

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg

FR *dir* Jacques Demy 1963 91m



A glorious romantic confection unlike any other in movie history.

Hal Hinson:**Washington Post**

When Catherine Deneuve made "Umbrellas" for the French director Jacques Demy she was 20, and her work in this film was a flowering that introduced one of the great stars of modern French cinema. The film itself was a curious experiment in which all of the words were sung; Michel Legrand wrote the wall-to-wall score, which includes not only the famous main theme and other songs, but also Demy's sung dialogue, in the style of the lines used to link passages in opera. This style would seem to suggest a work of featherweight romanticism, but "Umbrellas" is unexpectedly sad and wise, a bittersweet reflection on the way true love sometimes does not (and perhaps should not) conquer all.

Demy's film was a worldwide hit when it was first released, but if its star did not age, its film stock did. Like many of the movies shot in the 1960s, it was released in a version of Eastmancolor that did not remain true to the original colors. The greens and blues lost their strength, leaving the film looking pink, as if it had faded in a bright sun. Demy regained control of the film a few years before his death in 1990, and I remember a summer day in 1989 when I sat with Demy and his wife, the director **Agnes Varda**, in the garden of their house in Paris, and they talked of restoring the film's original color. That task was finally finished by Varda in 1994, and now here is "Umbrellas of Cherbourg" again, looking as bright and fresh as on the day it premiered.

The story is a sad one, yes, but it ends on a note we can only conclude is the right one. (Do not read further until you see the film.) Deneuve plays a young woman named Genevieve, who is head over heels in love with a local garage mechanic named Guy (**Nino Castelnuovo**). Her mother (**Anne Vernon**) runs a little local shop and is desperately in need of money to save her business. A rich man (**Marc Michel**) walks into the shop, falls in love with the daughter and begins a slow, indirect process that might lead to a proposal of marriage. Genevieve has eyes only for Guy, but he is drafted for two years by the army. And although they pledge to love each other forever, she receives only one letter from him in two months.

Meanwhile, almost inevitably, Genevieve finds she is pregnant. The rich man proposes, is told of this development and offers to marry Genevieve anyway and raise the child as their own. And then there is an epilogue, in which Guy returns to the town, discovers what has happened, turns to drink and dissolution, and then is rescued by Madeleine (Ellen Farnet), the young woman who was the companion for Guy's aunt and has secretly loved him for a long time. The very last scene, of a final meeting between Guy and Genevieve, is one of such poignancy that it's amazing the fabric of a musical can support it.



I had forgotten many of the details of the story in the 32 years since first seeing it; my mental images were of smiling garage mechanics and Catherine Deneuve happily singing with her lover. The film is incomparably richer and more moving than that. And although the idea of having the actors sing (or, more exactly, lip-sync) every single line might sound off-putting, it's surprising how quickly we accept it.

"The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" is now remembered as a bold original experiment, and now that it is restored and back in circulation, it can also be remembered as a surprisingly effective film, touching and knowing and, like Deneuve, ageless

Roger Ebert rogerebert.com

Deneuve, in pastel cardigans and hair ribbons, leaves us sobbing as she says goodbye to her boyfriend, called to fight in Algeria; when they see each other six years later at a snow-blanketed Esso station, the actress, now sporting the intricately engineered bouffant and all-black ensemble of a joyless bourgeoisie, destroys us all over again, her character's youthful exuberance is completely supplanted by adult resignation

Melissa Anderson ***The Village Voice***

Jacques Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* retains its direct appeal to the eyes, ears, and tear ducts after nearly five decades, with an emotionalism that's shameless but never crass. A first-love melodrama set in the French port city of the title, it stood as a bold reinvention of the movie musical in 1964, just as the genre was beginning a nosedive in its Hollywood birthplace. It became an international hit celebrated for Michel Legrand's sung-through score, a primary-color palette that gave its boutique, garage, and cobblestone street settings the aura of a fairy tale, and Demy's success in getting audiences to blubber at the pathos of thwarted romance, decorously adding elements like teen pregnancy and prostitution that had never been part of the just-expired golden era at MGM. ("Here comes the third hanky," Legrand recalled the writer-director gleefully strategizing in preproduction sessions.) If the aesthetics of characters bursting into song was



starting to meet with resistance as the Beatles prepared to storm the globe, Demy consciously upped the ante of artifice with his candy-hued spectrum, an entire off-screen cast singing for his lip-synching actors, and in nonstop reliance on his composer's melodies, both lilting and keening, to carry the plot. From the first scene in the garage where young mechanic Guy Foucher (Nino Castelnuovo) finishes up

his day's labors, the soundtrack startles, with some big-band swing in the flavor of Frank Sinatra's contemporaneous recordings with Count Basie as the car jockeys wash up and open their lockers, musically trading everyday banter. (One warbles a preemptive crack on preferring film to opera: "All that singing gives me a pain.") Guy is moony-eyed with passion, and it's not something the viewer has to accept on faith. His girl, Geneviève Emery, is embodied by 19-year-old Catherine Deneuve in her breakthrough role, and it doesn't seem like 20/20 hindsight to intuit as inevitable her reign as a world-cinema goddess with every smile, sob, and gaze she performs as a naïve



shopgirl in the umbrella store run by her well-intentioned but hectoring widowed mother (Anne Vernon). Castelnuovo is dark, dimpled, and sweet—and Deneuve's breathtaking looks establish a sort of hierarchy between the lovers. When Guy receives his draft notice and packs up for the Algerian war, leaving behind both Geneviève and his dying aunt, Élise (Mireille Perrey), it's clear that their ostensible future rests entirely on her resolve.

If *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* reaches an unsurpassable crescendo with the weepiest train farewell in cinematic history at its midpoint, Demy's visual intelligence and refusal to paint Madame Emery or Geneviève's new diamond-merchant suitor, Roland Cassard (Marc Michel), as villains are more apparent once the lovers have separated. The association of black with Roland, from his Mercedes to a wall he's framed against in the umbrella shop, seems not to translate as deviousness, but as a mark of the man's own burdensome lost love (an explicit reference to Michel's role in Demy's *Lola* from 1961). And the frequent long takes in the mother-daughter scenes permit us to notice how Deneuve's changing costumes and hair suggest that a daughter is inexorably repeating the practicality of her mother's life choices (both wear fiery red when Geneviève confesses that she's carrying Guy's child).

Beneath the jazzy pop and aching strings of Legrand's orchestrations is laid the brutal essence of a couple's dissolution: War separates them, and economics makes their reunion all but impossible. Demy doesn't bludgeon us with the ironies working against the youthful vows of fealty, and he sneaks



some mordant wit, as when Elise informs Guy that her highly eligible nurse, Madeleine (Ellen Farner), is still unmarried: "You know how well behaved she is." Through its poignant finale, a virtual snow-globe scene in a nighttime gas station, Demy and Legrand give their unhappy love story a depth that, beneath the tinsel and Technicolor, only comes with a beating, broken heart.

Bill Weber **SLANT**

Demy's revolutionary use of vibrant color is a strong departure from the highly stylized black and white films of the French nouvelle vague. Michel Legrand's compositions are more

characteristically fused from jazz and opera than structured from traditional Hollywood musicals. The story has distinct elements of neorealism It is an exhilaratingly beautiful narrative of a contemporary love story.

Acquarello:***Film School***

Demy, his cinematographer Jean Rabier and production designer Bernard Evein created an operatic masterpiece of romanticism, which makes a modest but effective antidote to the harsh era of cynicism that has pervaded world cinema ever since.

Desson Thomson:***Washington Post***

