

**Gena Rowlands in new Cassavetes film**

# Woman under influence of society, not love

By JULIAN BELTRAME

Because John Cassavetes is an unusual and intelligent director, *Woman Under the Influence* has received some bizarre reviews in this town, and probably in others as well.

Mabel (Gena Rowlands) is not a *Woman Under the Influence* 'of love' as has been suggested. Rather, she is under the influence of her society's expectations of what a woman is. She is a middle class housewife, the same person whom women's lib has tried hard, but failed, to enlist.

Love plays a part in her undoing, but it is not the love she feels, but the love she needs and searches for, which contributes to her breakdown.

The film's thesis is summed up near the conclusion, at which point, on the night of Mabel's return from the mental asylum to the 'sane' world, she is unable to find who she really is and pleads to her husband Nick (Peter Falk) to tell her what he wants her to be. "I can be anything you want," she says.

It is a crucial part of the film, and doubly effective because the point is not over-dramatized but underplayed. It is also untrue. Mabel cannot be whatever Nick wants her to be. It is doing precisely that which caused her to suffer a nervous breakdown earlier, and is taking her to the verge of a second.

The film makes a few subtle points about sanity; in the opening scene, before we realize Mabel is a bit strange, Nick tells his fellow workers that Mabel is not crazy. She cooks, she cleans, she takes care of the children — what's so crazy about that?

Nick embodies the type of person Mabel is surrounded and dominated by. All around her are what Bergman aptly coined "mental illiterates". They have no understanding of other people and the effect they are having on them.

My first thoughts led me to believe Cassavetes approached the film from the wrong end. If we had been clued

in on the cause of Mabel's insanity from the beginning, rather than starting off with the fait accompli, we might have been able to identify with Mabel from the beginning.

There's nothing wrong however, with the full-circle plot line. In fact, here it helps Cassavetes make a stronger point about the crazies outside the nuthouses.

Although annoying at times, it is not Cassavetes' hidden-camera style of direction which is at fault. His style is just as valid as the more conventional tight-plot approach.

What makes *Woman* an unlikeable film is that's it about a sad and tragic figure we don't want to know and don't want to share our feelings with. It's perhaps ironic that the most innovative aspect of Cassavetes' direction that he makes us feel as if we're actually living with his characters) turns out to haunt this film.

Rowlands' acting, although excellent and deserving of her Academy Award nomination, not only alienates the audience, but makes us feel aggressive toward the

character she is portraying.

Since audiences don't want to feel aggressive towards the main character, they feel very uncomfortable and restless. It is not until the very end that Rowlands solicits our sympathies and becomes a tragic character.

Despite this, *Woman Under the Influence* is still worth seeing, and Rowlands might well wind up with the Oscar, now that Liv Ullmann (who would easily have won for *Scenes from a Marriage*) is ineligible.

## Poet Elliott, feminist singer MacNeil stimulate small Women's Day audience

By BOB MCBRYDE

Capping off Women's Day at Stong College last Friday were three events, arranged and convened by Virginia Rock, master of the college.

A small but enthusiastic audience was provided with both entertainment and intellectual stimulation.

The evening began with what Rock introduced as "an indescribable melange of poetry, music and sound", coordinated by Canadian poet, musician and general woman-about-the-province, Pat Elliott. With winning informality, the energetic Elliott presented, along with the poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen, Earle Birney and Joe Rosenblatt, a pot-pourri of her own works, many of which are pastiches of comic verse combines with musical interpretation.

The theme of her composite work,

entitled *Sun Dogs 'n' Canadiens*, is the liberation which might be attained, in both a cosmic and a social sense, through laughter and through sense stimulation. In order to further the latter purpose, her presentation was liberally sprinkled with widely divergent music, ranging from rock to the softest of Eric Satie.

Bringing the liberation theme into a more intellectual realm was the next event, a discussion by Dr. Dianne McGibbon on *Marriage, Family and the Women's Movement*. Her written speech with welcome brevity presented a view of the pains and joys of creative change, which was taken up in more detail by the subsequent discussion.

McGibbon diplomatically fielded questions on topics ranging from abortion to primary education while showing nonetheless the necessary

spirit to be, in her opinions, provocative. The crowd, larger for this event than for the earlier theatrics, responded with a restless vigour which sometimes threatened, but never shattered, the equilibrium of reasonable debate.

McGibbon's discussion paved the way for the final presentation, a series of songs by Rita MacNeil of Toronto, feminist singer and author of *Born a Woman*. As was the case in Pat Elliott's event, MacNeil brought forth a nervous informality which, in keeping with the general tenor of the evening, proved suitable to the audience's taste.

Unaccompanied, she sang of her own conversion to feminism, as well as of more personal family matters, with a lyric charm. Those in attendance relished her relaxed approach as it combined with the general seriousness of her subject matter.

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