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Tallgrass Film Festival comes of age

BY BOB CURTRIGHT
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Veteran character actor Seymour Cassel, who will be honored at Wichita's seventh annual Tallgrass Film Festival next weekend, says he probably couldn't have avoided ending up in the spotlight.

The Detroit native's mother was a professional dancer with Minsky's who took him along with her to stops all over the country before he started school.

"She took me everywhere because I didn't have a father," Cassel recalled during a recent phone call from California. "We traveled by train, and I grew up backstage. It was a wonderful way to see the world. When I was 5, I got to do one show a day with a comic who wore checkered pants and a rope belt. When his pants fell down, I'd grab his wallet and run.

"Being on stage was great. I was probably born for it."

Now 74, Cassel has been a familiar face in nearly 100 films and countless TV shows for half a century, from early live television dramas like "Naked City" and "The Defenders" to the independent films of John Cassavetes to being a regular on Tracey Ullman's sketch comedy show.

At an age when many people slow down, Cassel seems busier than ever. He completed three films in 2008 with seven more in post-production for 2009 and two in development for 2010.

One of the 2008 films, "Reach for Me," will be showcased at Tallgrass on Saturday. Cassel plays a cantankerous old man who is relegated to a nursing home while everyone waits for him to die, but who grudgingly discovers a reason to live.

Cassel, recipient of the festival's highest honor, the Ad Astra Award for lifetime achievement, will hold a Q&A with festivalgoers after the film. With him will be producer and co-star Charlene Blaine-Schulenburg.

The independent film from AMediaVisions has already won awards at film festivals from San Diego to Krakow, Poland, including "best of the fest" at Lake Arrowhead Film Festival. It was directed by LeVar Burton, who came to attention in "Roots," and also stars Alfre Woodard, Johnny Whitworth ("Gamer"), Lacey Chabert ("Party of Five") and Adrienne Barbeau ("Maude").

"There's nothing wrong with being old," says Cassel, both of his character, Alvin, and himself. "There's something elegant and respectful about having decades of experiences. You can look back at your life and say, 'I did some things right, like my three children and my eight grandchildren.' And I'm proud of anything I did with John Cassavetes. That's what I want people to remember me for."

Cassel studied acting with Stella Adler, after initially being turned down, at the famed Actor's Studio in New York. He had admired Cassavetes as a successful actor and, when he heard that he wanted to begin making his own films, just had to meet him. Cassavetes had started an acting school to train his own stable of performers and gave out scholarships.

Cassel applied too late to get one but asked to hang around the set and watch filming of "Shadows," Cassavetes' first film in 1959. He observed and absorbed everything in sight, then subtly began helping the cameraman, eventually working his way on to the crew.

"Then John found a part for me, and it was the beginning of a beautiful relationship," said Cassel, who would eventually be in eight of the 12 films Cassavetes made before his death in 1989. Considered the first great independent filmmaker in the wake of the collapse of the studio system in the 1950s, Cassavetes won acclaim for his compelling cinema verite realism, often involving hand-held cameras and his actress-wife, Gena Rowlands.

"When John wrote a part for me in 'Faces,' he told me I was going to win an Oscar because he loved what I did. I

came close. I got nominated," Cassel said of the 1968 supporting actor award for playing a hippie swinger named Chet.

Cassel has made major Hollywood pictures ("Dick Tracy," "White Fang," "Honeymoon in Vegas") and guested in numerous TV shows ("Twelve O'Clock High," "Combat," "The FBI," "Flight of the Conchords"), but he prefers working with independent filmmakers. In recent years, he appeared in Wes Anderson's "Rushmore," "The Royal Tennenbaums" and "The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou" and Steve Buscemi's "Trees Lodge"

"It should be fun for both the director and the actor," he said of indie films. "It isn't about one or the other. It's an equal exchange. That's what John (Cassavetes) taught me. (Hollywood) makes a lot of movies for money, which is not the best reason.

"But as a practical measure, I also learned you have to make money in some films to make art in others."

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