

REALITISM FILMS
PRESENTS

casablanca

The Man Who Loved Women

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY **HUBERT WORONIECKI**

FRANCE – 2016 – 89 MIN – 1.78



FILMS DISTRIBUTION

5 rue Nicolas Flamel - Fr-75004 Paris | Ph +33 1 53 10 33 99

www.filmsdistribution.com

Synopsis

When he created the Elite modeling agency in the 1970s, John Casablancas invented the concept of the “supermodel.” If names like Naomi, Cindy, Linda, Iman, Gisèle or Kate are part of popular culture today, it’s mostly his doing. He lived a life many have dreamed about, surrounded by glamour and beauty. Now, John Casablancas tells his own story.

Who was John Casablancas?

Born in December 1942 in Manhattan to parents from the Spanish industrial upper crust, John Casablancas spent his childhood between the United States and Europe. After studying in Switzerland, he began his career in Brazil, as head of marketing for Coca-Cola.

At the end of the 1960s, while living in Paris, his life was forever changed when in a hotel corridor his eyes met those of the young Jeanette Christjansen, the sublime Danish model for whom he left his first wife. It was then that he decided his life would be devoted to women and in particular the most beautiful of them all. In 1972 he opened the Elite modeling agency in Paris. While the modeling milieu was running out of steam and put at a disadvantage by an old guard using outdated methods, "JC" broke all the rules bringing

models into the world of "Entertainment."

Throughout his life, Casablancas rebelled against the system and rewrote the rules of the game. At his impetus, the careers of the most famous models were launched: Cindy Crawford, Iman, Stephanie Seymour, Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Gisele Bündchen... a very long list of household names! Nicknamed "Dr. Frankenstein", John Casablancas knew how to shape their beauty and career to turn the most beautiful girls in the world into "Supermodels."

By the beginning of the 1990s, his total turnover had reached 120 million dollars per year (three times that of his main competitor) and his agency had branch offices in 35 countries. At the same time, John opened "John Casablancas" modeling schools, of which a hundred or so in the

United States are still active, as well as the world famous contest "The Look of the Year," which annually receives 300,000 candidates from 60 countries.

But it's his personal and professional life that has often caused scandal. His pronounced taste for young women, as well as his at times questionable morals pertaining to this industry fed a scandal-hungry press. In 1999, when a BBC documentary drew a vitriolic portrait of his Parisian partner, the president of his European agency, the entire industry was shaken to the core. In 2000, John sold his shares in the company and retired. In 2004, Elite NY filed for bankruptcy. In July 2013, John Casablancas died in Rio de Janeiro.

Interview with the director & screenwriter Hubert Woroniecki

Why did you want to make this film?

There was a time during my studies when I worked in modeling agencies to earn an income. I spent eight years working in this industry before I began making films. For me it was a fun and interesting profession. I wanted to show the reality of modeling agencies while at the same putting a spotlight on the supermodels who have entered pop culture and influenced our daily lives. Today still, if I pronounce the names Cindy, Naomi and Linda, their images immediately come to mind.

From a personal perspective, I come from a Polish film school, which Polanski and Kieslowski also attended. We learned how to film sad people who look out the window at the rain! After having my children, I wanted to take a break from this very different universe.

My first wish in order to evoke models and modeling was to find a cinematographic format that wasn't televisual. It finally came to me when I remembered the documentary made about Robert Evans *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, directed

by Nanette Burstein and Brett Morgen in 2002. I loved the way this film examined thirty years of the realities of Hollywood via this exceptional producer. John Casablancas was the ideal man to personify the history of these modeling agencies, along with the evolution of fashion from the 1970s to the 2000s, and the creation of the supermodels.

Through Elite, the modeling agency he created, John Casablancas shaped an era during which models held center stage in the entertainment industry.

Casablancas, with a few others, took advantage of the end of the Hollywood glamour era to put his models at the forefront of self-assured femininity and give them a public aura that they had never had before. It was a moment when glamour shifted towards fashion and that was when supermodels were born... Casablancas also had an excellent knack for public relations. In the documentary, we see him interviewed by the former Pope of American talk shows, David Letterman, as well as by Oprah Winfrey.

Did you know John Casablancas personally before making the movie?

In the mid-1980s, I spent my vacation in Ibiza. John had built a home in the same village and came there with his companion, Stephanie Seymour, who was sixteen years old, like me. I was a little nobody of a Parisian high-schooler and, I have to say, spending the month of August with this young woman transformed my perspective on life. I was entirely blown away. I didn't see much of John at that time. Later, when I worked as a booker, he telephoned from New York to hire me. Ford wanted me as well, but I chose Elite because we were allowed to smoke in their offices! That lasted from 1993 to 1997. Then I left the profession. At the end of the 2000s, I contacted John with the proposal of making a film about the industry in which he'd be the narrative thread.

The end result flows between documentary and fiction, because John Casablancas' life unfolds like a novel, from Paris to New York, from the 1960s to the 2000s.

That's the reason why only his point of view interested me. I didn't want to make a classic documentary constantly weighing out the pros and cons, but instead to tell the story of an epic saga from the inside, the ascension of a man, the evolution of an era through him. John had immediately accepted. From 2009 to 2012, I had unlimited access to his personal archives – videos, photos, etc. The whole process quickened when he called me one morning to announce his illness: *"I just came from the doctor's office. I have six months left."* Showing him a rough cut of the film before his death in 2013 was my priority.

You had already recorded the voice-overs, one of the most compelling elements of the film: a seductive, self-assured voice that tells the story of a life lived without any regrets.

John's voice and its intonations left a strong impression on the people who knew him, even briefly, at least as much as his good looks and sex appeal. I wrote the text in 2011; we holed up in an apartment in Tribeca for three days to record it. It was supposed to just be a scratch vocal, the final vocal was to be recorded later. In the end it became the final version.

The movie isn't a journalistic analysis of the modeling world, but the tale of a "larger than life" existence. Was that your goal from the beginning?

I am not a journalist who exposes facts, but a director who loves stories. John's story is incredible because it is rooted in pop culture. Although I didn't always agree with him and I chose not to have the same life, I have a certain empathy for this man, whom I found to be funny and quite sharp in his own way. It seems to me that there is a movie-hero dimension to his life. I thus tackled CASABLANCAS, THE MAN WHO LOVED WOMEN, as a tale with a novelistic construction derived from actual events.

Not a single scene was invented, but everything is expressed through this man's singular point of view, which most probably is quite different from others who were active in the industry during the same time period. It was a deliberate choice on my part to treat the story as if it were a piece of fiction. I'd like moviegoers to see the movie as an entertaining adventure, and in the end, that they gain insight into this key person's perception of an era and a milieu.

Casablancas was at the origin of many scandals, notably one concerning Stephanie Seymour's age when they met. Later, in 1999, a BBC documentary exposed certain questionable practices of the Elite agency, even if he wasn't directly concerned.

The only thing that people could not criticize John for was how he felt about drugs. He hated that. All of the scandals that you evoke are addressed in the film. Yes, he liked women younger than he. He left his wife for Stephanie Seymour when he was forty-two and she was sixteen. Later, when he was fifty-two, he married a seventeen-year-old girl. He didn't go back on his word, nor did he learn any lessons from it. He didn't wish to change. However, he stayed with his last wife until his death and they had three children.

He had his own conception of masculinity!

Having rubbed shoulders with him during a period of thirty years, and having seen him with numerous women, I have never met anyone who didn't still like him once having known him. He was a womanizer, a playboy, but he fell in love each time and knew quite well how to express it – even if it was for only three hours, or one night. There was something intense and sincere about him that I have always found rather touching. He was an ambiguous character, but in his own way, quite straightforward in love and friendship. I wouldn't go as far as to say he was a saint though, far from that.

To shed light on the character, you highlight certain anecdotes, in particular the joyful way in which he lost his virginity on a beach in Cannes.

I used animation for this episode (as I do in a few other sequences) to accentuate the comic book-like aspect of John Casablancas' life. And also to demonstrate the truth. Everyone thinks of him as one of the great playboys of the end of the last century, sleeping with the most beautiful girls in the world because he was the boss of the Elite agency. But it's actually the other way round: it's because he had been sleeping with the most beautiful girls in the world since he was a teenager that Casablancas founded Elite. His whole life attests to it: his vision of sex and women allowed him to then transform the world of modeling.

Beyond losing his virginity in Cannes, there was his expulsion from the exclusive Rosey School in Switzerland for having slept with a maid. Following that incident, John couldn't get the letters of recommendation he needed to go to great American schools such as Harvard or Yale as his brother did – they came from a great industrial family. His life followed another course very early on because of his relationship with women. I wanted to show the important role this connection with women played in shaping his life, instead of expounding on a modeling agent's 'philosophical' views of the world.

From the archive scenes that you've used, which one has made a particular impression on you?

I found videos shot by his last wife in New York in the 1990s, which are shown in the film's epilogue. We see John having fun, making snowballs. I illustrated these shots with music from the Strokes' *Is This It* album, which came out in 2001, and made Julian Casablancas famous. In fact, when John sold Elite, his son became a rock star. So the adventure continues...

*Interviewed in Paris by Olivier Joyard,
March 2016*

Credits

Director	Hubert Woroniecki
Screenwriter	Hubert Woroniecki
Editing	Jacqueline Mariani Seamus Haley Hubert Woroniecki
Music	David Sztanke 'Tahiti Boy'
Sound	Armelle Mahé Patrice Grisolet
Postproduction Supervisor	Hugo Manhes
Production	Realitism Films
Producers	Diane Jassem Christine Ponelle Grégory Bernard
Co-production	Maneki Lab
Co-producer	Julien Laur
In association with	Soficinema 11 Films Distribution Picture Farm Films
Executive Producer	Aline Casablanças
Honorary Producers	Alain Chabat André Saraiva Frédéric Beigbeder Pierre Weisbein Jérôme Zagury Ben Seale Jerôme Brun Stéphane Lapiquonne
French Distribution	Ricardo Bellino
International Sales	UFO Distribution Films Distribution