Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Gena Rowlands R.I.P.

Elisa Leonelli · Thursday, August 15th, 2024

One of the most rewarding experiences of my long career as a film journalist was spending three hours interviewing Virginia "Gena" Rowlands at home for the October 1996 cover story of Venice, Los Angeles Arts and Entertainment Magazine, where I served as Film Editor for ten years.



Elisa Leonelli, Gena Rowlands 1988

A sweet encounter with Gena had occurred shortly before that at the indoor pool of the Hotel Normandie, where we stayed in Deauville while attending the film festival. I wrote an article published in the same October issue of Venice.



Gena Rowlands (c) Elisa Leonelli 1988

For the November issue of Venice, I wrote an interview with her son Nick Cassavetes, who had directed his mother in *Unhook the Stars* (1996), after directing her in *The Notebook* (2004).



Gena Rowlands, John Cassavetes (c) Elisa Leonelli 1982

I had interviewed the enchanting actress many times before, with her husband John Cassavetes who directed her in several movies, including *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). In 1980 for *Gloria*, after the movie won the Golden Lion at the Venice film festival; my text and photos were published in the Italian weekly Sorrisi e Canzoni, and in 1982 for *Tempest* directed by Paul Mazursky. I photographed her again in 1984 and in 1988 for *Another Woman* directed by Woody Allen.



Gena Rowlands (c) Elisa Leonelli 1988

The last time I saw Gena was October 21, 2014 during a dinner in her honor after a screening of *Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks*.

In 2018 I highlighted a Golden Globe moment when Rowlands presented and award to producer Michael Douglas for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* that won as Best Motion Picture Drama in 1976.



Gena Rowlands (c) Elisa Leonelli 1980

Here’s some excerpts from our 1996 interview:

“For women of my generation the usual pattern was to go to school, teach for a couple of years, then get married and have your children. It was not a bad way of life. Now the younger women are almost all working and active, and it’s harder for them, because of the struggle between a career and children. That’s going to be true with any generation. It’s something that can be dealt with, but not solved, there’s no perfect solution.”



Gena Rowlands (c) Elisa Leonelli 1982

“Whether you mean to or not, you probably bring your children up the way you were brought up. The circumstances of John’s and my life were so different, because you can hardly call an actor’s life a norm, but my attitude towards my children was much like my folks’. They’re all in the arts now and I’m delighted. I’ve been very happy in my career, and probably your best chance of happiness is in the arts, so I’m thrilled to see my children in it. It’s wonderful to be writing and creating, singing and directing.”



Gena Rowlands (c) Elisa Leonelli 1984

“I was impressed with Bette Davis, I saw her when I was a little child, and she fascinated me, because, like everyone, I was taught to be good and perfect and agreeable, while here was a person doing just the opposite of all of those qualities and getting away with it. So I was intrigued by her.”

“John believed that society drove women crazy, or what is called crazy, because there’s just no place to put their creative energy and there’s so many expectations placed on them. So he often dealt with that in his films.”

Rest in Peace, dear Gena.

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