

Document Citation

Title	Ethnic fever
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1977 Dec 26
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	41
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Saturday night fever, Badham, John, 1977

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER.

Directed by John Badham. Screenplay by Norman Wexler, based on a story by Nik Cohn. Produced by Robert Stigwood. Released by Paramount Pictures.

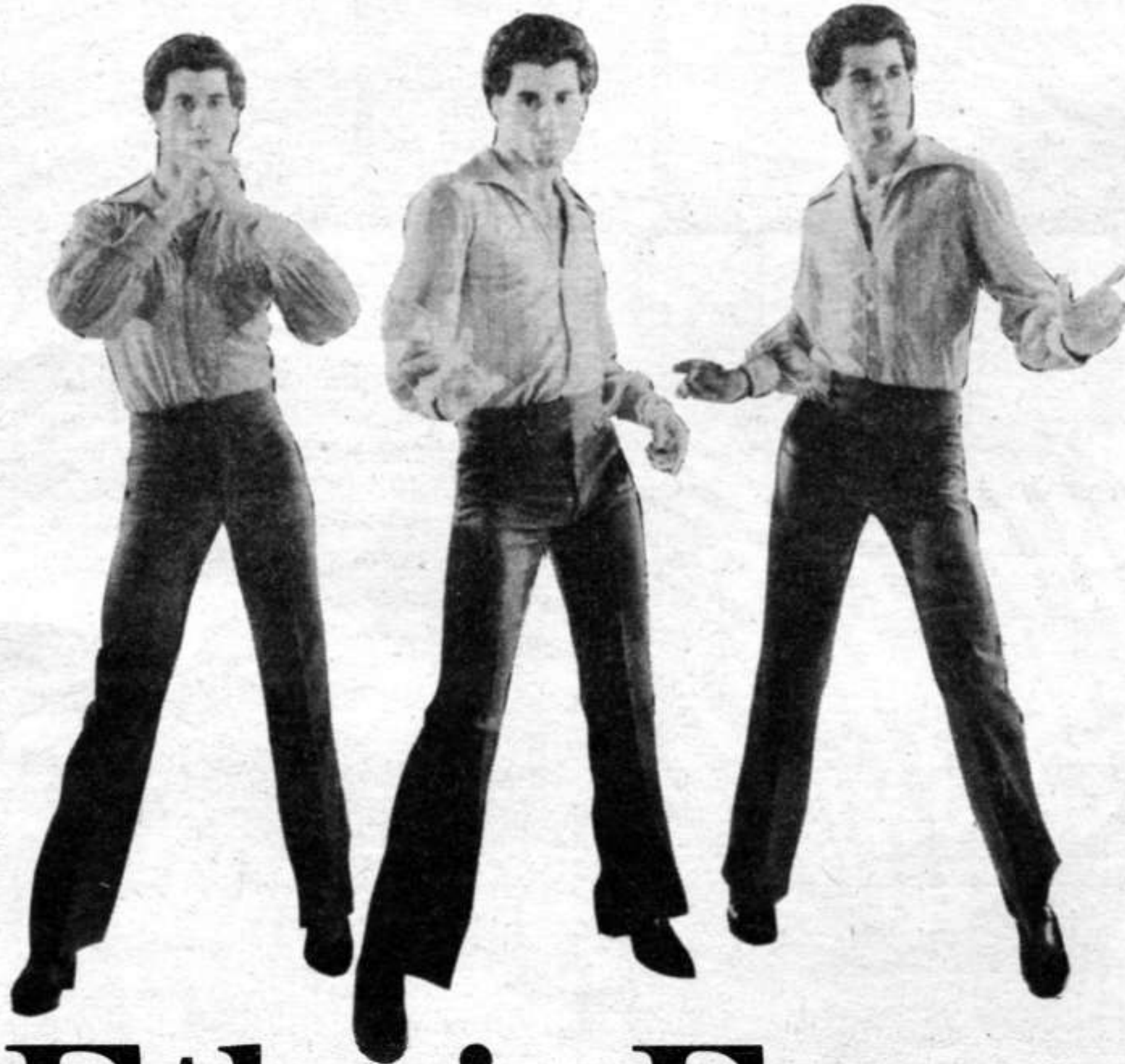
From what I have been able to gather in the way of audience reaction, *Saturday Night Fever* has turned out to be a downer despite its pulsating disco sequences and what seems like a happy boy-girl ending. Part of the problem may be that the disco dancing is so much more exhilarating than the ethnic family and street life that we begin to wish the characters would dance more and emote less. I must confess that I could not understand half the dialogue through the nasal mist of Brooklyn punk Italian-American dialect.

I am an ethnic myself, and I grew up among my fellow ethnics in Brooklyn and Queens, but that was a long time ago. Perhaps ethnics have become more self-conscious about their ethnicity through television sitcoms on which the laugh-tracks confirm how "cute" they are. Henry Winkler's Fonz is one such cute ethnic, and John Travolta's Vinnie Barbarino is another. I have never entirely understood the extraordinary appeal of these funky blue-collar types. Is their complete imperviousness to the possibility of mental and material advancement supposed to reassure the viewer that every slob in this country is happy wherever he (or she, in the case of Laverne and Shirley) happens to stand in the social shade? All these tube-boobs, male and female, are responsible for putting ABC over the top against CBS and NBC in the ratings war. Nonetheless, there is something funny-peculiar about a network's enthroning illiterates as pop heroes and heroines, and thus deifying dumbness. Is life really so hilarious for dropouts in the streets and on the assembly lines?

Anyway, both Winkler and Travolta seem to be intelligent enough to realize that the Fonz and Barbarino may be living on borrowed time. Winkler completely changed type in *Heroes* to reveal a quirkier sensitivity as a traumatized Vietnam veteran—hardly the stuff of sitcom. One could immediately discern the stylistic boundaries between Winkler as an actor and the Fonz as a media magnification. With Travolta the line between the actor and the personality is much less distinct, which suggests that Travolta may be a superstar in the making. In *Saturday Night Fever*, he is nothing less than a knockout on the dance floor, and he even manages to cheat on his inane lines with the slyly perceptive expressions of a player smarter than his part. Travolta's is the sexual swagger of the '70s. Like it or not, it is there in a relatively uncomplicated and irresponsible form. And he knows it.

Unfortunately, Norman Wexler's cranky script takes much of the fun out of the Travolta character by looking down on the disco world, and on the Italian-American milieu of Bay Ridge. The movie gets off on the wrong foot even before Travolta's Tony Manero gets to do his stuff at the local 2001 Odyssey discotheque. At the outset, we see Tony on Saturday afternoon performing his customary neighborhood rituals, eating a pizza here, delivering a can of paint there, ogling a polyester shirt with floral patterns in a shop window, and strutting all the while like the cock of the walk. We get the first hint that he is something of a loser on the street when a not-so-sensational-looking girl he tries to pick up turns him down cold. Director John Badham even shifts the camera viewpoint so that we witness the rejection from Tony's point of view. Up to that point, we had been following Tony from a safe distance as he went through the motions of a sociological specimen, but suddenly we are asked to identify with him without any adequate preparation. This kind of inconsistency can be attributed partly to the old Hollywood problem of the charismatic performer's pretending to be a nebbish character. Here, it is as if the late James Dean had been called upon to play Marty. So, while the puff pieces assure us that John Travolta can have any young girl he wants in these United States, the movie shows him striking out in his first at bat in Bay Ridge.

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Ethnic Fever

The incongruities multiply when he gets home for Saturday night dinner. After preening, primping, and pomading in front of his bedroom mirror, he materializes at the table with a white sheet draped from his neck to his ankle as if he were sitting in a barber's chair. This grotesque precaution to protect his shirt from the family pasta turns Tony once more into a low ethnic clown with an unpleasantly foolish family to match. The father (Val Bisoglio) is an unemployed hardhat with a habit of relieving his frustrations by hitting the nearest member of his family in the head. The mother (Julie Bovasso) is a pious bore who crosses herself every time she passes the picture of older brother Frank, Jr., the priest (Martin Shakar). There is also a kid sister and a grandmother to round out the demographic profile of the extended ethnic family. Even with his white sheet and stumblebum diction, Tony Manero begins to seem like a princely prisoner of horrid parents. Travolta's luminous blue eyes begin to show the first signs of pain, discomfort, and, ever so discreetly, distaste. From time to time, he flashes a professionally angelic smile to show that he knows what is really happening around him.

The same pattern is followed when he joins his buddies for the Saturday night revels. They seem to be meaner, raunchier, more profane and more bigoted than he is. Once more we have the pearly-toothed prince cast among swine. Occasionally, he will get into the back seat of a car to accommodate a female admirer of his disco dancing, but his heart is not really in it. The sex passages in *Saturday Night Fever* are all dull, nasty, dirty-minded, furtive, and guilt-ridden. Even when The Girl pops up on the scene, there is nothing approaching a romantic epiphany. This creature of great expectations (Karen Lynn Gorney), named Stephanie, lives in a slightly more respectable sector of Bay Ridge and works in a vaguely bullshit capacity for a Manhattan talent agency. She looks slightly classier than the girls Tony's buddies gang-bang on Saturday night, but when she opens her mouth she is simply another Brooklyn dialect joke. What then ensues is an upwardly mobile romance with two vocal defectives.

Louis Kronenberger once observed that Shaw's *Pygmalion* was one of the few convincing Cinderella stories in our literature because Cinderella's problem was not simply a matter of fitting a foot to a slipper, but of fitting mind, manners, and speech to the new social situation in the palace. In this respect, *Saturday Night Fever* is anti-Shavian in that it suggests that two provincial primitives can "make it" in Manhattan on feelings alone.

We actually see Tony and Stephanie crossing a bridge (I don't recall which) from Brooklyn into Manhattan, and this is supposed to transport them over the rainbow from mediocrity to maturity. But here the plot thickens into dumbo gumbo. All along we have been led to believe that Tony's rise from Bay Ridge to the tonier towers of Manhattan would be accomplished through his genuinely prodigious talent as a disco dancer. I mean that with his inability to pronounce correctly even his very limited vocabulary he can hardly be expected to replace Eric Sevareid on the seven o'clock news. But he might achieve at least a symbolic triumph on the dance floor.

Everything in the movie points to a delirious disco finale. John Badham has directed the earlier sequences in a clipped manner as if he were building up to a sustained surge of kinetic release. Tony sees Stephanie for the first time at the Odyssey where she is stunting in an ultra-professional manner, and later they practise together in a dancing school. But when they finally put their act together for a disco contest, their dance is soggy, sloppy, and slithery as they discover their Real Feelings for each other. And when they win the top prize, Tony gives the money and trophy to the runners-up, a Puerto Rican couple, while muttering something confused and inarticulate about fixes and rip-offs and prejudice and the evils of his crowd. At just about this juncture, one of his buddies falls off the Verrazano Bridge, which has served up to now as a source of ethnic pride and scenically death-defying challenges. The aura of ritualized bravado around the Verrazano Bridge is very faintly reminiscent of *Rebel Without a Cause*, but there is no emotional follow-through here, either.

I have no idea why this movie decides to

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go pseudo-moralistic in the manner of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, and play down the disco competition as a feeble substitute for so-called "real life." It can be argued that Badham and Wexler have opted for a moral and civilized ending by enabling Tony to rejoice that at long last he has found friendship with a woman. It may look good on paper, but on the screen it doesn't dazzle the senses as do Travolta's dynamic disco routines. And, anyway, I don't happen to believe that one should moralize about the alleged escapism of disco dancing when one is engaged in the making of movies.

All in all, *Saturday Night Fever* contains undigested morsels of *Marty*, *Mean Streets*, and *Joe*, as it tries desperately to avoid the inspirational wallop of *Rocky*. John Avildsen, the director of *Rocky*, was actually fired from *Saturday Night Fever* for refusing to work with Wexler's relatively sordid script. I have very mixed feelings about this kind of controversy. On the one hand, I am tired of the campy, thumb-sucking optimism of *Rocky*, *Star Wars*, and *Close Encounters*. On the other hand, the facile cynicism and self-pity of *Saturday Night Fever* is not the answer, either. Badham and Wexler may have miscalculated, as Scorsese did in *New York, New York*, by darkening the wrong genre. Sentiment seems to belong in musicals. On yes, there is *The Threepenny Opera* and *Pal Joey*, but God help you even there without a Weill or Rodgers score. The Bee Gees have such a long way to go in this context, and under the circumstances a little touch of the sugarplum fairy might have been more appropriate than the grim *Last Exit to Brooklyn* existentialism on exhibit in *Saturday Night Fever*.

REVIVALS: The Regency Theatre (724-3700) has added a new wrinkle to its Jeanette MacDonald and/or Nelson Eddy series with the showing on Wednesday, December 21, of *The Cat and the Fiddle* (1934), the last five minutes of which is in Technicolor. According to Ray Rennahan, the first special cinematographer for Technicolor, this is the first such footage in Hollywood history. *The Cat and the Fiddle* is worth seeing on its own for William K. Howard's graceful direction, a pleasant Sigmund Romberg score, and an adult triangle in which the older man is treated with the relative charity we now associate with movies in the early '30s.

The Theatre 80 St. Marks (254-7400) is reviving two of Alfred Hitchcock's lesser known British thrillers of the '30s: *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *Secret Agent* (1936). *Secret Agent* is based not on Conrad's novel, but on Maugham's *Ashenden*. Hitchcock did film a version of the Conrad novel, but under the title of *Sabotage*, not to be confused with one of his Hollywood movies entitled *Saboteur*. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* was remade by Hitchcock in 1956 with James Stewart, Doris Day, Bernard Miles, and Daniel Gelin in the roles taken in the original by Leslie Banks, Edna Best, Peter Lorre, and Pierre Fresnay. For a time, one's attitude to the relative merits of the original and the remake defined one's place in the critical spectrum. I now find both versions to be very complex moral meditations on the dilemma of social responsibility versus self-interest.

The Museum of Modern Art (956-6100) is providing a whole day devoted to the three versions of *Showboat* on Tuesday, December 27, with the 1951 George Sidney production (noon) featuring Howard Keel, Ava Gardner, Kathryn Grayson, Joe E. Brown, Marge and Gower Champion; the 1936 James Whale (2:30 p.m.) with Irene Dunne, Allan Jones, Helen Morgan, Paul Robeson, and Charles Winninger; and the 1929 Harry Pollard part-talkie with Laura La Plante, Joseph Schildkraut, and Alma Rubens. The 1936 version is the best, and has been seldom seen because the 1951 version monopolized the television screenings. The 1929 opus should prove to be an archaeological curiosity. Let me conclude simply by saying that *Showboat* is not only one of my all-time favorite musicals, but also one of my main pieces of evidence that the '30s was a Golden Age for Movies.