

Cassel looks back in wonder

Seymour Cassel, currently starring in 'Reach for Me,' wins film festival lifetime achievement award.

MARK OLSEN

Actor Seymour Cassel had just tucked himself into a booth at Hollywood's venerable Musso & Frank Grill when he was reminded of an interview he did in the same spot for Rolling Stone magazine in 1972, alongside John Cassavetes, the iconic filmmaker with whom he is most closely associated. Like the restaurant, Cassel, now 74, may be older but seems remarkably unchanged.

His unpredictable, live-wire energy, such a trademark from his roles for Cassavetes, was going full throttle. Cassel, who came to Hollywood in 1961, has a way with an anecdote and can drop some pretty impressive names — there was the time, for example, when he introduced Charles Bukowski to Johnny Cash at Barney's Beanery — and he manages to make it all sound plausible.

"I am a performer, that's what I like to do," he said. "I'm performing here with you, telling you truthful things. It's all performing, that's what we do in life. We talk, we look and we hear and we listen. Your life is a performance."

For that performance, Cassel was given a lifetime achievement award on Friday night at the second Downtown Film Festival. The event coincided with the festival's centerpiece gala screening of "Reach for Me," a new drama featuring Cassel in the lead role as an aging man adjusting to life in a hospice. The film, directed by LeVar Burton, costars Alfre Woodard, Adrienne Barbeau, Burton and Lacey Chabert.

Cassel's acting roots go back to the early days of the American independent movement. He was a key collaborator on a number of Cassavetes' best-known films, include "Shadows," "Faces," "Minnie and Moskowitz," "The Killing of a Chinese Bookie" and "Love



GARY FRIEDMAN Los Angeles Times

RANGE: Cassel, part of director John Cassavetes' acting stable, was in on the ground floor of independent filmmaking.

Streams." He has worked with dozens of other filmmakers through the years, including appearances in three of filmmaker Wes Anderson's movies, "Rushmore," "The Royal Tenenbaums" and "The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou."

When "Faces" premiered at the Venice Film Festival more than 40 years ago, it walked away with multiple awards. Cassel was nominated for a supporting actor Oscar and won a supporting actor prize from the National Society of Film Critics. Andrew Sarris, reviewing the film in the Village Voice, wrote at the time, "Faces" emerges for me as the revelation of 1968... 'Faces' not only works, it soars."

"John's films had the depth of character," said Cassel of what has made Cassavetes' work so vital and full of life, even years later. "Performance is performance, but you have to have the depth. And it shows; it



ROBERT ZUCKERMAN Touchstone Pictures

'THE CREW': Richard Dreyfuss, left, Cassel, Burt Reynolds and Dan Hedaya starred in the 2000 caper comedy.

makes it real. Even though the dialogue is there, you want it to be natural."

Cassel was born in Detroit, the son of a Milwaukee beer salesman and an unwed burlesque dancer. He never met his father — "When I got nomi-

nated for an Oscar for 'Faces,' I figured he'd show up. He didn't show up, so I forgot that," he recalled — and grew up traveling with his mother, getting onstage for the first time at age 4.

By the late 1950s, Cassel had made his way to New York,

where he began to study acting and seek an acting scholarship. What he found was Cassavetes directing his first feature, "Shadows." Cassel pitched in to help and never left.

"I said, 'When are you doing it again?'" Cassel recalled of their first meeting. "He said, 'Tonight.' I said, 'Can I come back?'" He said 'Sure.'

"And that was the beginning of finding the brother I never had and the best friendship I ever had."

Though Cassavetes' films were often dismissed by critics and audiences in their day, they have come to be regarded as essential works, precursors to the notion of independent filmmaking and full of the messy vibrancy of life as it is lived. Since Cassavetes' death from liver disease in 1989, a mystique has built up around him, and the legacy of his films has grown.

"It's exciting," said Cassel of

the revival of Cassavetes' standing, "but what I miss most is John. He was Greek, he was superstitious and he was a gambler. He wouldn't have a liver transplant."

Cassel would continue to support independent and emerging filmmakers throughout his career. He won the first acting prize given at the Sundance Film Festival for his role in 1992's "In the Soup," directed by Alexandre Rockwell, which also won that year's Grand Jury Prize. It was Rockwell who later put Cassel in touch with a young filmmaker from Texas named Wes Anderson.

Cassel's three roles for Anderson have brought the actor to a new generation of audiences. Particularly in "Rushmore" (1998), the filmmaker drew something unexpectedly melancholy and still from the actor, a complete turnaround from the unpredictable excitability of many of his best-known parts. Asked why the filmmaker pursued him in the first place, Cassel hazarded only a guess: "He liked my face."

Cassel has also recently become increasingly active within the Screen Actors Guild. Currently a national board member and self-described hardliner, Cassel successfully fought to be included on the current ballot as a nominee for president of the union.

"I don't want to be in it," Cassel said of his ramped-up union role, "but I love actors. And they won't stick up for themselves, and you've got to learn to do that. All I ever cared about was actors — toughest job in this business."

When Cassel had made his way into the restaurant, a pair of patrons at the counter had stopped him to say hello, a token of recognition that Cassel said means as much to him as the lifetime achievement awards he has begun to amass.

"The people who know my work like my work," Cassel said. "And that's great. For them to give me an award is nice, but any encouragement I can give to somebody else — it's a dream to become an actor. But it's your dream. Don't give up on it."

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