

CANNES SPECIAL EDITION

IFQ

Independent Film Quarterly

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LIFE WITH
JOHN CASSAVETES

\$4.95 US • \$5.95 CANADA



ISSUE 11

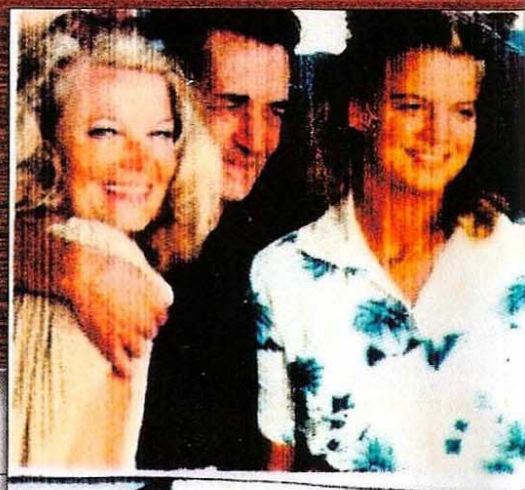
THE 1ST ANNUAL CYPRUS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL



Phedon Papamichael:

MY LIFE WITH JOHN CASSAVETES

By Stuart Alson



Being in the film business, sometimes I am asked to serve on the Jury at film festivals. If my schedule permits, I accept the offer as I hope to find a special gem on the trip.

In March 2006, I flew fifteen hours from Las Vegas to Cyprus for the their first annual film festival, Cyprus International Film Festival [CIFF]. During this business trip I found such a gem. However it was not a film, as I had hoped and expected, but it was a person. Had I not served on the Jury Committee in Cyprus, I would never have met this man.

Phedon Papamichael is eighty-four years old. He had a film career in Los Angeles working on John Cassavetes' films.

IFQ: You worked with John Cassavetes for twenty-five years on his films. What was your job in the film business and how did you get started?

Phedon Papamichael: I started doing art design for theatre in France. When I came back to Greece, I met Jules Dassin. He said forget the theatre; let's make movies. I said that I didn't know what to do, but he said don't worry. I did two movies with him, *Never on Sunday* and *Phaedra*. Then John Cassavetes came to our home to visit. He was my second cousin. He asked me to come to America to make movies together. I did not go right away, but eventually I did go and we lived together for twenty-five years and made movies.

IFQ: What was it like working together?

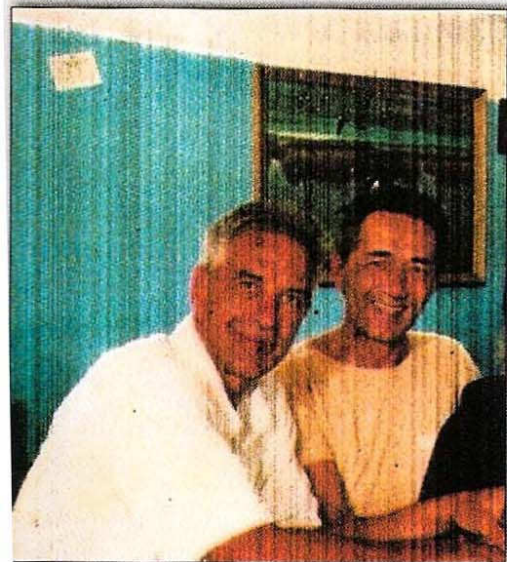
PP: It was wonderful. I was in charge of art design and costumes. However, whatever movies we made—we made together. We shot and edited them together in the house where we lived. We had two moviolas in the garage.

IFQ: How did you distribute the films?

PP: Many times, we had no money. We would go to theatres and ask them to play the films and they could keep all of the money. Then in the middle of the night, we would go around town and hang posters ourselves. It was all about the art and the work. John Cassavetes was the first independent filmmaker. He did not want money from some moneyman or studio because he did not want them telling him what to do. Everything was done on deferments and everyone worked for free or for points.

IFQ: How did you fund the projects?

PP: John and his wife would do acting jobs and put the money they made into the films. Also if things were tight John would turn to the actors, like Peter Faulk and Ben Gazzara, and say, "Hey you stingy Peter Faulk, put 50,000 dollars in to the film so we can finish." And they would. It was all about the film, not the money and everyone wanted to work with John. Steven Spielberg was our production assistant. He would go and get coffee and run errands just to learn from John.



IFQ: What were your favorite movies that you made?

PP: I did not have a favorite movie. It was how we made certain movies that made them my favorite. I remember *A Woman Under the Influence*. We had no money at all. We had no money to feed the crew. We ate at McDonalds. But John said, "I don't care we are going to make this movie." It was that type of adventurous independence that I loved. With *Faces*, it took us four years to finish the film. We would run out of money and John and his wife would take acting jobs and then come back and work on the film some more. *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* was great fun too.

IFQ: What was the worst thing that happened when you worked with John?

PP: The worst thing that happened was one time we got into a fistfight with each other.

IFQ: What happened?

PP: When we had breakfast together that morning, John told me that he wanted something a certain way on the set and I disagreed. When he came to shoot, he saw that I had not done what he wanted. We got into an argument and I said I was leaving. He shouted, "No one walks off my set." Of course, the set was actually in our house. I went to leave and we got into a physical fight. I ran away and he tried to chase me but could not catch me. I called later that night after we cooled off. He said to come home. When we saw each other, we kissed and that was the end of that.

IFQ: What happened after John died?

PP: I tried to find someone else with the same love and independence to work with, but I could never find the same happiness. I tried Peter Bogdanovich and others, but it was never the same. I stayed in Los Angeles and worked on

thing I did was with Charlie Sheen, Brad Pitt, Nicolas Cage and Nick Cassavetes [John's son].

Everyone put in some money and we opened a beautiful production office called Ventura Productions. We planned to make films. We had great offices and receptionists, but everyone just used the place to hang out and party. We did make one film with Gérard Depardieu because he wanted to do a John Cassavetes' script.

But that was it, so I came back to Greece where I started my life. I spend time helping new people, when I can and when they will listen. My son [Phedon Papamichael II] and his success give me happiness. [Phedon Papamichael II is a cinematographer whose credits include: *Walk the Line*, *Sideways*, *Identity*, *America's Sweethearts*, *Patch Adams* and *Poison Ivy*].



more films like the *The Fabulous Baker Boys*. I tried to help new people and give them advice, like Leonardo DiCaprio and others. He had a big party for me last time I went back.

"The worst thing that happened was one time we got into a fistfight with each other."

IFQ: Why did you finally leave Los Angeles and return to Greece?

PP: Well, I just could not find anyone to work with who was like John. The last

IFQ: What advice do you have for new people starting in the film business?

PP: I tell them: If you have talent and you love that talent, then you should go for what you want and do not give up just because things don't go your way sometimes. If you have talent and do not love that talent, then don't worry about it. I know many people who are talented but do not love their talent.

IFQ: What about stress?

PP: Stress is the worst thing for anyone. Stress can kill a person. You must keep your mind clear and deal with what is in front of you.



1st Annual Cyprus International Film Festival

March 24-27, 2006



A host of celluloid creative talent has been found at the "CIFF 2006", Cyprus's first International Film Festival. This four-day cinema competitive event opened on 24 March and was being held in Limassol, Larnaca and Nicosia.

The festival offers the opportunity to the young aspiring directors from anywhere in the world, to have their work shown in front of a stellar VIP Jury Committee. Cyprus started very dynamically presenting more than 130 films from over 40 countries from all corners of the earth!

This year's three main competition film categories are: feature, short and animation. The best feature film, *The German Unveiled* was awarded the 'Golden Aphrodite' award!

The festival program included also out of competition categories such as a selection of films by awarded Cypriot directors, films by Cypriot directors living abroad forming the innovative category entitled 'NÓSTIMON IMAR', fiction, documentaries, sport films and midnight movies. A screenwriting

seminar, photograph exhibitions and workshops on make-up and Special Effects were also scheduled. These special satellite presentations, to be given by top industry professionals were surely further enhanced the festival.

The GOLDEN APHRODITE awards ceremony was a red carpet/black tie event in true Hollywood style, that took place on 27th of March 2006, in the Municipal Theatre of Nicosia, a magnificent venue decorated specifically for CIFF and attended amongst others, by Stuart Alson, founder of the New York International Film and Video Festival (1993) and publisher of the Independent Film Quarterly Magazine, which is distributed at the Cannes International Film Festival, Gregory Cascante, Hollywood producer and CEO of August Entertainment Productions in LA, Phedon Papamichael, production designer of John Cassavetes' films, Chris Eyre, film director, first shown in Sundance, Renos Charalambides and Costas Apostolides, Greek actors and Dr Andrew Horton, awarded script writer (*Dark Side of the Sun* with Brad Pitt), director of Film Studies at Oklahoma University.

For further information on the 1st Cyprus International Film Festival one may visit www.CIFF2006.com.

