

A comment on Peter Falk's finest moments: *Husbands* and *A Woman Under the Influence*

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American actor Peter Falk died June 23 in Beverly Hills, aged 83, after a period of failing health. Falk was best known to the wider public for his role as the apparently bumbling but wily television detective, Lieutenant Columbo, for which role he received four Emmys.

However, when assessing Falk's most intriguing acting credentials one should look no farther than his collaborations with independent filmmaker John Cassavetes. Specifically, two seminal pieces from the early 1970s, *Husbands* (1970) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974).

The latter, an enthralling yet harrowing picture, stars Gena Rowlands as Mabel Longhetti, a woman suffering from the effects of severe mental illness. Rowland's performance is mesmerizing, but Falk does far more than play a mere supporting role. We find ourselves empathizing almost as much with his Nick, a world-weary Los Angeles construction worker, as we do with his wife. Why? Well, because here Falk displays the assiduous, sensitive, everyman qualities and wonderful listening skills which were to become his hallmark.

Throughout the film it is clear that Nick is at a complete loss as to how best to relate to Mabel. At times, as he has to deal with her deranged rants and endlessly embarrassing behavior, it appears that it is Nick, not Mabel, who is in the most severe emotional turmoil. But Cassavetes' singular direction may have been as responsible for this as Falk's performance.

Falk, a thoroughly conscientious actor who began working in the New York theater in the mid-1950s, admitted he liked to know exactly where he was, what he was doing and why he was doing it. In other words:

he sought straightforward direction. Cassavetes, notorious for his spontaneous, raw and unpredictable approach to filmmaking, took the antithetical approach, allowing (or obliging) the actors to discover the characters themselves, and encouraging exploration through improvisation.

Indeed, such was Cassavetes' apparent lack of direction that Falk had vowed never to work with him again after the filming of the earlier *Husbands*. "I didn't understand him. I wanted to strangle him!" noted Falk. However, on viewing the final cut of *Husbands*, Falk realized what a unique figure and talent Cassavetes was, and how few studio directors, almost inevitably, could or would ever grant him the level of freedom that the visionary director had.

Hence, Falk agreed to dive back into that dangerous exploratory process four years later. In fact, he believed so fully in the initial screenplay of *A Woman Under the Influence* that he invested \$500,000 in the project. Obviously, a strong indication as to his change of heart in his assessment of Cassavetes' talents!

A Woman Under the Influence went on to receive Academy award nominations for its star (Rowlands) and director (Cassavetes) and remains one of the most original and authentic films ever made on the consequences of mental illness.

Husbands is the story of three middle class, middle-aged men from New York who flee to London while undergoing a collective midlife crisis of sorts, following the death of a close friend. Equally hilarious and poignant, arguably Cassavetes' strongest film (along with *Faces*, 1968), and one in which Falk's

intrinsic vulnerability, depth and humor as a performer are at their very best.

The naturally more charismatic Ben Gazzara (as Harry) and Cassavetes himself (Gus) play the other “husbands” and at times seem to bully Falk off the screen, but Falk’s warmth and subtlety as Archie are undoubtedly a key to the film’s success.

This comic charm is evident in a brief “pick-up” scene with a terribly unattractive yet affluent elderly English lady who desperately attempts to woo Archie. Falk balances perfectly his patent desire to get out of this situation as quickly as possible whilst at the same time showing an unwillingness to offend the woman. The lady (who incidentally bears a striking resemblance to the queen of England!) establishes a firm grip on Falk’s hand, refusing to let go. Falk is flummoxed. “I’ll give you anything you want, anything you need. A girl. A boy!” she proclaims. The tension is palpable.

Falk eventually leans in for what seems like a smooch! Overcome with excitement, the lady releases her grip on Falk readying herself, but Falk (relieved as hell!) cleverly takes this opportunity to steal away into the night.

In the latter part of the story we discover Archie falling for a young Asian woman. Unfortunately for him, she doesn’t speak a word of English, which inevitably results in a great deal of confusion and discomfort. As they sit in silence in a hotel room, Falk is so authentically bewildered by the non-communicative Asian, that the scene may appear cringe-worthy. Cringe-worthy in the best possible sense, as Cassavetes (as was his trademark) allows the scene to unfold for an almost unnatural length of time. The silence eventually frustrates Falk to the point where he attempts to goad the young lady into any kind of reaction at all. First, through singing “Good morning Mr zip zip zip with your haircut just as short as mine!” Very amusing for the viewer, not so for the Asian woman apparently, as she remains stoical.

So Archie changes his tactic, pleading: “I don’t want to make it uncomfortable for you. If you could talk? Say what’s on your mind?” Eventually pressing

himself on the young lady, kissing her aggressively. Her seeming unwillingness to give him ‘tongue’ leads Falk to remark: “What?! Are you trying to make a sucker out of me? Who are you kidding? You and I suck wind?! You probably speak English. Speak Chinese. Anything. Just say something. Don’t just sit there like a virgin. Is that the way you kiss in Japan? Is that where you’re from? Japan? I’m from New York. You’re Oriental. And I’m from New York. Probably part of the tradition in your country. To suck wind!” In the hands of a lesser actor this scene would of course veer off into a downright xenophobic direction. Falk’s unflinching honesty and commitment to the “truth” of the scenario beautifully prevents this from happening.

Unsurprisingly though, Archie fails to win the Asian lady’s heart, and both he and Gus return to New York as disillusioned and discontented as they were when they left, leaving Harry alone in London clinging to his adolescent fantasies.

In the closing scene, Archie, in reference to their friend Harry, touchingly bellows at Gus, as they arrive back home: “What’s he going to do without us?!”

That very same question could be asked of Falk’s working relationship with Cassavetes. Perhaps I’m being a little unfair, but what truly important work did Falk do without Cassavetes? Alas, very little, I would suggest. But of course like so many actors he cannot be held responsible for that fact. He had to contend with mediocre directors and writers for the vast majority of his career.



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