

# Faces: “jolting & powerful”

## Film review

Dennis Raymond

John Cassavetes' "Faces," currently at the Studio North, is the best American American movie since "Bonnie & Clyde" or "The Graduate." By that I mean that this movie could not have been made outside of the United States and still strike us with all the honesty and impact and pain that it possesses. For the problems that Cassavetes has chosen to explore in "Faces" are, I believe, peculiarly American, deep rooted in our contemporary society: in particular, this country's almost fanatical preoccupation with sex.

The recurring motif in "Faces" is laughter. Everybody laughs. Continuously. Hysterical, inane, stupid, vacuous laughter. Dick (John Marley), an aging upper-middle class businessman, and a pal appear at the apartment of a beautiful prostitute (Gena Rowlands) where all three are swept up in an enthusiastic chorus of hilarity. We soon perceive that the laughter is forced and is either a prelude to getting down to business or an excuse to keep from getting down to business. Probably both, for one of the unique achievements of this film is its palpable illustration of the familiar attraction-repulsion towards sex.

Ultimately, Dick returns home to his lovely wife, Maria. More hilarity over a neighbor's sexual techniques. And then suddenly, unexpectedly, Dick demands a divorce.

None of the characters in "Faces" seems to have a past, and some are even obscure about the present. Whether they're roughhousing, or telling inane limericks, or simply sitting back and licking their lips, it is always clear what is topmost on the minds of Cassavetes' people.

But it is precisely because these characters exist only as libidos that "Faces" exudes a sexual tension that grows to almost unbearable proportions. This tension is further emphasized by the crude camerawork and the people that it has to work with.

As should be clear from the title, Cassavetes' principal tool is the close-up, which he used without flinching, mercilessly exposing every wrinkle, every glance, every teardrop. Soon it begins to seem as if these people have no environment, are afloat in some great sea of sex. Which, of course, is exactly the point, justifying the decision not to reveal much more about the individual characters than their gender.

Cassavetes cuts back and forth, from face to face. And when we occasionally get an "environment"—a night club, for instance—the camera picks up one patron after another as if to imply that if it weren't for these patrons and their ids, the club would simply not exist at all.

But it is in the two dwellings—the prostitute's apartment and Dick's suburban home—that most of "Faces" takes place, where the characters are again and again forced out of their defenses and made to look long and unsparingly at themselves. And as we are committing an invasion of privacy.

For unlike most American movies. "Faces" is bold enough to depict sex as it really is in this country: difficult and mostly unsatisfying work for the middle-aged.

A word, finally, about the magnificent cast. Gena Rowlands, John Marley, Lynn Carlin (as Maria) and Seymour Cassel (as a very wise young man who has a one-night stand with the wife) work as an ensemble, achieving a sensitivity and spontaneity that is unforgettable. They are all superb.

In sum, "Faces" is not a polished work. Almost every scene goes on too long during its 229-minute running time. And yet the total effect is rather like sitting up with a close friend, smoking, drinking, and talking non-stop for a whole night. "Faces is a jolting and powerful experience.

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