



## DISCOMFORT MOVIES

# A Woman under the Influence

### A Woman under the Influence

Directed by: John Cassavetes  
©: Faces International Films, Inc.

Produced by: Sam Shaw

In Charge of Post-production: Robert Heffernan

Production Secretary: Carole Smith

1st Assistant Director: Jack Corrick

2nd Assistant Director: Roger Slager

Script Continuity: Elaine Goren

Screenplay: John Cassavetes

In Charge of Lighting: Mitchell Breit

Additional Photography: Caleb Deschanel

Lighting Crew: Chris Taylor, Bo Taylor, Merv Dayan

Camera Operators: Mike Ferris, David Nowell

Additional Camera: Gary Graver

Camera Assistants: Tony Palmieri, Fred Elmes,

Leslie Otis, Larry Silver

Key Grip: Cliff Carnell

Gaffer: David Lester

Graphics: Steve Hitter

Supervising Editor: Tom Cornwell

Editors: David Armstrong, Sheila Viseltear,

Beth Bergeron

Art Director: Phedon Papamichael

Props: Kevin Joyce

Wardrobe: Carole Smith

Colour by: MGM Labs

Music: Bo Harwood

Sound: Bo Harwood

Boom: Nick Spalding

[Sound] Mix: Henry Michael Denecke

Cast:

Peter Falk (*Nick Longhetti*)

Gena Rowlands (*Mabel Longhetti*)

Fred Draper (*George Mortensen*)

Lady Rowlands (*Martha Mortensen*)

Katherine Cassavetes (*Mama Longhetti*)

Matthew Laborteaux (*Angelo Longhetti*)

Matthew Cassel (*Tony Longhetti*)

Cristina Grisanti (*Maria Longhetti*)

O.G. Dunn (*Garson Cross*)

Mario Gallo (*Harold Jensen*)

Eddie Shaw (*Dr Zepp*)

Angelo Grisanti (*Vito Grimaldi*)

Charles Horvath (*Eddie the Indian*)

James Joyce (*Bowman*)

John Finnegan (*Clancy*)

Vince Barbi (*Gino*)

Cliff Carnell (*Aldo*)

Frank Richards (*Adolph*)

Hugh Hurd (*Willie Johnson*)

Leon Wagner (*Billy Tidrow*)

Dominique Davalos (*Dominique Jensen*)

Xan Cassavetes (*Adrienne Jensen*)

Pancho Meisenheimer (*John Jensen*)

Sonny Aprile (*Aldo*)

Ellen Davalos (*Nancy*)

Joanne Moore Jordan (*Muriel*)

John Hawker (*Joseph Morton*)

Sil Words (*James Turner*)

Elizabeth Deering (*Angela*)

Jackie Peters (*Tina*)

Elsie Ames (*principal*)

N.J. Cassavetes (*Adolph*)

USA 1974©

155 mins

35mm

John Cassavetes had complete disdain for the idea of cinema as escapism. He didn't believe in making films that went down easily, or that reassured with their familiar tropes and happy endings. Scenes went on for durations that could test an audience's patience. His movies did not have plots in a conventional sense, instead letting their characters – who were prickly and complicated and sometimes hard to like – drive the action. As he said to Ray Carney in *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*: 'There's nothing I despise more than being entertained.'

All too aware that the way he saw the world and the function of cinema was diametrically opposed to the vision of mainstream Hollywood ('I like films as an art, and they like films as a profit'), Cassavetes spent his career fiercely trying to build and maintain his independence. Though he worked for big studios throughout his whole professional life, mainly as an actor but also as a director on *Too Late Blues* (1961), *A Child Is Waiting* (1963), *Gloria* (1980) and *Big Trouble* (1986), Cassavetes remains best known for the films he produced under his own steam. He worked for studios to earn the money he needed to make movies his way.

*A Woman under the Influence* (1974) was the most famous of these. It stars Gena Rowlands (Cassavetes' real-life wife) as Mabel Longhetti – a mother of three young kids and wife to Nick (Peter Falk), a construction foreman. The film follows her over a period of mental disintegration, tracking her changing relationship with her family along the way.

The first crisis occurs right away, when Nick is unexpectedly told that he and his team have to work through the night. Nick had planned a date night with Mabel, the kids had been shipped to her mother's, and we can tell from his evident anxiousness that she won't take this news well. She doesn't, and disaster ensues – as it will many times before the movie is over.

The next day, Nick arrives back home with his entire crew in tow, unannounced, expecting Mabel to make dinner for them. She does – with some help from the crew – and then we sit at the long table for the next 17 minutes, stuck in nervous anticipation at what she's going to do next.

The discomfort at the heart of *A Woman under the Influence* lies as much in Mabel's mental precarity as it does in the fear of how those in her orbit will react to her outbursts – more often than not it is Nick, the one who should be the most used to them, who reacts with the least sensitivity. The large crew of burly men are, on the whole, surprisingly sympathetic to Mabel. After a fraught build up, Nick is the one who ends up combusting, embarrassed by his wife, despite her trying so hard to appear 'normal'. Throughout the film, his treatment of Mabel is hard to watch; though he loves her, or at least sincerely believes that he does, his inability to reconcile her condition with his idea of a perfect wife results in mental anguish for both of them.

Cassavetes liked to work with the same actors as much as possible: Rowlands was his most frequent collaborator, Falk, Ben Gazzara, and Seymour Cassel all starred in multiple projects, and even Cassavetes and Rowland's mothers, Katherine and Lady, had prominent parts in several of their children's productions. This innate cosiness between Cassavetes and his collaborators

## DISCOMFORT MOVIES

### Eraserhead

Mon 1 Jul 20:40 (+ extended intro to the season by curator Kimberley Sheehan); Sun 14 Jul 17:50; Sat 27 Jul 20:50

### The Lost Weekend

Sat 6 Jul 15:10; Sun 21 Jul 17:45; Mon 29 Jul 20:40

### Requiem for a Dream

Sat 6 Jul 20:45; Fri 19 Jul 18:20

### A Woman under the Influence

Sun 7 Jul 19:30; Sun 28 Jul 17:20

### Bug

Mon 8 Jul 18:15; Thu 25 Jul 20:50

### They Shoot Horses, Don't They?

Tue 9 Jul 18:10; Mon 22 Jul 20:35

### Threads

Thu 11 Jul 18:15; Sun 21 Jul 15:15

### Possession

Mon 15 Jul 18:00

### Funny Games

Mon 15 Jul 20:45; Sat 27 Jul 14:15

### Climax + Strasbourg 1518

Tue 16 Jul 18:10; Sun 28 Jul 20:20

### Crash + Titane

Sat 20 Jul 18:15, 18:30

### Audition Ôdishon

Wed 24 Jul 20:45; Wed 31 Jul 18:15

### Skinamarink

Sun 28 Jul 14:20; Wed 31 Jul 20:45

**Relaxed Screening: Eraserhead** + intro and discussion

Mon 29 Jul 18:10

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lent his work a warmth and an intimacy, but it could also ratchet up the intensity.

And in the case of Falk, who was midway through his fourth season as the lovable Lt Columbo when *A Woman under the Influence* was released in 1974, Cassavetes wrought additional tension in casting against type. To watch him treat the fragile Mabel so cruelly is jolting now, and must have been even more so 50 years ago, when he was at the peak of his popularity.

Many of Cassavetes' films were set largely within a single domestic setting – *Faces* (1968) and *Love Streams* (1984) take place in the director's own home. Though this was a decision spurred by budgetary necessity, it also added an extra level of jittery claustrophobia to the movies. When they were at their rawest, we're given the uneasy feeling of seeing behind closed doors, a truth that usually gets its edges sanded off, to make it more palatable to the outside world.

Whereas some directors who specialise in making uncomfortable movies field valid accusations of misanthropy, Cassavetes has a deserved reputation as one of cinema's greatest humanists. Perhaps the most quoted phrase in film criticism is Roger Ebert's eternal idea of movies as 'a machine that generates empathy'. That's profoundly true of Cassavetes' work, but he made the machine difficult to operate. He demanded the viewer to get on the emotional wavelength of complicated, disturbed human beings, to ask why they're doing what they're doing, to try to understand the inexplicable. While as an actor he was best known for playing villainous parts, in his own films he refused to condemn anyone to villainhood. It was too easy, too pat, to write someone off like that; much more rewarding to sit with difficult people and think about why they may be acting that way, use those observations as a cue for self-reflection.

Following two and a half hours of knife-edge tension, *A Woman under the Influence* ends on a note of precarious calm. After months in hospital, Mabel is still desperately struggling with her mental health. Nick still has no idea how to help her. No problems have been solved, no victories won, but, for the time being, the danger has passed. Life will go on for Mabel and Nick after the credits have rolled, as it will for us.

Cassavetes doesn't give us the relief of a catharsis. That would have been as fake as all the escapist movies he so disdained, and he had no such disdain for his viewers. He knew that his films could be hard work, but if the audience trusted him, as he did them, then that work would be worth it. To quote him in *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* again: 'Give the audience the vaguest permission or cause to feel real emotions, and they will take up the challenge.' They did, and they continue to do so today. The rewards are worth the discomfort.

Chloe Walker, [bfi.org.uk](https://bfi.org.uk), 1 July 2024