

DIRTY DANCING

Directed by Emile Ardolino
Produced by Linda Gottlieb
Distributed by Vestron Pictures
Released in 1987

More than any other film, *Dirty Dancing* is an abortofascient. Just as that pill can end a pregnancy and mitigate sex-regret, so too does *Dirty Dancing* toy with the conscience.

Ground to powder and stirred into a fruity cocktail of nostalgia-infused romance, this pill is nowhere to be seen. Swept up in the undeniably compelling choreography and intergenerational intrigue, we're encouraged to accept something that's really pernicious—we're told that abortion can be reduced to a plot point.

Robbie Gould, waiter and prospective doctor, is reprehensible. He is insufferably arrogant and condescending, which is all the more disagreeable given his advantages. He routinely seduces the staff and guests.

He impregnates Penny, and dismisses Baby's protestations by saying that Penny is loose (and therefore the kid's probably not even his). Baby threatens him and demands that he stay away from her (imbecilic) sister.

Having Robbie be the father is similar to a screenwriting trick employed in a later film, *The Cider House Rules* (1999), which buttressed a pro-abortion message with a coming-of-age tale. In that film the young, idealistic would-be physician played by Tobey Maguire offers, at the film's climax, to terminate a pregnancy caused by an incestuous rape. Robbie's not as bad as all that, but he still gives pause to audience members who might wonder whether they'd be willing to carry any child of *his* to term.

Baby is catapulted into a new world when Penny is only able to have the abortion done on the same night she's supposed to dance with Johnny at the Sheldrake. Baby takes Penny's place and the new partners begin falling in love.

The abortion is botched, the "doctor" probably anything but. (This development is more likely to affect the audience as a plea for legal, safe, affordable abortion than a warning that abortion, itself, is an ugly business. Notice Penny never has reservations about the moral implications of ending the pregnancy; she has no concern about the baby.)

So Dr. Houseman is summoned. He takes the necessary steps to rectify the problem, but erroneously believes (not without cause) that Johnny is (was?) the father and is therefore responsible not merely for siring the child but also for procuring a quack for a quick fix. He demands that Baby stay away from these lowlifes.

Baby, of course, having already lied to her father by saying the \$250 she wanted no-questions-asked was for something legal, now compounds her error by immediately going to Johnny's cabin and seducing him!

Our heroine is supposed to be good but she's disobeying an unerringly good man. One key scene, the showdown between father and daughter at the lake, addresses this problem by wading into that oft-visited morass of self-justification—moral equivalency.

Baby begins by saying she's sorry she let him down, that she lied—wait, that's *all* she did?—and then downshifts by telling her father that he lied, too. And "if you love me, you have to love all the things about me." (Cue tears.) "And I'm sorry I let you down. I'm so sorry, Daddy, but you let me down, too."

He always wanted her to help people, but she realizes now that he wanted her to marry someone of Ivy League caliber while she helped people in a distant, professional capacity as an economist or a lawyer.

He didn't want her to get her hands dirty. And the only people who deserve a chance are the people like them, the 'respectable' types.

So even as she says she's sorry, she tacitly admits that she has no compunction about the other things she did, since the man who taught her to know better isn't worth listening to after all. He's a hypocrite, but at least she's true to herself.

The scene, which is expertly directed, and features exceptional performances by the wounded Jennifer Grey and the stoic, chastened, silent Jerry Orbach, is incredibly manipulative. There's no music, the first leaves of autumn are falling (incongruously, since this is Labor Day weekend), and the sky over the lake is a dull, chilling gray.

What's sorely lacking in this scene, and the film as a whole, is any sense of proportion. It does take guts to embarrass yourself and admit a wrongdoing in order to exculpate someone who's accused of theft. It does take guts to turn down easy money and forego a dalliance with a beautiful adulteress who could make life difficult if you say 'no.'

And it takes guts to fly a jet plane into the World Trade Center. Courageous behavior is not necessarily righteous behavior.

But this is a movie review, not a discourse on the psychology of terrorism. So (hypocrisy alert!) where is the requisite "sense of proportion" in our analysis? Admittedly, we must concede that *Dirty Dancing* doesn't excuse mass-murder...just murder. Both Baby and Johnny actively encourage Penny's 'choice.' Shame and destitution are nothing compared to *that*.

All through our lives, it never changes: We minimize the wrong things we do, maximize the right things we do, and concoct labyrinthian justifications to paint whatever we do in the best possible light.

So it could be argued that Penny is courageous to terminate her pregnancy. But it takes more courage to see it through.

And if we return to the hypocrisy/sincerity dichotomy discussed above, no one would argue that carrying a baby to term after you make a stupid choice is hypocrisy. It's integrity, plain and simple. You're not behaving as you *want* to behave. You already tried that when you *wanted* to have sex, and did. But you're behaving as you *ought* to behave. You screwed up once but that doesn't mean you get to screw up again. Indeed, we fool ourselves into thinking that we're 'living a lie' so that we can have an excuse to do what we *really* want, while claiming we have no choice in the matter.

Reflecting on the discussion between resort manager Max Kellerman and the bandleader, Tito, just before the climax, and contrasting that fatalistic offstage rumination with Johnny's impassioned declaration at the microphone just moments later, seeing how Johnny

usurps the tired closing-night program with something audacious and sexy, it becomes clear that this is a film about a vibrant generation throwing off a tired generation. And the *next* generation (Penny's child) isn't even granted a foothold. Maybe that's ironic.

No, it's just sad.

Sure, nobody puts Baby in a corner.

But we should care a lot more about putting Baby in the trash.