

Zoe Cassavetes

For the daughter of two screen legends, the personal is professional.

It's tough enough trying to break into the movie business without anyone having any expectations of what you can accomplish. It's another thing trying to break into the business when you carry the genes of two film icons. Such is the case with former actress turned writer-director of the romantic comedy *Broken English*, Zoe Cassavetes.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword," says Cassavetes, 37. "I'm so proud of my family and all of their accomplishments and how they made films and art, so I think I was brought up in a very nurturing environment for making films, writing and being creative. People have such an expectation of what I'm supposed to do as opposed to what I want to

do. But, I'm doing what I want to do. It's a hard fight to make your own stuff, but I think it's more of my expectations for myself because everyone in my family knows how hard it is to do your own thing and make your own film."

She's right. If there were ever a family that knew the hardships of making their own films, it's the Cassavetes clan. Zoe's family

tree has quite the resumé. The patriarch—the legendary John Cassavetes—directed such classics as *Gloria* (1980) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974); mother Gena Rowlands is a three-time Emmy® winner and two-time Oscar®-nominated actress; sister Alexandra is an actress, director and musician; and brother Nick is an actor and writer-director who helmed the hit film *The Notebook*.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Zoe Cassavetes wasn't sure which direction to take as an adult in the entertainment industry. Although she got the writing bug as a child, she began her career as an actress, making her film debut when she was just a baby in her father's film *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971).

"I stuck my face in the cake. That was the best acting I ever did," she laughs.

As she matured, her mother gave her the ultimatum of either getting a real job or going to school, so she enrolled in The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Pasadena. After landing a few small roles in such films as *Noises Off* and *Ted & Venus*, Cassavetes and best friend Sofia Coppola hosted the short-lived comedy series *Hi Octane* on Comedy Central.

"I tried to be an actress for a while," remembers Cassavetes. "I just wasn't good at it and I didn't feel comfortable, but I went to a lot of classes. School in general wasn't my favorite thing. I always wanted to be a writer."

Embarking on her own career, Cassavetes made the big move from L.A. to New York City where she is currently based. The hustle and bustle of the Big Apple was where she found her true voice as a writer. Taking a day job at a luxury hotel to help support the high cost of living in New York, Cassavetes financed, wrote and directed a short film before quitting her job altogether and pursuing a career as a writer-director.

"I moved to New York with the notion that I had to have a job because it's kind of expensive [to live]," admits Cassavetes. "So, I worked for about five years in the hotel business. I made a short film, was able to finance it myself while I was working, and that was great. And I saved up, you know, not enough money to quit my job and I was like, 'I'm gonna quit my job and I'm gonna write this script!' I had no idea what script I was going to write, I was just sure I was going to write one."

That script turned into her first feature



Writer-director Zoe Cassavetes

"I'm probably writing the best thing ever," she says. "It's like, I'm so embarrassed this is my life, but you know what? It ends up being other people's lives, too."

A creature of habit, Cassavetes likes to write on a certain schedule, allowing herself the time each day to get things in order before sitting down and focusing on her work. "I like to wake up in the morning, have some tea, and go to the gym to try and get rid of some excess energy," she explains. "I write in my house, which is somewhat dangerous. I can't write unless my house is completely clean and all my errands are done."

"The first time you write a script is really fun, and every time after that is really not fun. I'm kinda crazy because I have to write in chronological order from beginning to end, and I like to write on paper first. I write a very detailed outline because I feel like I'm just going to get lost if I don't do that. So, if I think of dialogue I want or any details, I put it down starting with number one and going to whatever it is, going through all my scenes. I'll then take that outline and put it in the screenwriting software on my computer, which is the most genius thing in the world. I remember writing on typewriters as a kid and thinking that was fun, and when this program came out, it was great!"

A self-proclaimed eavesdropper, Cassavetes finds much of her inspiration while walking the streets of New York City. In a city where invading another's personal space is an art form all by itself, listening in on other people's conversations can be the perfect tool to uncovering the truth in the human condition, something Cassavetes strives for in her work.

"Some of *Broken English* is part of my story, some of it is what I've listened to," she says. "I love human stories. I love watching them. I love reading about them. That's what I'm interested in writing. I like writing about people with problems; I like writing about my problems." 🦋

film, *Broken English* (2007 Sundance Grand Jury Prize nominee), which stars Parker Posey, Drea de Matteo and Melvil Poupaud. The film centers on Nora (Posey), an unlucky-in-love, single, 30-something hotel worker in New York; and Audrey (de Matteo), her married best friend. After a round of dating disasters, Nora meets Julian (Poupaud), a passionate, live-for-the-moment Frenchman. Expecting disaster, Nora tries to avoid her relationship mistakes of the past by looking to break old habits, ending up in Paris in the process. It's no surprise that much of the film is inspired by Cassavetes' personal life.

"I looked back on my writings and found 50 pages of [a script I wrote] about this girl who left for Paris to find this guy," she remembers. "Even though I probably didn't use one thing out of that script, I started thinking about this concept. I was single and there was this constant joke of 'Do you have a boyfriend? Are you happy? Do you have someone?' And I was like, 'Wait. I have a job. I make good money. I have tons of friends. I live on my own. And I'm really happy!'"

After speaking to a number of friends who were "having the same kind of problems," Cassavetes decided to explore the concept of loneliness and love in her film. As she explains it, "I was really obsessed with feeling the honesty of being alone and the kind of humiliation that people feel when they feel like they can't find someone to love. I didn't even think of my movie as a romantic comedy, more a portrait of loneliness."

For a writer, exposing oneself emotionally is one of the toughest, yet most cathartic, methods of achieving truth in writing. According to Cassavetes, it's that "cringe factor" that brings out the best of her abilities.

"If I find myself cringing when I'm writing,



Parker Posey and Melvil Poupaud in *Broken English*

[Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures]

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