

GREASE

Directed by Randal Kleiser
Produced by Allan Carr and Robert Stigwood
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1978

Engaging the past is an exercise in wish fulfillment. We either find evidence to support our notions of unaccounted wrongs or assume universal pleasures that were in reality the purview of an exclusive few.

Writings on history seem to begin with a hypothesis, when truth may be served better by pure curiosity and a willingness to discover.

Sometime in the early 1970s, a Chicago theater troupe helped launch a surge of nostalgia that infused the culture of the decade. The '50s viewed from the perspective of the Sexual Revolution meant a greater injection of sensuality into the decade than was collectively recalled. (The '50s are second only to the '60s as a battleground for historians because of the decade's reputation for moral conservatism.) And now we look at the movie *Grease* with interpretations relevant for (and relative to) our time, far removed from the period of its subject matter and its creation.

From a creative standpoint, creating a story within the confines of a particular time in the past generates a host of problems, particularly these: A critical audience questions every detail from experience, and to launch a production where every item of clothing, every automobile, every colloquialism requires an authenticity grounded in research, not memory, is a consuming difficulty.

In the end, insouciance is the mood of the '50s. Telling the story of Sandy and Danny demands a world where no outside influences can interfere with the objective of having fun. This is a requirement better matched by the mood of the 1950s than the storm-tossed '60s and '70s.

The centrality of Danny and Sandy to this story is established in the pre-credits sequence. A leisurely montage documents the joys of a teenage couple at the beach. At its conclusion, we first see their differences—Danny is eager to get busy, Sandy is reticent. But she is not upset by his advances. She seems discouraged, asking plaintively, "Danny, is this the end?" / "Of course not. It's only the beginning." Sandy's return home to Australia is bringing their time to an end, but Danny has faith their love will carry on. Sandy does stay, but Danny embarrasses himself and so begins an elaborate courtship.

First, Danny's goal is simply to resume dating. But once that hope is realized, and tensions still surface, he strives for nothing less than spiritual unity. The idea of physical unity or marriage doesn't seem to hold his interest.

All the travails of the supporting cast contribute to the story of Danny and Sandy. A (mistaken) pregnancy affords us a chance to see Sandy's kindness, while Kenicke's drive for Thunder Road glory deepens the friendship between he and Danny, producing an occasion to

demonstrate Danny's bravery and fortitude. The dance just serves as another forum for romantic conflict, as Cha Cha's passion for the trophy derails Sandy and Danny's progress. The narrative excursion of Danny searching for a sport compatible with his personality gives perspective on his dedication to winning Sandy.

After rejecting Danny at the pep rally, Sandy promises to be finished with her summer lover, but, hopelessly devoted, vows forever love. Occasional disgust with Danny subsequently surfaces, but, overall, the suspense lay with the question of whether Danny can satisfy himself with this One. At the drive-in, Danny makes his decision. In the musical counterweight to "Hopelessly Devoted," "Sandy"'s most critical line is "When high school is done...the two of us will be one in Heaven forever...."

Finally spared the subplots continually intruding upon the story, Danny decides to shift to Sandy's way of life to win her just as Sandy decides to do the same. Encountering these new personas at the carnival, Danny is stunned. His conversion aborted, the boy-in-black returns and, by reassuming leadership, elicits Sandy's delight.

She is dressed provocatively and her hair is really big, but what is the huge change? Underneath, has she become irresponsible, happily amoral and suspicious of authority figures? Just what the two of them were and what they are now is left unsaid.

The ascent into the skies is oft derided as a bizarre capstone to a rollicking fantasy flick, but actually this development is grounded in the narrative, providing a welcomed dose of thought-provoking symbolism in the process. Danny sang for this, pined for it, vowed that it would happen, and in this '50s netherworld of timelessness, the protagonist has the power to levitate objects, and, with his mate, transcend the confines of mere mortality through the transcendent power of staying Cool.

If the 1950s were as wonderful as millions have maintained, the reality that an entire generation raised in a time of secure fun would have to face a crucible of division and upheaval with the passage of years is here alleviated symbolically. Sandy and Danny don't face sadness, disappointment, and the burden of aging. They pass over, through, and above these snares, remaining the same happy people they were, lost in love, lost in time.