

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER

Distributed by Cinema International Corporation (UK)

Category: 'X'

No cuts

Footage: 10697 feet

Country of origin: USA

Running time: 118 minutes

Tony Manero (John Travolta) escapes from the boredom of his job in a Brooklyn paint store and the repressive nagging of his Italian-American family through casual relationships with adoring girls - adoring because he is the acknowledged natural leader of his male gang and because he is a marvellous dancer. Indeed in dancing, this nineteen-year-old seems to find an even more satisfying escape than in his relationships, and he practises devotedly. About women he has an old-fashioned and chauvinistically simple code: they are either nice and un-touchable, or bad and sexually available. While the homely Annette pursues him doggedly, trying to decide into which category she should place herself to ensnare him, Tony has eyes only for the unattainable Stephanie, an accomplished dancer who knows herself to be a cut above him since she works in a theatrical manager's office in Manhattan and has occasional brushes with the stars. The simple order of Tony's world is further upset when his older brother, who has constantly been held up to him as an example, quits the priesthood, having suddenly lost his faith. Tony tries to introduce Frank to his world of the Saturday night disco, scraps with rival gangs when honour demands, and casual, almost public sex, usually in the one car the gang possesses, but Frank is ill at ease. When Stephanie agrees to partner Tony for the disco dance contest, Tony gets a chance to sample a different world. Meanwhile Bobby, the weakling of the gang, has made a girl pregnant and desperately seeks advice from his friends that could help him avoid a wedding. Another gang member is beaten up by some Puerto Ricans, and Tony's friends take their revenge, too late discovering they have beaten up the wrong group. At the dance contest, the favourites, Tony and Steph, win the prize, but Tony, convinced that the Puerto Rican runners-up were better, hands it over to them. Stephanie is dragged off to console him sexually but rejects his clumsy advances and walks out. Tony drives off with his friends, and in the back seat Annette finally opts for the bad-girl category and gives her body to each of the group in turn as Tony drives the car. When they stop on Brooklyn Bridge, he asks her cynically if she's satisfied to have lost her reputation. The evening has gone wrong for all of them, and as the boys high-wire walk recklessly on the spars of the bridge, the hapless Bobby falls, perhaps deliberately, to his death. Chastened, Tony rides the subway to Steph's Manhattan flat, promising himself, and then her, to get a better job and a place of his own, and to try to make his way in New York as a grown-up.

The story of this film in no way conveys its driving energy and vitality, or the instant impact of John Travolta as he swaggers down the street under the opening credits. Inspired by a magazine article called "Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night", the film has provided for American and now for British youth a reflection of a world they appear to recognise, full of dreams, but caged in by the difficulties of growing up in a restricted and poor environment. The language is that of the streets, and it reflects a coarseness of the spirit which is as much a part of the prison as the dead-end jobs and the lack of hope. The British distributors were well aware that the disco scenes, the music of the Bee Gees, and the star personality of Travolta, which won him an Academy Award nomination, could appeal to teenagers of 14 and over. Yet to cut the language would be to compromise the authenticity of a film which speaks the language of its audience in a way they instantly trust. The film is, in the end, a very moral piece, too moral, some critics have thought, since the hero becomes disillusioned with the values of a world he has hitherto accepted without question. Since the audience believe in him, they seem able to accept his conversion as relevant to their own lives, and it would be a pity to water down the film and risk both spoiling a vibrant piece of popular entertainment and alienating the trust of its mass audience. The sexual problems depicted are also essentially those of young adults. The characters in the film are 19 and 20, and we felt it was preferable to reserve their problems to audiences approaching the same age range. Very young teenagers could find the hero's life-style as seductive as his physical appeal and might miss the point that finally his cruelly casual attitude to those of whom he makes sexual use disgusts him. Indeed, younger teenage girls might simply see themselves as lining up to be the next after poor Annette. For all these reasons the 'X' seemed wholly appropriate, although, once again, an 'AA' at 16 might have provided a useful alternative.