Stavisky — the ultimate dream

by G.K. Roberts

From the beginning, Alan Resnais' Stavisky is a film of intricacy and delicacy, of intensity and sensibility. It is a difficult film but a moving one; it need not be fully understood to be appreciated.

It opens into a pale world of pastel colors, fragile buildings, and a feeling as silent as falling snow. The background music is rhythmic, lulling. Are we watching someone else's dream? But the quiet is just a little disquieting, the beat a bit too heavy. We are in a dream of sorts, but it is the ultimate: a dream of death.

Stavisky is nominally the story of "a scandal that rocked France" in the 1930's. Serge Alexandre (Jean-Paul Belmondo), formerly Alexandre Stavisky, a petty con-artist, is a powerful wheeler-dealer, gambler, and entrepreneur. With half the police and politicians on his back, he is able to defraud the government with a single-minded scheme. He is eventually exposed, leading to the destruction of the Alexandre empire and near civil war in France.

These are the facts of the case, but they are nearly incidental to the film. Resnais gives us a portrait of a man so preoccupied, consciously and unconsciously, with the concept of death that it effects every facet of his life. It is not surprising that Alexandre is so concerned; his father's suicide, one of many in the family, was inspired by his son's first street. But we are told that Stavisky is, in a sense, a dead man himself. He is a classic example of a split personality. "Get that small-time con man out of my life," he says, referring to his younger self, Stavisky. He is Serge Alexandre now, the rich, the powerful, the living cannot escape his fate. He craves are just things to throw in the back, distorted mirror images, and a feeling cumulating in the expulsion from the flow of time that is death as white, not black. The visions of Alexandre that are projected and overlay his consciousness are undeniably, with the concept of death that it effects every facet of his life. It is not surprising that Alexandre is so concerned; his father's suicide, one of many in the family, was inspired by his son's first street. But we are told that Stavisky is, in a sense, a dead man himself. He is a classic example of a split personality. "Get that small-time con man out of my life," he says, referring to his younger self, Stavisky. He is Serge Alexandre now, the rich, the powerful, the

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Alexandre is destroyed in the end, but it is the ultimate: a dream of death. The living cannot escape his fate. He bleeds a pale, pale pink. The background music is rhythmic, lulling. Are we watching someone else's dream? But the quiet is just a little disquieting, the beat a bit too heavy. We are in a dream of sorts, but it is the ultimate: a dream of death.

A Woman Under The Influence is a disturbing film, and a particularly difficult one to watch. Though director and writer John Cassavetes' intentions may well have been to create a portrait of an American marriage that was indeed menacing and disquieting in its revelatons, A Woman is distressing more in its failings than in its successes.

Cassavetes' style has long been to paint graphic, often harsh, renditions of the more intimate social contacts of life—in the process, providing an attention and focus on matters that far too frequently are ignored. Such was the case with Faces and Shadows. Unfortunately, the very concerns that Cassavetes deals with, and the ardous and rambling film-sticking technique he employs, tend to work against each other. In what has been called an "undisciplined" manner of letting scenes run on seemingly interminably and editing/outing most painstakingly, Cassavetes shifts an audience's attention away from a film's content and toward a somnious realization of just how grating and irritating is the presentation.

Posibly, in the case of A Woman Under The Influence, such a reaction is an expected one, calculated to magnify the unsettling nature of the theme of the movie. Certainly, as Mable Longhetti (Gena Rowlands) is portrayed as a woman going crazy because of the stifling confines of her (nominally blue-collar) marriage to Nick (Peter Falk), the stridency of the filming amplifies the mental chaos. Yet in terms of characterization, the same grating quality obscures what does develop, particularly in the characters of Nick and Mabel.

Similarly, excellent performances by Rowlands and Falk are lost, if not quite so completely; the rest of the cast, drawn greatly from the Cassavetes family and the Cassavetes/Rowlands/Falk axis of friends, contribute competent acting jobs (especially Hef's father, Fred Draper). A Woman, thanks somewhat, to the fact that Cassavetes and Rowlands are real-life husband and wife, is another in a small new breed of films with major woman's roles—Rowlands does the part more than justice, but the film cannot return the favor.

John Cassavetes has set his sights high with A Woman Under The Influence—the issue he is wrestling with is so simple a one. The potential is there, and, for sure, a measure of the role-revaluation that he attempts to imitate (quite) for men, and not just women, in a relationship does succeed. Sadly, the vehicle of the film itself weakens the possible cathartic effect of just such an emotional/sexual/romantic confrontation and challenge, because the more fails to provide the necessary and desired insight, and in turn fails to spark viewer interest in that truly disappointing aspect of A Woman Under The Influence.

A film buried under the influence

by Neal Vitale

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Wendy Waldman — up from Maria

photos by Roger Goldstein

If there were any lingering doubts as to whether Wendy Waldman had successfully established herself as a very individual songwriting/performing talent (quite apart from her first contributing "Vaudeville Man" and "Mad, Mad Me" to Maria Muldaur's debut solo album), last week's string of sell-out performances at Feinstein's convinced all. Accompanying herself on dulcimer, acoustic guitar, and piano, Wendy premiered several cuts from her soon-to-be-released third record (following Love Has Got Me and Gypsy Symphony), backed by bassist Jimmy Berenson and drummer Bob Mason. Judging from her live and recorded work, it may well be that Wendy Waldman has topped even her one-time benefactor, Ms. Muldaur, in her devoted fans' circles; she's little short of sensational.