

**TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
ACTOR, WRITER, AND DIRECTOR NICK CASSAVETES
DREAMPATH PODCAST, EPISODE 46**

May 6, 2020

Host: Bryan Smith

[00:00:00] **Nick Cassavetes:** Love is everything. The rest of it, there's nothing else that matters. The rest of life is bullshit only love. So if you have a point of view of what you're actually trying to make, especially with an experienced actor, they know what you want. And then it gives them freedom to like, not make choices that are out of the director's comfort zone.

And they can do whatever the heck they want, you know? And, Even if you're the most technically gifted actor in the world, everybody always gets in trouble. Everybody always, there's something happens and you just try to be there and, you know, through a series of permission givings, make sure the actor's comfortable and that it's okay for him to dig deep and be as authentic as he can be.

Bryan Smith: Brian Smith here and welcome to the DreamPath Podcast, where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world. My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process, and make it accessible to everyone. Now let's jump in.

[00:01:00] Nick Cassavetes is on the show today. Nick is an actor, screenwriter and director.

Nick's dad, John Cassavetes, was a pioneer of independent cinema in the 70s and 80s, writing and directing classics like *Gloria* and *Woman Under the Influence*, both starring Nick's mother, Gina Rowlands. With both of Nick's parents receiving Academy Award nominations, Nick had a lot to draw from for inspiration.

But as you'll hear in this interview, his path into the arts was a bit more circuitous than you might think. I've been a fan of Nick's work for decades, starting with this role as Dietra Cansler and the movie *Face/Off* with Nicholas Cage and John Travolta, but I began appreciating him as a screenwriter after seeing *Blow* with Johnny Depp in 2001.

Blow is one of those extremely rewatchable films, like *Casino* or *Goodfellas*. I watched it again to prepare for the interview, and it still holds up as one of the great drug/crime genre movies. In this interview, Nick tells us how he got hired to write that script at a time in his career when he knew very little [00:02:00] about screenwriting.

Nick has also directed some impressive, and even iconic, films. You can check out his filmography on IMDb, but a few noteworthy films he directed are: *John Q*, starring Denzel Washington; *The Notebook*, starring Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams; as well as *Alpha Dog* starring Justin Timberlake, Emil Hirsch, Amanda Seyfried and Chris Kincaid {who was interviewed on Episode 30 of this podcast.}

I rewatched all of these films leading up to the interview with Nick, and they're just as great today as they were when they were released. So, if you have some downtime as the

pandemic drags on, I recommend going back and watching or rewatching these films. One of Nick's most recent acting roles was Tattoo Joe in *The Hangover 2*.

And just like with his role in *Face Off* there's a story about how he found that role, or more accurately, how the role found him. It's stories like this that make this interview a bit longer than most, but I promise it's worth sticking around until the end. I have to admit, I [00:03:00] felt pretty intimidated going into this interview.

My friend Chris Kincaid, who has known Nick for decades assured me that Nick was sweet and easy-going, but Nick's onscreen personas: his tattooed, physically imposing nature, and his no bullshit personality, made me wonder whether I could pull this off. Despite my trepidation going in, Nick was a fantastic guest.

He's a natural storyteller. He was generous with his time and his unique perspective on acting, writing, and directing made for engaging and compelling conversation. So, let's jump right into my talk with Nick Cassavetes. Nick Cassavetes, thanks for being on the podcast.

Nick Cassavetes: Thank you for having me.

Bryan Smith: I know we had some technical difficulties getting started here, but, this might be our new normal here with the pandemic style of meeting. Huh?

Nick Cassavetes: Yeah. Unfortunately, I'm a tech dope, but, you know, the pandemic is something. I've been in quarantine for... I think this is seven days now, I haven't been outside.

Bryan Smith: How are you and your family doing, by the way?

Nick Cassavetes: Well, I have a sick [00:04:00] daughter and, so I don't see those two kids in person. We talk all the time, and I have my youngest daughter who's living with me, but, we're the only two ones here right now. My girl went to Las Vegas to be with her parents and, but she'll be back soon. But basically we've just been staying inside.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. So what is, what is happening right now in Hollywood, and the film and television industry now that everything seems to be kind of at a standstill? Is there anything creative happening behind the scenes? People are talking like you and I are, you know, remotely and trying to get stuff done, or is it basically a shutdown?

Nick Cassavetes: No, everything's shut down on the outside. But I think everybody's, there's, how can we, make money during the shutdown? How can we keep going? How can we be creative? You know, I personally am a writer, so I have lots to catch up on and that's fine, but, I think that when this is over, if indeed it ever is over in a timely manner, that people will be, you know, raring to [00:05:00] work and make money and to be creative and we just keep plugging along- except it's at home.

Bryan Smith: Well. I've been doing a lot of research, getting ready for this interview, and I have to say, I've followed your career since the... probably, I would say the 90s. I really wasn't tuned in too much to Hollywood films in the 80s, but there's so much to unpack here. And what I'd like to start off with is asking you about the timeframe of when you decided to

get into athletics, and basketball in particular. And why you made that choice, at least based upon my research, why you chose to avoid the film industry at first, and how you got brought back into it.

Nick Cassavetes: That's a pretty legitimate question. Both mom and dad were in the film business. Tell you a little story. My dad and mom met at American Academy Dramatic Arts. They were both actors, they both became relatively [00:06:00] successful young. My dad wanted to be a filmmaker. He started directing studio films- a lot of people don't know this. And on a film called *A Child is Waiting*, which started Burt Lancaster and Judy Garland, about some mentally disabled kids. He did a film for, I forget what studio, but the producer was Stanley Kramer, and... he loved the film.

And back then they had these kind of things where they would be, it would be not a test screening like they have today, but it would be kind of a preview screening where everybody dressed up in suits, and go to like the Cary Grant Theater and sit there and applaud or whatever. And my dad turned in the version that- to play on Friday, and little did he know that Kramer had gone in and recut the entire film over the weekend. So when the film, {laughs} when the film played, Dad -who's nuts- got up and walk to the screen, kind of like in a daze, and put his hands through the screen and [00:07:00] tore it.

And Kramer came up behind him and said, "Hey, John..." And, you know, he dumped him right in front of about 500 people. And so, Dad didn't work anymore. And so we all moved to California. And Mom took Peyton Place and supported the family and Dad started writing stuff that he wanted to do for himself.

They would still hire him as an actor, but after a while, but... So he was kind of forced to be an independent filmmaker. A lot of people don't know that. So basically, you know, we didn't have a lot of money, or not enough to make films. So, he made them very inexpensively, and that meant having everybody staying in the house and you know, like, 9 trillion people over for every dinner, and there was a giant pain in the ass.

You know, my sisters are a lot younger than me, and I was alone a lot 'cause they'd go off and make movies and stuff. So I just felt kind of, I don't know, it was their thing, and not my thing. And, when I found basketball, I was pretty [00:08:00] good at it, and I was real big. And, you know, I want him to be good at something, so I chased that.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. So when you decided to go in that direction, with basketball, what brought you back into the direction of sort of television and film?

Nick Cassavetes: Well, I mean, {laughs} it's kind of a circuitous route. I, I snapped my Achilles playing basketball, so it was kind of a career-ending type of injury back then, they didn't have the kind of stuff to rehabilitate that you do now. And to be really quite honest, I was, I thought I knew everything is a kid. And so when that happened, I, I quit school and I came back and got an apartment in Los Angeles, and I worked at Sears for a couple of years as a janitor, you know, just because I was mad and I could, and I was on my own and I could have some freedom.

And actually Sears was a cool company to work for. And it wasn't until I knew, and my parents had gone to American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York, and I found out there was an American [00:09:00] Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles. And I was like, I wonder if I could get in there? And then I knew a pretty girl that was going there, and I was like, eh, let me go out and check this out.

And I went out. And the people that, ADA were very nice, and my parents were, you know, who I wasn't speaking to back then. A lot. Well, they were, they were happy that I had made that choice. And I really didn't know that I liked movies or anything, or like theater or acting or anything. But when I got there, I really loved it.

You know, it was a... it was something that you could spend a lot of time trying to get better. And, it always has tripped me out, like, trying to understand why people do things and putting myself in their positions and role playing, if you will. I really loved it, and I wasn't even that great, but I really loved it and I worked hard at it and it gave me a sense of self-esteem.

And

Bryan Smith: when you were at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, did you, did you feel [00:10:00] yourself being pulled in a particular direction, whether it was acting or writing or directing, because you've done all of those things in your career, but what were your, what were your thoughts when you were at the school?

Nick Cassavetes: Man, I was going to be the greatest actor in the world, and I deserved that. Both my parents are good actors, I came from it. I thought, Oh, I got this biologically and every other which way. {laughs} It turned out I was, I was OK. You know, I would hire me as a director, but I was super tall and all the good roles went to guys who looked like Tom Cruise- which was cool, and he's very good.

And so I spent about, I dunno, like, I don't even know; 10, 12 years, 13 years playing the sidekick going, "Hey buddy, what are you talking about? She loves you, man. You got to go get her." You know, it's being the- kinda like the best friend side kick, or being some kind of, like, evil God that wants to, um- All of the things that were like, the movies needed, but I didn't feel anything about those things, and [00:11:00] it just didn't feel like a job for a grown man, you know?

So, it wasn't until much later that I was away on a film by a guy named Jim Chambers, and I don't even know where that film is; it was a beautiful film. He wrote it, it was all in poetry, and he financed it himself. And we're up in Northern California, and I had a lot of downtime and I had done some television thing and had an agent for some reason, but you know, but for the first... I'd say three, four years, I mainly, you know, we all read drama log and said, you know, "Where's the plays out there?" Back there you could do equity waiver theater, and you know, I did that for a while, and then I went to New York and I did a off-Broadway and I got a job at a Westbeth and I didn't have a place to live in New York.

And Westbeth was kind of a housing community in Chelsea. Back then they had two stages, a little stage and a big stage, and we had the big [00:12:00] stage. In fact, the stage was so

big that it was set up like an apartment. So, I kind of was the stage manager and lived there. And, it was a great, until I got caught. And then, I was fired. And... but you know, basically it was chasing down job after job. And back then, as long as you had something to eat at night, it was cool. We're chasing artistic experiences and then- and fallen in love each time.

Bryan Smith: And when you were, in acting school, did you have any influences outside your own family? Because obviously you grew up in an acting and filmmaking family, that had to be formative, but were you looking outside of your own family for ideas on directions to go?

Nick Cassavetes: You know, it's weird. Maybe it's because, you know, I had some kind of difficulties with my parents when I was young and that -they were right and I was wrong by the way- but, my overall sense was I wanted to be left alone to find out about things on my own, and process it in my [00:13:00] own way. So, even till right now, while I enjoy many other people's work and so much so that I'm jealous, like *Manchester By the Sea*, I always say like, why didn't I think of that idea? Why didn't I write that movie? It's so great.

Even if I love something, I'm not really, I'm not trying to bite it, you know? I'm not trying to be... I don't know. Being an artist, you get to feel like you feel, and that's the it of the it, of why you do it, or for me. So, yeah I don't have a lot of, like, kind of artistic influences. I have a lot of people I really like. For me, it all comes back to the beginning. I try to process it through my stupid brain, and see where it goes from there.

Bryan Smith: So, coming out of that household, which had to be just a hotbed of creativity, and all of these actors that are kind of traipsing in through your house, you know, shooting these independent films with your Dad and your Mom in your own house. And Peter Falk, I understand, was a [00:14:00] family friend was there a point when you realized how unique and special that upbringing was? And I imagine it came with its set of downsides as well, but when you kind of look back on it and go, "Wow, that was pretty special."

Nick Cassavetes: I guess the best way I can answer that is like, you always knew you were around something special with that cause it was, he was magic, it was just certain people, they're just like magic, and people are drawn to them. It's infuriating when you're a young man and you're like, "I want someone to pay attention to me," or whatever. But he was also super generous with me and always be like, he always, lets pretend I was his number two and I'd had his back and you know, I was a great number two.

But, I don't think we ever had a conversation saying like, "Nick, son, if you've ever make a film, make sure you remember... or do it like this. This is important." Nothing like that. My dad was really interested in what he was doing.

[00:15:00] Like this. My, my bedroom was the edit room many, many times. He would wake me up in the middle of the night. Two or three in the morning and he'd be like, "Hey, come downstairs." I'd be like, "What's up?" He's like, he'd tell me what he wanted to do and, like, he would tell a story and if you didn't like it he changed the story in the middle, and then he'd say, "Go up and find that piece of film with your Mom scratching her nose."

And you'd be like, it wasn't marked. You'd be, like, looking through film and it wasn't even, I didn't even have a flat bed. Just on the reels and loops and stuff, but then Mom would come

downstairs at four in the morning going, "What the hell is everybody doing? Go to bed! Go to bed!" But my dad never slept, so I never slept. And so, like, when I was a kid, a real kid, like 13/14, I started working for him, you know, and like we would, like back then he had movies and they were in bins and cans and there weren't a bunch of cinema centers and movie plexes back then.

So, what we did. Since we sat in the office and I called every freaking [00:16:00] theater in the world and said, "Hey, you know, I got a John Cassavetes film here. Are you interested in it?" And they'd be like, "Yeah." - "Give me the phone." And he'd make the deal. And, I guess the kind of the come to moment I had, there's a theater on Wilsher and La Cienega, I think it's now called The Savoy, it's probably a, it's probably a, a legit theater now, but it used to be a movie theater. And dad's offices were up above that, he had the floor above that. And in Los Angeles when *Woman Under the Influence* first came out, that's the only theater he could get. And that's because, you know, you knew the guy in the building.

And... it, for whatever, it caught the guys that was a runaway hit. And Dad and I would go down every, every show because he was convinced the guy, that theater guy, was stealing from him, and we count the people going in the theater and it was, it was just insane. There was lines around the block, every show, and back then you were like, "Maybe this is something." You know, like it really was something, and that's kind of one... He was very, [00:17:00] very respected in the film community before that, but I think that's when, like, a lot of people in mainstream America started to, that was the movie that brought it out. He made a lot of money for, on that film.

And, Yeah, that was, I was 14 at the time, you know, I was gone the day I turned 16 I left the house, you know, so I was only there for a couple more years before, you know, I was on the road doing my own thing.

Bryan Smith: What were you doing at age 16, leaving the house?

Nick Cassavetes: Getting kicked out. My mother brought her in a couple of suitcases and said, "It's time." And she was absolutely right, I was... You know, so I moved out, went to school, finished high school, got a job at Evelyn Woods speed reading, and then went off to college.

Bryan Smith: And what were you doing in Evelyn Wood speed reading. I know my dad used to read, or do Evelyn Wood speed reading stuff, but I've never done it myself.

Nick Cassavetes: It's actually very boring. The, when I got there, it was cold calling, like, "Hey, how would you like a free introductory [00:18:00] lesson? Have your kids do better in school..." Would they hang up on you. But then I worked with some guys, back then they were, they would go to schools, and they would give the people that got people into the introductory lessons, 75 bucks a piece for showing up to the introductory lesson, because when they signed them they would bleed them for lots of money, and I was like, you're giving 75 bucks a person just to show up.

I was like, "How about, I'm going to quit this phone job?" And what I did was I printed up 25,000 flyers, and when they went to a school, and I just illegally littered the school with

flyers- got one on every car, one under every door, on every cloud. I mean, like if the cops are always chasing us, but the first time, like 300 people showed up, I was like, rich, you know, like this. And so we did okay for a little while until they decided they didn't want to pay us anymore. But, and then I went off to, I went off to college.

Bryan Smith: What did you get from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts that you still have with you [00:19:00] today, that you still use? If that's even possible to answer.

Nick Cassavetes: I was very, very lucky that the school back then was run by a guy named Mike Tomas, who was a genius and knew how to- not only did he have all the secrets, but he knew how to reach young kids, and teach them that it was okay to, to love what they were doing. And, he was a big influence in my life. And, they had, a number of teachers, even though she hated me, a woman named Georgia Phillips taught me a lot about retaining. You know, when you listen- we're doing a scene called, "Who's a Player to Virginia Wolf?" A lot of the dialogue by Tennessee, and that is, is argumentative. And it's in a lesson I tell actors all the time, it's- just because someone's yelling at you doesn't mean you need to be yelling at them. You have your own thought process. You have your own thing that you're going through.

And then that particular piece, "Virginia," Martha's yelling at him and, he keeps us calm because he knows that's what infuriates her the most. If she can get, she can get him into an [00:20:00] argument. And she went. And, it's just little nuances of behavior, showing you how to love material, how to not be afraid to work on character, because the more you work, even though it seems like it's never going to get there, and it's all fraudulent. That, that is the process, and that's what separates the authentic from the non authentic. So, I really liked it. I really, really liked it, even though I wasn't really that great. I just loved the work.

Bryan Smith: Yeah, I've had the pleasure of actually talking to actors who have worked with you in the past, and one comment that I heard from, I won't say his name, you might be able to guess who this is, but one comment I heard from one actor was that you do not spend your time, and kind of shifting forward to your directing approach and as you work with actors, but you don't spend your time in "video village," that you are there with the actors, and that you connect with them in a way that other directors don't. Does that sound familiar to you or, or make sense in [00:21:00] terms of your approach to directing?

Nick Cassavetes: Well, I mean, it's very kind and, I, I don't even have a "video village" on movies, I, I just invite everybody to come and watch, because I think on a small box right there is kind of, there's a lot of falseness, even if you're looking at it and you think that, like, you're seeing the real thing. You know, a lot of guys... directors and there are fine directors, there are very shoddy directors, and they use toys, and they make things look incredible, and they have special effects. And I think that those, I'm, I marvel at what they're able to do. I mean, that's not what I do.

Like, I always joke around like, "What's my movie about? Two people sitting in a room talking about how they feel." You know? And, if you make movies like that, the most

beautiful shot is an actor who's dialed in. So, yeah I do spend a lot of time with actors, and I'm sure that most of them wish I wouldn't.

Bryan Smith: I'd love to talk to you about individual films, but one kind of broad observation I've made studying your work is that you seem to [00:22:00] have a really good eye for new, young talent. And I'm talking about films like *The Notebook* with Ron Gosling and Rachel McAdams, *Alpha Dog* with, Emile Hirsch and Justin Timberlake, and Amanda Seyfried and all of these people that really got their start, and became very well-known through your films. And I was wondering if that's something that you knew you had a knack for at the time, and then you really got excited about and focused on that, or if it's just kind of unfolded organically for you that way?

Nick Cassavetes: It's organic, you know? I mean, I mean, I've worked with movie stars too, but once people get to be big movie stars, they don't want to work with me. But, I always, I've never been fearful of working with younger actors. I feel like they, they're wide open, and want to please, and will do the work, and a lot of them are ridiculously talented. And, for me, it's always lovely working with young people, but it's also great working with [00:23:00] like a master.

I've worked with Denzel, I've worked with Sean Penn, I've worked with Jenna. I've worked with a lot of people that are literally fine at their craft, and some of that process is explaining how you see things, and what you, and why you're- what the director's point of view is, and- because, like, every time you do a movie the most boring thing is: *and then this happens, and then this happens, and then this happens.*

It's like, when I'm an audience, I'm like, "Yeah, I understand what happens, but what the fuck does it mean? Like what are we, you know, why am I watching this?"

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: And if you're smart as a director, you're like- my first movie was about a woman who's getting older and she feels like she has no more, you know, worth in the world, you know? So, we have all these scenes play out, but really that's the through line, you know?

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: The second- she's so lovely and there's a lot of things that happen kind of crazy and like this. But really what I wanted to say was: love is everything. The rest of it, there's nothing else that matters. The rest of life is bullshit; only love. So, if you have a point of view of what you're actually trying to make, especially with an [00:24:00] experienced actor, they know what you want, and then it gives them freedom to, like, not make choices that are out of the director's comfort zone, and they can do whatever the heck they want. You know? And even if you're the most technically gifted actor in the world everybody always gets in trouble.

Everybody always- there's something happens, and you just try to be there and, you know, through a series of permission givings, make sure the actor is comfortable, and that it's OK for him to dig deep and be as authentic as he can be.

Bryan Smith: That's interesting that you say that you, you said, well, in this happens and then that happens and then this happens. And that's not interesting. And I agree with that. But also when I'm observing with your films, and I saw this too with *A Woman Under the Influence*, is that you're not afraid -I mean, and of course that was your dad's film- but...

Nick Cassavetes: Yes.

Bryan Smith: ...but you're, you're not afraid to sit with a moment for much longer than you would think a Hollywood director would be [00:25:00] clipping along at. And I think that there's, there's a tendency because of our attention spans these days. To, to kind of like, alright, then they say that, and then we move to the next scene and now they're in the next room and now they're in the car.

But I've noticed that even as far back as *Unhook the Stars* and your, you know, your very early films, you sit with a scene for as long as it takes. And you're, you're not pressured to kind of move that thing along, because it's the emotion of the moment, I think, that I'm getting when I'm watching the film as an audience member. That's what I appreciate, is your confidence in that moment and staying there.

Nick Cassavetes: You know, I hate to say it, like, everyone thinks that I am- Other people have styles, I don't have a style. For me, it's all situational. I was doing a film called *John Q*, and I had the legendary Dede Allen as an editor. She's- the famous story about Dede issue, it's- cutting on film and they had a screening, and back then you cut on film. So you had, you were playing a dupe with truest, like kind of a pot- a shitty [00:26:00] positive of a film that you would play just for screenings.

So, you could actually cut on the positive, right? And there was a film side, and then there's a, a sound side. Then you can cut the sound side very, very thin just to take out pops and stuff, like I can cut it real thin. So, she was doing a film with, I guess, Lumet and they- the rumo- the legend is, they were missing a piece of critical sound. It was gone.

And they were just about to- because they've been cutting in like this, and the legend is that they found it in her hair. So, it gives an impression of like chop suey, film flying all over the place; I always loved it. But she was- she's maybe the most well-respected at it, or whoever lived. And, it was on my first film with him, and she kind of looked at me cross-eyed like, "I don't know about this guy." 'Cause I was always coming here, and we had Denzel on the film, and it was a film about a sick kid. And you know, a guy that didn't have any insurance.

And she always- she was very, very particular about nobody coming in, and what she used to call "brown bagging," like cutting over, or anything [00:27:00] like this. But one morning I got there before she did and I sat at the thing. I didn't really know how to use that. It's the first film I did on, like, video, so I didn't know how to work the machine very good.

So, there was a scene where Washington is bent over his kid. And I had written a speech for him about, like, he's about to kill himself and he wanted to tell this kid in, like, five minutes everything he knew about life; maybe he would hear it, because he's going to be dead. And he gave a remarkable, remarkable performance in that. I mean like, oh my god. And I watched the scene and it wasn't just like, you know, it didn't hit the gong for me. I wasn't like, "Yeah," like this. So, I started to, like, put it together and I just, like, kind of left it on Washington, because- and for, like, an unbearably long time, just like this, and just he became emotional.

But we had the chance to become emotional with them, and give us the time, I mean like I care, cut back to the kid, like Weiss during the thing. And then we got back to him later, but on the crucial point it said, "Oh, it taught me that lesson about ,like, you know what, if we're trying to do [00:28:00] something and we want someone to feel something, we got to give the audience time to feel it, you know?"

You rush it through, it may seem more polished and put together, but sometimes you don't need polished and put together. Sometimes you need to feel like, you know, a pit in your throat and a lump in your stomach. Or maybe I got that backwards, but, anyway, she came in and screamed at me. She said, "You know, you're not great! You could be great, but you're not great."

But she agreed with the cut. I guess I don't know why I got into that story, but it was kind of reminded me about what you were talking about.

Bryan Smith: Yeah; about just sitting with, you know, sitting with a moment for longer than maybe you're comfortable with, but really what you're getting, I think the payoff is, a more robust emotion and authentic emotion in the moment. As opposed to, you know, this is just plot, plot, plot; let's just next scene, next scene, next scene. And yeah, it's, it's been a lot of fun really getting to know your work after all these years of seeing them intermittently, but I've kind of-

Nick Cassavetes: Sorry for boring you.

Bryan Smith: No; I crashed course, Nick Cassavetes' crash [00:29:00] course over the last week getting ready for this. Yeah, and I noticed on your IMDb that you actually were in the movie *Mask*. You played TJ.

Nick Cassavetes: Yeah, Bogdanovich directed that movie, and I was a big, kinda strapping young kid and he said, "Come on, you'll be one of the motorcycle guys." I thought I was going to go down for a day, but he hadn't been there whole time. We had a really good time. I mean, Eric Stoltz, what an actor.

Bryan Smith: Oh my gosh, I loved that movie. I loved it. I saw it in the theaters.

Nick Cassavetes: Maybe the most overlooked actor of that period of time, he was just a genius.

Bryan Smith: Yeah.

Nick Cassavetes: Got a weird story. We were doing *The Notebook*, like right after that, we- after *John Q*, I believe that my next movie was *The Notebook*. And I, you know, everybody was like, "Hey buddy, now you don't have Washington in this film. What are you going to do?" So, we got this film and I read it and I was like, "Oh God, I can't believe I'm going to do this film." Because when I first got it, it was like: *You know, I love you. I love that you love me. I love that you love that you love me. I love you.* It just was [00:30:00] sappy, right? And I went to the studio and I said, "Guys, I mean, like, for me, when I'm really in love, all I ever do is fight."

They're like, "Do whatever you want, just please make this movie for us." So, I was like, "alright." They even let me hire Ryan and Rachel, and were very sweet about it. But I had a studio executive named Lynn Harris was very, very smart. And a producer named Mark Johnson, who is legendary, came up with Barry Levinson. And they were very, you know, the movie had been with Jimmy Sheridan, and had been with another director, had been with Spielberg, and they hadn't been able to get it the way they wanted to.

So, of course they went with the discount version of me, and the idea was that the people that had been working on it all this time, probably correctly so, felt they knew the material better than I did. But you know, I've always had an over belief in my ability. So, I started digging in, and it became a very performance-oriented piece. I get to work with Jimmy Garner. I got to work with Ryan and Rachel and- [00:31:00] and it was what I wanted to do.

My editors, Alan Haim, at this point, he doesn't like anything, but he was like, "Hey, we might have something here." So we'll cut it together. And the studio execs looked at it and they were like, it's a good film, but I didn't even cry.

I was like, "Is the whole point of the movie just to cry?" And they're like, "Yes, you fucking idiot." I was like, "Oh, I'll be right back." And I went back in with Alan. We did a day's worth of work, and after that does the cut that you see in the movie right now. And how you do that is just, you know, through breadth of experience, and then just make terrible things happen one after the other, and just don't let up until people run from the theater screaming and yelling.

Bryan Smith: {laughs} You did make people cry though. I mean, I mean, I know people that-

Nick Cassavetes: Man, I saw the, I saw the first cut and I started crying and I was like, "This is fucking stupid, so egotistical to be crying at your own work, oh my god!" But you know, it was, it was a great story, and the kids were great and the old guys were great. Everybody [00:32:00] kind of, you know, it was a wish fulfilment movie, everybody wants to be loved so much that, you know, you spend your whole life with them and hopefully die in the same bed as them.

Bryan Smith: Were you surprised by the reception of the film, and eventually the cult status that it reached? Because, I know my kids were just watching that. I mean, they had the DVD and they were watching it almost on repeat, for like six months to a year after the DVD came out.

Nick Cassavetes: Well, funny things, we were going to release it. New Line, god bless them and god bless the studio executive- he runs Warner Brothers now, his name was Toby Amara, and god bless him, he really got behind the film and, you know, what they do is they- everybody in the film community, when they have movies they have dates. Like, you get them, like, six months out, and then you prep for them and you do your advertising, and the publicity, and all your marketing and stuff like that.

And it's, they're very important, and you can't move them because they mess up everything. Well, [00:33:00] on our date, we were free and clear except for a week before we opened Mike Moore, god bless him, released *Fahrenheit 9-11* on the same day as us, and he did like \$7 trillion his first week, and we did, I think, like \$6 million. Considered disaster.

Right? Just like everyone was like, "Well, sorry Nick. It was a good film. We just got unlucky, bla, bla, bla." But you know, like the little edge and this- the reviews came out and they slayed us and they're like, "Nick Cassavetes is like, his father should be embarrassed. This movie's like cotton candy, and sacker any sweet, and bla, bla, bla." Kind of just like, were bitchy about it.

You know, I basically didn't like it, but second week we, you know, you're supposed to lose 50% and we did another \$6 million. And then the next week we did another \$6 million, and we played for 11 months in a row. And so it never was- we never thought of this kind of like a hit movie until much, much later.

And I think the part where it, like, came to [00:34:00] me, what we had was... Buddy of mine calls me up, he goes -and this, you have to remember this was in 2002- he's like, "You ever heard of Facebook?" I'm like, "No."

"College thing where college kids can talk to one another." I'm like, "Yeah, so what?" He said, "Your movie just got voted the greatest movie of all time. I said, "Well, first of all, that's wrong, and second of all, wow, that's, that's kind of cool." And then when that happened all the kids went to see it, and we actually started doing more business. And then about two or three months later, god bless him, Clint, Clint Eastwood is on NPR radio, and it's going to be Oscar time. And of course I thought did, at least our composer and our cinematographer should have been recognized for the movie as well as the actors.

We weren't like, we were not even close, but they're talking about the best films of the year with Clint. They're like, "What do you think the best film is?" And of course they're talking about the nominees. He goes, "The Notebook. It's the best film by far. Best film I've seen a few years."

And the guy was like, "Come [00:35:00] on, get out of here. Come on." Nothing. That's the best film.

Bryan Smith: Wow.

Nick Cassavetes: And after that, they picked that up. Everybody ran with it, and we got a little job from it. So, and god bless him, you know, god bless you, Clint, to be sweet about a film like that.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. Well, and he's, I mean, he, he's done some thrillers over the years, and he's obviously, you know, a Western guy from a long time ago. But as he matured and as a filmmaker, *Bridges of Madison County*, you know, he has that sensibility for romance. And I think what *The Notebook* did was it really made romance movies kind of, and this was like an epic drama as I viewed it.

I mean, it spanned over many years, and... but it really made romance movies accessible to all ages. And that's what was so remarkable when I was observing my kids getting excited about, I mean, there were teenagers at the time, young, young teenagers like getting excited about *The Notebook* and then *I'm*, it's a movie that I can watch with them.

Nick Cassavetes: Well, I appreciate it. You know, like it's weird cause I'm like a big, [00:36:00] tattooed, kind of like weird, rough and tumble guy. But, you know, I think no matter who we are, at least me, I believe in apple pie. I believe in, like, to love, I believe in, like, one person and, like, men being men and girls being girls and like, you know, fulfilling the promises of love.

And I think that's dope. Everybody's far too cool to make a movie like that, but underneath it all there's some cool, there's some real cool shit that the movie represents.

Bryan Smith: So, let's go back to your acting days. And I know you're not done acting, but you know, your early acting days in the 80s, starting with *The Wraith*. And I watched this film recently and, I was struck by how it is a cult classic. I mean, this is something that I never saw at the time, and I think that's sort of one of the foundations of any cult classic movie is that nobody, you know, it didn't have a big audience at the time, but later on it becomes something completely different than what maybe the director intended it to be.

When you got [00:37:00] involved with that project, what did you understand the movie to be and what type of impact it would have on 80s culture.

Nick Cassavetes: I, I swear to God, I never thought about that. Like, it was kind of the big hot shot movie to get, like everybody wanted to get into that movie. And you know, back then we were like in auditioning three, four times a day, just going around and trying to get jobs.

This was a very, very, prestigious at the time, like, job to get. And, I was delighted. The director was- I'm still friends with the director to this day. He's one of my closest friends, Mike Marvin. And it's weird because, you know, Charlie was on the movie, and Matt Barry's on the movie, and Dave, Sherilyn, Jamie Bozian and Chris Nash and all these guys that I'm friends with -Clint Howard- to this day, you know, we became very, very close on this movie.

What happened was nobody thought it was, like, campy and cultish when we were doing it; we all thought we were playing it straight. But as the movie turned out it became a, you know, it became [00:38:00] very stylized, And when it came out, it was considered like a little too stylized. And then, later on, you get *Bob's Drive In*, or whatever, and all these kinds of other shows.

They, they went back and nostalgia looked at it, and everybody likes the film. I look back at my performance and kind of cringe.

Bryan Smith: {laughs} Well, I mean, it is, it's, that's what's so great about it too, is that there's, there's some cringe-worthy aspects to the film, including the clothes, but that's just part of the, that's just the era.

Nick Cassavetes: Nobody escaped the eighties, brother.

Bryan Smith: No, I was there too. And you know, I was taking notes, getting ready for this interview, and one of the things I wrote down was "through line," and I listed all of the actors that I would see pop up in project after project that you were involved in, even if you weren't directing the film.

Nick Cassavetes: Yep.

Bryan Smith: But, you know, Clint Howard is one of those people.

Nick Cassavetes: Love him.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. And there's just like, let me, let me find the, the list that I wrote down here... [00:39:00] okay. Clint Howard, Harry Dean Stanton, David Thornton...

Nick Cassavetes: One of my dearest friends in the world, I miss him

Bryan Smith: ...and Chris Kincaid, obviously...

Nick Cassavetes: The greatest.

Bryan Smith: And it's so cool to, to look at a filmography and see that there's a circle of people that love each other, basically. And they're there because they trust each other. I mean, I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but this is what I'm getting from your filmography, is that you have this inner circle of people that you enjoy working with. And Clint Howard must be one of them cause he shows up in a lot of your films.

Did you intentionally make that happen as a, as a filmmaker is like, "Hey, you know what, I'm going to write this part for Clint, or Chris, or David, or did it happen less intentionally and subconsciously?"

Nick Cassavetes: It's, it's less intentional. It's, it's more along the lines of, *Oh God, I have a really tough part. This is going to be this, and this is, I'm dead.* I don't know if I like, *Oh, shoot, I know I'll put* [00:40:00] *Christian it, I'll be fine.* Or like, *Oh shit, this is Dave Norton, he'll crush this.* You know, and...

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: ...for me having actors that are wonderful character actors that turn your okay words good, and your good words great is real currency, real, real currency. And I don't mean to talk about people in such a crude way, but it's the way you look at it when you direct, you're like, you want your stuff to be real and, you know, jump off the page, and be excited for people to watch, or at least interesting.

That's the beauty of great acting. They just, they just make stuff so much better and it's just, it's, it's weird because there's no real formula for how they do it. It just, it's just their true innate talent.

Bryan Smith: As you may have noticed, there are great resources and advice mentioned in all our episodes, and for many of them we actually collect all of these resources for you in one easy place: our [00:41:00] newsletter! You can go to dreampathpod.com/newsletter to join. It's not fancy. Just an email about each week's episode, featured artists, and resources to help you on your journey. Thanks! And now back to the interview.

How did you get involved in the *Alpha Dog* project? I watched that movie last night, and I think the last time I saw it was when it came out.

Nick Cassavetes: Right.

Bryan Smith: And it was...

Nick Cassavetes: How does it hold up? I haven't seen it for a while.

Bryan Smith: It holds up well. I mean, it's so intense, and I think what I noticed about it today as, as a parent with kids that age. It was even more intense watching it now, because it's like you're watching this, you know, fucking train wreck about to happen. It's just crazy. And it's a true story too, so that even makes it more horrifying. But how did you find the project?

Nick Cassavetes: My kids, my two oldest kids... My oldest kid, Gina, was... they went to school with these guys. She knew Hollywood, she'd -Jesse James [00:42:00] Hollywood was the guy- and she knew that those people- and my younger of the two older daughters, Sasha, was in the same grade as Ben Markowitz, who was played by Anton Yelchin, not Ben Mark Woods.

Nikki Markowitz, who was played by Anton Yelchin. So, when that went down, I heard about it, and then I'm living in Woodland Hills and picked- this kid Hollywood, who was the one that ordered the murder in the, in the movie. Went on the lam, was out of the country, or was someplace, but he became urban legend.

All the kids would come over and say, "I saw him at the comments," and the other ones like "I hear he's in this, and I hear-" It's like, "Alright, hold on. What the hell is going on? Tell me this fucking story because I gotta hear it." So they pull me. And as you could probably would understand, it's an open investigation.

One guy's out of the country, and missing the rest of the kids are in jail, one facing death penalty, and the worst one is the kid that got killed. Nobody wants to talk to me. It's an open [00:43:00] investigation. They think that, "How can you be sensationalizing this? You're making money off that." I was like, "Let me just get to the bottom of the story."

And I'd go around and I tell him like, "Hey guys, I'm making the movie, ike, you can either talk to me or I can make it up. One of the two." And one by one, people would call me, and

everybody's story was different. I mean 100% they were like all kind of, like, building the story that there was no responsibility to them, and then everybody else did everything.

And then my researcher, McMahan and I went up to Santa Barbara, which is where the murder really happened. And we talked to this DA up there, and we noticed -gosh, I hope he's not still working there- he was a bit of an alcoholic, and he would be- and so we couldn't get the information we wanted and he'd be dealing it out. So, we kind of kept talking right around lunchtime and we started getting squirrely, and squirrely, and squirrely.

And finally he goes, "You know what? All the stuff's in there. Just, I'll be back from lunch, don't take anything, blah, blah, blah. Like, just go in and look at what you need." Which was a complete violation of the law. [00:44:00] And we went in and we saw everything, from the autopsy photos to the, you know, the arrest reports, to everybody's interviews and stuff like that.

So we got a real good idea of what really happened. And that, building it on two people, the reason I took the interviewer kind of a convention is kind of, that was my experience. I would go and I would interview these people, and they'd start talking to me, and I'd get information in bits and pieces.

Finally, Hollywood's dad -Jack Hollywood- who was, you know, he does what he does for his line of work, but he's a great guy. And I wouldn't have talked to me if my kid was missing. He talked to me and between the- I really never did get a lot of permission from the Markowitz's. They were very emotional, and reasonably so.

I mean, you know, understandably so. They never really fully trusted my motives. But you know, I spoke to to them a lot [00:45:00] and tried to like, you know, assuage their fears, and I think that I represented their son and, if it wasn't a hundred percent accurate way, but a sympathetic way and the best I could. And that's kind of how that happened.

Bryan Smith: So there was no original work to adapt. I mean, this is an original screenplay then.

Nick Cassavetes: Oh, that was full from- it was based on, on the weirdest part- okay. So, we're making the movie, right? So, I write the script and it's kind of a tailor-made script. The kid dies, the other kids get arrested, and one kid disappears. And by the way, we never saw him again. Goodnight folks, drive home safe.

We're shooting the movie and we have to shoot with a break over Christmas, it's one of those times. During the Christmas break my kids call me and go, "Look on CNN." They have arrested the kid. So, now my story is completely different, I have to rewrite the ending of the story like that. Everyone's like, "Well, that's going to cost money." And...a big fight. It was, it just was, it was a nightmare.

But, you know, it was a weird [00:46:00] movie, that the kid actually got caught, maybe even partly because of the movie.

Bryan Smith: Oh, because of all the attention that was being placed on the story, at the time, during your filmmaking process?

Nick Cassavetes: It was awful. I never... I didn't root for the kid to get caught, you know? And I understand that, you know, he did something wrong. And I went to the trial, and the kid looks at me and he's like... like- I'm like, "Dude, you're in jail. Shut up." But, you know... it wasn't my intention to get him caught. I feel horrible for the dad.

I feel, you know, kind of the opposite for the parents of the child was murdered. It's tough. It's just tough, man. But what was interesting to know for me is like, there's all these little kids, little spoiled little shthead kids, they're not tough, but they want to act tough.

Bryan Smith: Yeah.

Nick Cassavetes: They get themselves in real bad situations and parents ain't paying enough attention, so...

Bryan Smith: That's interesting. that you make that comment about them wanting to be tough, but they're not tough, because you really [00:47:00] captured that with the young actors. And I forget his name, who played, Jesse James Hollywood's basically slave who later became the murderer...

Nick Cassavetes: Oh, Shawn Hatosy, one of the greatest actors in the world. Shawn is another one that's in almost every one of my films.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. And I'm looking at this performance and, and he's so vulnerable and sad, as he's doing all of these things for, you know, the main antagonist in the film. But then flips on a switch and becomes, you know, a monster at the end. And not to get too much away if people haven't seen this film yet, but...

Nick Cassavetes: Yeah, let me give it to you: the kid dies.

Bryan Smith: Okay. {laughs} Okay. There's the spoiler, the main spoiler. But that's something that, when you're not working from an original work to adapt that, that's your decision as a storyteller to capture. And is that something that you got through the interviews, or is that just a choice you made to make it more, well, just to make it a better story?

[00:48:00] **Nick Cassavetes:** Well, both. I mean, we had a lot of information through our kind of resources, and we went up to see the kids was Brian Boyd, he's in jail. We went to see.... oh, well, maybe I'm not, maybe I'm not thinking of the right kid. No, Ryan Boyd was the- I'd never saw him. I saw a different kid, Jesse, but I guess... then I didn't, I didn't meet the kid, but it was how he was described in an overwhelming majority of the information that I had.

So, you know, that's what you do when you write something. Like, I just wrote a story about Cus D'Amato and Mike Tyson. And they're like, "Did Mike really say that?" I'm like, "No, I didn't know what Mike says." Nobody knows. Like only Mike, and he probably doesn't remember what he said there. You just know that they were there, so your experience is: well, this happened, so it would be reasonable to think that maybe they were thinking something like this, but a lot of the time you're just making really good educated guesses.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. And your writing process, can you tell us [00:49:00] about that in terms of, what a day looks like for you when you are deep into, you know, whether you're writing *Blow*, which I watched the other night for the second or third time. Another highly rewatchable movie, I love that film; with Johnny Depp. But you, you know that you're going to write this film and, whether you have a deadline or not, what does that writing process look like for you? A day in the life of Nick Cassavetes?

Nick Cassavetes: Well, two different things. *Blow* happened to be the first time I ever got hired to write anything. It was Mike DeLuca and Tevye. Denny and I were kind of three guys that used to go out and raise a lot of hell together, and Mike suddenly got promoted to head of New Line, and -because he had done so well for Bob Shay- and he calls me and he says, "Hey, can you write?" And I'm like, "I wrote one thing before, but it was like kind of an exercise." He goes, "Well, I think- Can you do it? 'Cause I think I can get you 250."

"...What did you say to me?" He says, "Can you do a [00:50:00] fucking figure it out?" You know, and I'm so stupid. There's a book, right? There's a book about basically, so while times of George John, that was kind of like... how's the best way to put it? It just sucked and, but it had some factual stuff in there, and he said- he gave me an office. Now, it was in the Melrose triangle, and I'm so stupid back then, I don't know that I'm allowed to order furniture in the office, and I didn't have any money to get my own furniture in there. So, basically I sat in there on the carpet and, like, it was a kind of a cool thing to write.

I had met- what happened was Teddy said, "I want to do this movie, Nick, you've got to write it. I want Johnny to be in the movie." I introduced him to Johnny, and he took me to see George John and I met George. He was up in Otisville, New York, it's an FCI up there. And I talked to him, and George is kind of like... George and I, we missed- I love George, but he [00:51:00] doesn't fully appreciate me and- Whatever, we're just not the same type of people.

And it was- when the first time I talked to him, he was like, "I got lots of money here. You gotta get me outta here. This thing is all bullshit." Like this, just basic con artist shit, right? And then I went back the next day and Teddy's like, "How's it going?"

I'm like, "Eh, you know, I want the two 50 I don't know what I'm doing, whatever." And then the third day we started talking about his daughter, said, "Oh, my daughter never comes to see me." I said, "The daughter that you sold the car for to get a thing where you were free and clear, and now you're in jail for 20 years?"

He said, that, "Yeah, she hates me." I'm like, *OK, I got two daughters. I know how to write this thing.* So, that became like the fulcrum of the story of what I wanted to build out- nobody knew it. I wrote this, then one pass... turned it in; I didn't hear nothing. Now you understand, Teddy and Mike are like my two best friends.

Not- six weeks goes by; I'm sitting in that fucking office like, *I'm a fraud. This is over. I hope I can still get [00:52:00] paid...* I don't know wha-. I just didn't know the things that were going to happen to me, all I knew that it was, like, that part of my life was over.

Finally, Teddy calls me. He goes, "I just read it. It's the greatest thing I've ever read, it's the best first draft I've ever read!" I said, "What the fuck is the matter?" He goes, "I've been busy." I'm like, "You mother fucker!" Like this, calls you right after I go, "I couldn't call if he didn't call!"

So they decided to make a movie and... god bless Teddy, he was another guy that had a lot of magic to him, you know, just magic to him. He was full of shit in a lot of different ways and, you know, we were best friends, but he really was able to capture the spirit of fun of George Gentleman- I think that's what made the film so successful.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. What was it like to watch the film not being part of the shooting process? Just, just the screenwriter and seeing your work on screen.

Nick Cassavetes: You know, it's mixed. Being a writer- the best thing about being a writer is it's the only job I've ever had, or I even know of where, you know, like let's just say you- somebody owed you a [00:53:00] thousand dollars. He comes over and gives you, in like, \$5 bills. You don't need \$5 bills, you need \$100. So there's always something weird, like nothing ever happens a 100% right, but when you write, everybody does exactly what the fuck they should.

So, it's a very satisfying experience. So, as filmmaking is an interpretive art that directors do, and actors do when they're supposed to come and interpret it the way they are- they pick the parts they connect to, they change the part that they don't connect to.

And so, when I watched it, it's a mixed bag. Some of the parts are much better than the script. Some of the parts -eh- I wish that they leaned on that a little bit more, but all in all, it's a generational type of film. Johnny was spectacular. Penny was spectacular. Ethan Suplee was spectacular. The whole thing was just- it was a celebration and it worked real well for Teddy, and I was so happy for him.

Bryan Smith: Yeah, I mean, I think those, those types of movies and, and *Narcos* is another example -I don't know if you've seen that on Netflix- but the *Narcos* series, [00:54:00] there's something so fascinating about that world. It's so exotic and kind of exciting at the same time, and it puts you... I know Jean-Luc Godard talked about the power of the false where, and for instance, Tony Soprano is someone who's a despicable character, but you love the guy. And it's, it really puts the audience in a, in a conflicting situation where you're like...

Nick Cassavetes: David Chase is probably the smartest. That's, I think that's the greatest television show of all time: *the Sopranos*. If not, it's up there. But the genius of that show is, no matter how big and bad a motherfucker you are -I hope I could swear on the show cause I've been swearin' more and more- you're not a big shot when you go home. You're not a big shot at home, you just get the shit kicked out of you at home. Like, your family doesn't think- So, everybody could relate to it.

Bryan Smith: Right. Yeah, cause Carmella, you know, everybody knew who was the boss at home with the Sopranos.

Nick Cassavetes: And the kids didn't think he was anything, and it just, it [00:55:00] really reflected kind of- it was a great dialectic of violence versus just, you know, home.

Bryan Smith: Yeah, and I think you really captured it with Johnny Depp too. I mean, there's, there's this vulnerability of the family man, and the juxtaposition between his, you know, him as a family man and him as this big shot, you know, drug dealer; supposed to be scary. And it's those, those, I don't know, I'm just a sucker for that type of narrative, and you just did such a great job with it. Are you, are you being asked to write screenplays currently? I mean, is that something that people are seeking you out for because of *Blow* and other projects?

Nick Cassavetes: That's, well, kind of how I make my livin', you know. I, I've, I make a movie once in a while when they let me, and- but most of the time I'm writing original stuff or adapting some stuff.

Bryan Smith: Now, the movie *She's So Lovely* with James Gandolfini -speaking of the Sopranos- that was pre-Sopranos, right?

Nick Cassavetes: Yes, sir.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. So, what did you [00:56:00] notice in that actor James Gandolfini -very special man, you know, we all miss him- but what did you notice in him when you were making that film, if anything, that maybe gave you a glimpse into what he was capable of in projects like the Sopranos?

Nick Cassavetes: Well, Jimmy was a friend, you know, we were very friendly, and so we knew each other not professionally. He is a very private person, and I really liked the way he thought -he doesn't think like me, so I don't like it that much- but I liked that it was individual, and you could see that he was reflective and he definitely was considerate of everything that he had to do.

I mean that in the right- the most best possible way. And he always had a clear thought process, which made him great. And I mean, we used to joke around after he does *The Sopranos*, it's like, "When are we working again?" I'm like, "Fuck you. You're Tony Soprano. Your career is over." But it [00:57:00] wasn't, if you look at the film, like *The Drop*, I mean, he just is magnificent, magnificent talent.

And honest, you know, just honest. You know, there's a rumor about- I don't know this, this happened, but I heard it happened and I heard it from a pretty good source. Like, you get in a situation where there's a scene with two people and neither one of them back down. And then you play the scene out and then the director is like, "And then you say this, and then you say this..." But really in life, if there's two guys that don't back down.

It's going to come out in a lot of different types of ways. And they were doing a film called *Crimson Tide*, and it was Gandolfini's first day with Denzel, and they had an argument. And I've worked with both of those guys and I know them, and they're very authentic. And I heard the first day it was just a fucking fist fight, just pulling motherfuckers apart, like really going at it.

And both of them have two brains; one of them is like, *I hate that motherfucker*, and the other one is like, *that guy's a good actor, you know, that's what we're supposed to do*. And they resolved it, they squashed it, and they went back in and did the [00:58:00] film, which was a good film. And, but I, I, you know, it's that process that, that makes those two guys special.

Bryan Smith: And speaking of *She's So Lovely*, that was an original screenplay by your dad, John, right?

Nick Cassavetes: It was, it was a, a shorter type of piece of material. And here's the thing, like, I was off doing my own thing, you know, I never wanted to be John Cassavetes, that's the last thing in the world I ever wanted to be. I wanted some new, I wanted some new clothes, you know?

And, so I did my first film- and even before I did my first film, Sean Penn and my dad had talked about developing it into a movie, but dad was sick at the time, and dad talked about a lot of things, and Sean loved my dad.

And. After my first film came out, the producers were like, "Why don't we do that film?" And I said, "Well, I don't know." They said, "Well, we'll do it right away." I said, "Well, let me, let me talk to Sean." Sean, he wanted to do it, but he didn't know who I was. He [00:59:00] loved my dad, he didn't love me.

There's the old, the old adage: Cassavetes; great last name, bad first name. You know you have John, that's good. Nick, not as good. You're not like John at all, you're like Ashby. I said, "Well, Ashby's my favorite filmmaker, so, hey, there you go! Correct, that's great."

And we got along good. And I initially had had Patty Arquette playing Robin's role, and he wanted Robin to play it, and so did the producers. And I had to tell poor Patty she didn't have the part, and she hated me for years afterwards.

But Robin came on and then... So we have a part in the movie about two people that fall in love, they're crazy, all they do is drink, and then one guy does something really bad and he's kind of mentally unstable. He goes away for 10 years, and he thinks he's been gone a week, and he goes back to, like, find his girl, but she's married and has got three kids. So it's kind of a, basically in film speak, it's a love triangle.

But everybody knows Sean and Robin are married and everybody knows Shawn's a biggest actor in the world at that time. And like, who the [01:00:00] hell is going to be like, "Oh, I wonder who she chooses?" What? Who's that actor that makes you have that? Any of that?

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: So, they wanted me to hire Bruno Kirby, but then they were going to like- I was like, "No." And then Kevin Spacey was talked about, but they were going to do that David Ray thing after that. And then... John Travolta became available, 'cause he was doing the plant ski film and they had had a falling out.

So, I knew Travolta's assistant, because I went to the agent, they're like, "No, no, no. John Travolta, that's no, he's a- but he is on a big comeback now. He's not going to play second fiddle to Sean Penn." But I knew the assistant. I called her and I said, "If I get you a script, will you put it on his reading list?" You know, even though the agent told me to fuck off, she's like, "Sure, I'll do that." I said, "OK," and I literally drove to the Palisades and threw a script over a fence, not knowing where it would land or anything.

So, back then I'm a young kid with a bunch of, like, [01:01:00] stupid wise guy friends. A couple of days later I get a phone call, "Hi, Nick, it's John Travolta. I love your script." I'm like, "Fuck you, you fucking moron. Stop bullshitting." And he goes, "No; really, it's John." I'm like, "If you don't fucking stop I'm gonna fucking lose it." And he said, "Would you meet? I really would like to do your movie." I'm like, "Really?" He goes, "Yes, why don't you meet me at the peninsula, and we'll talk about it."

We go to the peninsula. John's amazing. He talks about it- talking about, like, how he just didn't like to be, like-, Polansky would give him line readings, and he couldn't work like that, and he was like this. I said, "There's not going to be any line meetings here. No chance. Everything's going to be perfect."

He goes, "All right, then I'm in." And then we started- we had a meal and he said, "You think we could have a reading?" Fuck. I just went from having him in my movie to, like, doing a reading to see if he's going to be in. I'm like, "Eh, of course." -"I see. So when?" I said, "Tomorrow at one o'clock." He said, "Great."

Now -oh god, this story... it's bad- now, I'm sitting in my office, it's like 11:30 [01:02:00] going to be reading at one. You know, like you're a director, you want to make sure everything is going to go well, and it's all going to be right. I get a call. I pick it up, it's Robin. They're having, she and Sean are having a fight, and I hear Sean like, "Fuck you! Quit the movie cause I quit the fucking movie like this!" Like then, "What's going on Sean?" -"This mother fucking bitch, she's trying to find out, blablablabla." I said, "I understand, I understand..." Then all of a sudden: *click*.

I went to go into the producer's office. I said, "Er... I think we might have a problem." They said, "What's happening?" I told them, they said, "What, are we going to do?" -they're French- I said, "I don't know." You get another phone call... more of the same like this. Finally -I leave out all the good parts- but finally I get Robin on the phone. I said, "Robin, I got an actor coming here at one-a-fucking-o'clock. I'm your director. You and Sean, get your asses down here." *Click*. Not hung up on, now.

Producers are in the room. They're like, "What? [01:03:00] What does that mean?" I'm like, "I really don't know, I just don't know." So, now it's like 20 to 1:00 and I'm like, *What do I say to Travolta when he comes in?* Just then at- they say, "You say, 'John, we are so happy to see you. We are very happy to have you on the film, you're going to be wonderful!'"

Travolta walks in 15 minutes early.

Bryan Smith: *Ugh...*

Nick Cassavetes: I say, "John, it's really nice to have you. You're going to be so wonderful in this film..." Like this. He goes, "Where's everybody, am I early?" I'm like, "Yeah, you're just a little early, let's get a cup of coffee." So, we go downstairs and walk. We started walking in a direction -I know there's no coffee places in this direction- but we just started walking.

He looks around, he goes, "Where the fuck are we?" I said, "Ah, it's the other way, man. Sorry, sorry, sorry." So we go walk, go walk back. By the time we get back Sean's grand Prius, like, just like you would watch on Ben to get out of that car. Dark sunglasses, her too, they walk up. Sean, his bullshit fucking Hollywood thing. Like, "John, how are ya?" [01:04:00] Robin greets me going, "I'm still not doing your fucking movie."

Bryan Smith: {laughing} Oh god... jeez...

Nick Cassavetes: So, they get in there and they read. Of course it's magical. John finishes, he goes, "How was I?" Sean, god bless him, he goes, "You were fabulous." He goes, "Then I'm in!" Like, we all- all is happy, and Robin's looking at me like- and like it all- it all worked out and that's how we got John in.

Bryan Smith: Well, it sounds like Sean and Robin's relationship off-screen really kind of prepared them for their relationship on screen with that, that film. I mean, that was the dynamic.

Nick Cassavetes: I don't know if that's fair... I think that if you do movies about drunks, you're going to have a lot of drinking for a while.

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: Movies about killer, you're gonna have a lot of dark thoughts while you're doing it. You know, it just-

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: ...goes with the thing. Sean, in my opinion, for a period of time... There's no one in the American history of cinema that could touch him.

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: Just on another level. And, you know, he could be a giant pain [01:05:00] in the ass, and I'm sure he'd say the same thing about me, but you don't make movies to make friends. And his performance in that particular film -and we were very close at during the filming of that- was, it was just supersonic. There's nobody in the world could have given that performance. Nobody. Nobody. Nobody. And, I, I just think he needs to be looked back upon for what he is. And that's, like, really the father of modern American actor. He's just that good.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. Yeah. He's legendary. And I have two, two final questions about this film; this particular film. I was looking at a YouTube clip of you talking about- Actually, no, it was you on *Entourage* talking about the scene where Sean jumps through the window. So, just for my listeners, Nick appeared as himself in a couple of episodes of the HBO series

Entourage. And so in one of these scenes, you're talking about Sean Penn [01:06:00] insisting that he jumped through a real plate glass window with no stunt man. Did that really- Is that, an accurate description?

Nick Cassavetes: A little different than what it was in But they, there's a scene where Sean goes crazy and he jumped through the window. And they had built a fake glass window, but it wasn't candy glass. It's not the kind of shatters in a million pieces and is safe. It's the kind that's fake... it's fake, but still there can be pieces that can cut you and you can get hurt.

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: John said, "I'm jumping through the window." And I said, "Actually, insurance says that they can't." And he goes, "No, let me explain it to you another way, and so you can deliver this message. I don't think I want to do the movie if I can't jump through the window."

Bryan Smith: Huh.

Nick Cassavetes: I'll let you guys just decide what you want to do, because I'm pretty sure about that." So, I went to the producers and they're like, "No, it's insurance! It's impossible!" And Sean said, "Okay." [01:07:00] And got in his car, and they're like, "No, you know what? We've thought it over and, well, you can jump through the window." But they took a big risk -they were French- they took a big risk, because if he had gotten hurt, it would've been really bad. And thank god nobody got hurt.

By the way, young directors out there, that's irresponsible filmmaking. You shouldn't do it. I did not know what I was doing back then. I was too young and stupid. But, yeah, anytime anybody gets hurt on anybody's show it's the director's fault period.

Bryan Smith: Yeah.

Nick Cassavetes: So, I don't advise it, but he jumped through it. He had a couple of little cuts and bruises, but, you know, he was very happy about it. And, you know, I think that we developed a kind of, a little bit of trust, at that particular moment. It worked for the film.

Bryan Smith: And the ending of the film. It definitely -and I don't want to give away too much in case somebody wants to go back and watch the, this film, because it really is worth going back and, and renting or purchasing. It's available on [01:08:00] iTunes and Amazon. Were you getting any pushback from producers or from test audiences about the ending? Which is definitely an art house cinema ending.

Nick Cassavetes: Well, I was sensitive to the ending because that's what, like, dad, when he gave the script and it was like a 28 page script, and then I wrote the script. I wrote it out to be 100 page script, and I think I, I knew dad well enough to copy his style and his intention pretty good. So, but the end was definitely always John's, you know?

Bryan Smith: Yeah.

Nick Cassavetes: We had French producers, but we were distributed by Miramax back then, and Harvey. And Harvey Weinstein... I'll say this about him. You know, he's got a lot of problems now -and, deservedly so- and he was a real cocksucker to me. But he loves movies and he was, and he, I'll give him credit for, like, he loved movies and he put a lot of movies out. And he actually was smart about some of them, but he wasn't smart about this film. And he thought this film was a comedy.

He wanted it to be a romantic comedy. And he got [01:09:00] into Sean Penn's head, like, Nick doesn't know what he's doing, blah, blah, blah, and didn't help when we went to a test screening. And I had never been to a test screening before, and we tested the movie and we got like a 17, and I was delighted. I'm like, *I can't believe 17% of the people like this film, it's so dope.*

But they were not amused, and he convinced Sean to recut the film, to try to make it a little bit more comedic and put funny music in it. And I just hated it, but it was nothing I could do. I wasn't the most powerful person in the scenario, and the French producer let them do it. And then died a few years later, and I really never got a chance -I was so pissed- I never got a chance to tell him that I forgave him, and you know, it's just a movie. So, what? But... I think you were talking about just the end of the movie?

Bryan Smith: Yeah, just the pushback that it- 'cause I mean, just as a, as an audience member who was looking for a payoff at the end, that is kind of your traditional [01:10:00] three act structure, conflict resolution at the end. You know, it gives you the art house ending. It doesn't give you the Hollywood ending.

Nick Cassavetes: I don't think it's art house, man. I think, like, it's authentic.

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: If you love somebody more than you love somebody else, it don't matter if you have three kids to them.

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: Like this- and, like, I had people stand up and test like focus groups and say, "This would never happen! A woman would never leave her children!" And I said, "Lady, people kill their kids. Where the hell you know what you're talking about?" You go with the one that you love, and that was- remember I said we have point of views for the film?

Bryan Smith: Yeah.

Nick Cassavetes: So another ending was impossible. If that is the POV for the film, you have to go back and reconceived the whole film.

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: There is another version of that film where she says she does something reasonable or the guy dies or something, you know, traditional, like, like some bullshit Hollywood ending. But really the traditional ending is: she loves the first [01:11:00] guy, and

she goes with him. Years later, I would make a movie called *The Notebook*, and it was the same dynamic: Noah and Allie.

And then there was James Marsden who came in who was rich, a super nice dude, who loved her just as much as Noah did, I think. And she chose Noah. Why? Because he got there first.

Bryan Smith: Hmmm.

Nick Cassavetes: Your first love is the best love, it's the one you make all your promises to. And if you make some of the promises to a second love, they're real, but they don't trump the first love. You still have those outlying promises there, no matter how much, you know, you've wrapped that up. So, that was the reason this one- when Rach said, "Why do I go with him instead of the other one?" I said, "He got there first, you know?" Not to mention he has more screen time and the audience wants him to go with them, but...

I think that that ending is absolutely great. The problem I have with that film, it's my own film, is that like when they're fighting on the grass and there's funny music and everyone's [01:12:00] going, *isn't this cute?* It just drove me fucking nuts. I- it was a different cut. I had a lot of- it was a lot, I thought it was a lot slicker, my version, and Harvey promised that I would have a cut, and then he -whatcha call it- backed out on that too.

Bryan Smith: I find it- You know, that's interesting, because I did notice that discontinuity a little bit. Or incongruity is what I would call it in that scene, because it's high drama and you know, it is the very moment when she's leaving everything behind and it does kind of get a little bit comedic, you know? So, but that, that was Harvey Weinstein's contribution or...?

Nick Cassavetes: That was Harvey Weinstein, and it was done by Sean Penn.

Bryan Smith: Yeah.

Nick Cassavetes: I don't think anybody goes in thinking, *let's fuck the film up*, and I'm sure that it's my second film and everybody thought, *we can't trust Nick, he just got a 17 on his test screen*, but they were messing with a film, which is still the last movie by John [01:13:00] Cassavetes. You know, and they should have, they should have treated it better and trusted me. And that's my opinion and everything, and every- it's all opinion right there. But, you know, parts of the movie were phenomenal. Sean's performance was phenomenal.

Bryan Smith: Agreed.

Nick Cassavetes: Robin's too. You know, I mean, like it's just a supersonically good film. It's too bad it got screwed up by people that I don't think have bad attentions, but they got- they had a different point of view than me, and they didn't realize that you can't mix point of views.

Bryan Smith: So, are you able to go back in and do a director's cut of any kind, or are- legally are you prevented from doing that?

Nick Cassavetes: I actually legally am... He's mandated to give it to me, but he never did. And that's cut. That's cut on- that's film and I can't get to the film, so no one's ever allowed me to do it. I wanted to do it as like a... it was 97/ 2017 I wanted to do a 20 year version. They were like, no. No. It's like, all right, but, you know, I mean, it's hard to get to [01:14:00] Harvey right now, so there you go.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. Well, now in terms of your character acting there, there's a couple of performances that I wanted to ask you about. One, your performance in *Face/Off* with Nick Cage and John Travolta. Dietrich Hassler... a classic, I mean, just a classic character acting experience, I would imagine. And, and also Tattoo Joe in *The Hangover Two*. How did those- how did you find those parts, or how did they find you? And what do you get from those experiences in terms of, you know, your professional aspirations? Is this- are these just fun, little things to do to kind of kill time, or are you, are you really seeking out these types of professional experiences to round out your whole career?

Nick Cassavetes: It's a complicated question. Back then, both of those parts came off, very accidentally. I couldn't get ahold of Travolta to do the ADR I needed to do on [01:15:00] *She's So Lovely*, and I couldn't find him and find him. And finally I found out he was on set, and that was- so I was going to go talk to him in person. So, I showed up on Woo's set and John saw me. He said, "Oh, you're fantastic, you'll be in the movie." I'm like, "No man, I just have to talk to John." And he was like, "No, you a genius. I wouldn't need you in the movie." I'm like, "No man." And so we finally, John said, "Come on, be in the movie. I'll be your AP." I said, "All right, all right, I'll be in the movie."

I thought I was going to be in for a day, and I was in for a lot longer than that. And the part was being Travolta/Cage's best friend as a criminal, and that wasn't a big stretch for me. This whole character arc was that he hated cops, you know? Wow. I was, it was not a hard, it wasn't a stretch. And, it was a, it was a fun performance and, you know, I shaved my head, and we put in- You know, I've never been in a film where they had so much money to spend and put you in wardrobe.

And I was like, "Hey, I need a black evey." And they're like, "Cool."- "I need a neck thing, that..." -"OK, cool." They just let me do whatever I wanted to do. [01:16:00] And it just kept getting bigger and bigger. It was very strange. Kind of like John said about, my old man had a movie he did called *Dirty Dozen*. And, back then, you know, they had Charlie Bronson, and Lee Marvin, and Jim Brown, and Telly... and they had just, everybody in the movie.

And dad got cast in the movie, and he had like one line. But he loved Bob Aldrich, which was the director, and I love John Woo. And there would always be some sneaky, little fucking shithead thing to do, and I'll just say, "Who's going to do it?" And all those guys are protecting their careers going, "No, no, no. Not me, not me, not me." Johnathan: "I'll do it!" And pretty soon he had- the whole fucking movie got nominated for Acad- Best Supporting Actor in the movie, just by doing all of the shit that everybody else didn't want to do. And John just kept giving me stuff to do, and giving me stuff to do on it. It was a lot of fun. The, the other movie was a lot simpler.

Bryan Smith: *The Hangover 2?*

Nick Cassavetes: *The Hangover 2*, which Liam was unavailable to do some additional shooting that [01:17:00] Todd - who's above- {mic interference}

Bryan Smith: So, Todd- Yeah, you cut out a little bit. You said, Todd had asked you to do it?

Nick Cassavetes: Yeah, Todd Phillips, the director, asked me. I said, "Todd, are you, are you serious? You would really think the audience is going to be delighted to lose Liam Neeson and get me?" He goes, "Nah, it's going to be fine, whatever, blablabla." Okay. And you know, I look like a tattoo guy, whatever.

The rest of the movie shot in Thailand. I shot it in, like, Burbank on those, on a soundstage... Burbank. And Todd's very clear about what he wants, he's a genius. I think he's gonna probably, when it's all said and done, you know, rewrite the books. He really wants to be a director for the ages, and I think he's on his way. *The Joker* probably was the best film of last year. It's just, just ridiculous what he does.

But he was very clear with me: "I want you to do this." This, it was the easiest acting job of all time. I was in and out in like an hour.

Bryan Smith: Well that, that [01:18:00] performance, even though it was a short, short lived, and I've seen that- I've seen the whole *Hangover* series probably 10 times, and I'm not exaggerating, it's one of my favorite comedic trilogies. But your performance is just so classic, because you're, I mean, you're capturing the tattoo, the sort of, the trope of the, the tattoo artist perfectly, but you're also taking it to a very unique level where you're, you're giving a tattoo to a kid in this tattoo parlor, and talking so matter-of-factly about all these horrific things that the characters are doing the night before. I just, when I go back and watch that movie, and especially that scene, it's just, I think, *you're right. Todd Phillips is the fricking genius.*

Nick Cassavetes: By the way, when you've got the words -when you've got Todd Phillips' words- just say them. They're going to feel- they're going to be fine.

Bryan Smith: Right.

Nick Cassavetes: If you get Todd Phillips' words out of your mouth, you're gold.

Bryan Smith: Yeah, and I think there's [01:19:00] some- I've heard that the reason comics makes such good, dramatic actors, and they get nominated a lot for awards for their dramatic parts is because, I think, comedy is probably one of the more difficult things to do. So, if you can pull that off, I think you can, you can pull up straight drama pretty easily.

And same thing with Todd Phillips going from *The Hangover* series to *The Joker*. I mean, how masterful that was, that *Joker* film. I'm sure that his chops, you know, sort of honing his skills in the comedy world helped him do that.

Nick Cassavetes: I dunno. I just, I- when I saw it, I was shocked. I called up Todd, I said, "Best film of the fucking year, dude." And he's like, Nick, you know, like, we got there and I talked to a Joaquin and we're like, kind of dead. We're like in a fucking Marvel movie, you

know, and we're kind of just dead. And we just kind of thought to [01:20:00] each other, *Well, fuck it, why don't we just go for it? And whatever happens, whatever happens.*

And I understood what he said, because when your dead sometimes you just commit and you're, and- You know, that movie is nothing without Joaquin's dancing and, and Todd's encouragement, and the way his body moves and all those weird things. Like, you look at that movie it's very simple, but it's just executed... there's nobody could have made that movie. Only Todd could have made them movie that way, and only Juaquin could have given that performance. So, kudos to them.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. So, what are some current projects that you're working on that you're excited about? You talked about the Mike Tyson project.

Nick Cassavetes: Yep. Doing that movie with Anthony Hopkins playing Cus D'Amato, and I'm very excited about that. I have a film that I'm doing that, is about Philadelphia criminals and in Kensington that- You know, it was Bob De Niro ,and a lot of different great people are going to be doing, and I'm super excited about that. I can't [01:21:00] believe they're going to let me make that movie, it's phenomenal. I've got a bunch of stuff in the cooker. We'll see what happens.

Bryan Smith: Is most of it directing, or is it writing and directing?

Nick Cassavetes: The Bob movie has already been written, I'm just kind of working out with a guy who's a wonderful writer, named Anthony Thorne. The other movie, I wrote myself. But I'm always writing, you know. You get up every day, and you can always be creative.

Bryan Smith: Yeah. And not to get- to geek out too much on software, and that type of thing, but what program are you using or are you still using a shorthand to write screenplays?

Nick Cassavetes: It's- Final Draft is the easiest one. I love it. But, you know, when I first started, we wrote on typewriters with a lot of whiteout.

Bryan Smith: Yeah.

Nick Cassavetes: And the margins weren't set. So like, you know, anything that lets it come out easy, you know, then writing experiences, you get an idea... I still have a pen and paper next to my computer, because sometimes it's faster just to get the thing out. So many great ideas are lost between your head and getting them [01:22:00] down. They do, just you're thinking about 15 things at one time. They just spill. You know? You always can go back in and type them and make them sound important and brilliant and whatever. But Final Draft is a great, great software for writing scripts.

Bryan Smith: And if people are looking for you online and on social media, where, where can they find you?

Nick Cassavetes: Well, I don't do Facebook, because I don't really have any opinions that I want to share with the world. I'm on Instagram, I'm like -it's- I have a weird site, but it's just my own personal site with my daughters and my girlfriend. But that's, paul_smenus, S-M-E-

N-U-S, like small penis kind of sideways. And that's it. I don't, I don't really, I don't really go out and Twitter or do any of that kind of stuff.

Bryan Smith: Well, I'm really looking forward to seeing these projects that you're currently working on, and I want to just thank you so much for taking the time, and getting through these tech issues. And it was a frustrating at the beginning and, telling us your, your story.

Nick Cassavetes: Hey man, I [01:23:00] really appreciate you spending the time with me. I apologize. I'm kind of socially awkward, so I don't really like talk bad about myself too much, but this was very painless and I appreciate you taking the time to talk.

Bryan Smith: Hey, thank you for listening and I hope you enjoyed today's episode of the Dreampath Podcast. If so, I have a favorite ask. Can you go to your favorite podcast service and give me a rating and review? Your feedback is what keeps this podcast going. I appreciate your time and as always, go find your dream path.