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Cannes: On the Road

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“The only ones that interest me are those that burn, burn, burn, burn...” So says Sal Paradise (Sam Riley) near the start of Walter Salles’s spirited attempt to adapt Jack Kerouac’s Beat classic *On The Road*, a novel of such towering zeitgeisty significance that the prevailing wisdom has always been it couldn’t be done, *writes Matt Mueller*.

The answer to that conundrum is that it most certainly can, but the end results aren’t all that towering or significant. *On the Road* is merely a serviceable compression of Kerouac’s seminal take on youthful passions and search for answers.

What it does have is lashings of crazy-dancing, random-coupling, Benzedrine-swallowing debauchery that reminds us of one inescapable fact: watching people have the time of their lives on screen is a fairly tedious experience, even if those people are incarnations of era-defining individuals like Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Neal Cassady. Like the book, it’s an episodic affair as the characters flit cross America searching for the elusive “It”, Salles outlining their existential wanderlust with quick, frenetic pacing and a cool jazzy soundtrack.

Riley gets locked in a passive rut as Kerouac’s alter ego, trailing freewheeling hedonist Dean Moriarty on his pleasure-seeking missions while scrawling/narrating his pithy observations for our benefit, but he manages to hold the attention. Garrett Hedlund conveys Moriarty’s charismatic mania, usually not wearing many clothes, but he seems to be missing that little extra that could have made his part tragically compelling. Tom Sturridge registers strongly as the gay, Ginsberg-alike Carlo Marx, and Kristen Stewart is practically a revelation as Dean’s paramour Marylou, not only managing to get through the entire film without once mopily biting her lip and baring all for the film’s spicy bed-hopping, but becoming the character you miss most when she’s not on screen. Kirsten Dunst is fine without much to do, and Viggo Mortensen, Amy Adams, Elisabeth Moss and Steve Buscemi all crop up for brief, mostly diverting interludes.

The film looks lustrous and has been gorgeously photographed by cinematographer Eric Gautier, but a grittier approach would have better reflected the book’s darker vision of America. A scene where migrants picking cotton in California for slave wages could have done without being shot like a Timotei ad. Salles’ biggest error though was failing to explore the relationship between Cassady and Paradise in sufficient depth, leaving *On the Road* registering primarily as a pretty

travelogue.

Cannes had its first genuine car crash in Lee Daniel's *The Paperboy*, a pulpy, gumbo-flavoured mess that wastes the talents of its starry cast and is permeated throughout by an aroma of ineptitude, down to '60s costumes that look they flew straight out of a catalogue and onto the characters' backs. Ostensibly a tale of two Southern brothers (Matthew McConaughey and Zac Efron) who combine with a black British journalist (David Oyelowo) and Nicole Kidman's brass-tacks bombshell to save from execution the vile racist (John Cusack) she's fallen in love with via letter-writing, the film can barely keep track of its themes or throughlines, which include one character's repressed homosexuality and Efron's moony infatuation with Kidman's "sexual Barbie doll".

The Aussie actress' borderline camp turn is the main recommendation for seeing *The Paperboy*, and she's her usual game self, urinating on Efron after a jellyfish attack and combining with Cusack for an alarming sex scene. Efron hardly bothers with his southern accent, while Macy Gray as his family's maid delivers the film's running voiceover, which starts out as one thing, suddenly becomes omniscient halfway through, then vanishes altogether. A fetid, swampy fiasco, although looking on the bright side, also daftly entertaining enough to top 'Bad Movies We Love' polls for years to come.