



An Honorable Actor: Seymour Cassel

Seymour Cassel will receive a Lifetime Achievement Award at this year

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'Seymour is a Hollywood legend; he supported indie film before it became an institution. His philosophy was that he'd play a role he connected with for the price of a ticket.'

So comes homage to acclaimed actor Seymour Cassel from an unlikely source "Slash of Guns 'n' Roses.

As the iconic rock guitarist explains in his 2007 memoir, Cassel's son, Matt, was one of his closest friends during Slash's Fairfax High days. In fact, it was Seymour Cassel who christened the erstwhile Saul Hudson with the nickname that became his professional nom de rock.

Summing up Cassel's colorful career evokes several words: 'charmed' and 'eclectic' among them. Cassel's talent has landed him roles in more than 180 movies. Which is why Cassel, alongside fellow actor Robert Guillaume, will receive the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Fifth Annual Pacific Palisades Film Festival on March 6 through 8.

'These are two well respected people in the industry today who, as far as I know, have not been honored locally,' says Palisadian Bob Sharka, director and founder of the PPF.

The future Slash was just one of many rock legends Cassel befriended over the decades. The Rolling Stones showed up to many a Cassel house party in the 1970s, and 'when Dylan saw 'Faces,' he invited me up to Woodstock,' Cassel, 73, tells the Palisadian-Post.

In retrospect, the 1970s have been viewed as Hollywood's last hurrah: a golden time of formula-bending narratives and stylistic experimentation inspired by Kurosawa, the French and Italian New Wave, and other non-traditional approaches to cinema that had ripened in the preceding decade. Hopper, Fonda, Nicholson, Beaty "you name 'em, Cassel worked or partied with 'em" Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda, Hal Ashby, Warren Oates, Kris Kristofferson.

'I knew Kris when he was a musician,' says Cassel, who was supposed to play the title character in Kristofferson's big break, 'Cisco Pike' (1972). 'I was offered the part of Cisco. They were giving the writer [B. W. L. Norton] a hard time about directing the movie.' So Cassel dropped out. But he did get to work with Kristofferson on the Norton-scripted 18-wheeler comedy 'Convoy,' directed by renegade filmmaker Sam Peckinpah.

'Sam was a demon in the sense that he liked to do things that stirred people up,' Cassel says. 'And he was fun to work with, fun to drink with.'

'What they didn't take into consideration when you're doing the movie is that you're shooting trucks. Every time you shoot, they have to turn the trucks around and drive them back. That takes a lot of time. We fell behind. Kris had to tour in August. They had to change the actors' contracts and we had to wait another six weeks before they could start up again.'

Cassel filed a grievance with the Screen Actors Guild after the studio tried to call back the actors and crew gratis.

'You can't call me back without paying me,' says Cassel, still indignant over the breach of contract. Ultimately, he prevailed.

By the time he was shooting 'Convoy' Peckinpah had started down his tragic booze-and-coke-laden freefall.

'It was the beginning of the end for a lot of us,' Cassel half-jokes. 'When you were close to Sam, he was a great friend. He really wanted me to play in 'Osterrman Weekend' [Peckinpah's final film]. They shot one day with another guy. Sam kept telling the producers, 'Give me Seymour!' and they kept telling him, 'No, you can't have Seymour.'"

Cassel's candor and his yen for acting was 'implanted' in him during his peripatetic upbringing.

'My mother was in burlesque,' the actor says. 'She was with Minsky, a burlesque house in New York. They



Rich Schmitt / Staff Photographer

Veteran actor Seymour Cassel walks the streets of the Palisades, where he will receive a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Pacific Palisades Film Festival.

would show a movie and have some dancing. We went to Baltimore, St. Louis, Buffalo, Boston.'

When Cassel talks about 'John,' you sense there's only one John he could be referring to: Cassavetes.

Cassel remembers how he first spotted the groundbreaking actor-cum-filmmaker who became the defining professional and personal relationship of his life when he dropped by the John Cassavetes Workshop in Manhattan to wrangle a free acting scholarship.

'John said, 'They're gone,' but he called me into his office and he talked to me for an hour.'

Cassel tagged along on a shoot 'that turned out to be footage for 'Shadows' [Cassavetes' revolutionary 1959 directorial debut]. I just kept coming back. John was that way "if you wanted to be involved, you were. He became the older brother I never had and the best friend I had never known.'

Cassel co-starred in such Cassavetes classics as 'A Woman Under the Influence' and 'Minnie and Moskowitz.' They also acted together in Don Siegel's 'The Killers.'

'John probably knew people better than anyone that I had ever known and I thought I knew people very well,' Cassel says.

Contrary to the popular belief that Cassavetes' films are totally improvised, Cassel insists that 'they were the best parts ever written. They were totally scripted, but he gave you freedom. The music in 'Faces,' all the songs I sing, are mine. I always make up these goofy little songs.'

Cassavetes and Cassel were close friends by the time they made Don Siegel's 'The Killers' in 1964, the same year that Cassel married Betty Lou Deering. The Cassels had three children "Matthew, Lisa, and Dilyn" before divorcing in 1983.

'Every time we did a movie, it always was a good time. John drove me to the hospital when Matt was going to be born.'

Today, Matt Cassel works as a film editor, but as a tyke, he not only shunned acting, he did it with panache.

'Matt turned down Woody Allen when he was five,' Cassel laughs. 'He had glasses, the muscles in his eyes needed correcting'. I took him with me to [a movie premiere]. Woody said, 'Hi, do you want to be in a movie?' And Matt said, 'No.' He asked Matt, 'Can you do a British accent?' and Matt said, 'Why?'

So while young Matt missed out on playing young Woody in Allen's directorial debut, 'Take the Money and Run,' he did act in Cassavetes' 'Women Under the Influence'.

'The reason Matt did the movie was because he knew John.'

Cassel had a blast shooting 1992's 'Honeymoon in Vegas' with his buddy, James Caan, and Nicolas Cage.

'I know he does a lot of diverse crazy things,' says Cassel, 'but Nic truly loves to act.'

Cassel has also connected with a new generation of filmmakers, including Wes Anderson, for whom he played roles in 'The Royal Tenenbaums' and 'The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou.' In Anderson's second outing, 'Rushmore,' Cassel played the barber father of the character played by Cage's cousin, Jason Schwartzman.

Before casting Schwartzman as Max Fischer, Bill Murray's precocious teen rival, Anderson 'went through a couple of thousand kids,' Cassel says. 'Wes takes me to dinner one night, he says, 'Listen, I don't know what to do. Bill wants me to fire this kid.' I said, 'What, are you kidding?' 'He told me the kid's not funny.' You see, Bill has to get the laugh. In order for this film to work, you've got to love this kid. Wes talked to Bill, and Bill was smart enough to understand that.'

As a prank gift, Schwartzman bought Murray a prosthetic leg.

'He asked me, 'Do you think he'll like it?' Cassel remembers. 'I said, 'I think you'll find it in the trash can.' Which he did.'

Cassel still shakes his head as he recalls the antics of an underage Schwartzman on the set of the 1998 comedy. One night, Schwartzman convinced Cassel to get the young actor into a nightclub.

'I thought, What the hell!' Cassel says. 'So I take the kid out to a club and I get him a drink'

Afterwards, Schwartzman insisted on stopping at a pharmacy to pick up some Robitussin.

'I thought he had a cold,' Cassel says. 'I didn't know that all these Beverly Hills kids liked to get high on cough syrup!'

The next day on the set, Schwartzman doesn't show up "but his mother, 'Rocky' actress Talia Shire, does'and she's furious. Turns out Schwartzman was in the hospital, getting his stomach pumped. Shire accosts Cassel, under the assumption that Schwartzman was hospitalized after Cassel had taken him drinking.

'She's screaming, 'A hell of a father figure you are!' says Cassel. 'I said, Wait a minute, Talia, I'm just playing his father. I'm not his father.'

Even after working with the greatest talent in entertainment, Cassel still supports an underdog. He just worked on 'Staten Island,' co-starring Ethan Hawke, for a first-time director. And in one of his most challenging roles, Cassel portrays a mute in 'Reach for Me,' directed by LeVar Burton.

Cassel appreciates the Palisades Film Festival 'because people don't want to see a lot of the crap that's

out. The kids will go see anything 'Hannah Montana.' A lot of films don't get seen and it's a way to be seen.

'There's a lot of studio films by the Coen Brothers, Wes, Paul Thomas Anderson. They made their name and then they take that confidence from the studio and they fight to make what they want to make. But they're more the exception.'

Seems fitting that Cassel should receive the Festival's accolade on the evening of March 6. After all, the actor's goal and the PPF's mission are identical"supporting the vision of independent filmmakers.

So support both. If you want to see a good film, hit the PPF. And if you've got a good part for Cassel, hey, will you at least cover his airfare?

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