

# Cannery Row isn't my cup of tea, but maybe yours

Movie Review: *Cannery Row*, Nick Nolte, Diane Winger

by Michael McCarthy

Two guys are in a bar. One guy is sitting peacefully, nursing his beer. The other suddenly grabs the first guy's beer, and takes it to the end of the counter. After a minute, the first boozier blurts "Hey, I want my stein back." The second guy saunters over, gives him a copy of *Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck, and leaves. "No, no," says the other guy, "I said stein back!"

Actually this movie is based on two Steinbeck novels: its namesake, and *Sweet Thursday*. This is somewhat like a contest where first prize is one Steinbeck novel, and second prize is two Steinbeck novels.

*Cannery Row* is a place people live because they don't want to be well known. This is the home of the down and outs. They timourously haunt the streets, like phantom wastrels trying to dodge the past and hide from the shadows of tomorrows that could have been. Most succeed admirably.

This movie is entertaining, if nothing else. And, in fact, it is nothing else.

On the plus side, there are lots of yucks. You can laugh at people who live in abandoned boilers. You can laugh at winos. You can laugh at big, fat, mentally impaired people; washed-up baseball players; seers who swim with their clothes on; and marine biologists who order beer milkshakes.

If this isn't enough, you can Hear- an apprentice prostitute dread an upcoming date because she "ain't got the class of a duck".

See - a man who can't be a character witness because he hasn't any character; Thrill - to a party with a Snow White theme. Some partygoers can't decide who should be Dopey and who should be Sneezzy, so they go as trees instead.

This movie attempts to reach the audience by showing it the humanity of the downtrodden. A low-key, folksy approach is taken, aided by the aged and venerable John Huston's frequent narration (in his ubiquitous drawl). The film hopes to show that even when the gaudy trappings of success and the middle class are stripped away, and nothing remains but the vulgar shell of a shattered loser, there is still an essential spirit that cannot be broken.

*Cannery Row* fails in this. (Typesetter's Note: No it doesn't!) pointedstickpointedstickpointedstick The main reason is that one simply can't believe in most of the characters.

Winos living in abandoned sewer pipes are not generally healthy, happy sorts, leaping out to party at a moment's notice. Rarely is one of them a proficient R & B pumping piano player. One doesn't conceive of a brain-damaged, self-styled seer as being a blues trumpet player. Whores are not usually benevolent, well-adjusted "jes-plain-folks".

The characters are artificially happy and good natured. In an attempt to uncover the beauty inherent in all humanity, director what-the-hell-was-his-name Ward spoils the effect by contriving the depictions, forcing the goodwill and ingenuousness. What soothing truths are to be found, are



(Left to right) John Malloy, M. Emmet Walsh, and Frank McRae, co-starring as "gentlemen of leisure" stalk their prey — frogs — in MGM's "Cannery Row"

buried and distorted amid dowdy excess and superficial glow. (TS: No they're not.)

As for the acting - unfortunately, the type of character lead player Nick Nolte portrays has been done often, and better, by such actors as Clark Gable (from whom Nolte borrows a moustache and roguish appeal) and Harrison Ford (from whom he inherits mock-heroic swagger and an Indiana Jones type hat).

Debra Winger, as his love interest, has a wonderfully throaty voice, manic charm, and generally has everything that Susan Saint James has more of. The

direction is crisp and well-paced, the supporting cast is amusing.

The best part of all was the excellent photography by Sven Nykvist. He brings the viewer directly into the milieu with his close-up scenes of frantic frog hunting in a fog-fraught marsh. He charms the eyes with panoramas of the evening shoreline: craggy rocks dotting the breakers, as solitary figures struggle with their insignificance in the face of nature.

It is to be noted that I am biased against this genre - the homey portrayal of ordinary joes, devoid of didacticism, statement,

or forceful dramatic acting. However, if you like this style of movie (i.e. *Grapes of Wrath* or *Our Town*, except with lots of comedy thrown in), you well might like this one.

*Cannery Row* is very funny. It is very warm, appealing, and a pleasant way to pass an hour and a half. However, it suffers from being an underachiever, hackneyed and tired. The plot is tired. The acting is tired. I am tired. I'm sick of trying to decide your taste in movies. Go see them and form your own opinions. Shut up and leave me alone.

## And it's another Dareing English band



serious.

This English band makes its music entirely with vocals and synthesizers, and the result is sophisticated, mostly quite clever techno-rock, beautifully produced by the League and Martin Rushent. The emphasis is on pop and dance rhythms, so the music tends to be bright, clear and attractive, despite *Dare's* seriousness. Yet even on the catchiest numbers, there's an undertone of pessimism or fear or irony which can be almost unnerving. Still, the effect is intriguing. Although the percussion is electronic, the rhythms are sufficiently varied and well countered to keep one's attention, and the vocal arrangements, while they take getting used to, can be quite sharp.

"The Sound of the Crowd," which I like better in its long version on the EP, is a terrific dance number. Its intricate little synthesized rhythm motifs, gliding keyboards and crisp edgy vocal harmonies snag at your mind even while you can't help moving. Even abbreviated, it's still one of the most persuasive songs on *Dare!*. "Seconds," a song about the murder of John Lennon, is appropriately ominous with its insistent beat, strong keyboards and brief suggestions of gunfire

and sirens; it also manages to avoid the dreariness which tends to hover around other moody numbers, such as "Darkness" and "I Am the Law."

Actually, The Human League are at their best, musically and lyrically, on edgy, ironic pop/dance songs like "Love Action," "Don't You Want Me" (in which Phil Oakey shares the singing with one of the female vocalists, Joanne Catherall, I think), and "The Sound of the Crowd," which counters its exhortations to "Stay in time with the rhythm and rhyme!" with some fairly disturbing imagery of the world you create with your make-up box. If there's anything that Oakey and Adrian Wright, the band's principle writers, really believe, it may be that there's a vast difference between what you'd like to believe and what usually proves to be true, especially in love affairs, but you still have to take chances.

I believe in truth though I lie a lot  
I feel the pain from the push and shove  
No matter what you put me through  
I still believe in love  
"Love Action"

*Dare!* has a way of growing on you. I think The Human League knows that while the clothes and make-up might change from year to year, the dance clubs are still going to be around, with the ebb and flow of relationships constantly going on on the floor, behind the disguises. As the synthesizers weave their way around you, you start to realize that these people have the kind of talent which can comment on trends quite perceptively, but can also, very likely, outlast them.



Review: The Human League, *Dare!* (Virgin VL 2230)

by Gisele Marie Baxter

Last summer, The Human League issued its *Sound of the Crowd* EP which was, among other things, one of the year's

very best dance records and a quite ironic comment on the New Romantic scene -- you remember, the flashy disguises and electronic music. *Dare!* is the new League album, and it continues along the same lines, though it's both more ambitious and more