

Ask the Dust (2006)

Rated R. Our ratings: V-1 ; L-8 ; S-6/N-6 . Running time: 1 hour 57 min.

All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Ecclesiastes 3:20

Director/writer Robert Towne's *Ask the Dust* film, based on the novel by John Fante, is set in 1933 Los Angeles, about the same period as *Chinatown*, for which Towne also wrote the script. Filmed in warm, glowing colors, the life and times of people who came to the city with high hopes and often wound up in desperation is well captured. Five months earlier Arturo Bandini (Colin Farrell) had come seeking his future as a writer. He had \$150 from his first sale of a short story published by his idol L. Mencken in an anthology of *The American Mercury* and an old typewriter, but now he is down to his last nickel and four months behind on the rent at the cheap residential hotel whose female owner despises Mexicans and Jews. (This theme of racism runs just below the surface of the story.) He is as far from his goal of writing the great American love novel as when he

had arrived.

Arturo goes to a café to spend his last coin on a cup of coffee, only to become upset by the rude Mexican waitress Camilla (Salma Hayek) and the bad cream she provides. They exchange nasty insults, and we can see that ahead looms a love-hate relationship. Maybe this will move the writer to actually write something, his wastebasket being crammed full of crumpled up pages over the months. There are other interesting characters, such as his neighbor Hellfrick (Donald Sutherland) who helps him through his financial crises by showing him that he can steal a bottle of milk while the milkman is talking with him (Hellfrick). Vera Rivkin (Idina Menzel) seeks Arturo out, so desperate is she for someone to even to pretend to care about her. How the writer finally emerges from his depression and manages to write and to love takes a while to tell, so this is a somewhat slow film that might try the patience of those who prefer things to blow up every few minutes or for the characters to start punching or shooting each other. There is an air of melancholy, almost film nourish, that tells you early on that some of the characters are doomed souls.