors. Twenty-five or thirty per cent of the film was hand-held. I like to use it where it wouldn't ordinarily be used – for example in an acting scene

rather than in an action sequence – for fluidity, for intensity. I do it myself, because on hand-held shooting the feeling you want can't be transmitted to a cameraman. It's too delicate. It's not that they don't understand, but I have an enormous advantage in that I'm not afraid to talk to the actors while the scene is going on, and you want to be specific at times. When I'm shooting, I think nothing of saying to the actors, 'Get the hell out of there, move, move!!' – but I don't think the camera operators would dare to take that privilege. I also like the hand-held camera, because the actors go faster. In the Mitchell scenes [the non-hand-held ones], they can be more relaxed. They're not pushed by the camera. A hand-held camera pushes the actors' tempo up without words.

Cassavetes would always ask the cameraman to have a number of prime lenses at his disposal, though he frequently ended up using a telephoto for more than half of the shots in his films. It not only allowed him to keep the camera away from the actors while still being able to get close-ups, but it saved time on changing lenses. He could do successive takes with several different focal lengths without ever changing the lens. The only drawback was the shallow depth of field of the telephoto, which is why in *A Woman Under the Influence* and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* he frequently racks focus to get from one point in space to another.

Most of the film was shot in the dining room and the foyer, basically from two angles. One good thing about the house, of course, was that we could shoot all the sequences there in continuity. I directed it in chronological sequence, just as it would have been lived. I used long, long takes so that the actors could develop emotional scenes without interruption. One of the reasons we used long lenses, especially for all the work in the house, was to avoid a feeling of confinement. So much of the picture takes place in the Longhetti house there's a real danger of getting the feeling the actors are locked in by the camera. The long lenses meant the camera could be far away and the actors wouldn't be constricted by its proximity. And after a while, the actors weren't aware of the camera. It seemed to work very well, very easily.

With respect to Mabel's breakdown scene in particular, we just set it up on such an extremely long lens that I knew it would be technically impossible to do it all in focus. The operator and the focus-puller couldn't possibly be in concert because there'd be no way of knowing where the actors would be at any moment. It had to be a natural thing: certain things would come in and out of focus because there were so

many points of interest switching back and forth all the time. We did that sequence many different times in many different ways. But out of maybe twelve takes, this was the only one that seemed to play in continuity in terms of performances and everything else.

One of the things that frustrated many cameramen who worked with Cassavetes was that he made no concessions to staging the action for the camera. All of his attention was placed on the actors. For the cameraman it was sink or swim. He was expected to get the shots on his own – any way he could – with no help from anyone, including the director.

We would light the whole picture generally and let the actors play it to the best of their ability. The important thing is for the operator to shoot whatever action is most interesting at the moment. I'm not going to stand over the camera operator's shoulder and say, 'Swing over to that. Do you have a good frame there?' It's more like documentary work. Besides, we had a wonderful camera crew. I knew they would be as artistic as possible and would frame in such a way that it wouldn't seem like a movie. The fluidity of the camera really keeps it alive and allows the operator to make his selections emotionally. In the course of the shoot we become attuned and sensitive to what this person is trying to say. So we try and make it easier for her to say that. Easier for her to express herself. So if I see her doing something that maybe someone wouldn't see, it would become terribly important that I shoot that and that we shoot that, and I don't say, 'LET'S MOVE THE CAMERA IN AND GET HER IN THAT MOMENT!' You know, the poor thing would be destroyed. That would destroy her. The people that worked behind the camera were the damnedest crew because they really were for the actor and put themselves second. And if they saw something wrong they just went like this [winks almost imperceptibly] but didn't let the actor see it.

Film is the cheapest thing on a shoot. I'm not going to stop and say, 'Let's go back and get that moment of that woman or of that man or of this whole area.' When you multiply that by twelve performances, by fourteen performances, each person coming in with something else – there's a lot going on. So I anticipate that and I say to the cameraman, 'OK. We have no money, but we're going to spend money in one area – we're going to shoot *a lot* of film.' So our ratio goes up. We must have shot 600 or 700,000 feet of film [more than 120 hours]. The finished film is about 13 or 14,000 feet.

Cassavetes later said he deliberately kept the photography in *A Woman Under the Influence* a little rough and the colors muted.

I have never liked 'metallic' colors, the 'hard' picture, even when this was fashionable. It doesn't leave anything to the imagination, there are no secrets. People expect beautiful effects. Some people like a slick, metallic look. I can watch a black-and-white film that's rough and grainy. I can feel more belief in that film. I made a slop print of *A Woman Under the Influence* in black and white, but after seeing it I realized that there were certain values greater in the color print.

Cassavetes insisted that he never used marks; but he would, in fact, occasionally mark a position. (Tape is visible at the bottom edge of the frame in the scene of Mabel's return from the hospital, for example.) Al Ruban, who was strong-willed and extremely outspoken, would occasionally insist on the use of marks and on limiting actors' movements to keep them in the light or in focus. However, as much as possible Cassavetes tried to minimize these constraints.

It's much easier for an operator to follow action that's free and natural than staged action. To give you an example, here's the way an actor to me moves when he's staged. [Cassavetes walks with a series of comical, jerky movements.] Impossible to follow! I mean, it's *just impossible*! When a person is free, how can you *not* follow him? You're so concentrated on what's happening that there's no way to do it wrong. But if the action is wrong or you don't believe it and you're not zeroed into it and it's phony and it stinks, your photography stinks, you know? So you don't like it and you want to do it again or you miss it. And thinking that you have to have the actors hit marks is a fallacy. It's a nonsense rule that's been passed down. I think it's much easier *not* to stage, *much* easier – of course, you must be prepared!

The sound must be prepared, film has to be in the camera. The focus-puller has to know approximately what his distances are. OK. For example, we're in a lecture room here, and say I have a camera and I've got to shoot everybody in this room. That's the problem. If you want to be a *good* technician, you measure everybody and mark it down. If you want to be a *better* technician and *better* at your job, you've got to have good depth perception. To be a good focus-puller you have to have good depth perception. You've got to know that *this* is approximately twelve feet. And you've gotta know that it's twelve feet, and then you check it by eye, and then you go here – that's fourteen, that's sixteen, eighteen, so you know how many rows there are. One, two, three, four

– and you count them. And if you're good at your job, you'll do your own homework and you won't wait until the scene is being shot to figure it out. And if you were getting ready to film the spaghetti breakfast you'll think to yourself, 'Now here's this whole group and the camera is here.' That's all there is to it. We're here, man. And you're in your chairs. No one's moving around. So it's the easiest scene in the world to do. And the lighting man has got to figure out before everyone comes in how to light it.

But if you're *professionally* trained, you're gonna walk in and say, 'Put everyone where they're gonna be. Now, we're gonna move everyone out of here and now we're going to put all the actors in.' And somebody's going to walk around saying, 'You're in seat one, you're in seat two, you're in seat three, you're in seat four, you're in seat five.' And it can go on indefinitely. That's what they do to get their technical perfection! Now who the hell cares whether *you're* there or *you're* there! It doesn't make any difference. The lighting still has to be the same. And what they're *really* saying is, 'Give me a lot of time to light. I don't want to be hurried, because I don't want this to look bad so Bobby Evans can go to a screening room and say, "This guy was in the dark or out of focus."' Because everyone double-crosses you when you sit in a projection room. You're a technician and you're sitting there and all the executives are sitting in this room and they see something out of focus and say [Cassavetes says it with a mock executive voice], 'WHAT HAPPENED HERE? RUN THAT BACK! PUT THAT – WHO *IS* THAT CAMERAMAN?' And the director's sitting there and he knows who the cameraman is. Well, Evans knows who the cameraman is too. So what you as the director are saying is that it's *his* fault not yours. And so on and so forth. *That's* a professional film. It's one built on fear and not one built on a relationship between people. And yet every film student would *love* to work for Universal Pictures or work for all those other studios! What *we* do in the greatest sense is try to offer an option for people that would like to be independent. [In a stage whisper] I'll tell you the truth – the money's much better when you work for Universal than it is when you work for me. But at the same time, I think that you have a different kind of reward. The reward is that it's a shot in the dark – *if* you can make it. And *that's* the reward. And it's yours. It's not mine; it's *yours*!

Cassavetes actually preferred using amateurs with little prior experience on his crews. Over the years he had discovered that it was extremely difficult for professionally trained cameramen to adapt to his methods. AFI

students made up the majority of the crew when *A Woman Under the Influence* began shooting. The price was right, since Cassavetes could get them for nothing. As they were students, presumably they would be eager to work and open to new ways of thinking. But, ironically, even most of them turned out to be 'too professional' for his methods. Caleb Deschanel was one of the star students at the AFI, and Cassavetes appointed him DP and allowed him to hand-pick his own crew from among his classmates. It was his first feature filmmaking experience, but he simply could not work the way Cassavetes wanted him to. (To be candid, there were also a number of serious personality conflicts between Deschanel and Cassavetes and non-AFI members of the crew.) Cassavetes fired him a few weeks into the shoot (only a few of his set-ups and shots are still visible in the early house scenes of the final edit – the scenes in the bar and the house with Garson Cross, the scenes on the construction site after Nick commits Mabel and when Eddie falls, the scenes involving Nick's nighttime work and his call to Mabel, and the scenes where Mabel is alone in the house after her mother leaves with the children). The Deschanel touch is visible in a number of them, which have a degree of gorgeousness that Cassavetes seldom allows himself. It would not be at all surprising if the visual beauty of some of Deschanel's shots was another reason Cassavetes fired him.

Writing to me recently, Deschanel indicated that he still does not agree with Cassavetes' view of cinematography: 'I think John would just as soon pull the film through his brain and expose it that way as worry about what it took to record something on film through a camera . . . He really never accepted film as a craft that is mastered in order to make it work as art.' Even Al Ruban, who worked on several of the films, said he and Cassavetes had knock-down, drag-out arguments on other films almost daily, since Cassavetes made virtually no concessions to the cameraman and his crew, and consequently made photographic demands that were almost impossible to meet.

When Deschanel was dismissed, virtually the entire crew went with him in protest (since they were fellow AFI students and friends, and all equally regarded Cassavetes as impossible to work with). If Cassavetes had been less driven (or more sane), he would have quit then and there. He had no money to hire replacements and no one else to call on for help. The only person left in the camera department was a lowly apprentice named Michael Ferris. Cassavetes took him upstairs and, as Ferris recounts it, said, 'Look, I want you to take over the camera department. You and I are going to shoot this thing together!' Ferris had little previous experience, had never shot a feature before and, by his

A Children's Crusade. Talking to Caleb Deschanel (extreme right) while Elaine Goren (later Kagan) takes notes on a copy of the shooting script. Nick Spaulding holds the boom. They are off to one side of the sofa bed that Nick and Mabel sleep on. © *Michael Ferris*

own account, was not ready to handle a camera department. Cassavetes knew it; but it just didn't matter. When he took over, Ferris wasn't even sure how to load the camera they were using (with the result that his entire first week's worth of shooting had to be thrown away because of scratches before he figured out that he had missed a roller), but Cassavetes was a believer in on-the-job training. One of his most remarkable qualities, with both actors and crew, was his capacity to show enough belief in someone to make them better than they thought they could be, and to this day Ferris is deeply grateful for the trust Cassavetes placed in him. ('He thought of you as a hero, and you became one in response.') Ferris continued to work with Cassavetes on *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and *Opening Night*.

Beyond his crew problems, Cassavetes was having union problems. Given that the production featured Falk (which drew a lot of attention) and was entirely non-union, the unions were determined to shut it down or impede its progress in every way they could. While Deschanel was fomenting resistance from inside, the unions were lobbying other members of the crew to quit (succeeding with a few). They threatened immediate legal action and future blocking of the exhibition of the film (which they succeeded at two years later), as well as secret mischief and

sabotage on the set (which more than one member of the crew is convinced actually took place).

Bo Harwood was another individual who would stay with *A Woman Under the Influence* through thick and thin, and who would become an even longer-term artistic collaborator with Cassavetes. Two years earlier, while *Husbands* was being edited, Cassavetes had met him at an AFI screening of an experimental film for which Harwood did the music. As he sometimes did, Cassavetes took an immediate shine to him, and without much more than a brief conversation, asked him if he would help him do a little editing on *Husbands*. A year later, he asked him to do a little sound editing on *Minnie and Moskowitz*. From that point on, the friendship grew.

Harwood tells a story similar to Ferris's about how Cassavetes could believe someone into doing more than they thought they were capable of. Just prior to beginning *A Woman Under the Influence*, Cassavetes asked Harwood if he would do the music for the film. Harwood was a young, unknown, unemployed rock musician who couldn't read music, but he embraced the challenge and began experimenting with things on his guitar. A few days later, Cassavetes came in and said he had decided he wanted piano music. When Harwood protested that he didn't have access to a piano, Cassavetes blew off the objection and said that Peter Falk had one in his offices that they could use. When Harwood said that he didn't know how to play the piano, Cassavetes was still unfazed. That didn't matter; he could learn. Then a few weeks later, just as Harwood was getting comfortable at noodling around on the keyboard, Cassavetes came in again and said he had just bought a Nagra and decided that Harwood would also be doing the film's sound. When Harwood protested that he didn't know the first thing about sound recording, Cassavetes again said that that was fine: 'It's just a tape recorder. They're all the same. It's easy. You can figure it out.' Harwood spent the next three weeks carrying the recorder and microphone everywhere he went, experimenting at home, in restaurants and on the street.

With no more professional training, background or experience than that, Harwood would, from this point on, be in charge of sound and music in almost all of Cassavetes' subsequent work, including the stage-plays of the eighties. Since Harwood did not have access to professional equipment, and Cassavetes had no budget for music or sound effects, he used whatever guerrilla methods he could think up to create sound effects and music for these works. Effects were recorded not in a sound studio on a mixing board but in Cassavetes' office on a portable tape

recorder. Cassavetes himself often came up with the lyrics for the songs that appeared in his later films, and hummed or pounded out a primitive tune on a guitar or the piano. Harwood's assignment would be to turn the stammering and strumming into music. Some of the music for *A Woman Under the Influence* was created with tissue paper and a comb. Some of the sound effects for *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* were created by recording Cassavetes or Harwood knocking objects over in Cassavetes' office or pounding on a table. It wasn't only by financial necessity that music was created in this rough and ready way. According to Harwood, on the rare occasions when for some reason he had the resources to mix a few professional-caliber musical selections and presented them to Cassavetes, when Harwood finally saw the finished film in a theater, he would invariably discover to his surprise (and embarrassment) that Cassavetes had, in the end, used the office recordings rather than the studio ones. He just didn't like things that were too smooth or polished.

Cassavetes did make one attempt to involve a professional musical performer in *A Woman Under the Influence*. When he decided he wanted some opera music for the opening sequence, he got Maria Callas's phone number in Monaco and called her up, asking permission to use her recording of *La Traviata*. She said she would be glad to have him use it – for a $10,000 fee. Cassavetes spent an hour on long distance trying to convince her to give it to him for free, 'as one Greek to another', but ended up stealing the music off 'some Russian record'. (Significantly, there are no permission credits for the opera excerpts used in the film.)

In an attempt to free up the actors' movements, Cassavetes began *A Woman Under the Influence* using radio mikes; however, due to the poor quality of the sound, he switched to booms early on. (Even though the sound was still inferior to boom miking, *Opening Night* and *Love Streams* would employ radio mikes extensively for the same reason.)

Editing on *A Woman Under the Influence* began in February 1973, briefly paused during the period of additional shooting that took place in April, and was more or less complete by November. Cassavetes did some of the editing and sound mix at the AFI. But when he was done, he discovered that their equipment was so substandard that the mix had to be redone at a professional studio. Cassavetes' work on the edit was interrupted by the most important acting appearance he ever made in films beyond his own: Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky*, which was shot in Philadelphia in the summer of 1973, with a couple weeks of additional pickup footage being filmed in January 1974. Cassavetes pro-

vided technical help to May during the filming and editing period – giving her advice or assistance on every aspect of the process – at one point during the filming of a difficult night scene, according to May, showing up with a group of 'kids with cameras' and positioning them on rooftops to grab additional footage he thought she could use. He spent many months between the spring of 1973 and the spring of 1975 helping her edit the print. (In typical Cassavetean fashion, and as he himself had done with *Minnie and Moskowitz*, he and May would go into the editing suite where *Mikey and Nicky* was being assembled late at night and undo much of what the film's professional editors had done during the day.) And he provided moral support in her battles with Paramount over the film's release.

As always, Cassavetes experimented with many different shot selections and assemblies on *Woman*. At one point, he had a 'final' edit that ran just under four hours in length. (Many people who saw it testified to its brilliance. 'As slow and stately as Dreyer,' one friend told me.) The film was eventually pared down to a 155-minute edit, which was the one shown at several pre-release screenings, at the New York Film Festival and when the film was first released. The film was shortened to a 147-minute running-time a few months into its run. This is the print currently distributed and released on video. (Unfortunately, even beyond the loss of eight minutes of footage, all recent prints I have seen – in all video and film formats – also have a new, remixed musical soundtrack dating from the early 1990s, a remix supervised by Al Ruban after Cassavetes' death, which is significantly different from the soundtrack Cassavetes created.)

The first version was three hours and fifty minutes long. I didn't want to make too many cuts because I don't think viewers would be interested in emotions stimulated by a technical effect. Gena is a miraculous actress and I think Peter is a miraculous actor. And you can't really tell until you've seen take after take of these people being just absolutely true, true to themselves. They could break your heart in every take and it's a terrible responsibility to come in and have the fear, the terrible fear on all of our parts, that we will screw up something. So then we start to go to work with our preconceived notions of how a scene is going to play well, and we do it, and all of us take a shot at it. Maybe there are five or six people working in the editing room, all of us wanting to get at the scene and trying, you know, terribly excited by the material that we have. You have the tremendous problem of structure. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. It was a terrible trial-and-error in which we

screwed up the movie, put it together, screwed it up, had a nice version, tried to fix it, screwed it up, tried to fix it, screwed it up. And eventually this is what came out. The rhythms and the idea of what's happening aren't dictated by movie terms because this isn't a movie. There are no geniuses. It's just a lot of fucking hard work and *trying to get it*.

Cassavetes was aware of the demands his movie made on viewers.

You can't edit the film any more than you can direct that film. You're not able to make the film play any better than it plays. I mean, certainly we can take ten minutes out of the beginning and trim everything. I mean, it can be trimmed easily but it's an awfully tough film. It's just an awfully tough film. You can't get a breath, I mean, a breath to breathe because it's too tough. I mean the fact that you're in love with a woman and a woman's in love with you, or that you commit yourself in one way or another to another person and you can't live with it. You can't change that basic reality. Take the scene of Mabel's breakdown, for example. We had to prolong it. The sequence was full because unless you actually see them do that, unless you actually see the continuity of that, the actual idea that he would do this and carry it through could have been weakened. And I didn't particularly like the scene upstairs. But I felt it was necessary for Nick to go upstairs and make up his mind that he would actually do this in the face of the children, in the face of his wife. It was very important that he actually decide to commit this woman so that it would become a memory for him. It's the hardest thing in the world to put someone that you love in an institution. There is a lot of pain involved. To make it play is nothing, that's just a cut – boom – like that. But to keep the ideas of the people, so that at the end when they go upstairs and tuck the kids in bed that it has some relevance to what you've seen was the hard part. The rest, it's a matter of a week of trimming, of bringing together. How far and deep we do it depends on how intense it gets. If we rushed the story just to get to the dramatic areas, it would no longer be a valid picture. We're just talking about people and their lives, their loves and their activities. If it becomes exciting, that's because it is exciting. I'm not going to push it.

We've spent maybe seven months trying to find some things in it that would soften it. I think in a great sense the music score will soften it. I think that those other feelings will be amplified through it. But I don't want to use music as a trip. We have a great musician, Bo Harwood, who's been with the picture from the beginning and has done sound on the picture and he's just a sensational guy and he understands the prob-

lems that we're confronted with. I mean, there's certain things that will make laughter come when we need it and make time not last quite as long as it does. I mean, sure, it's long. It *is* long. When we started to cut the picture it was mandatory first for us to *see* it in that length and make sure that everything we have is in there so that we can begin now deleting and finding out where we are as we take stuff out of the picture. I can't take into consideration what some theater-owner or distributor might think about the length or the painfulness. I couldn't care less. You do one thing at a time. After we finish with the film we distribute it. But we don't distribute the film while we're making the film. You know, I'm an artist, not a friggin' salesman.

As was always the case, Cassavetes shot many scenes that never made it into the movie, including one Falk was particularly fond of – in which Nick and Mabel talk about their dreams and, according to Falk, 'the crazy side of Nick came out,' as well as a tender side, since it is the only time in the film that he gets to interact with Mabel alone, away from the pressure of relatives and co-workers.

The picture fluctuates between being a romantic picture and a realistic one. We all know how to make a movie that's a little more romantic, but frankly, I get bored with that because it has nothing to do with anything I'm seeing. I cut out many entire scenes. For instance, there were several scenes where Gena and Peter were alone together. I very much liked what developed between them. There was a very beautiful scene in the morning when they tell each other their dreams and another when they walk together in the rain. When I saw the whole edit, I realized that, perhaps unconsciously, I was giving the public what they wanted and that this was possibly the result of a certain romantic desire on my part and that of the actors to see the union in a romantic way. Yet in my view marriage is not really a 'romance'. The romantic episodes in a marriage are very short. The relationship between the two characters was so intimate in these scenes that one could no longer believe in the fundamental problems facing them. So I cut them out.

Though he hated most of the films he saw, Cassavetes made it a policy to see as many movies as he possibly could – the good, the bad and the ugly. He told me he thought it was his professional responsibility. He was influenced in some way by almost everything. *Mrs. Miniver* was one of his favorite films and *Rosemary's Baby* one of his least favorite, but

The filmmaker's real family during the time *A Woman Under the Influence* was being made. The children are, from left to right, Xan, Nick and Zoe.
© *Sam Shaw*

both are ghostly presences in *A Woman Under the Influence*. The bedroom scenes with Walter Pidgeon in Wyler's film echo some of the scenes with Falk in bed in *Woman*, and the commitment scene and the general sense of a woman being imprisoned in her own home by apparent friends in Polanski's movie are in Cassavetes' film. But Cassavetes had problems with the veracity of even the Capra movies he most adored. One of his complaints about more recent Hollywood films was that although they were about falling in love, romance, infatuation and lust, they almost never dealt with complexities of mature, adult love.

One of the reasons I make films is to make clear to people that family life is not always going to be a bed of roses. Don't be upset if you fall out of love, because it's gonna happen lots of times. Don't be upset by conflict. The film shows that there is something to a one-on-one relationship, something so beautiful that it is worth all the problems. There is in some ways a greater value to family life, and that is something that hasn't been said since Andy Hardy. Everything is so negative! No matter how 'horrible' the love story was, it really was a love story and not just a chance meeting and a two-second love affair. Nick and Mabel,

with all their problems, and they have a *million*, were more comfortable with each other than they were with anyone else. And when they were alone I don't know if there were two people who liked and respected each other more than any two people I've ever seen.

*

Once post-production was complete, the next step was to interest a theater chain or distributor. Cassavetes later said that he conducted so many distributors' screenings at the American Film Institute that he wore out his work print and was still unable to get anyone to pick up the film. Years later, he would tell me that he was personally convinced that the studios and unions had put word out that any theater-owner or distributor who touched the film might find it difficult to get future studio releases.

In the following statement, although Cassavetes doesn't overstate his difficulties securing distribution, he does slightly exaggerate the amount of time it took him to get the film into a theater. It was about fourteen months from the completion of post-production in November 1973 to the first commercial screening in December 1974; but, as I shall describe, even at that point *A Woman Under the Influence* still did not have a distributor.

I finished the film almost two years before I could get it screened in a theater. I knew what I had but couldn't convince *anyone* to give it a shot. It was always the same thing from theater-owners and distributors: 'Too long.' 'Too depressing.' Absolutely nobody wanted it. It was the most discouraging eighteen months of my life. I almost gave up, threw it in, at that point. I really did.

Distributing is a closed shop – perhaps the tightest shop in the world. Amateurs are not welcome. The studios have had no interest in *A Woman Under the Influence*. And if they did come to us, we wouldn't sell it cheaply because we've taken our risks and expect to be paid well for it. After all, who the hell are they? Unless they finance the production, they're a bunch of agents who go out and book theaters; that's what it really boils down to. Most of them don't have any real interest in films. How could they? They hate artists anyway. The only thing the distributors are interested in is financial rip-off, and that's all. No one ever says it, but it's true.

My films are hard to assess or categorize commercially. They're always a gamble. We'd submitted this picture to every company before

we started. We don't have any desire to finance and be the whole show, we really don't. We can work under any circumstances, but obviously the financial problems become a burden. There's no way to know if this film will draw an audience. The companies take precautions. Their pictures take precautions against failure. They put unrelated violence in just because there is some kind of an audience appetite for it. They'll put action scenes and production values in, things that don't have too much to do with the films that we make. I have to put a rape scene in or a nude scene, or I have to shoot somebody in the face for this film to be 'good'!

Distributors have all kinds of lists of what you can do and what you can't do for commercial sale. They go on the basis of what's worked before, while this is an original film. You can't go to *A Woman Under the Influence* on the basis of having seen my other films. It's hard for the major companies to fit it into a category. We've learned a long time ago not to even try to second-guess them. You can go crazy.

Everyone who makes a film is at the major distributors' mercy. We don't want great sums of money, but we do expect distributors to offer us some continuity and be more practical: not to offer actors a million dollars when times are good and make the business impossible; not to take twenty-five per cent overhead so they can put more money in their coffers; and not to make destructive pictures they don't even believe in. They'd make a picture about a revolution in which all major studio heads were killed if they thought it would make money. The one group that has any leverage is reviewers. It's important for the critics to object because they're the only ones who have a voice with the studios and the public.

In the late summer of 1974, Cassavetes turned to his old standby, the New York Film Festival, as a way of breaking the log-jam. Unfortunately, his friend and long-time supporter Amos Vogel was no longer there, and under the leadership of Richard Roud the festival had switched to almost exclusively programming European features. Cassavetes brought in the print and screened it for the festival jury (chaired by Roud and comprising Andrew Sarris, Susan Sontag, Richard Corliss, Arthur Knight, Henry Langlois and Arthur Mayer), but according to the filmmaker, who told me he was present, one of the members of the selection committee left in the middle of the film and never returned, and Molly Haskell (who accompanied Sarris to the event) expressed her distaste for the movie on the spot. The final comment is probably an allusion to the checkered commercial career of jazz clarinetist Sidney Bechet.

I decided to let the New York Festival have it. But *they* rejected it too! We had a screening. When I walked up the aisle, Molly Haskell called it 'the biggest piece of garbage I've ever seen'. They told me they rejected it because it had no ending! [Laughs.] I made the film, and I know that if anything it was a series of endings. [Laughs.] I wanted to *choke them*! [Gesturing and laughing.] I decided to open a tailor shop.

About a year earlier, Cassavetes had heard that Warner Brothers was having trouble finding someone to direct *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More*. He had some contacts there, and in the spirit of helping out people he knew and liked, he kept calling them and telling them how good Martin Scorsese was. Scorsese got the job and owed him a favor. He got on the phone after the jury screening.

I went back and called up Marty Scorsese and said, 'Pull your film.' *Italianamerician* had already been announced as part of the Festival's 'Roots' series. An hour later, the phone rang. Guess what? It was the Festival. They said there had been a mistake! That's how I got it in. The film got some attention after that.

***A Woman Under the Influence* was shoehorned into two back-to-back screenings at 6.00 and 9.30 p.m. on the next to the last night of the Festival, Saturday 12 October 1974. Cassavetes went without sleep for most of the week before the screening, tinkering with the edit. He had the final cut rush-processed, and made the event with only hours to spare. Both events were sensations – arguably the two most resoundingly successful screenings Cassavetes had ever had. The applause started with the final credits and turned into a sustained standing ovation as Rowlands rose to accept the audience's homage. (Cassavetes was not there; though he sat through most of the film to gauge the reaction of the audience, he left just before it ended; he was still mad at the Festival.)**

***Woman* garnered pages of press coverage over the course of the next week, but Cassavetes still could not make a dent with the New York critics, who continued to agree about one thing – the awfulness of his work. For John Simon *A Woman Under the Influence* was 'muddleheaded, pretentious, and interminable'. For Pauline Kael it was 'a murky, ragmop movie'. And for Stanley Kauffmann *Woman* was 'utterly without interest or merit'. (To give a twist to the shiv, Kauffmann's negative assessment appeared in a two-film review which went on to praise *Murder on the Orient Express* as 'first-class entertainment [and] one of**

the best all-star pictures I can remember'.) Cassavetes found himself still completely unable to get distribution for the movie. The cold, hard truth was that after *Husbands* and *Minnie and Moskowitz* had lost money, the distributors and theater-owners wanted nothing to do with him, no matter what 'The Critics' said – pro or con. He was box-office poison.

The majors told me nobody is interested in women's problems. They have no desire to see it. It scares them. They would have to put a considerable amount of money in to sell it, and they've already decided it won't reach an audience because it's about a painful part of people's lives. But I think we'll be successful. I think it's a very delicate movie. Yet if you tell audiences that, they won't go. They're so conditioned to anything called beautiful and tender being boring. The first thing that anyone wants to know about a movie is whether it moves along with a lot of action or whether it is about boring, fantasized problems that don't really exist. We're in the middle with our film, because these problems really do exist. You do see a film that has something to do with you. To me it's so boring to see a movie that has nothing to do with my life in any way, shape, form or gender. I think the only interesting thing in films is to see a man–woman relationship.

After spending the rest of October and early November unsuccessfully attempting to interest a distributor, Cassavetes decided on a novel strategy. He would four-wall the film (renting the theater at his own expense) in prestigious New York and Los Angeles theaters; launch a major publicity campaign (spending tens of thousands of dollars of his own money on large-scale newspaper display advertising for the opening weeks); make a number of rapid-fire television appearances to promote the movie; and then would publicize the receipts. The goal would be to persuade a distributor that the film was worth picking up.

Cassavetes swung into action, opening *A Woman Under the Influence* at New York's Columbia I and II on 20 November and at Ted Mann's Fox Wilshire on 11 December. The choice of the theaters was not random. On the East Coast, he played *A Woman Under the Influence* on both screens of the Columbia, because initially he could only provide one screenable print. Since the theater was a duplex, he was able to shuttle the reels between the two projection booths. On the West Coast, he chose Mann's theater, because Mann was a friend and the only theater-owner in all of southern California willing to buck the union and studio blockade.

Cassavetes made the rounds of the talk shows. Unfortunately, he was

never comfortable on television or skilled at turning the triteness and superficiality of a talk-show visit to his advantage, and his publicity appearances frequently backfired. That happened, in this instance, most egregiously on 6 December, when Cassavetes and Peter Falk appeared together on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*. Not only was Cassavetes surly and rude to Carson, but the studio audience, automatically assuming that Falk would be playing a comic role, inappropriately laughed during the airing of a serious dramatic clip from the film: the moment in which Nick and Mabel talk after the construction workers leave.

A full-page ad in *Variety* on Wednesday 4 December 1974 blazoned the revenues from the first two weeks of the Columbia I and II run: $33,600 in the first week; $45,624 the second. The figures were really quite respectable, but even at this point no distributor contacted him. He gave an interview to make sure that there was no misunderstanding: he would be glad to sell *A Woman Under the Influence* for just about the same amount as *Husbands* had been sold to Columbia for.

There was this article that said I'd been turning down studios who wanted to release and distribute that film. For $3.5 million someone can have that film. Hell, do I look like a distributor to you? Do I look like the kinda guy who likes to work with his hands?

A Woman Under the Influence continued to do strong business throughout the holiday season, and to Cassavetes' surprise the demand to see the film continued unabated as December turned into January. But there was still no offer of distribution from anyone. Cassavetes waited until the middle of the month, and with no other prospects in sight, decided that the only alternative to putting his film into storage was self-distribution. In the mid-1970s, such a step was even less common than it is today. Independent distribution on a large scale had been attempted only a few times prior to *A Woman Under the Influence* – by Ely Landau in his *American Film Theater* project, by Cinema V and by Libra. Actor-director George C. Scott had also attempted to self-distribute *The Savage Is Loose* a few months earlier in 1974. But the results in every case had been quite disappointing. Cassavetes knew virtually nothing about distribution, but, as always, threw himself into it with gusto.

We're taking the picture on our shoulders. We'll distribute it *ourselves*! Let's go down to the all-night newsstand! Let's get all the newspapers from all over the cities, see what movies are playing at what theaters!

Then we'll know which theaters we like. The distributors have forced us to go directly to the exhibitors, and they've eliminated their percentage of the profits, that's all.

He talked a good line in public, but in private expressed a different view of the situation. He hated the self-distribution process from start to finish – finding it expensive, time-consuming and discouraging. It immediately cost him $750,000 of additional out-of-pocket expenses, bringing his total expenditures on *Woman*, prior to any receipts, to more than $1 million (though he later estimated it would have cost a studio at least ten times that amount to do what he did).

To manage the operation, Cassavetes hired a twenty-one-year-old Long Island theater manager named Jeff Lipsky with no previous experience in distribution. Cassavetes was never big on résumés, and Lipsky got the job simply because Cassavetes had liked him when Lipsky had interviewed him for his Nassau Community College newspaper a couple of years before. The result was a little like the Children's Crusade in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Cassavetes rented offices in New York and Los Angeles, hired a staff of twenty young people to man the phones, paid to have more than 200 prints of his film made and sent Rowlands, Falk and himself on a whirligig round of interviews and media appearances. In what was considered an innovative practice at the time, two staff members were assigned to handle college markets exclusively, an audience that Cassavetes always felt was more open to his work. On 31 January, the filmmaker issued a press release (which generated an article in *Variety* a few days later), announcing that the office was staffed and ready to accept bookings. While prints were being struck, Cassavetes booked the few prints he had at his disposal into a few large city theaters in February, and then opened the film nationally at more than a hundred theaters from Miami to Minnesota in March 1975.

It was a learning experience all around and a not entirely pleasant one. Local theater-owners in Louisiana or Idaho had cozy, long-term relationships with friendly representatives at regional distribution offices and balked at having to deal with strangers in Los Angeles or New York, or having to make long-distance phone calls to reach them. Larger theater chains tried to take advantage of Cassavetes' situation by insisting on having 'back-up prints' which they would then surreptitiously screen without paying rentals. Many theaters never returned the prints they rented, falsely reported their ticket sales or refused to pay their bills after the rental was over, knowing that Cassavetes had no way to police the situation or retaliate. The most he could do was what he

had done with *Faces*: ask friends in various cities where *A Woman Under the Influence* was playing to visit theaters unannounced and check if he was being cheated (as he invariably was) or to try to retrieve a missing print and personally ship it back to him. (Cassavetes' screening problems were not confined to the United States. Several months after the fact, he discovered that all of the Paris prints of *A Woman Under the Influence* had thirty minutes cut from them to fit the film into a two-hour screening slot.)

Not all of Cassavetes' distribution problems were caused by others; many of his wounds were self-inflicted. For example, because of the problems Cassavetes had had with New York critics over the years, he fatuously believed that urban viewers and reviewers were too 'artsy' and 'intellectual' to appreciate his work, and that black and working-class viewers were the natural audience for his work. He spent a lot of his money in the distribution of his films on newspaper ads and bookings directed to working-class and minority viewers. The result was a number of foolish bookings. Lipsky tells the story of how the owner of Harlem's Apollo Theater called up in desperation to beg to be released from his contract after his first two screenings of *A Woman Under the Influence* had grossed a total of $2.50.

If somebody says there's an *art* picture – I don't want to go! They usually mean it's beautifully shot, or they used certain techniques, or it's about loneliness, an empty room with beautiful lighting. And somebody walks through and you hear some eerie music. Very few things come out of the people themselves or their own frustrations. I'm not a *highbrow* or an *intellectual*. I'm a street person. I just really believe that all the things that I can think everybody else can feel. I'm not shooting through rainbows or glasses or anything like that, just taking life and saying what is my problem. The greatest thrill for me is that an uneducated person like me can look at the film we make and understand we were making it for him. It aggravates me when people say, 'You make intellectual films.' I'm not an *intellectual*!

Yet I believe in art. I believe in it in the movies, in music and in fine art, where it can become a great investment. What's all this about certain stories being commercial and others not? People in the movies should go on strike for quality, not money. In this country we're not really in love with films, are we? I mean, we're really in love with some kind of attitudes to success, and it's a sad truth because then there doesn't seem to be room for the *students* of film. That's a sad commentary, not on the greed, but on the numbers game and on the new art of

American life, the only all-consuming art, the art of business. So that supposing you don't want to be in *that* art, you want to be in another art – of self-expression – then there's no outlet.

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So powerful is most viewers' tendency to identify an actress with the character she plays that for years afterwards many women equated Rowlands with Mabel, ignoring the fairly breathtaking differences between the wealthy, designer-attired actress who had a maid and boarded her children at private school, and the working-class wife in mismatched clothes who waited for the school bus on the street. Mabel's and Rowlands' personalities were about as different as they could be. Rowlands impressed everyone who knew her as being elegantly turned out, poised and emotionally contained and reserved – more or less the opposite of the gawky, exuberantly unbuttoned Mabel. If any deep imaginative linkage between on- and off-camera life exists, Mabel's crazed non-conformity, her clumsy passionateness, her childlike enthusiasms and her frustration with social conventions were more a reflection of her creator's temperament. Cassavetes' post-release comments touch on the differences between the actress and the character, and his own imaginative affinities with Mabel.

If you knew Gena, she's so unlike that thumb-flicking, raspberry-throwing girl. In real life, Gena is as calm and composed as Mabel is nervous and troubled. By comparison, I myself am half mad. It surfaces at the least expected moments. I can usually tell it with my own life when the insanity's going to surface. I think it comes from loneliness – our own dedication to what we're doing – whether we're laborers or whether we're white-collar workers or college students or whatever. I think it's the promise of two people getting together and having a love affair in a one-on-one relationship, where two people get together that may not have that much in common because one is a man and one is a woman. One day I think that marriage is the best life I've ever had, the next minute I feel like killing myself, or someone else feels like killing me! Life for me is difficult and full of mysteries as to what will happen next or what I'm going to feel. Half of life is taken up by unpredictable moods. This particular woman isn't really mad but frustrated beyond imagination. She doesn't know what to do and she is socially and emotionally inept. Everything she does is an expression of her individuality, but she doesn't know how to interact with others. She's like me in this

respect. Yet it is only by interacting, by engaging in some sort of competition with others, that she feels alive.

But if Cassavetes' personality was as different from Nick's as possible, Nick and his creator had a few things in common. Like the construction worker at the beginning of the film, the workaholic filmmaker had missed many 'special nights' with Rowlands over the years – birthdays, anniversaries, events with his children. He had stood her up for dinner or canceled at the last minute too many times to count. He had left her at home hundreds of evenings while he was out with the boys. Notwithstanding Cassavetes' reputation as a 'family man', his family frequently – in fact almost always – took second place to his work. Many times he had promised Rowlands that he would take time off from his work to be with her and then reneged when a film project came along. In fact, this was exactly what happened on the film preceding *A Woman Under the Influence*. In December 1970, after spending more than a year editing *Husbands* virtually around the clock, day and night, followed by months with Falk and Gazzara promoting the film, Cassavetes vowed to Rowlands that he would absolutely take the next three months off to go on a long, leisurely vacation with her. The deal to make *Minnie and Moskowitz* materialized less than a week after the ill-fated promise, and Cassavetes told her their vacation would have to wait. They never did take it. In a comical vein, years later, Rowlands told the story of how during the final months of finishing *Shadows*, Cassavetes was so absorbed in his work that he briefly 'forgot' they had a child. Only a few days after their first son, Nicholas, was born, Cassavetes flew to Los Angeles to begin work on the *Staccato* series, leaving her alone in New York. She flew to the West Coast by herself a few weeks later and met him at his office. After a little chitchat, she impatiently inquired, 'Aren't you going to ask *about the baby*!?' 'What baby?' Cassavetes replied. (It's evidence of how Cassavetes mined his relation with Rowlands in his work that the same exchange appears in *A Woman Under the Influence*. Mabel asks the work-preoccupied Nick a similar question.)

I spend eighty per cent of my time working. I'd been so horrible as a husband in my life that the long hours, the incredible ambition to try to make something that would satisfy me, the obscure conversations that have no meaning to anybody except to artists, for so long, that I thought, 'My God, look at this woman who has stood beside me every inch of the way thinking, "He has such an incredible potential, if *only he would listen*!" – you know?' I think there was a terrible double-cross

of a man sending his wife away, knowing full well that she hadn't really warranted being sent away before he instigated something. And yet I think that's quite revealing about men's relationship with women.

I've double-crossed Gena several times. I don't mean badly, I don't mean that I've plotted it out and planned it out; but I've done things that have been a double-cross. Working late at night. Working hard. Not keeping up always the romantic impulses that is the promise of two people when they get together. Being in love with other things. Things that really, I think, that all people within a marriage or a long relationship go through. In recent years I've come to recognize the errors of my own ways perhaps, the selfishness and the insensitivities of my past, but mind you, I'm in no way putting these down. From an actor's and a director's point of view the pains and problems are wonderful things – his art is forged from them. It's just that now I recognize things I had eliminated from my life and *A Woman Under the Influence* is an appreciation of those other values in familial and social relationships.

Cassavetes' chief gratification was the pleasure of seeing people respond to his movie. As part of their deal, Ted Mann had provided Cassavetes with a fourteen-room suite of offices on the second floor of a building almost directly above the Fox Wilshire Theater, where *A Woman Under the Influence* was playing. Many evenings Cassavetes would stand in his window looking down at the people lining up for tickets, going in or briefly stepping out for a smoke. On more than one evening, he ran down to ask them what they thought of his movie.

Rowlands' performance was an obvious candidate for an Academy Award, and *A Woman Under the Influence* garnered two nominations – one for her as Best Actress and the other for Cassavetes as Best Director. The filmmaker basked in his moral victory over the establishment on the day the nominations were announced. Bo Harwood tells the story of stopping by Cassavetes' offices and of Cassavetes taking a bottle of Courvoisier and two glasses out of his bottom desk drawer and arranging a quilted moving blanket out on the fire escape. The two men sat out in the open air, looking down at the theater and the people buying tickets for that evening's screening. Cassavetes raised his glass and triumphantly proposed a toast that summed up the sweetness of his victory over everyone who had told him for more than three years that it could not be done: 'Fuck 'em.'

In an irony that was not lost on the filmmaker, Rowlands lost the Actress Award to Ellen Burstyn in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More*, the film Cassavetes had helped Scorsese land (and in which Lelia

Goldoni from *Shadows* coincidentally plays a small role). The Director Award went to Francis Ford Coppola for *The Godfather, Part 2*.

Even without an Academy Award, and without the support of critics like Kael and Canby, Cassavetes' self-distribution gamble paid off. *Woman* more than doubled the receipts *Faces* had brought in – the film that was Cassavetes' previous career record. Though there were inevitably many negative reviews and responses (which generally took the line that Mabel was 'too crazy' to be interesting or 'too extreme' to be believed – American critics always being more comfortable with visual than performative extravagance and stylization), *A Woman Under the Influence* received hundreds of enthusiastic reviews and touched the hearts of hundreds of thousands of viewers. It played successfully at first- and second-run houses throughout the United States for more than six months, from the spring through the summer of 1975. It entered the history books as one of the first and most important cross-over independent film success stories, and the biggest commercial success in Cassavetes' career – eventually grossing $6 million in the United States and an equal amount in foreign markets. Even after Falk's share had been taken out and various expenses were deducted, the profits would pay most of the production costs of Cassavetes' next two films. In his new-found fame, Cassavetes was asked to direct *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; however, negotiations broke down over details of scripting and casting (including Cassavetes' desire to feature Seymour Cassel in the film).

Even as he was enjoying the greatest commercial success of his life, Cassavetes continued to speak out about the plight of the director who aimed to make more than 'entertainment'.

I see people like Bob Altman, Elaine May, Elia Kazan – great directors. These people shouldn't be left alone. Somewhere along the line there has to be somebody who makes things easier. Not someone who says like most distributors, 'Can you do it? Can you be a killer? Can you pretend that everything is right?' The one difference between the film industry now and the old days is that back then nobody had a responsibility to make a *great* film. They had a responsibility to sucker in the big guys, band together and have fun on their own small level. Through that, the accidents of great films occurred because the love was always there. All those guys had pride in making a good film, if only to be able to say, 'Well, our picture was good at least.' No one thought in terms of millions of dollars. Now the big question is, 'Can a picture make a hundred million?' Who the hell cares? If you're thinking that way, you're

not making films, you're making money. If that's what it's come to, let the audience look at pictures of money, put money on the screen, and then rape it, shoot it, defecate on it – because that's basically what everyone is doing. I'm not really an angry person, but I get angry when I see people of extraordinary talent and ability abused so terribly by the majors who defile anything.

There are blockbusting pictures that have been heavily promoted. The audience looks for deeper meaning because these films are sociologically acceptable. The better movies do not give you acceptable meanings. I think that consequently the audience has lost its taste. There's too much emphasis on how successful each and every picture should be. You're really doing an experiment and no matter how hard I work or you work on something, it's just one thing out of billions and trillions of things. It shouldn't have that much importance placed on it. To be forced to have that much importance forces films out of a productive area for both the people that make them and the people that view them.

It's just the stupidity of not allowing certain pictures to be made simply because they're not expensive enough. You have to kill yourself to make an expensive picture out of an inexpensive movie, in order to suit the economic standards everyone is used to. Why? It's a camera and some people – why should that cost more than a five-story building? It's dumb, and it's really frustrating. That's the kind of impossible situation that makes paranoids out of all people who make films. We have to contend with it; we accept it, and in accepting it we hurt ourselves and everyone else around us. I don't say I've been a saint in my life, but I couldn't sell my soul out for things I just don't believe in. And if that means I'll never make a film again, then I'll never make another film again.

In a series of post-release interviews, Cassavetes replied to a host of criticisms directed at the film. He replied to charges that his work was 'apolitical':

When I took *A Woman Under the Influence* to American universities, I was accused of being apolitical. The film doesn't take a political stance. I'm incapable – if I make a film – of checking in first with my political party or newspaper. *A Woman Under the Influence* is an individual story *behind which* you can find political issues.

Though a number of feminists embraced Mabel as a heroine, it was an uncomfortable alliance in that Cassavetes' film confounded many con-

victions to which they were ideologically committed – for example, that Mabel had no desire to leave or criticize Nick; that Nick was not treated as a villain; and that Nick and Mabel were clearly in love.

I'm sure we would have had a much more successful film if the picture were rougher, more brutal; if it made statements so that people could definitely take sides. But along the way I'd have to look at myself and say, 'Yes, we were successful in creating another horror in the world.' I don't know anyone who has such a terrible time that she doesn't smile, ever, that she doesn't have time to love, open her eyes, think about the details of life. Something happens all the time, even at the height of tragedy, even in a prison or insane asylum.

Gena in this film became a figure for the women's movement as an example of what was happening to women. But I would think that Women's Lib would not like the film because I really think there *are* basic differences between men and women. A biological difference, a sexual difference, a lifestyle difference, a training difference. People can say, 'No, there isn't a difference,' but I have two daughters and a son, and I see the difference.

The film really shows, beyond any other movie I've ever seen, the real, solid differences between men and women. Women are more receptive by nature than a man is. I don't know whether it's a conditioning or whatever – it's an actuality, anyway. I've seen my daughter, when she was very young, practice on me, practice seeing herself through a man's eyes. I mean, no one told her to do that. I don't see boys doing that. They don't practice being. They just grow up, and they are either something that pleases them or nothing that pleases them. I don't think that the question of identity is so strong with a man as it is with a woman. Most men don't go around worrying if they're good enough. And women do. When a woman commits herself to a man, she doesn't quite know what to expect. She *can* be almost anything the man wants her to be. If she's deeply in love, she wants to please him. Mabel had a sense of worthlessness. She assumed the personality she thought she should have, wanting to be a good mother and a good wife. I watch lots of women pick up their children from the bus stop like Mabel does and my heart leaps. I want those other women to talk to her, tell her the time at least!

As so often in Cassavetes' work, the problem is created by the individual's need to please or do what Cassavetes always referred to as 'follow the rules of society'.

I wasn't concerned with the problem of *women*, *per se*, in *A Woman Under the Influence*. I was concerned with the problems of someone who was forced to behave in a manner that she couldn't cope with. Mabel's problem was that she had no self. Her problem was that she was doing everything to please someone other than herself. When Nick wanted her to go to bed with him, she'd go to bed. When he wanted her to be embarrassed, she'd be embarrassed. If he wanted her to apologize, she'd apologize. He wanted her to be nice to guys coming in at eight o'clock in the morning – ten guys for spaghetti – well, OK. That is a man's dream for a woman to get up and say, 'Yeah, let's cook it and have a good time.'

That is a man's dream, not a woman's dream. I mean, when women are married for five or ten years, they begin to say, 'Look, that's not me. What happened *to me* here? I'm here every day taking care of the kids and waiting for my husband to come home,' and there's a dissatisfaction there. And I don't think it's a social thing. You can't blame that on politics so much. It's really the way things have been because men really are not willing to stand up and say, 'I am me and I want to be me at any cost.' And women too.

Mabel's not behaving herself, but you can't behave yourself when you've been pushed so far from your own way of being. How do you act when you can't be yourself? In the homecoming scene, she's separated from herself. She's upset, afraid of coming back, she's afraid she's no longer herself. I think that Nick makes it clear that he's not been tormented by her being in the asylum or for having sent her to that hell for six months. It's not important for him, or for her. What's important for her is to behave herself and not to make any mistakes. So when he takes her over to the staircase and says to her – it's a horrible scene – 'Be yourself,' he's sincere. He just doesn't know what to do or what to say.

In response to repeated criticisms of Nick as a 'male chauvinist' (particularly from student audiences, who sometimes hissed Falk if he was present), Cassavetes argued that the situation was more complex than that.

Nick shows that people would rather follow the rules of society than deal with emotions. It's awful. People suppress their emotions to follow their idea of what society expects of them. Nick is upset because he can't control Mabel. I mean, here is a construction worker, a guy who goes out and works with his hands. He is a very formal guy. He believes

in family and home. His mother really has a great influence over him. Relatives have a great influence over him. He is a conservative and all of a sudden he marries a girl. He takes the one little act of danger in his life. She is a little kooky. She is a little crazy. She loves him intensely. It is a little embarrassing to him. He doesn't want to display that emotion to the world. He wants distance in his public life. And while he feels this thing in her to be attractive – crazy in bed, divinely kooky, whatever – he can't handle the results.

His life is falling apart through a series of embarrassments, the pull of family, the pull of friends. How is he going to look in front of his friends when this woman carries on? He is attracted to her, but only when they are alone. To Nick, being embarrassed in front of his family and friends is against all 'rules'. Society, embarrassment, his relatives, his men, his feeling that he is doing the right thing, all of this background comes between them. The first half of the film is a series of these embarrassments, minor and major. Life is a series of attempts to avert being exposed as a fool. But in the effort to do this we make even bigger fools of ourselves. Most of us like to think we know how to handle life, but, actually, we are ignorant emotionally. We have to learn not to be so hard on ourselves. I'm obsessed with the idea that people are human and have fallacies, and that those embarrassing fallacies are better out in the open. That way we don't waste time covering up. I see life as a struggle, and the real romance is in not walking away from it.

Cassavetes' response to comments by students that Mabel should leave Nick. (Note the echoes of Nick's speech pattern near the end of the second paragraph.)

There is the outside world and there is the inside world. The inside world is your home, your family, the things that create emotions within you. The outside world is you and where you are going and how you move and where you fly, you know? And they are two worlds. I realized after making the picture, not before, that the inside world really holds you, really contains you, can cause you pain that you don't show outside and that is why no one ever talks about it. He has two selves and she only has one. The entire film is brought together for me in the argument scene near the beginning after the men leave. To me, it's two people trying to really talk to each other on such a specific level: they're two people who are unmistakably in love with one another, they're not covered and they're not supposedly 'doing' something for one another. It's our screwed-up psyches that have been warped by thousands of books

and millions of feet of tapes and advice so that we don't know how to have one-on-one relationships anymore. That's what that scene is. They're just one-on-one, trying to work things out.

I hate separatism in anything. Women's movements only spread distrust between people and move people further away from each other than they should be. I really like people and I don't share any of these biases; I don't like people to be separate from me. I really like people to be accessible, not films so much, but people. I think there *is* an underlying hostility between the sexes today. And so we chose in this for there *not* to be an underlying hostility there, for there to be a love there. And there is a peculiar love there. It's peculiar but it's definite. The man is not trying to throw her away, really. He doesn't know what the hell he's doing! Doesn't know what love *means*! Doesn't know what it is. Doesn't know what a woman is. Has no ideas. Both – thinks it's something that's supposed to be something that cleans and sews and cooks and stays home at night and never has a thought or a sexual idea or an instinct in her to do anything at all except to be his wife, you know. And she accepts that idea! And she can't live with it!

In response to Pauline Kael's breezy dismissal of the film as a trendy adaptation of R. D. Laing's theories about madness (arguing that Cassavetes presented Mabel as 'a sympathetic . . . symbolic victim' and failed to criticize her 'for not getting herself together'), he argued that madness was only a metaphor for the everyday.

I reject what Pauline Kael has to say. I'm sure there *are* people who are clinically in trouble, but most people just don't know *what to do*. I don't find them to be 'crazy people'. I find them to be just individuals not able to blow with the orchestra, to go with the orchestration. A lot of people say the behavior is too extreme, but we know that within the intimacy of our homes even worse emotional things than this take place, within even more extreme feelings. We can learn to live with these things in our families, or we can avoid them by looking to the outside world and saying that 'things aren't going well' or by using expressions like 'madness', etc., to describe them.

His response to a question about why Mabel was 'shackled with' children:

I wanted the Longhettis to have children because children grow up with innocence and an instinctive love for the people they care about. Firm in their emotional commitments and thrust into the middle of changes

in their immediate surroundings, their permanence and fixity of purpose contrasted with the on-going flux of a domestic household.

His response to an interviewer's question about the decision to depict a 'working-class environment':

That's kind of a crazy question! Was it intentional? [Laughs.] I don't do anything that's hidden in my films. There's nothing élite or fashionable or subtle in this kind of choice. Other people worry about classes. I didn't really worry about that. I wanted to make a film about a man and a woman and I wanted to reach the problem fast. This woman has three children. I wanted her to take care of them herself; I don't want her to have maids and nannies and helpers and all that sort of stuff. I want her to be close to those children and close to her husband – and yet alone. It's very hard to be alone if you're in a certain economic class; working-class people understand home and family. It would really be terrible if a woman was separated from that in her own life and in her own mind and had nothing but that, doing everything for that man and her kids. But it's not only a problem for people who work with their hands and their families. It's also a problem for Park Avenue people. Anyway, I don't deal with a social structure to 'expose' it.

His response to a question from a foreign journalist, about 'why he had chosen members of a minority group as his main characters':

It's not significant that they're a minority. Every group in America is a minority. The only oppression in America is money. It's the fear of losing your job. Class might be important in world politics, but not in my personal life. It doesn't matter to me whether someone works with his hands or is an international financier. For me, it's people who matter. I didn't want to show a particular milieu, a particular background. They could have been Martians or communists or whatever. What interested me was their relationship to life. How they got on with it.

In response to questions about 'gaps' in the narrative, Cassavetes suggested that the presentation of facts was less important than emotions:

A lot of people ask the same question about how did the mother know Mabel had a man over? The Falk character told the mother. And how did he know? Listen, you have to assume that everybody has lived. Men and women both have an understanding of these things. If a man walks into his house and sees his wife sitting like that in a mood and he has lived

with her for a number of years, he knows that something is wrong. I'm not interested in pursuing that dramatically. I'm interested in the involvement between the mother and the son. And the mother does control that son, a grown man. He's forty-six years old and she comes into that house and she runs that house. And she asks Nick to commit this woman, and he only commits her because she wants to. And she really feels that what Nick told her about Mabel is the truth. And then she adds her own truth to it and feels that the son can no longer live with this woman. Nor did I film a scene in which he told the mother about it. You know, when you're making a film, you deal with it somehow in a subjective view. I would rather not deal in terms of conventional expectations of what actually happened. It didn't seem very emotionally important to me that Peter would tell his mother and we would see it. There is no point in repeating in a film what everyone knows from experience: that while a man goes to work at nine in the morning and comes back at seven at night, his wife is on her own; that she goes shopping, looks after the children, watches television, reads a book, plays cards with some friends. All I am interested in analyzing is the relationship between this couple.

His response to the charge that pacing was too slow:

Family life doesn't move at an enormous rate of speed. *Ordinary People* is one of the slowest beginnings of any film ever made. But it's worth waiting for. That's the language with which Redford tells his story. And it's a lovely language. I find it so much more appealing than the common film language that pushes us to the brink in the film's first ten minutes, and then for the next fifty minutes you fall asleep.

His reply to the statement that people would rather see escapist pictures:

You name me a picture that people go to just to escape their feelings and I'll name you a bad picture. People go to have their emotions *aroused*. Anyone who goes to a movie not to be emotionally affected is an asshole. They might as well dig a pit and jump in. I don't believe people do that. I think the escape theory is a lie. You go to Hitchcock to be frightened. You go to *The Exorcist* to be scared. You go to *Orient Express* to match wits with the smart guys, to play detective. You go to *Towering Inferno* to see a fire. We're talking about *emotions*. No one goes just to sit there. You think a *Death Wish* isn't talking to your emotions? There's no reason why a serious film, one about life, can't be 'enjoyable', maybe even fun. Emotions can be very entertaining. I try to use them generously in my films.

His response to the criticism that the film's view of marriage is disillusioned:

It looks like Mabel and Nick have a hard time, but that's a hard time we all have. What man doesn't get caught up in his work? What woman hasn't been double-crossed by a man she loves? What man hasn't been terribly embarrassed by a woman he loves? We've seen a lot of stuff about how marriages don't work, but you've got to work at it. Love is a full-time job. But then there are other things. They take time too. Sometimes it's too much to handle.

For years I heard women talking, I would overhear them in the street in New York saying, 'Gee, I wish they'd make love stories.' Well, my idea of a love story is when two people get together and go through so much turmoil and so much pain in just loving each other. I don't know what anybody else feels, but that's the way I've always known love to be. It's been an extremely, extremely harrowing experience to me. It's easy to be in love with somebody for five minutes. But you put it over a twenty-year period of marriage – you get tired of a wife: you like them, you love them, you get excited by them, but you also know all their stories, all their jokes, and your tastes begin to splinter and go in different directions. In every love situation, whatever people do, they mess it up. It's very tough. From my own point of view, men do double-cross women sometimes, even when they're in love with them.

He argued that Nick seemed rough only because he wasn't presented in the idealized way figures in most other films are.

I think that men can connect with the Nick character if they want to. If they want to admit that they're really people. But you don't get a chance to see a guy like Nick on the screen very often, a guy that will really say, 'I'm gonna be the way I am at home, and not the way I am in front of people, and not the way I want to appear to my girlfriend or to my wife or to the world at large.' So a guy like Peter Falk, who could with a smile get out of any situation, goes up there and, in a great way, speaks about the emotional ignorance that all men feel to all women. The movie is really about the woman. If its subject was what happened to the man, no one would be interested.

He confounded many questioners by arguing that *A Woman Under the Influence* was not despairing but hopeful.

The films are a road map through emotional and intellectual terrains

that provide a solution to how one can save pain. As people we know that we are petty, vicious, violent and horrible, but my films make an effort to contain the depression within us and to limit the depression to those areas that we can actually solve. They represent the assertion of a human spirit. If, along the way, in *A Woman Under the Influence* you find something that you didn't know before or if you find something out about people that you might have thought one way about and then possibly might think another way about, then it has some value. An experience that leaves the spectator vacant is not art.

We took a chance with this movie. It's naïve in that sense, because we weren't sure that people would want to see family life, family life with problems, not hyped up. I find my films both enormously funny and enormously painful. And the more painful they get, sometimes the funnier they get. It's pain. We love pain. I think all good humor comes out of pain, and all good works come out of the understanding that life is painful. The modern world denies this, but it's a normal thing, it's nothing spectacular. I see young people turning away from pain – like an older person would turn away because he's had enough – when to overcome it is a glorious part of life. I just hope our films keep on opening up a dark pathway for young people. We really make them for the young, we don't make them for older people. Old people already know all that stuff. Maybe for them it is defined a little more clearly, but for young people it's a mystery. We hope we don't make lecture films. But by seeing people who have lived a little bit maybe they'll see in their own lives that it never changes. When I'm told that our films are painful, I think, 'Oh God, I know real pain.' We soften our pictures so tremendously. We make them almost romantic fantasies and just barely touch on these things in a less idealistic way than other people do.

We have problems, but they are human ones.

I could never make an unrealistic type of picture; I cannot work that way, but I admire people who can. I think Frank Capra is wonderful, and I think many of the early Lubitsch films were great. I even admire Dick Powell and his detective stories; he's wonderfully talented in those areas and it's a good thing he can make that kind of picture so that we can have a little variety. It would be awfully somber if people made only realistic films. However, that's the best way I can work and if there's no market for it then I'll pack up as it's the only kind of film I am interested in. I'd rather work in a sewer than make a film I don't love. If I directed a picture like *Return of the Jedi* or even *worked* on one, I would faint –

Lining up a shot for the scene in which Nick sheepishly brings the construction workers home with him.
© *Michael Ferris*

I'd faint and never get up again I'd be so ashamed. If I did *The Towering Inferno* it'd be all black leader. Nothing. I'd get sick. I'd take the insurance money. I couldn't do it. I'm not interested in starting fires. I like to feel pain through what really causes pain. I don't want to frighten people by showing them tragedy. I've never seen an exploding helicopter, I've never seen anybody go and blow somebody's head off. So why should I make films about them? But I *have* seen people destroy themselves in the smallest way. I've seen people withdraw. I've seen people hide behind political ideas, behind dope, behind the sexual revolution, behind fascism, behind hypocrisy, and I've myself done all these things. In our films what we are saying is so gentle. It's gentleness. We have problems, terrible problems, but our problems are human problems. I like to deal with subjects of divorce, subjects of children being battered. I don't know – you can say, '*Please*, there is *no* problem at all, I'm *American* and I know there's no problem here, *nothing's* ever touched *me*!'

At the same time, he laughed at the suggestion by a questioner that the 'happy ending' made the film affirmative.

[A laugh followed by a sigh.] If that's what you got out of it. I can't sit down and explain what I worked on for two and a half years to you or anyone else in one sentence. I thought it was an optimistic film in my terms. My most optimistic film to date. If you see it as not being that, that's an opinion. If you're talking about it being happy simply because they get together at the end, that's really a put-down to me. But I do believe that the end of the picture shows that love is possible, not only possible but practical and appealing, and not maudlin and quite noble.

I think by the end of the film that this man has started to realize the delicacy of the woman he's dealing with. That he has some idea of the contradictory expectations men have of women. We want them to be impressive, to be admired, but we want to keep them to ourselves. We make being a woman a kind of tightrope act. I think Peter's character has started to realize this. Whether he'll do any better, I don't know.

The synopsis he prepared for the film's press-pack indicates that he felt that Nick and Mabel had come to some sort of understanding by the end of the film.

When the storm of emotion clears, everything appears to be calm – graceful goodnights to the kids, much kissing and apologizing. Nothing that has taken place seems to have any importance except that Mabel has been set free. The children still accept their parents, and Nick and Mabel in some way discovered they can accept the difference between commitment and emotional needs. The ritual of preparing for sleep, re-establishing, without conversation, the need to make room for the dilemmas of love.

Cassavetes always felt that something in him died after the struggle to get *A Woman Under the Influence* made and released. The experience left him weary and burnt out. It was more than a reflection of a passing emotional state. Up to the end of his life, he told friends that he felt his best work had all been done by this point and that he had nothing more left to say.

I'm doing whatever I can. It's kind of a disappointment to realize that you're inadequate in certain areas. That's a terrible disappointment. You've had your opportunity, and then you find out that you were much more dynamic in your ideas and pure in your way of doing things

ten years before the time that you actually achieve them. *Woman* was a heavy emotional burden. I almost killed myself and Gena and everyone around. I felt used up. I don't think I could ever make another film like this again. And I'm not talking about the quality of the film – I mean the kind of film where you do everything. I've done it four times, and I don't know that I could do it again. It's too difficult. You say to yourself, well, what is it? It's a film. All right, it affects people's lives. Maybe it'll connect with somebody. But it doesn't affect my life that much – I'm just putting down what I know. So is it worth it to kill yourself to make the film and bring it to an audience so that someone will applaud? Or so that you'll have a big house? I can't like making films anymore if they're this tough. The pressures are too unnatural. I'm not crying, because I enjoy it. But I am saddened by the fact that I have physical limitations.

What you have to spend is terrifying. I feel that my filmic life has come to some kind of an end. It's too tough; in my mind I've already beat the system, so the only thing that remains to do is to find other people I can torture with that same idea. You can corrupt people bad, you can corrupt people good, and it's the same thing. If you take somebody and make them believe in something that is not practical, it's torture. It's not practical to make films the way we make them. There's no reward at the end of it. I don't know. But I guess it's still more interesting than steeping yourself into a dinosaur society.

I'm retired. This is it. I've had it. I don't want to go through this anymore because I don't know the difference anymore myself. I've been doing this since I started without a stop, and I want to stop because I've nothing more to say. I just like men and women, that's all. Nothing else that I want to talk about. Bombs, killing, sex, up, down, I don't care. So now I'll go out and I'll watch people on the beach and see sailboats and enjoy the mountainside. I'm through making films I don't want to make anymore. I feel that I'm one of the few filmmakers in America who is truly independent in the sense that I've gone beyond my first film, I've gone beyond my second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth films. So in a sense I should achieve the place of a guy who has now, at least, earned the right to cop out and make films that are easier and more relaxed. I want to have more ease and relaxation; I want to have some endorsement of my talent and the film I'm making.

Privately, he told friends and relatives that he wanted 'to take the wife, the dog, the kids, and start a farm' – an artists' colony, where actors could 'work on scenes together'.

We'd have a theater in a barn. And a rehearsal space. And young artists and actors could come there and learn and have fun. There are so many scenes to do; there would be so much to learn. We don't have to make a movie. It would be great just to do it.

It was an old dream that he had had back when he made *Shadows* – of being part of a group of people living, arguing, working together like a big family, doing it all simply for the love of it. In some respects, it was an anticipation of the world of his next film.