

Dancing Lessons

Dirty Dancing. Written by Eleanor Bergstein. Starring Jennifer Grey and Patrick Swayze. Showing at Hoyts nationally. Reviewed by Lyndell Fairleigh.

Dirty Dancing is not as salacious as its title suggests and is surprisingly free of moralising on sexuality for a movie targetted primarily at an adolescent audience. It's the story of a young woman's awakening: not simply to her own sexuality but also to the politics of class.

It's 1963 and "Baby" is on her way, with parents and older sister, to an exclusive Jewish summer camp resort. Daddy's a doctor and the family well-heeled. They are the particular friends of the camp's manager and, consequently, are accorded preferential treatment. Baby has convictions, nonetheless: she aspires to join the Peace Corps and change the world. Buttressed by her family's wealth, she is naively optimistic about achieving those changes.

Another "class" of people also inhabit the camp. They are the "dance people", employed to dance with the patrons, among whom are lonely middle-aged women.

The "dance people" are domiciled separately in smoke-filled ghetto-like rooms where they can dance "dirtily" to suit themselves, to a gutsy, liberating '60s pop that underscores how twee and stale are the entertainments of the wealthy.

Almost by accident, Baby steps into their world and is immediately drawn to the palpably physical presence of Johnny, a smouldering and outlandish fiction. He is the kind of Rochester-like hero who populates many a schoolgirl fantasy. Somewhat devilish, seemingly arrogant but, underneath it all,

lonely, sensitive, even needy of affection. A fiction usually all the better for being kept so.

Baby is tempted to keep Johnny as her own private fantasy — her father has already made it plain that he believes any association between the two would be unacceptable — but eventually faces the challenge of admitting to the liaison. She thereby allows Johnny an independence and humanity that the women he has played gigolo to have not. This is Baby's story, nonetheless, and Johnny stays true to her image of him.

Unlike the aristocratic Rochester, Johnny has stepped off the streets and is vulnerable. (He is more like his literary brother, Heathcliff, but without the violent contradictions of the latter's character.)

Johnny may be macho in body but he has a heart of gold: it's the rich boys you need to be wary of.

Baby's fantasy contains other pleasures. While Johnny may lead the dance, at first anyway, she takes the lead (her class has done her a favour and given her self-confidence) in other matters. Johnny is thoroughly responsive: he appreciates her for her commitment and humanity. He is also the only one ever to call her by her given name, Frances, which he refers to as "a nice grown-up name". Their romance, in the tradition of its literary precursors and within a society portrayed as exclusively heterosexual, is radically subversive.

Dirty dancing itself is not

incidental to the plot nor simply another form of storytelling (though it is that, too): it is an act of subversion and, following in Baby's footsteps (metaphorically), Johnny determines not to bow down to the management and their complacent routine. He and his friends eventually lead the rest of the resort a merry dance (literally) and disrupt the social fabric in the process. These two previously isolated groups mingle on the dance floor and, for as long as the music lasts, dance to the same drum.

When Johnny leaps from the stage and invites the audience to join him, he is refusing to contain his subversive energy and to play the fiction they have devised for him: the no-good dancer. Like quite a few twists in this plot, this scene jumps *Dirty Dancing* from one stage of fantasy to another. By now, it is nothing less than fantastic.

Dirty Dancing lacks the consummate filmmaker's skill that Carlos Saura brought to *Carmen*, for instance, a film in which flamenco and "realist" drama were woven together seamlessly. The borders between them become so blurred in that film that the audience can no longer be sure what's "real" and what's a performance. Perhaps *Dirty Dancing* is too exuberant and tears a few seams in the plot. What's at issue, however, is not that it's obviously fiction, but what's in the dance.

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