



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# **35 Shots of Rum**

## **(35 Rhums)**

### **Claire Denis on '35 Shots of Rum'**

*What was the first thing that came to your mind when you conceived 35 Shots of Rum?*

It was a story about my grandfather, who raised my mother from two months old. His wife died giving birth to her, and so he became a family legend. My mother told us many stories about him that differentiated him from the image we had of a father. He was a wonderful grandfather, but also an adventurer: during the war he ran away from Paris with my mother. He was a serious father; he never joked about my mother's food, her school or her education, but he was also a charming and attractive man. We thought, How great it would be to have a widower father, a guy who does everything from cooking to being a little foolish – not like a mother taking care of everything.

When, as a student, I discovered Ozu's films, I was flabbergasted by the father figure in so many of them, usually played by Chishu Ryu. He was familial, yet secretive, hiding all his suffering. I'd never seen films where what happens inside a family is offered so delicately. It's not exotic at all – even if the food and the way they sit are all Japanese. There is something so strong that everyone can recognise in this kind of family, this kind of love or sadness.

I was intimidated for years by this project, partly because of Ozu, but especially because I worried what my mother would think. Yet now my mother is older, as is Alex Descas [who plays Lionel]. He is now the perfect father. I knew the time was right because my mother is still with me and she could see the film.

*The composition of some of the shots is also very reminiscent of Ozu. Did you consciously aim for this?*

No, the shape of the apartment dictated that. On location you can't design the space between people. I was lucky enough to find an apartment that seemed right – a long corridor with rooms on the side. The meaning of this corridor is not remotely Japanese: when Lionel's daughter was a child, he had his bedroom next to hers; when she became a young woman, it was time for them to be more separate. In Ozu's compositions, the place where you eat is the centre of the house – for him bedrooms exist only at night, wherever you roll out your bed. Ozu framed from a low eye-level. I did as much as I could to indicate Ozu as an inspiration while not using that framing, because that's not me. I wanted it from my point of view, in a French apartment.

*The daughter in 35 Shots of Rum, Josephine (Mati Diop), is very like the characters played by Setsuko Hara in the later Ozu films.*

In *Late Spring*, when they go to the seaside together and when the father peels an apple in one movement, it's very moving – Ozu at his best. It's a secret thing, the effect Ozu has on people. You could be from Africa, wherever, it has nothing to do with culture. His films make you feel you know so much about being Japanese, yet those feelings are universal.

*You don't let the audience know initially what the exact relationship is between Lionel and Josephine.*

They could be lovers, until she says 'papa'.

*There is ambiguity in all the relationships in the film – between Josephine and Grégoire Colin's character Noé, for instance.*

They knew each other when they were kids, and he's come to really like her, but it's very difficult when you grow up together to be able to say, 'I love you,' not as a neighbour or a friend, but as a man.

*Why did you make your central character Lionel a train driver?*

I didn't want the film to be labelled 'a film from the suburbs, with black people'. It's about working-class people. Lionel has a solid job where you have companions and you belong to something. I wanted none of that compassion for a 'black man looking for a job'. I wanted them to be looked on as people, not 'black people'. A long time ago I heard a radio programme in which a train driver was talking about his life, what he was reading, how he filled his time. I remember the deepness of what he said: 'When I'm alone driving the RER train I'm concentrating because I'm responsible for all those people, and I have to respect the signals. But it's so lonely in there – in planes or trucks there are two or three of you, but in a train you're alone. The train's movement leads to introspection.'

Trains and cinema have a parallel. As Jean Renoir once said, there's something about the way a train sits on the rails and the way film moves through a camera which gives a hypnotic effect. I asked permission to ride with a driver in the front of a train, and I felt exactly what the radio guy had said. It was just what I wanted for the character: a solid job that made him responsible. You're one of many, but every time you drive the train you're the only one responsible; you have to be hyper-concentrated, yet there's a daydreaming hypnosis thing.

I've also wondered about suicides on the rails. I think of the driver. He has to stop the train and walk to the body. By the time they retire, drivers have had anything from six to 12 of these experiences. I gave drivers the script to read and one said, 'I've had six and now I won't go down to the track. I wait for the firemen to come. I cannot go down, because if I do I have too many nightmares.'

*One of the drivers in the film commits suicide. Did this detail come from what the drivers told you they had experienced?*

No, we wrote that in. He couldn't stand being deprived of a working life. Unless you are rich or really dislike your job, to be retired when you are still young is to feel suddenly condemned. People say how great it will be, but not everyone feels like that. Some people suffer and die from it.

*The evening where they all head to a concert, but end up in a bar in the rain, is a turning point for Lionel and Josephine's relationship.*

Suddenly the father shows his daughter and everyone else that this moment is one they must experience for themselves; he's saying, 'Don't expect me to be the leader of the pack.' It's a message to his neighbour Gabrielle, to his daughter and to Noé: 'This is your life, don't wait for me.' He decides to have his own private night.

From then on, in the film's last third, everything is related to the split between the father and the daughter. So the apartment's old cat dies, and Noé is sort

of blackmailing Josephine, warning her that he won’t wait. It was time then to see the other half of Josephine’s life – her blonde mother from a different culture. It was very important to me that this should exist in the film, that Josephine is mixed-race and has something else. That’s why Lionel says he’s so happy that she can speak German: she has something more than he has, she has her mother’s culture. The trip to Germany is how Lionel says to Josephine, ‘This is our last trip where you are “my child”, though we are still father and daughter.’

Claire Denis interviewed by James Bell, *Sight & Sound*, August 2009

35 SHOTS OF RUM (35 RHUMS)

A film by: Claire Denis  
©: Soudaine Compagnie, Arte France Cinéma, Pandora Filmproduktion  
Production Companies: Soudaine Compagnie, Arte France Cinéma, Pandora Filmproduktion  
In association with: WDR/ARTE, Cofinova 4, Soficinéma 4  
With the participation of: Canal+, TPS Star, Ministère de la Culture, CNC – Centre national de la cinématographie, FFA – Filmförderungsanstalt  
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In association with: Procirep, Angoa-Agicoa  
Distribution: Diaphana Distribution  
Produced by: Bruno Pesery, Karl Baumgartner, Christoph Friedel, Claudia Steffen  
WDR (Commissioning Editor): Lucia Kreuter  
Production Manager: Benoît Pilot  
Germany Unit Production Manager: Angela Krabbe  
Unit Manager: Cristobal Matheron  
Germany Unit Manager: Selinde Ramsey  
Post-production Supervisor: Sophie Vermersch  
Production Administrator: Anne Mondet  
Germany Unit Production Administrator: Ulrike Bojahr  
1st Assistant Director: Pierre Sénélas  
2nd Assistant Director: Alexandre Billon  
Script Supervisor: Zoé Zurstrassen  
Casting: Nicolas Ronchi  
Extras Casting (Germany Unit): Michael Damm, Géraldine Bajard  
Screenplay: Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau  
Director of Photography: Agnès Godard  
1st Assistant Camera: Connie Ott  
2nd Assistant Camera: Mathilde Cathelin  
Key Grip: Gérard Buffard  
Gaffer: Jean-Pierre Baronsky  
Stills Photographers: Carole Bellaïche, Giasco Bertoli  
Visual Effects: Éclair VFX  
Visual Effects Supervisor: Pascal Laurent  
Visual Effects Co-ordinator: Elodie Glain  
Editor: Guy Lecorne  
Assistant Editor: Sandie Bompar  
Art Director: Arnaud de Moléron  
1st Assistant Art Director: Bruno Via  
Set Decorator: Boris Piot  
Germany Unit Set Decorator: Claudia Hellwich  
Sculptures: François Roux  
Costume Designer: Judy Shrewsbury  
Wardrobe: Sandrine Alpha  
Key Make-up: Danièle Vuarin  
Titles: Charlotte Bayle  
End Titles: TEST  
Production Manager Éclair Numerique: Didier Dekeyser

Original Music by: Tindersticks  
Sound: Martin Boissau  
Re-recording Mixer: Dominique Hennequin  
Co-mixer: Christophe Vingtrinier  
Recordists: Philippe Dongé, Benjamin Le Loch, Johann Nallet  
Supervising Sound Editors: Christophe Winding, Josefina Rodriguez  
Dialogue Editor: Sandie Bompar  
Foley Artist: Pascal Chauvin  
Foley Recordist: Christophe Vingtrinier  
Assistant Foley: Franck Tassel  
Post-synchronisation Recordist: Didier Lesage  
Animals: Fauna & Films Villemer  
Distribution: Nicolas Lublin

Cast

Alex Descas (Lionel)  
Mati Diop (Joséphine)  
Nicole Dogué (Gabrielle)  
Grégoire Colin (Noé)  
Julieth Mars (René)  
Adèle Ado (bar owner)  
Jean-Christophe Folly (Ruben)  
Ingrid Caven (German aunt)  
Mario Canonge (colleague)  
Stéphane Pocrain (teacher)  
Mary Pie (Lina)  
Eriq Ebouaney (Blanchard)  
Malaika Marie-Jeanne  
Jean-Luc Joseph  
Giscard Bouchotte  
Virgile Elana  
Luvinsky Átché  
Djédjé Apali (Martial)  
Tony Mpoudja  
Adama Niane  
Meyen Ravine  
David Saada (cowboy)  
Thomas Murviel  
Paul Bebga  
Sylvana Martel  
Anne Makangila-Lebo  
Cheikh Touré (barman)  
Jacqueline Andrieux  
Mélanie Petzold  
Mani et Ozale  
Moulaye Diarra

France/Germany 2008©  
101 mins

The screening on Wed 28 Jul will feature a pre-recorded intro by Be Manzini, poet and director of Caramel Film Club

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