

## Grace of My Heart

*Grace of My Heart* is a cinematic love letter to a rock-pop music era by writer/director Allison Anders, a reminiscence of the hit factory that was New York's Brill Building in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Apparently based--but very loosely--on the life of singer-songwriter Carole King, the film follows the peregrinations, personal and musical, of the well-born but unsophisticated Edna Buxton (Illeana Douglas) from Philly who hits New York with a song in her heart, determined to express it as a singer.

Once in the city, she is taken on by manager, Joel Milner (John Turturro), but only as a songwriter for other performers. Rechristened as Denise Waverly, her career thrives by writing hit material for the girl groups, duos, and bubble-gum singers of the period--although she never gets to sing her own stuff. The career also evolves through her relationships with several men, her first husband, a socially-conscious folkie with Beatnik overtones (Eric Stoltz), a smooth, supportive (but married) music critic (Bruce Davison), and her second husband, a loopy California dreamer (Mark Dillon) who parodies the Beach Boy's Brian Wilson. She willingly shapes herself to each of them, learns from them, but is likewise constrained by them, too, until she breaks loose creatively with the grand concept album--titled "Grace of My Heart"--which sums up the travails of her life and launches her long-suppressed solo career.

The principal reason to see this good-hearted motion picture is Illeana Douglas. As Edna/Denise, she is in almost every scene and all plot moments turn around her. Throughout, she is constantly affecting and real. This is no roiling, agonizing "artiste" (as depicted, for example, in the recent painful performance of Jennifer Jason Leigh in *Georgia*) but a becoming natural talent who levelheadedly, sensibly both uses and finally stretches her gift. Douglas, last seen in *To Die For* as the skeptical sister, retains a sweet (rather than starchy) persona throughout her character's constant changes in lifestyle, wardrobe and hairdo. It is a performance of great integrity.

One can criticize elements of *Grace of the Heart*, while some of the parallels with real life are cute (like Dillon's surf group "The Rip Tides") others are too derivative (like the same Dillon wandering into the Pacific like yet-another Norman Main character from "A Star is Born"). The male leads--except for the hustling Turturro--seem underwritten and paraded out merely to test Denise in her next phase of life. But no matter, Douglas's performance carries you along.

So does the music, a great pastiche of sixties numbers that brings back the period--from doo-wop to surfin' sound. Since this is a fictive re-creation rather than a docudrama of the period, musical director Larry Klein and his colleagues (which include Burt Bacharach and Elvis Costello) had to re-imagine wholly *new* works that fit the spirit of the epoch. This they do splendidly and convincingly, giving the picture both the bounce and elan it needs.

(*The film is rated "R" for adult themes.*)

(September 1996)

