



## Big Screen Classics

# Opening Night

### Opening Night

Director: John Cassavetes

©/Presented by: Faces Distribution Corporation

Made with the cooperation of:

Pasadena Community Arts Center, Pasadena

Community Services Commission, Inc.,

Cal-Neva Community Action Association

Executive Producer: Sam Shaw

Producer: Al Ruban

Assistant to the Producer: Sharon Van Ivan

Associate Producer: Michael Lally

Accounting: Susan Howell

Production Co-ordinator: Teresa Stokovic

Production Managers: Foster H. Phinney,

Ed Ledding

Location Supervisor: Jack Krupnick

Secretaries: Arlene Harris, Michelle Hart

Production Assistants: Carol Roux,

Robert Bogdanoff, Raymond Vellucci

Post-production [Secretary]: Kathleen Barker

2nd Assistant Director: Lisa Hallas

Script Supervisors: Tom Cornwell,

Joanne T. Harwood

Casting: Prometheus Patient

Writer: John Cassavetes

Director of Photography: Al Ruban

Camera Operators: Frederick Elmes, Michael Ferris

Camera Assistants: Catherine Coulson,

Jed Skillman

Gaffers: Donne Daniels, Joseph L. Rezwin,

Donald Robinson, Richard Ross

Graphics/Still Photographer: Richard Upper

Editor: Tom Cornwell

Assistant Editors: Kent Beyda, Nancy Golden,

Hal Bowers

Art Director: Bryan Ryman

Prop Man: Robert Vehon

Chief Set Construction: Verna Bagby

Assistant Set Construction: Abraham Zwick

Local 33 Stagehands: Pat Don Aroma,

Larry Baughman

Local 33: Larry Dean, Dave Walker,

Emmett O'Connell

Costume Designer: Alexandra Corwin-Hankin

Wardrobe Masters: Miles Ciletti, Charles Akins

Men's Wardrobe by: Gangi of Rome

Colour by: MGM Labs

Composed Music: Bo Harwood

Arranged/Conducted Music: Booker T. Jones

Musical Consultant: Lee Housekeeper

Sound: Bo Harwood

Sound Assistant: Joanne T. Harwood

Boom Operator: Crew Chamberlin

Sound Mixer: Bill Varney

Re-recorded at: Goldwyn Studios

Sound Editor: Joe G. Woo Jr

Teacher/Welfare Worker: Adria Licklider

Location Equipment: Cinemobile

Appreciation to: Playboy Limousine,

Colonel Sanders

Stunt Drivers: Victor Paul, Charles Picerni

Stunt Double: Donna Garrett

Publicists: Esme Chandlee, Eve Siegel

Cast:

Gena Rowlands (*Myrtle Gordon*)

Ben Gazzara (*Manny Victor*)

John Cassavetes (*Maurice Aarons*)

Joan Blondell (*Sarah Goode*)

Paul Stewart (*David Samuels*)

Zohra Lampert (*Dorothy Victor*)

Laura Johnson (*Nancy Stein*)

John Tuell (*Gus Simmons*)

Ray Powers (*Jimmy*)

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

An attempt to grapple with the mystery of John Cassavetes might usefully begin by noting that, at least during the director's lifetime, both his supporters and detractors generally agreed on one thing: that no mystery existed. His best-known films were either admired or despised for their blatant transparency, for their tendency to present unmediated chunks of 'real life' without relying on explicitly cinematic effects.

Seen today, however, the films look far more formally ambitious, to the extent that there now exists an uncertainty as to how they should be approached. Whereas 'realist' works of the 1950s such as Delbert Mann's *Marty* and Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* appeared hopelessly dated after a decade or two, Cassavetes' 1970s masterpieces only fully revealed themselves once their *cinéma vérité* veneer was recognised not as a rejection of stylisation in pursuit of an unvarnished 'truth', but as a deliberate technique by which the filmmaker conveyed his concerns.

For Cassavetes, 'acting' was not just one of the raw materials out of which films are made but rather the embodiment of his obsessions with identity and the ways individuals relate to a wider community. Concepts of identity are presented as virtually indistinguishable from concepts of performance, and conflicts between extroverted improvisers and inert role-players (which appear in every Cassavetes film) signal a wider interest in how the self is revealed or concealed through performative interactions. Yet to achieve fully the ambitions of these opposed character types – either by completely retreating into a one-dimensional role or being totally liberated from the demands of moment-to-moment consistency – is to risk becoming unreal or 'ghostly'. It's a problem that lies at the heart of 1977's *Opening Night*, the last of the five films Cassavetes financed personally, partly by asking his cast and crew to work for deferred salaries.

The film, perhaps conceived in response to Barbra Streisand's expressed interest in having Cassavetes direct a remake of 1954's *A Star Is Born*, features the director's wife Gena Rowlands as Myrtle Gordon, a middle-aged actress starring in a Broadway play entitled *The Second Woman*. Incapable of following the playwright's advice simply to 'say the lines clearly' – incapable, that is, of being merely a role-player – Myrtle decides to set aside the written text and improvise. The approving response of the onscreen spectators ironically resembles that of an audience that applauded an early cut of *Opening Night*. Ironically because, according to Cassavetes scholar Ray Carney, the director subsequently recut the final reels, removing all those moments that had been greeted with approbation. Predictably, the resulting film was a box-office flop.

This (possibly apocryphal) story suggests not a rejection of the traditional ways test screenings are used as a guide to final editing, but rather a parodic recreation of them, reversing the accepted touchstones of success or failure. And in the film itself Cassavetes' usual emphasis on how our everyday 'reality' involves more or less concealed notions of performance is similarly rejected in favour of an investigation into that reality hidden beneath the surface of an actually (rather than metaphorically) theatrical world in which performance is considered the norm. For Myrtle, who complains that she has 'lost the reality of

John Finnegan (*prop man*)  
Louise Fitch (*Kelly*)  
Fred Draper (*Leo*)  
Katherine Cassavetes (*Vivian*)  
Lady Rowlands (*Melva Drake*)  
Carol Warren (*Carla*)  
Briana Carver (*Lena*)  
Angelo Grisanti (*Charlie Spikes*)  
Meade Roberts (*Eddie Stein*)  
Eleanor Zee (*Sylvia Stein*)  
David Rowlands (*doorman*)  
Sharon Van Ivan (*Shirley*)  
Jimmy Christie (*news stand operator*)  
James Karen (*bell boy*)  
Jimmy Joyce (*bartender*)  
Sherry Bain (*bar maid*)  
Sylvia Davis Shaw (*hotel maid*)  
Peter Lampert (*maitre d'*)  
Peter Falk, Peter Bogdanovich, Seymour Cassel,  
Tony Roberts (*opening night congratulators*)  
USA 1977©  
144 mins  
Digital

The screening on Wed 27 May will be introduced by  
Katie McCabe, Reviews Editor at *Sight and Sound*

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the reality', acting is less an abandonment of life than a way of dealing with it at  
one remove: a surface lie concealing a deeper truth.

Complicating all this is the presence of Nancy Stein (Laura Johnson), a young  
admirer of Myrtle's who dies in a car accident and subsequently flits in and out  
of the narrative as a ghost. Whereas the images that directly follow the opening  
credits depict Myrtle as a transparent figure superimposed over a shot of a  
theatre audience, Nancy's apparition is treated as concretely as anything else in  
the film and her overt function as a reminder of Myrtle's youth is less striking  
than the ways her appearances problematise Cassavetes' investigation into the  
connections between identity and performance. In her ghostly form, Nancy  
both embodies the dilemma confronting Myrtle and calls into question the  
cinematic terms in which that dilemma is presented: one striking moment has  
her demonstrate her ability to hear Bo Harwood's background score ('I like the  
music'). This evocation of an unchanging inner being – a 'soul' that can be  
freed from the limitations of the mortal self, which can only be revealed through  
performance – shows Cassavetes beginning to explore the Shakespearian  
themes that would come to the fore in the last film he wrote and directed, *Love  
Streams*, with its dream states, visionary revelations and supernatural  
occurrences.

Brad Stevens, *Sight and Sound*, July 2007

Lines between theatre and reality were blurred in Cassavetes to the point of  
being hopelessly and deliberately intertwined, a phenomenon only amplified by  
the sometime appearance of the two together. But it was Gena Rowlands who  
raged and prowled front and centre as a restless creature who was incapable  
of, unwilling to, resolve the contradictions of life; of the actor's life. Did  
Cassavetes invent her or did he unleash her? This wild animal always battling  
personal demons; her characters challenging norms of behaviour, testing the  
limits of what an audience would accept.

This was particularly true of *Opening Night*, with its Pirandellian shifts and its  
two audiences: one in the theatre at New Haven, Connecticut, where Myrtle's  
new play is in previews, the other where we moviegoers are subjected to her  
wild and unpredictable swings. But in *Opening Night* her discontent turns  
virulent. She dislikes the play, sabotages the production, questions lines,  
invents some. Myrtle scorns the theme of the ageing star – even as she herself  
worries that playing a menopausal woman, especially as she isn't one yet,  
would put an end to her career. (This was something the real-life Rowlands  
needn't have worried about: she was always working, both in film and  
television, and enjoyed one of the longest and richest careers of any  
contemporary actress.)

Finally, in the denouement, she staggers on to the stage late and drunk – and  
gets away with it, as some diabolical new version of reality is enacted between  
Cassavetes and herself. The fourth wall has long ago receded and, as they  
duke it out physically, we catch a sense of their unique and electrically  
pugilistic bond.

Molly Haskell, *Sight and Sound*, October 2024