

# John Cassavetes: Four Star Reviews

by David Macdonald  
STAFF WRITER

In 1959, an actor named John Cassavetes changed movie making forever, when he decided to become a director. Instead of going the way of Hollywood, however, he made his first film with his own money, and with the help of friends. As well, the film was completely improvised. That film was called *Shadows* (A-), and the result is a film which, while far from perfect, is a breakthrough, and part of a body of work which elevated Cassevates to the position of the father of independent film.

The story is messy and filled with intensity and nervousness. It is also strangely compelling. It involves a group of siblings, three brothers and a sister. This family would be considered black, although at least one is light-skinned enough to pass for white. It is the sister who has the light skin, and this creates the major problem in this film, as she becomes involved with a white man. Eventually, however the brothers find out, and one day kick the white man out of the house. This creates a lot of tension, especially from the point of view of the sister.

I, for one, was rather shocked at her passivity to the overpowering nature of the brothers. They clearly do not give her a choice, and she

does not fight back. Yet later on in the film, she is about to go on a date with a local black man. Her actions during these se-



quences seem to tell me that this is her way of fighting back against the unspoken racial codes which are obviously embedded in the mentality of the male characters.

Two other story threads appear in this film. Two of the brothers have a career in music, one is the



singer and the other is his manager. The singer is bitter over some of the venues he has to play, the sort where the customers would rather see dancing girls than listen to an ac-

complished jazz singer, but the manager always tries to put a positive spin on everything.

Another thread involves the third brother, who unlike the others is truly aimless. His time is spent with his friends, hanging out, and getting into trouble. These friends seem to feel jealous of those who have done something with their lives. The friends cover up their feelings of inadequacy by dismissing those successful people. This is revealed in a scene where the friends go to a museum and essentially insult every piece of art in the place, and one of the friends says that these were made by a bunch of professors who've failed in life.

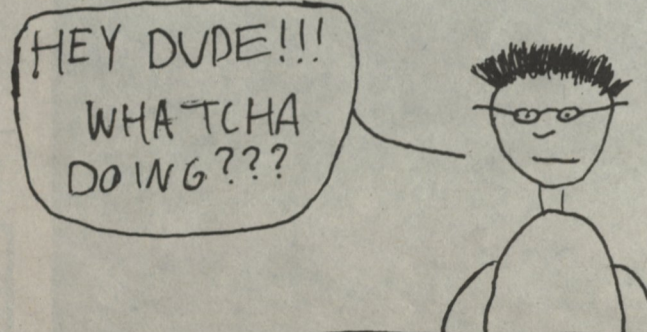
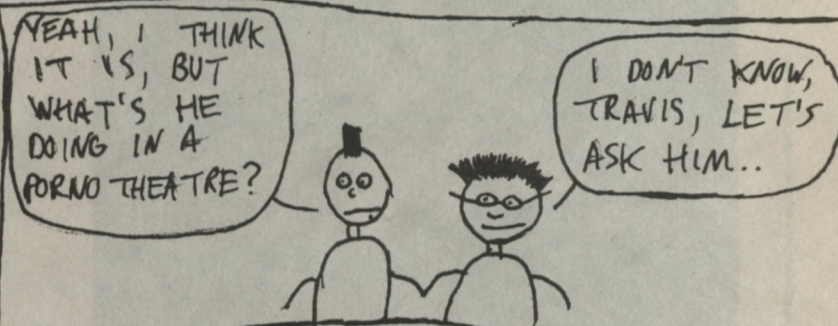
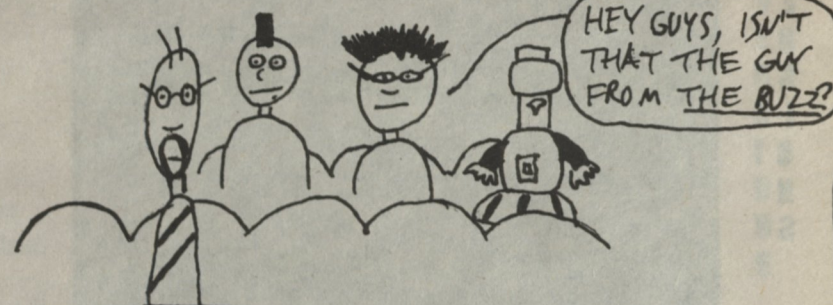
The improvisation makes for a realistic film. Some of the actors tend to stumble occasionally, and the emotions go wildly back and forth, but you get the sense that it would be no different in real life. The film does not feel like a poor experiment, but a lively slice-of-life, always exciting to watch.

As I said, the story is somewhat messy, but it always feels real. Cassevates had an interesting career. The impact of this film was such that Paramount signed him for a long-term contract (which was

**Cassavetes**

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