Directed and written by John Cassavetes
Original Music by Bo Harwood
Cinematography by Mitch Breit and Al Ruban

PETER FALK...Nick Longhetti
GENA ROWLANDS...Mabel Longhetti
FRED DRAPER...George Mortensen


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American director  actor, scenarist, and producer, was born in New
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1966), "Peyton Place" (19 episodes, 1967), "Kraft Suspense Theatre" (2 episodes, 1963-1965), "The
Alfred Hitchcock Hour" (3 episodes, 1962-1964), "The Virginian" (1 episode, 1963), "77 Sunset Strip" (1 episode, 1963), A Child Is
Waiting (1963), "The Dick Powell Show" (1 episode, 1963), The Spiral Road (1962), Lonely Are the Brave (1962), "87th Precinct" (3 episodes, 1961), "Laramie" (1 episode, 1959), "Johnny Staccato" (1 episode, 1959), Shadows (1959), The High Cost of Loving (1958), "Studio One" (1 episode, 1955), and "Robert Montgomery Presents" (1 episode, 1955).


American director  actor, scenarist, and producer, was born in New York City, the younger of two sons of Greek immigrants, Nicholas and Katherine Cassavates. His father, a Harvard-educated businessman, had a knack for making (and losing) millions. John Cassavetes grew up in the Long Island towns of Sands Point and Port Washington, where he attended public schools and became a movie buff, enamored of Frank Capra comedies and Dick Powell musicals. He majored in English without taking a degree at Mohawk College and Colgate University, both in New York State, and then, inspired by the plays of Robert E. Sherwood, enrolled at the New York Academy of Dramatic Arts. He graduated in 1950.

The story is much quoted that Cassavetes, having chipped his tooth in a fight when he was a child, was for years afterwards too embarrassed to smile: “When I finally got enough money for caps, I’d forgotten how to smile.” I still seems difficult for him to convey uncomplicated good humor, and this no doubt handicapped him as a young actor looking for work. At any rate, he played for a time in a Rhode Island stock company, he looked in vain for parts on Broadway. “Nobody would hire me,” he says, “because I was, quote, ‘such an unusual type.’”

His career got underway in 1952, when he played a small part in a Gregory Ratoff movie called Taxi. Ratoff hired him again—as assistant stage manager—for his Broadway success The Fifth Season. The same year Cassavetes played an intense and brooding young matador in “Paso Doble,” a short play on the television magazine program Omnibus. Many similar television roles followed and Cassavetes became typecast as a disturbed or delinquent youth….

Cassavetes’ ambitions went beyond profitable assignments in routine entertainments. He has always “wanted to express things that I think may be of value,” and been more “concerned with the problems confronting real people… than emphasizing dramatic structure or bending characters to fit a plot.” It was this that brought him into “this ridiculous business” of filmmaking. In 1956 he had begin to teach method acting at a Manhattan drama workshop. One of the group’s improvisations seemed to have the makings of a movie, and Cassavetes mentioned this project on Night People, Jean Shepherd’s unique late-night music and talk show. Shepherd’s audience of insomniacs and moonlighters sent in donations totaling $20,000. Thus encouraged, Cassavetes raised a similar sum from show-business friends and his own savings, assembled a crew willing to participate for nothing, and started work on his first picture, Shadows.

Both the story and the dialogue of Shadows were improvised by the cast who gave their names to the characters they play… .The film was made intermittently over a period of two years. The cameraman, Eric Kollmar, used a 16mm hand-held camera, and the picture acquired a grainy quality when it was blown up into 35mm. The dialogue was recorded live and synchronized later, backed by the jazz of Charlie Mingus. Unable to interest American distributors, Cassavetes sent Shadows to Europe, where it was welcomed enthusiastically as a pioneering triumph of cinema verité, a harbinger of an American New Wave. It won the Critics’ Award at the 1960 Venice Film Festival and made a respectable profit. In 1961 it was released in the United States under the auspices of Lion-International, a British company.

...For many …it marked the beginning of “the New American Cinema.” To those who wanted to crown him as the American Godard, Cassavetes responded unhelpfully that credit for the film belonged to the actors: “The director is the most expendable person in the film. If you have a good script and good actors, all the director has to do is aim the camera and keep things going.”

Impressed by the success of Shadows, Paramount hired Cassavetes to make a series of high-quality, low-budget films, beginning with Too Late Blues (1961) which stars Bobby Darin as a struggling young jazz pianist. It pleased neither the critics nor the public, and Paramount canceled the contract. Cassavetes was then signed by Stanley Kramer to direct A Child Is Waiting (United Artists, 1963), a drama in which retarded children at a California hospital play alongside the stars Judy Garland and Burt Lancaster.
There was a falling-out between Cassavetes and the studio, and he was given just two weeks to edit the film—extreme hardship for an improvisational director who needs more time than most to cut and shape his material. Kramer made further cuts and the result, according to Cassavetes, was a sentimentalization of his work. _A Child is Waiting_, written by Abby Mann, is technically the most orthodox of the director’s pictures, “with classic Hollywood pans and zooms and a steady camera,” but it seemed to some critics a moving and provocative film that deserved a better press than it received.

After that, Cassavetes directed no more movies whose ultimate form was in the hands of others, though he continued to act in them. He regards himself as an “amateur” director but a “professional” actor, prepared to appear in good, bad, or indifferent productions so that he can afford the luxury of making his own films in his own way, from his own scripts. In the middle of the late 1960s he was seen in an assortment of television dramas, in Don Siegel’s _The Killers_ (Universal, 1964), in _Devil’s Angels_ (American International, 1967), and in Robert Aldrich’s war film _The Dirty Dozen_ (MGM, 1967), which brought him an Oscar nomination for his impersonation of yet another psychopathic killer. He also earned good notices as the young actor who sells his wife to the devil in Polanski’s _Rosemary’s Baby_ (Paramount, 1967).

In 1965, meanwhile, Cassavetes had written the first draft of _Faces_, about a middle-aged, middle-class couple whose marriage has become a comfortable pattern of habits that do not include communication, and what happens when they discover this. Unlike _Shadows_, the film was acted by experienced professionals (John Marley and Linda Carlin as the couple Dick and Maria, and Cassavetes’ wife Gena Rowlands as the call girl Jeannie). Though they worked with a fully written script, Cassavetes allowed them an exceptional degree of autonomy in their interpretation of his lines, sometimes revising dialogue to fit a role more closely to the actor’s sense of it. The effect is almost as free and spontaneous as with the improvisations of _Shadows_, and the director’s subsequent have been made in the same way.

Shooting again in 16mm (Later blown up to 35mm), Cassavetes spent eight months filming _Faces_ and something like two years on the editing. It was shown in 1968 at film festivals in New York, San Francisco, and Venice, where it received five awards.

Released in the United States later the same year, it earned two million dollars within a few months and was expected eventually to gross about seven million. Diane Jacobs wrote that “the extravagant physical gestures and child play which appeared first in _Shadows_ are redoubled in _Faces_. Maria masks her confusion with a high-pitched laugh. Jeannie communicates with Dick in nursery rhymes. . . . Cassavetes intensifies the isolation of each character by cutting from one to the other, rarely portraying both husband and wife in the same frame. As they laugh at ostensibly shared jokes, the camera jolts uneasily.” Alex Ross called _Faces_ “the longest, most ambitious, most brilliant home movie ever made. . . . Somehow Cassavetes has captured the texture of actual life on film.”

_Husbands_, which followed in 1970, is the only one of Cassavetes films in which he has given himself a major role. He appears with Peter Falk and Ben Gazzara as one of a trio of affluent Long Island suburbanites—middle-aged adolescents who mourn the death of an old friend with a three-day private wake that takes in an impulsive visit to London for gambling and sex. By turns ribald, witty, cruel, and moving, _Husbands_ leaves the audience to find answers to the questions it raises about responsibility, marriage and mortality. . . . Cassavetes himself said that “_Husbands_ is about feelings and sentiment, and sentiment is selfish. We try to prove that selfishness is important, a way to stay sensitive.”

His aims were more modest in _Minnie and Moskowitz_ (Universal, 1971). The history of an improbable love-match between a Wasp sophisticate (Gena Rowlands) and a raffish Jewish car parker (Seymour Cassel), it is an affectionate tribute to the sentimental idealism of the Frank Capra comedies and (for most of its length) a holiday from the home-truths of most of Cassavetes’ other work. Indeed, the picture has something of the spirit of a family outing, with Cassavetes appearing as the heroine’s married lover, his mother as Moscovitz’s strident Mama, and various other relatives of the two stars as minor characters. This unabashed nepotism was repeated in Cassavetes next film, in which he cast not only his wife, mother, and children, but also his in-laws.

_A Woman Under the Influence_ (1974) was written at Gena Rowlands’ request—she had wished to return to the stage and needed a vehicle. As the work developed, however, the central role began to seem too taxing for nightly performances, so Cassavetes rewrote the piece as a film, mortgaging his house and borrowing from his friends to finance it. The story is virtually a case history, and among other things reflects contemporary concerns over the disproportionate number of women committed to mental hospitals. Mabel Longhetti is a loving wife and mother who knows but cannot explain that something in her remains unfulfilled. She becomes “different”—unable to sustain her role as a model housewife—and begins to express physically the frustration she cannot articulate. Her bewildered husband tries but fails to understand her and, giving way to his mother’s bullying, commits Mabel to an institution. She is released months later, shaky but touchingly determined to “succeed,” though it is painfully clear that she is returning to a situation that is just as uncomprehending as it was when she left. But perhaps her case is not entirely hopeless, since (unlike the couple in _Faces_) she and her husband love each other: Cassavetes said, “I really think _A Woman Under the Influence_ is a new film. . . . a film that says we’re not so evil as we are caring.”

Most of Cassavetes’ films focus down on the objects of their scrutiny to the virtual exclusion of all else, but here we are given a fuller impression of a world outside (if only to emphasize the claustrophobic narrowness of Mabel’s life). Some critics greeted the picture as a feminist tract, but Diane Jacobs thought it rather an investigation of “the extent to which love mas responsibility, and an exploration of the capacities of both men and women for self-abnegation.” Paul Zimmerman described the picture as “flailing
away at us with its heavy-breathing hysteria, boring us with its repetitiousness, wounding us to the heart with the tender combat of its loving, hating characters, making us confront our deepest feelings even as we cry, “Stop, enough!” Zimmerman concluded that “Cassavetes is the biggest gambler around, betting that he can make magic out of inspiration and improvisation to keep his characters from boring us to death. For two and a half hours, he wins and loses from scene to scene until, battered, exasperated but close to tears, we surrender.” There was universal praise for Gena Rowlands’ performance as Mabel and Peter Falk’s her husband....

Diane Jacobs has described Cassavetes as “the father of the new Hollywood,” saying that his “fascination with realism and the actor-based narrative set the stage for the ‘personal’ styles of the school of directors that invaded Hollywood over a decade later.” Many of the young directors have acknowledged this influence.

For Jacobs, “it is in the shady area between life and fiction that Cassavetes’ films are both most effective and most disquieting—less than myth and more than fact. . . . Eschewing metaphor on the one hand and the painterly image . . . on the other, Cassavetes’ myopic lens denies man the option of either escape or of metaphysical redemption. . . . It is Cassavetes’ belief in the spontaneity of emotions and his unswerving integrity in evoking them that elevate his films beyond moments of improvisation.” The director himself says: “I am more interested in the people who work with me than in the film itself or in cinema.”


Cassavetes’ style centers around a freedom afforded his actors to share in the creative process. Cassavetes’ scripts serve as sketchy blueprints for the performers’ introspective explorations and emotional embellishments. Consequently, camera movements, at the command of the actors’ intuitive behavior, are of necessity spontaneous.

The amalgam of improvisational acting, hand-held camera work, grainy stock, loose editing, and threadbare plot give his films a texture of recreated rather than heightened reality, often imbuing them with a feeling of astonishing psychodramatic intensity as characters confront each other and lay bare their souls. Detractors, however, see Cassavetes as too dedicated to the performers’ art and too trusting of the actor’s self-discipline. They charge that the result is too often a mild form of aesthetic anarchy....

As his career progressed, Cassavetes changed his thematic concerns, upgraded his technical production values, and, not surprisingly, attracted a wider audience—but without overhauling his actor-as-auteur approach.

Faces represented Cassavetes’ return to his favored semi-documentary style, complete with the seemingly obligatory excesses and gaffes. But the film also contained moments of truth and exemplary acting. Not only did this highly charged drama about the disintegration of middle-class marriage in affluent Southern California find favor with the critical and filmmaking communities, it broke through as one of the first independent films to find a sizable audience among the general moviegoing public....

A Woman Under the Influence was by far Cassavetes’ most polished, accessible, gripping, and technically proficient film. For this effort, Cassavetes departed from his accustomed style of working by writing a fully detailed script during pre-production. Starring Gena Rowlands in a magnificent performance as a lower-middle class housewife coming apart at the seams, and the reliable Peter Falk as the hardhat husband who is ill-equipped to deal with his wife’s mental breakdown. Woman offered a more palatable balance of Cassavetes strengths and weaknesses. The over-long scenes and overindulgent acting jags are there, but in lesser doses, while the privileged moments and bursts of virtuoso screen acting seem more abundant than usual.

Financed by Falk and Cassavetes, the film’s crew and cast (including many family members) worked on deferred salaries. Promoted via a tour undertaken by the nucleus of his virtual company (Cassavetes, Rowlands, Falk) and booked without a major distributor, Woman collected generally ecstatic reviews, Academy Award nominations for Cassavetes and Rowlands, and impressive box office returns. ...

“People who are making films today are too concerned with mechanics—technical things instead of feeling,” Cassavetes told an interviewer in 1980. “Execution is about eight percent to me. The technical quality of a film doesn’t have much to do with whether it’s a good film.”


Cassavetes certainly was a director like no other, and, contrary to popular conception he also (except for Shadows, which was improvised) wrote all his own scripts. John was our most revolutionary filmmaker, whose restless and uncompromising vision remains vividly contemporary, challenging, provocative, and at its heart, darkly lyrical. If there was ever an American Jean Renoir, Cassavetes was the one.

from John Cassavetes A Woman Under the Influence dvd. “The War at Home” by Kent Jones

If there’s one quality that separates John Cassavetes’ movies from almost everybody else’s, it’s the density of detail in the storytelling. His films need to be read closely, from beginning to end. There are no lulls with Cassavetes, no breaks in rhythm; the films aren’t broken down the way most are. You have to apprehend them from gesture to gesture, breath to breath. Very few filmmakers in the sound era have chosen to work this way, at least in the realm of fiction. Only Carl Theodor Dreyer, of whom Cassavetes was a great admirer, comes to mind. This is not to slight other filmmakers with a different approach to their art, who either break up their scenes in clearly articulated units (Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Bresson), build tableau effects that take the action into an eerie timelessness (Stanley Kubrick), isolate certain visual or behavioral events as the
focal point of a given shot (Jean Renoir), or dig into the marrow of time to make an event out of duration itself (Andy Warhol, Andrei Tarkovsky). Every approach is equally valid, none more elevated than the rest. Die-hard Cassavetes devotees do him no favors when they buy into his own pronouncements and claim that his methods allowed him a greater purchase on the truth (whatever that is) than other filmmakers. “My films are the truth,” he once said during a personal appearance with a filmmaker of my acquaintance; needless to say, my acquaintance was more than a little put off. Yet such pretentiousness is easily forgiven in a man like Cassavetes, just as it is easy to make allowances for the pomposity contained within Bresson’s book of maxims. When you consider how far against the grain they both went, it’s understandable that they would accord their own idiosyncratic working methods the status of scientific breakthroughs or archeological finds.

A whole generation of critics misunderstood Cassavetes so spectacularly that the ones who are still around are probably too embarrassed to take a second look. The Gustav Mahler of cinema, Cassavetes was excoriated in his lifetime for formlessness, lack of focus and modulation, et cetera and ad infinitum. And, like Mahler, his work has come back after his death to haunt those who were so quick with their doctrinaire judgments. Actors Studio exercises, formless improvisations, and unmodulated emotionalism are all you are going to see if you look at every movie with the expectation that it will/should be broken up into visually and behaviorally pointed units. Films like A Woman Under the Influence defy a century’s worth of film theory, screenwriting tips, and film school orthodoxy. when you look at a close-up in a film by almost anyone else, you’re looking at a representation of the idea of an emotion, no matter how detailed the acting. In Cassavetes, every blink, every shrug, every hesitation counts and drives the story forward.

What is A Woman Under the Influence? If you look at it from one end of the telescope, it’s a hyperrealistic portrait of a woman going mad, a bravura performance in vaguely working-class setting, a sort of déclassé Americanization of Ingmar Bergman’s Face to Face (1976), without Bergman. From the other end, it’s a richly detailed experience, alternately soaring and gut-wrenching, composed in two long, mighty, almost but not quite unwieldy movements. And it’s about...what? Men and women? Family life? The difficulty of distinguishing between your real and ideal selves? Male embarrassment? All of the above, none of the above. Tagging a movie like Woman with something as neat as a “subject” is a fairly useless activity. “John had antennae like Proust,” Peter Falk once wrote. A Woman Under the Influence and Faces, probably his two greatest films, are both ultimately as impossible to pin down as In Search of Lost Time. Like Proust before him, Cassavetes rode the whims, upsets, vagaries, and mysterious impulses of humanity like a champion surfer.

The first movement of A Woman Under the Influence takes us up through Mabel’s commitment, and the second movement is devoted to her disastrous homecoming six months later. Within these movements, different forces come into play. First and foremost, of course, there is Mabel herself (Gena Rowlands). She is the magnet, the center, of whom everyone is demanding what seems like the simplest thing in the world, but which is, finally, impossible: “Just be yourself.” There’s Nick (Peter Falk), who clings for dear life to his image of happiness. It’s an image based on memories of a carefree past with his wife, probably before the arrival of children, and it blinds him to the difficulty of the present. How many times in the film does Nick violently insist that everyone have a good time, that they get along, that they relax? How many times does he scream at strangers or family outsiders, insisting that they look away from Mabel’s madness, for him only a temporary aberration? Is this a portrait of a blue-collared type “resorting” to violence? For Cassavetes, that seems wholly unimportant. Nick is a man who believes so passionately in his idea of perfect happiness, no matter how wrongheaded, that he’d rather destroy everyone around him than see it compromised. “I’ll kill ya,” he warns Mabel, once again on the brink of madness, “and I’ll kill these sons-o’-bitchin’ kids.” A terrifying moment and a liberating one as well, because it gives voice to frustrations that most people bottle up when they’re about to reach the surface. It’s one of the film’s five or six key moments, when an emotional tidal wave swells and breaks.

Nick’s mother is another force, and she’s played, forcefully, by Cassavetes’ own mother, Katherine. You might call her the meddler, or the passionately interested outsider observing the maelstrom within, picking and choosing the moments when she must intervene. One of the side benefits of Cassavetes’ cinema is his wonderful ear for the music of American speech, the voices of intelligent yet relatively inarticulate, second-generation, working-class Americans. And it reaches a peak in the voice of this wonderful woman, with her beautifully nasal delivery and stubbornly insistent pronouncements. “This woman is cra-z-y! she screams in fierce authoritative defense of her son and grandchildren, putting many of us in mind of our aunts or family friends from childhood.

There are the children, passive and loving in the first half of the film, just the way people always want children to be, and unconditionally loved in return; we can infer from that the inconveniences and awesome, life-changing responsibility of children has been furiously denied (by Mabel) and batted aside (by Nick). In the second half, the kids are recalcitrant, fiercely protective of their mother, and stubbornly unwilling to stay put.

There are the outsiders, sometimes silently judgmental, sometimes vocally so—Nick’s fellow workers, who look the other way, or tentatively reach out, or deride Nick when he reuses to admit that there’s a problem with Mabel; and the in-laws, including Mabel’s father (Fred Draper from Faces), who doesn’t understand what Mabel means when she asks him to “stand up” for her.

And finally there’s the house itself, also a force: the foyer with the bench, the ground-floor bedroom with the sliding doors opening onto the living room, the dining room with the long table. the backyard, and, most dramatically of all, the staircase (like many great directors before him, Cassavetes understood that the staircase
was a necessary focal point of domestic drama—as it is in this film, or in the devastating final shot of *Faces*). With its geography of open and closed spaces, places from which to observe and places in which you’re left exposed, places to congregate and places to be alone, the house becomes a theater of battle, as houses often do—even the ones with loving families inside.

People often speak of Cassavetes’ films as prime examples of “actors’ cinema.” In other words, he’s one of those poor schmucks who turned the keys of the asylum over to the inmates out of misplaced respect. It’s astonishing that anyone still believes this hogwash, but it keeps coming up again and again. His mother, Katherine, is 100 percent electrifying presence in *A Woman Under the Influence*, striking the action like a lightning bolt. “Doctor, aren’t ya gonna give ’er a shot?” A hair-raising moment: she’s standing with her arms crossed on the stairs, craning to observe the goings-on between her son and her daughter-in-law, her face breaking into a sneer. Is it great acting? On one level, of course, it is. But inasmuch as we think of a performance as a unified creation, it seems to me we’re witnessing something else here. Every gesture, every look, every movement, every hesitation has become the exclusive property of the director. Human activity is to Cassavetes what color is to Vincent Minnelli and space is to Hitchcock. It’s at once his aesthetic and moral center of gravity, his canvas, and his most reliable tool. In the final analysis, he’s far closer to a Hitchcock or a Bresson than many people realize.

As she did in three of her husband’s major films, Rowlands portrays a woman on the edge of madness in *A Woman Under the Influence*. Which means that the level of calculation and imagination in her acting is necessarily higher than it is for her fellow actors. Rowland’s Mabel, with her abstracted turns of the head and hands, her overemphatic emotional responses, her violent attempts to eradicate potentially threatening impulses, is certainly an imaginative feat. Falk is out on an emotional limb here. Cassavetes made the most of what he perceived as Falk’s sense of embarrassment as a human being, and the moment where Nick screams at his mother to send away the sixty well-wishers crowded into the house, because he cannot bear to do it himself, should give many men a shock of recognition. Yet Rowland’s Mabel, with her bizarre emotional responses, her violent attempts to eradicate potentially threatening impulses, is certainly an imaginative feat. Falk is out on an emotional limb here. Cassavetes made the most of what he perceived as Falk’s sense of embarrassment as a human being, and the moment where Nick screams at his mother to send away the sixty well-wishers crowded into the house, because he cannot bear to do it himself, should give many men a shock of recognition.

Along with *Raging Bull* (1980), made by Cassavetes’ old friend Martin Scorsese, *A Woman Under the Influence* is the toughest of all great American films. It takes conflicts and dynamics that we all know—all of us—and writes them uncomfortably large. Like the Scorsese film, it doesn’t reach expressive peaks—both films begin at peak expressive levels and stay there—as much as it hits emotional pressure points. “Die for Mr. Jensen, kids,” says Mabel, unforgettably, as the crying boxing trainer in *Raging Bull*.) “I have five points, Nick,” utters Mabel just before she’s carted away—her hand is outstretched, and she’s trying to figure out how the odds are stacking up against her. The music of the moment is fearful as Mabel lowers her voice for perhaps the first time in the film and slips down another notch into a dangerously private, dissociated reality. Cassavetes takes us from level to level of Mabel’s withdrawal from reality, and the two passages of her madness are among the most harrowing in movies.

To say that *A Woman Under the Influence* is a singular achievement is to put it mildly. And yet it does bear a more than passing resemblance to another film, which is Dreyer’s *Ordet* (1955). Both are “household” movies, and in both so much is dependent on the woman at the holding center. In both films, the layout of the house itself seems to contain the entire universe, and the tone of both is pitched between the earthy and the ethereal. And just like *Ordet, Woman* ends with a resurrection: Mabel’s sudden snap back into clarity after Nick smacks her down, as if she’s awoken from a trance. Two miracles, ultimately inexplicable, that violently wrench their respective films away from despair and toward some kind of affirmation. Yet unlike *Ordet, A Woman Under the Influence* is a war movie. In the end, Mabel and Nick have dueling conceptions of reality, each as valid as the other. And that’s how wars get started.


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Judith McNally: How did you get involved in doing the screenplay for *A Woman Under the Influence*? Is it something you had wanted to do for a long time?

JC: I think we’re just reporters, all of us basically. And 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. And in telling a story, I think the most important thing is to make it correspond to the emotions of the audience you’re addressing. I have a total awareness that a film can be successful only because an audience is interested in a particular subject. The quality of the film itself doesn’t affect an audience as much as the subject you choose.

JM: Did you have a particular audience in mind?

JC: Yes—people. Women and men, to be specific. Actually, *A Woman Under the Influence* was first a trilogy of three-act plays, which I converted to one screenplay. It was hard to cut down, and the finished film is long. As I get older, I guess I have a tendency to
make longer pictures. But the subjects are also more difficult. I don’t think audiences are satisfied any longer with just touching the surfaces of people’s lives; I think they really want to get into a subject.

JM: I certainly didn’t find the length excessive, but two and a half hours is long for a feature. Do you anticipate any trouble from theater owners?

JC: I haven’t had any; no one has brought it up. This film deals with the serious problems of a man and a woman who are alienated from each other by their backgrounds, ignorant of their own problems, yet totally in love. If we rushed the story just to get to the dramatic areas, it would no longer be a valid picture. So I can’t take into consideration what some theater owner or distributor might think—I couldn’t care less.

JM: How tightly was the film scripted?

JC: I think it’s in the modern screenplay tradition—if there is such a thing. The old screenplays, as you know, detailed every shot, every angle, every location. Today we just don’t do that; pictures are much more loosely made. This script was really for the actors. So we did have all the dialogue scripted.

JM: One of the hallmarks of your films is the consistently brilliant performances you get from your actors. Do you do a lot of rehearsing?

JC: Not that much. I just use very good actors—that helps! 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.

If an actor wants to do something in a certain way, I don’t want to tell him that wouldn’t be right—that would be crazy. I’m never aware of anyone being bad; I don’t have that type of criticism in me. I believe everything until the actor stops and questions. 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 try this,” and then tries to do it, he’s putting untold pressure on himself.

JM: Can you explain why you often work with both amateurs and professionals in the same picture?

JC: I find it very easy because they help each other. The amateur has no preconceived notions of how it should be done. The professional has: he’s gone to school, learned techniques, knows what will work—his choices, his selections, are usually better. The amateur has no selection; it’s a very pure thing. So the professional gets a little jealous while the amateur begins to pick up a few things. Somewhere in the course of the film they come together and aid each other: the professional takes purity from the amateur, and the amateur takes on a certain amount of professionalism.

JM: Do you consciously direct this, or does it sort of happen by osmosis?

JC: I think it’s all in the atmosphere. It’s very hard to let the technical process of film take over and then expect the actors to reveal themselves. I mean, you can’t take a shower at a dinner party. If I have any special way of working, it’s just to set up an atmosphere where what the actors are doing is really important, fun, and nothing takes precedence over it.

For that reason, the choice of the crew becomes extremely important. They have to understand that what they are doing—no matter how hard they are working—is only to help what is going on in front of the camera. Audiences are not watching the technical processes as hard as they’re watching the actors. If the actors are good, the picture looks good—I mean, the actual photography looks better when the actors are better.

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 institution. But 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 onstage. We all work quietly, and hopefully efficiently, and get it done.

JM: In this film, the performance of the three small children is critically important at times. Did you find any special problem in working with such young children?

JC: It is different. You’re always stooping to the children, always aware they are children. You don’t know quite how much they 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.

I found the best approach was to be kind of cold to the children, always aware they are children. You can’t take them up the stairs, Pete,” and then eliminated that from the soundtrack.

JM: One striking thing about your films is your use of the camera to select, probe, and reveal. How closely do you work with the cinematographer in planning camera moves and angles?
JC: Obviously, you have to begin by putting the camera somewhere. But I feel that there is no such thing as setting up a shot that is “right” for the scene. So I’m just shooting the action, and the selections are those of the operator. If the operator is free to think in those terms, he can simply photograph what’s happening without constricting the actors.

Usually the actors don’t know what’s being shot. Even though we sometimes shoot very tight, they never know when the camera’s going to swing onto them, so everyone has to play every moment. If you set up a formalized shot, the tendency is for the actors to let down when they’re not on-screen. So the fluidity of the camera really keeps it alive and allows the operator to make his selections emotionally.

JM: In that long sequence when Mabel is committed, it was fascinating the way people kept going in and out of focus, and it very much matched the emotional dynamics of the scene. Was that carefully preplanned?

JC: We just set it up on such an extremely large 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 can 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.

JM: And it was all shot in one take?

JC: Oh, yes. I shoot almost everything in ten-minute takes—unless, of course, it’s a very short scene. I’m not bright enough (and I don’t think anyone is, really) to get everything all at once. If there are emotions and revelations taking place a mile a minute, how can we separate all these things with our camera and then go into an editing room and try to make selections? It would really be impossible.

I have to get a take that plays. If we don’t see Peter for a moment, or if we don’t see Gena for a moment, it’s not that important. The important thing is to play 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.

JM: Did you do a lot of handheld shooting in this film?

JC: Twenty-five or thirty percent of the film was handheld. And I do all the handheld shooting myself. I like to use it where it wouldn’t ordinarily be used—for example, in an acting scene rather than an action sequence—for fluidity, for intensity.

Besides, once there’s a handheld camera up there, the actors go much faster. 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.

JM: And how many takes do you usually do per scene?

JC: It depended on the difficulty of the writing. If the writing was excellent, the scenes went easily. If the writing wasn’t too good and there were loose or open ends, then we did several takes, sometimes up to twelve or fourteen.

I shoot a lot of film because I shoot ten-minute takes. I can’t stand to have an actor go through a whole scene in master and then, simply because he has nothing to do, shift him into one little thing: “Now look here...Look there...Fine. Cut. Print.” I’d rather spend a little bit more time and money and give the actor an opportunity to play the scene with other actors who are also playing the same scene. So out ratio goes up. We had a thirteen-week shooting schedule and must have shot 600,000 or 700,000 feet of film. The finished film is about 13,000 or 14,000 feet.

JM: Did you do much multiple-camera work here?

JC: Not too much. We were shooting in regular 35mm with a Mitchell BNC. We used an Arri for a second camera—for the handheld work and for exteriors. Mainly we used long lenses and wide-angles. We tried to match their look by setting the optics so we’d always be shooting from underneath, which gives the wide-angle the same appearance as the long lens.

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 mean 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.

The location could have been a serious problem. At first everyone said, “How can you do a picture where 80 percent 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. So most of it 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.

JM: Was it hard to find a house like that, with that extremely big, open entrance hall?

JC: 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 had an incredibly talented art director, Phedon Papamichael, who has worked with us before. Not only was he the art director, he was the whole fun of production. His desire to keep that house neat and clean (and it was an important part of Mabel’s character that she was a good housekeeper) was fanatic; he had his cleaning fluid out all the time. He’d say, “I don’t want anyone walking in the set”—and this with thirty or forty people around! Or, “If anyone smokes, I kill them! I throw them down on the ground and kill them!” He really kept everything quite alive.

JC: What was the budget?

JM: Faces International Films, the production company, is your company, isn’t it?

JC: Yes. Peter Falk and I did the financing. We went into this together, and he deferred his salary. He loved the picture; he’s a great actor and very artistically oriented. He is also about the best friend I have in the world.

JM: What directors do you feel have influenced your work?

JC: Well, I’d like to feel that people have influenced me, but when you get on the floor, you realize you’re really alone and no one can influence your work. They can just open you up and give you confidence that the aim for quality is really the greatest power a director can have—if you’re in a quest for power. In a way, you must be out for power. We wouldn’t make films if we didn’t think that, in some way, we could speak for everyone.

When I was a kid, Frank Capra was certainly America to me. In terms of today’s directors, I think Marty Scorsese is phenomenal and singular. I very much like Don Siegel for what he does, and also Peter Bogdanovich, Melvin Van Peebles, Shirley Clarke, Michelangelo Antonioni, Sidney Lumet, and certainly Elaine May. In a way, I admire them all: each picture is different, every person has a different strength. when it comes right down to it, I admire anyone who can make a film.

JM: Sooner or later, the question comes up whether film is an art or a craft.

JC: I think film is magic. With the tools we have at hand, we really try to convert people’s lives.

Directors are alone because their work is so disproportionate to daily life. When you become a director, you take on the responsibility not just of making a picture and putting yourself on the line as a person, but you’re also saying: “Today I am going to make a great movie. I am also going to be successful. I am going to reach an audience so I can make my next film.” I hate the present system of directing because there’s too much pressure to be good. There’s no relaxation at all. You’re constantly aware of the financial responsibility, the fact that your life without directing is very empty and that you have to make a successful movie. So your instincts and what you know sometimes give way to what you have to do. You must please distributors and your audience.

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?”

I think the greatest thing a director can do is keep himself straight, realize that he or she doesn’t have to know all the answers, and be content with enjoying oneself without thinking about what’s going to happen afterwards. That’s very hard to do. You have to be somewhat innocent.

JM: You’ve always stayed well away from the usual Hollywood system. Do you think it’s possible to maintain that kind of innocence in it?

JC: 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. I would want to have more ease and relaxation; I would want to have some endorsements of my talent and the film I’m making.

This way, it’s too difficult. You say to yourself, “Well, what is it? It’s a film. All right, it affects people’s lives. Maybe I’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.

At the end of every film, you have to say good-bye to everybody. Here are people who worked night and day and killed themselves, and at the end you shake hands and go away, and now all of a sudden all the credit belongs to me! And to the actors who put in their thirteen weeks—while other people put two years into it. At the end, I feel this bitterness and hostility because I’ve got to walk away and do another film that may not have anything to do with them. It seems like a double cross.

If a major distributor comes in, the people who made the film possible are not acknowledged—they’re not even given a ticket to see the movie! That’s a big reason against major distributors.
We’re distributing *A Woman Under the Influence* ourselves because the studios have had no interest in it. 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. Sure, being a distributor is a craft in its own right, and if they had done a better job we’d all be in better condition. They’ve lost millions and millions of dollars because of their petty egos. Most of them don’t have any real interest in films. How could they? They hate artists anyway.

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 25 percent overhead so they can put more money in their coffers, and not to make destructive pictures they don’t 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.

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.

**COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:**

Apr 6  Wolfgang Petersen, *Das Boot* 1981  
Apr 13  Federico Fellini, *Ginger & Fred*, 1985  
Apr 20  Michael Mann, *Collateral* 2004

**BFS XXI, FALL 2010 PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE:**

August 31  Buster Keaton *Our Hospitality* 1923  
September 7  Jean Renoir *Boudu Saved from Drowning* 1932  
September 14  Orson Welles *The Magnificent Ambersons* 1942  
September 21  John Huston *The African Queen* 1951  
September 28  Kent Mackenzie *The Exiles* 1961  
October 5  Martin Ritt *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* 1965  
October 12  Mike Nichols *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966  
October 19  Eric Rohmer *Claire’s Knee* 1971  
October 26  Hal Ashby *The Last Detail* 1973  
November 2  John Mackenzie *The Long Good Friday* 1980  
November 9  Wim Wenders *Wings of Desire* 1987  
November 16  Charles Crichton *A Fish Called Wanda* 1988  
November 23  Wong Kar Wei *Chunking Express* 1994  
November 30  Chan-wook Park *Oldboy* 2003  
December 7  Deepa Mehta *Water* 2005

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