

# Ac-cent-u-ate the Negative

# JOHNNY

# STACCATO

## Scats the Blues

### Brian Light



In the late 1950s, Richard Berg was a hot commodity on the small screen. He was working on a Studio One production titled *Calculated Risk*, a teleplay he'd scripted about a pair of IRS agents starring E. G. Marshall and John Cassavetes. The head of production at Universal Pictures, Jennings Lang, approached Berg to see if he could persuade Cassavetes to do a TV series. Lang wanted to cash in on the success of *Peter Gunn* by doing a similar private-eye show. Berg wasn't interested; he wanted to develop his own concept. Lang was adamant, though, and Berg relented, suggesting the protagonist be a jazz pianist—with an existentialist bent—who moonlights as a detective. Lang didn't care what the dick did as long as Berg wrote the pilot and enticed Cassavetes to commit. So, Berg conjured up John Staccato (tersely titling the show *Staccato*) and lobbied to produce the series should it be picked up by the network.

In February of 1959, Cassavetes had completed reshoots on two-thirds of his first feature film, *Shadows*, but had yet to re-edit the new footage. He initially turned down Universal's offer to do *Staccato*, considering it an affront to his artistic integrity. He had by then appeared in dozens of television shows, but believed a series controlled by commercial sponsors was beneath him. However, it only took Cassavetes a New York minute to survey his dire bank book and reconsider. His wife, Gena Rowlands (three months pregnant with their first son) had terminated her contract with MGM, and being shackled to *Shadows* kept Cassavetes from taking on new acting jobs. Consequently, their joint income had dropped precipitously. *Staccato* offered Cassavetes the opportunity to wipe out his debts and finish *Shadows*.



In the series' pilot, "The Naked Truth", Cassavetes strolls under New York City's 59th Street Bridge

Once onboard, Cassavetes began flexing his muscles and locking horns with network executives. He used his leading man leverage to oust Berg as producer, bringing in Everett Chambers, a casting agent and old friend, to produce the series and run much-needed interference.

Not your standard-issue shamus, John Staccato gave up his musician's union card because "his talent was one octave lower than his ambition." He only moonlights as a private detective to "pay for the groceries." His real passion is music, among other esoteric interests. He collects Picasso etchings, quotes Oscar Wilde, and favors Chopin's mazurkas. At his *de facto* office, Waldo's—a Greenwich Village night club where he helms the ivories—he's always ready to dance with danger. He routinely deposits his gun and coat with the hatcheck girl before settling in for a night of cool jazz. Though sleuthing pays the bills, Staccato is more inclined to take on a case *gratis* if it helps an ex or an old friend. He doles out advice, even to those who don't want it, because he's always the smartest guy in the room; his eyes rarely smile when his lips do, and that smile often becomes a lopsided leer or slides into a smirk.

As the proprietor and over-protective *padre* in most of the episodes, Waldo (Eduardo Ciannelli) provides good-natured ballast to Staccato's cynical sensibilities. He often administers advice (seldom heeded) to his resident pianist, but on occasion Waldo delivers the goods, as Staccato acknowledges—in backhanded fashion—in "Tempted" (Episode #10): "Half the time the things you say don't make sense...but *man*, that other half."

The pilot episode, "The Naked Truth," crisply directed by Joe Pevney, sets the musical stage -- opening with Red Norvo (in his

only episode) laying it down on vibes, Barney Kessel picking it up on guitar, Pete Candoli swinging the trumpet, Red Mitchell and Shelly Manne supplying the rhythm—all West Coast musicians. Spelling Staccato on piano when he's tapped to solve a case is Johnny Williams, soon to be *John* Williams, the Academy Award-winning movie composer. In Berg's lone directing effort, he crafts a lean tale of Freddie Tate (Michael Landon), a young crooner being blackmailed by a scandal sheet.

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Staccato provides the voiceover as he strolls the Manhattan streets, often dodging traffic in true New Yorker fashion. On the way uptown to gather the dope on his first case, Staccato muses, "The fastest way uptown or down is underground," as he enters the Union Square subway station at 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The nimble camera follows him inside the car and then out onto the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street platform where he strides through Grand Central Terminal. As soon as Staccato takes on the case, Freddie Tate takes a knife in the back intended for the detective. Closing in on the blackmailers, Staccato crushes one to death with a truck and out-guns the other. Freddie recuperates from his near-fatal attack in Metropolitan Hospital, 97<sup>th</sup> Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue.

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This pilot episode set the geographical template for the series; interiors shot on a Hollywood soundstage effectively combined with second unit exterior locations shot in New York, providing a gritty *Naked City* realism. Many Manhattan locations—both iconic and nondescript—serve as the backdrop for Staccato's urban travails, often in night-for-night scenes with the only illumination being street lamps and neon signs. Bellevue Hospital appears in two episodes. The 59<sup>th</sup>



rehearse and rewrite for two days,” Chambers recalled. “There was a lot of rewriting. John wouldn’t read the script until the weekend and then there’d be a knock on my door and we’d start rewriting.”

—*Accidental Genius*, Marshall Fine

In “Murder for Credit” (Episode #2)—the first of five episodes he directed for the series—Cassavetes was already upending the format, steering the plotlines away from *Peter Gunn* and into *Playhouse 90* territory. Noir tough guy Charles McGraw plays Lester Prince—“Prince” to his fans—a jazz composer who, after a lengthy dry spell, now boasts a new chart-topping composition titled “Life.” When Prince gets dosed with arsenic, Staccato is pressed into service to finger the killer. The dialogue in this episode, and throughout the series, is a cross between beatnik banter and assorted pearls from the Hepster’s dictionary. Before he checks out, Prince calls Staccato, announcing as he’s keeling over, “I’m on a new kick...I’m far out, man...Man, I’m really gone!” McGraw’s broad-shouldered performance is adroitly undercut by Martin Landau’s vivid turn as Jerry Lindstrom, the soft-spoken music arranger driven to murder. Laboring in the shadow of Prince, Jerry spent the better part of his life creating “Life” only to sit by meekly as Prince wrested credit for the tune. “Will I die for this?” he asks. Staccato looks away, and merely replies, “I don’t know.”

In “Evil” (Episode #7), the second Cassavetes-directed episode, the tone grows darker as the series veers away from the conventional tropes of crime solving and leans more heavily on character observation and moral ambiguity. He also began to experiment with different stylistic devices, some of which he discarded (such as tracking shots and low-key lighting), while others became hallmarks of his later films. As Ray Carney astutely asserts in *American Dreamer, The Films of John Cassavetes*:

The narrative interest that emerges out of this haze of cinematic virtuosity...is Cassavetes’ attention to the psychological and social situations of his characters. His camera explores

Staccato displaying the gun he routinely leaves with the hatcheck girl at Waldo’s

Street Bridge provides a backdrop in three episodes, and the brownstones and four- and five-story walkups of Spanish Harlem provide local color in at least four episodes. Staccato even faces down a killer in the empty Polo Grounds stadium in northern Harlem. “Most of my job is walking and waiting,” Staccato intones as he navigates the city from Times Square to the nether regions of the boroughs.

Berg’s resistance to a “by the numbers” detective show was embraced and expanded on by Cassavetes. From the start, his low regard for the medium was reinforced by television executives who cautioned him, “Don’t get any big ideas. All you have to remember is that you’re just a twenty-four-and-a-half-minute fill-in between commercials.” Despite the sobering smack-down, Cassavetes quickly became invested in the show, using it as a training ground to refine his acting, hone his scriptwriting, and burnish his fledgling directorial chops. He often proclaimed, “I’m fighting to make this a good series, and each episode is going to be different. Just don’t judge us by the first few scripts. We’re working on better ones.”

Though many of the episodes were farmed out to studio staff writers, Richard Carr—a prolific television writer who co-wrote *Too Late Blues* (1961) with Cassavetes—was credited as the writer or story consultant on fourteen shows. According to Everett Chambers, Cassavetes’ fingerprints were everywhere:

“We would shoot for three days and then



Noir stalwart Charles McGraw, as the swaggering Lester Prince, gets “real gone” for Staccato



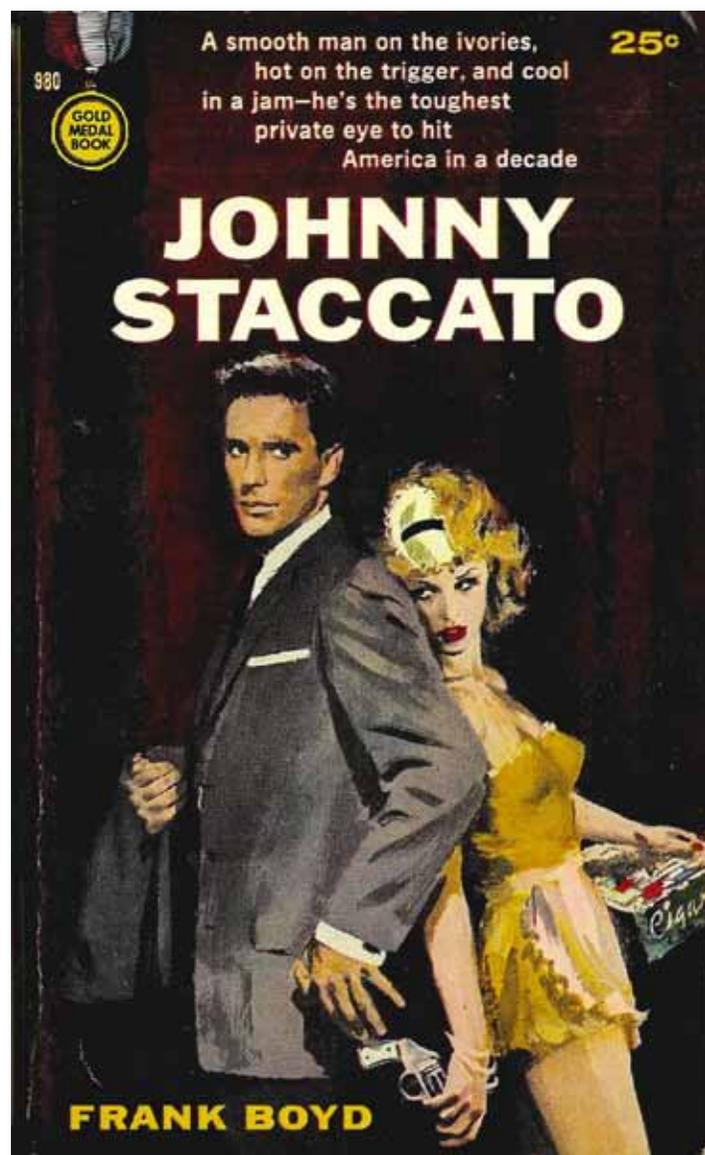
Staccato and Brother Conrad (Elisha Cook Jr.) confront the “Evil” in the bottle

faces, postures, and glances between characters almost at the expense of allowing viewers to forget they are watching a whodunit where clues and alibis are supposed to matter more than glances and facial expressions.

In this episode, Staccato slums the Bowery to expose Brother Max (Alexander Scourby), a storefront preacher who’s fleecing his flock out of their nickels and dimes so he can live large and keep his dame in diamonds. Cassavetes can’t resist nipping the hand that feeds him when Max cautions his followers, “Evil can attack you through your television sets.” Elisha Cook Jr.—in the first of his two episodes—is captivating as a skid row rum-dum and revolving-door reformer who frequents the Bowery Mission in search of salvation. In a beautifully framed scene, Brother Max boldly reveals his “evil” scheme to Staccato, while the “good” minister, Brother Thomas (Lloyd Corrigan), sheltered behind a stair railing, clutches the bars as if imprisoned. Bolstered by the revelation, Brother Thomas takes control of the podium and eradicates the “evil.” Striking camera-work is supplied by Lionel Linden (*Alias Nick Beal* [1949] and *The Manchurian Candidate* [1962]) in the third of eight episodes he shot.

“A Piece of Paradise” (Episode #13, Cassavetes’ third effort) begins with a low-angle shot of a well-heeled woman slinking into her uptown apartment only to be strangled, slowly falling into the frame. Structured as a conventional whodunit, the episode examines the complexities of human nature. Investigating the case is Lieutenant Gillin (Bert Freed) who, shades of Laird Cregar in *I Wake Up Screaming*, keeps materializing with a menacing glower—and whom Staccato learns was infatuated with the victim. The prime suspect, however, is Staccato’s old pal McGill (Walter Burke), a broken-down ex-jockey holed up at the Jamaica Racetrack in Queens. Relying on pure instinct, Staccato believes McGill is innocent, but after a savvy tip from Waldo he realizes he’s put his money on the wrong horse. The final scene in the stable, when McGill confesses, is set in deep shadows offset by key lights. Staccato’s face is partially illuminated as McGill struggles to move his twisted body—mangled in a near-fatal racing accident—in and out of the gloom as he recounts the murder. Burke’s performance is shot through with abject anguish. True to formula, Lt. Gillin is seen lurking in the shadows, taking it all in.

In Cassavetes’ fourth directing stint, Staccato gets caught in the crossfire between T-Men and counterfeiters in a nightmare-tinged crime thriller. “Night of Jeopardy” (Episode #19) hits the ground running, with a plot accelerated by brisk editing and a pulsating jazz score that bobs and weaves throughout the action. After gunning down a cop killer, Staccato becomes Topic A for paperhangers who believe he’s confiscated the killer’s package, which contains printing plates for counterfeit bills. Kingpin Eddie Wainwright, (Frank de Kova with a mug like a Mexican road map) gives him two hours to produce the “package,” or Waldo gets whacked. On the hook, Staccato’s first reach is for Shad (Frank Fenton, who appeared in six episodes), a chirping stoolie who can always be bought for the right price (“There’s not much togetherness in hoodsville,” he quips in another episode). The trail then leads Staccato to Bobo—an unctuous, jive-talking janitor, played with relish (and mustard) by Morris Buchanan. Their interaction in a cluttered, dimly lit storage room is obfuscated by a tangle of metal furniture frames and bed springs. Bobo comes clean after getting icepicked by Wainwright, and Staccato retraces his tracks to uncover the package, but the T-Men are one step ahead. They take out Wainwright’s gang—tommy-gun style—in a hail of bullets. In four of the





Orchestra and small jazz combos play theme, underscore, and sound cues

five episodes Cassavetes directed, not a single shot was fired. This one made up for all that absent ammo.

His final directing effort, arguably the best episode in the series, is “Solomon” (Episode #22), which overtly references the biblical “Judgement of Solomon” in an almost abstract three-character set piece. It opens with Staccato emerging from the subway at Wall Street to meet with the great criminal defense lawyer, Solomon Bradshaw (Elisha Cook Jr.). When he’s pressed to alibi Solomon’s client, Jessica Winthrop (played with schizophrenic zeal by Cloris Leachman), accused of murdering her wealthy husband, he insists on first interviewing her. Employing expressionist lighting (Benjamin H. Kline, *Detour* [1945]) and minimalist staging, the episode is constructed like a two-act play. Solomon presides over the first half and Staccato over the second, which takes place in a bare room, the only props a wooden stool and a knife. Exploring existentialism, pacifism, civic and moral responsibility, and homosexuality—themes uncommon for television at the time—the episode’s final reveal is startling. When Staccato violently provokes Winthrop, her icy stoicism disintegrates into seething murderous rage. “Solomon” is the second of three entries scripted by Stanford Whitmore, who later penned the pilot episode of *The Fugitive* (“Fear in a Desert City”), and three others from that series.

*Staccato* tackled difficult topics such as black-market babies (“The Parents,” Episode #3), a Korean War veteran’s PTSD (“The Return,” Episode #14), and suicide (“The Nature of the Night,”

Episode #5). “The Wild Reed” (Episode #12), originally scheduled to air Thanksgiving night, dealt with heroin addiction, but the network bumped it as unsuitable and the Christmas episode aired five weeks early. “The Unwise Men” (Episode #15) is a yuletide tale of a Macy’s Santa Claus (Jack Weston) coerced by his brother (a suitably oily Marc Lawrence) to heist the store payroll. Staccato foils the plot, of course, and returns to Waldo’s with a surreal flourish, breaking the fourth wall to wish the television viewers a Merry Christmas as a gaggle of children gather behind him singing “Silent Night.”

Other notable entries include “Viva Paco” (Episode #6), a Runyonesque tale of a scrappy Puerto Rican boxer and Spanish Harlem hero who gets framed for murder before a big prize fight. Staccato heads up to the St. Nicholas Arena at 66<sup>th</sup> Street and Columbus Avenue (razed in the early ’80s)—where the exteriors *and* interiors were shot—for the showdown between the boxer and the crooked promoter who framed him for the rap.

“Fly, Baby Fly” (Episode #9) takes a page out of Hitchcock’s play-book. Staccato is transporting a case full of rare gems by airplane, but the viewers know that the suitcase really contains twelve pounds of TNT. Set in the confines of the plane, the taut plot is charged with tight-wire tension; his assignment is to open the case when the flight approaches Los Angeles. Gena Rowlands co-stars as the intended target, which allows Cassavetes to flirt and play-act with his wife. Exterior and interior shots of the pre-Kennedy Idlewild Airport supply New York color.

In “The Poet’s Touch” (Episode #11), Staccato scours his home turf, Greenwich Village, to find a missing poet. “Is the beat generation really beat, or merely dead-beat?” he riffs as he surveys a crowded coffee house. He drifts in and out of poetry readings with avant-garde magazine publisher Scott Fenwick, played with beat-speak splendor by Mike Kellin. After learning the shanghai’d sonneteer trucks with rough company to experience life in the raw, Staccato closes in on two longshoremen, but not before scarfing a hot dog from a food cart under the West Side Highway. In the final showdown, the poet graduates from the school of hard knocks with flying colors.

Predating a 1962 *Twilight Zone* episode with a similar theme, “An Act of Terror” (Episode #23) features a ventriloquist with a split personality (Maurice McEndree) who is haunted by

**Staccato tackled difficult topics such as black-market babies, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, suicide, and heroin addiction.**



Staccato is backed by the West Coast elite: Shelly Manne, Pete Candoli, Red Mitchell, and Barney Kessel



Staccato on the NYC streets — Cassavetes and the second unit crew scout for exterior locations in lower Manhattan

a recurring nightmare of murdering his wife. Staccato tumbles to the truth and coaxes a murder confession from the dummy. This was the first of two episodes directed by gothic-noir master John Brahm (who later directed twelve *Twilight Zone* episodes); Ted de Corsia appears in a colorful cameo as the puppet maker.

In “Double Feature” (Episode #20), Staccato comes face to face with his doppelgänger in the form of a contract killer. The climax was a har-binger of things to come, as it concludes with Staccato killing “himself” in a spasmodic, over-the-top death scene atop a pinball machine.

Another perk Cassavetes negotiated when he signed on was approval of casting choices, enabling him to hire friends such as Lelia Goldoni, Paul Stewart, Tom Allen, and Marilyn Clark, among others. Curiously—especially given the social conscience on display in *Shadows* (concerning an interracial relationship)—there were virtually no black actors in the series. Even the musicians at Waldo’s were all white. The one exception was “Collector’s Item” (Episode #16), which featured an all-black cast of musicians and their friends. Staccato perpetuates an unfortunate stereotype here in a scene depicting him and the show’s protagonist, Romeo Jefferson (Juano Hernandez), enjoying a “backwoods” jug of corn liquor. “Collector’s Item” is Whitmore’s first effort; “A Nice Little Town” (Episode #26) his third. Whitmore, coincidentally, published a critically acclaimed novel in 1956 about an idealistic jazz pianist, who believes independence is the wellspring of creativity -- which could describe not only Staccato, but Cassavetes as well.

About a dozen episodes in, the network decided to lighten the show’s grim tone, making *Staccato* more soft-boiled by reshooting the opening sequence and adding “Johnny” to the title. The original credits open with strident horns arranged by Elmer Bernstein. As Staccato plays piano, graphic black piano keys cut into his profile like barbed wire. A new opening sequence aired at the top of episode #14. The horns were replaced with a percussive piano riff as Staccato’s eyes dart frantically in every direction; he barrels down a stairway then up an alley before

crashing his gun through a window. He squeezes off a shot as *Johnny Staccato* appears onscreen. This was precisely the persona Cassavetes was striving to avoid, and he was vocal in his objection. He may have found a sympathetic ear because the original opening reappeared in two later shows, “The Unwise Men” and “The List of Death” (Episode #21).

The rancor between Cassavetes and the sponsors (one being tobacco company R.J. Reynolds) continued to escalate, as Cassavetes’ expressed in a 1959 *New York Herald Tribune* article: “Sponsor interference has approached the level of artistic agony...What can I do? Fight, I guess. Either I will make all parties so unhappy they’ll release me from the contract, or they’ll give in to me and let me put a little guts into the series.” Later, in a 1971 *Playboy* interview, Cassavetes put a finer point on it: “... it wasn’t until I started to criticize them (the sponsors) publicly that they let me leave. I can be a despicable person.” So, after completing 27 of the contracted 39 episodes, Cassavetes was released from bondage, but he went out in a manner befitting Staccato’s character. At the conclusion of “Swinging Long Hair” (Episode # 27), Staccato watches helplessly as a humble Hungarian pianist is murdered in the street outside Waldo’s. When the mysterious man who ordered the hit escapes, Staccato laments, “Killing...I kill, they kill, it seems it never ends. Now the bald-headed man has to be found, and someone will kill him. But not me...I’ve had it!!” Marching off defiantly into the night, Staccato never looks back.

*Staccato*, which aired opposite the popular, corn-pone comedy *The Real McCoys*, struggled in the ratings, but it was quickly picked up by ABC for re-runs from March through September, 1960. That same year, it became a hit on the BBC and slowly developed a cult following in Europe. In retrospect, the best of the episodes, which challenged the period’s status quo, remain stylish and intriguing, and Staccato’s hyperkinetic, wise-cracking delivery always entertains. And then there’s the jazz! Like a lean 70-minute noir, the plot points don’t always hang together, but with a scant 25-minute running time defining each wild ride...who cares? ■