

# Grease

(Kleiser, USA, 1978)

## Component 1: Key Developments in US Film

### Focus Areas: Genre, Narrative and Context

### PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1 – ‘Summer Nights’:

<https://goo.gl/ERmpta>

Sequence 2 – Sleepover – ‘Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee’: <https://goo.gl/rqQnrX>

Sequence 3 - Rizzo – ‘There are worse things (I could do)’: <https://goo.gl/U3xYVW>

### PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography (including Lighting)

- High-key lighting represents the positive mood of all involved in the musical number
- Contrasting medium shots (MS) of Rizzo (Stockard Channing) and Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) show them framed by two friends (Pink Ladies or Patti Simcox) establishing their binary opposition and importance to each other in narrative.
- Contrasting low angle (LA) shots of both Danny (John Travolta) and Sandy see them surrounded by groups of friends, emphasising their role as key protagonists, their relationship to one another and represents their status within the friendship groups.

#### Mise-en-Scène

- Outdoor setting with classic American high school iconography (bleachers, dining cliques, etc.)
- Dress codes key to understanding characters. Rizzo has a purple/ black colour motif as seen in her clothing in sequence 2 and sequence 3. This contrasts in those scenes with the pastel colours worn by Sandy, Patti Simcox and the other girls outside of The Pink Ladies.

Her short dark hair is also in contrast to longer hairstyles used by Sandy and Patti.

- The use of jackets to signify their friendship groups and values.
- Sequence 2 is set in Frenchy’s bedroom (Didi Conn); a cluttered pink room that reinforces the focus on appearance as the room is full of beauty paraphernalia but also contains pictures of horses, as well as heartthrobs. This highlights the tension of adolescence and how The ‘Pink’ Ladies (despite much bravado) are still young and inexperienced.

#### Editing

- The camera tracks the antics of the T-Birds and zooms in to a medium shot (MS) of the male group before cutting to a similarly framed shot of their female counterparts, The Pink Ladies, at a different external setting elsewhere in the school campus. The links the two groups and sets up the ‘duet’ nature of the musical number.
- Towards the end of ‘Summer Nights’ Sandy and Danny are brought together by a medium close up (MCU) of Sandy being slowly, and translucently, superimposed over a MCU of Danny (who is framed to the right of the shot). This mirrors the duet, which now becomes a harmony of the two characters singing the same lines. In the same shot the camera zooms out and the equal status of the characters is lost; Sandy’s MCU remains, holding half the frame, whereas the shot of Danny becomes an Extreme Wide Shot (EWS) LA view of Danny at the top of the bleachers.

#### Sound

- Use of musical numbers to convey the emotions and drive narrative forward.
- The musical score becomes diegetic in these numbers (characters begin singing with a backing band/ orchestra/ singers without question), adding to the constructed realism of the film.
- ‘Summer Nights’ has dual narrative with contrasting lyrics conveying the gender and sex politics (‘He got friendly holding

my hand/She got friendly down in the sand') that the film explores throughout.

- 'Look at Me, I'm Sandra Dee', sung by Rizzo, makes reference to Hollywood star Sandra Dee who had been married to Bobby Darin, both well-known American 50's stars. The lyrics again reflect and explore 50s (&70s?) gender politics with a focus on how women in the media/film were represented and contrasted with the reality of the film.

## PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social:

- The film looks at the role of women in the 1950s and how they were depicted on screen – Sandy is initially the classic ingénue.
- There are clear depictions of 'good' and 'bad' girls; good girls such as Sandy and Patty Simcox are defined by their clothing, pastel colour motif and 'preppy' hairstyles whereas Rizzo, The Pink Ladies and Cha-Cha are all 'outsiders' and are depicted as more dangerous in regard to their sexuality through make-up, hair and clothing. Rizzo voices the inequality in 'There are Worse Things (I could Do)'.

### Historical:

- The film is set in the 1950s (*Singin' in the Rain* was released in 1952) but deals with issues rarely seen in mainstream Hollywood film from that era such as sex, teen pregnancy and gender politics.
- Nostalgic look at 1950s America (Hot Rod cars, malt shakes, drive in movies, school dances) and a contrast of 1970s issues/themes with a highly stylised and nostalgic 1950s aesthetic.

### Comparison with *Singin' in the Rain*:

- Looking at the aesthetic of *Singin' in the Rain* and *Grease* – both have 'historical' American settings that are explored through the mise-en-scène. Both share a nostalgic view of the past; almost a pastiche of the eras in which they are set.
- Comparing the representation of Sandy Olsson (Olivia Newton-John) and Cathy Seldon (Debbie Reynolds). This could contrast with the representation of Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen) and Rizzo (Stockard Channing) or Cha-Cha (Annette Charles).
- Comparing the representation of Danny Zuko (John Travolta) and Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly).
- Looking at mise-en-scène and how dress

codes distinguish groups/characters.

- Narrative – looking at the key turning points (Sandy's transformation and Cathy's reveal).
- A focus on how the musical numbers have many similarities, despite the differing production eras. However the contrast appears in the content and issues explored in these numbers (*Grease* explores sex in a way that was taboo in Hollywood at the time *Singin' in the Rain* was produced).

## PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Genre, Narrative & Context

- As a musical, the film follows typical conventions: non-diegetic sound (i.e. background musical score) is transformed into diegetic music (i.e. main characters singing with accompanying score) as seen in 'Summer Nights'; the rules of realism do not apply (i.e. musical numbers are normal within this construction of reality), musical performances have a 'show-like' quality and are accompanied by dance routines, often with a large cast as seen in sequence 1.
- In a musical, the song performances are often used to show the inner feelings of the characters, and act as a monologue, such as Rizzo in sequence 3, Sandy in 'Hopelessly Devoted to You' and Danny in 'Sandy'. These songs are interwoven into the narrative and elaborate on key feelings/turning points for the characters.
- The film also has conventional elements of the teen genre; despite being in their early twenties, the cast portray 17/18-year-old characters about to graduate high school and the film deals with the pressures and difficulties of adolescence typical to a teen narrative (e.g. pregnancy, friendships, relationships, identity, careers, etc.) as well as elements of a romantic-comedy.
- The film is focused on the final school year of a group of teens and many of the more elaborate musical performances (such as 'Summer Nights', 'There Are Worse Things (I Could Do)' and the finale 'You're the One that I Want' take place in high school locations. This is atypical to many traditional musicals, where elaborate production sets were used to showcase the theatrical elements and often used lavish sets.
- However, a few of the musical performances move away from the depiction of realistic settings (such as the high school and Frenchy's bedroom) and create a traditional look with a stage, reminiscent of a theatrical production

(such as 'Beauty School Drop Out' <https://goo.gl/xs4Gmg> and 'Greased Lightning' <https://goo.gl/VmA0dS>). In both these numbers the characters are transported from the realism of the setting (café/garage) and are transported to a lavish sound stage, complete with cast, costumes, props, etc. This reflects the genre's origins.

- *The Jazz Singer* was the first musical film (1927), which set up the generic formula until it was developed by MGM in the late 1940s

and early 1950s. However, the genre was in decline by the 1960s and 1970s due to changing demands for more realism in cinema. *Grease*'s phenomenal success was, to some extent, attributed to the buoyant 1950s pop-style original musical score. It was released in the same year as *Midnight Express*, *Halloween* and *Dawn of the Dead* – it offered audiences total escapism and was the highest-grossing film of the year.