



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

A Christmas Tale

(Un conte de Noël)

Arnaud Desplechin on 'A Christmas Tale'

Arnaud Desplechin's new film *A Christmas Tale* is another addition to the currently burgeoning French family-drama cycle, assembling a heavyweight cast which includes mother and daughter Catherine Deneuve and Chiara Mastroianni, Jean-Paul Roussillon, Mathieu Amalric and Emmanuelle Devos, among others, for a fraught family reunion at Christmas in Roubaix (the provincial town where Desplechin grew up). Junon (Deneuve) and Abel (Roussillon) have three children, but lost an earlier one to a rare genetic condition. It now transpires Junon is dying of the same disease, and only a bone marrow transplant from one of her family members is likely to save her. Will that be Henri (Amalric), the feckless son unaccountably 'banished' years earlier by his solemn sister Elizabeth (Anne Consigny), or Elizabeth's own anguished adolescent son Paul? Desplechin unleashes a battery of formal devices and references to frame the ensuing entanglements and harsh reckonings, making *A Christmas Tale* one of his richest works to date.

What was the starting point for A Christmas Tale?

Often I start with things that I don't understand intellectually, but which are good material for an actor. A while ago I was reading Emerson on the death of his child. A man in a cemetery says, 'My son detached himself from me as a leaf falls from a tree' – I thought, that's good. Then in order for me to try and understand what I'm doing, I like to tell myself my film belongs to a genre. I thought we'll have this house, and it'll be a Thanksgiving movie. And all these strange sentences and this material that I don't quite understand, I'll put into this house. Sometimes it's a question of shape as well; in this case I thought it a good idea for the film to be structured as an Advent calendar so that all the characters are locked up in this house, and every time you open a window, it's like a little present – a character trapped in there.

Did you choose your music before or after shooting?

I can't write and put the music on it at the same time. I've always felt guilty about that, because of Godard's adage that you mustn't use music, but you must serve it, as in be useful to it. If I added music immediately, it would be clichéd. Sometimes when I'm editing, I tell my editor to take off the sound. I'm trying to work out what I meant – not what I see, but what did I film? I give the editor a record to play and suddenly I see the performance of this character. And that's something that I love in Scorsese's films. It seems that he too uses music to understand what he's done.

Why did you choose to have each character talk straight to camera?

When the script was advanced, I wrote something a bit silly. You see Junon (Deneuve) doing her housework, and then suddenly she turns to camera and explains the set-up, saying this is my house, the whole story is going to take place here. It was as if she said, I'm the main character, you're not obliged to look at all the others. And because the family is full of eccentric weirdos, each of them takes the spotlight to say, the others don't matter, I am the main one. So it was an interesting competition between the characters.

Why did you decide to build in mythic underpinnings?

There's a line that Mathieu's character says (but if it weren't Mathieu saying it, it would be a dreadful line): 'We're swimming deep in a myth, but I don't know which one it is.' It was amazing because you feel he's very moved when he says that. And I don't know either. I love the characters aspiring to this grandeur – but they are just in Roubaix. They have such great expectations and their lives are disasters. It's lovely! This is what films are about.

Was the role of Junon written especially for Catherine Deneuve?

I can't write for actors. If I could, it would mean that I know the character. I write characters I don't understand and then ask actors to help me create them. With another actress, Junon's character would be very different. I don't want to get someone stuck, particularly if I love and respect them. I don't want to blackmail them.

It seems a classically subversive Deneuve role, the unsentimental mother?

What interests her in a part is what she calls cruelty. I'm not sure I would call it that; it's more the power of scandal, the power of subversion. It's a question of generations, that's the impression I have. For example, it was important for her to say the maternal instinct does not exist. It's a very strong thing from the 1960s; it means freedom for women, to say we are allowed not to love our kids, just like men. She never crushes the part with her performance. She just looks at the whole movie and says, okay, this is what I need to give. She's not choosing films for the sake of performing, even though she is a terrific performer.

Interview by Kieron Corless, *Sight & Sound*, February 2009

A CHRISTMAS TALE (UN CONTE DE NOËL)

Un film de: Arnaud Desplechin
©/Production Companies: Why Not Productions (France), France 2 Cinéma, Wild Bunch, BAC Films
Presented by: Why Not Productions (France)
With the participation of: Canal+, CinéCinéma, CNC – Centre national de la cinématographie
With the support of: CRRAV Nord-Pas de Calais, Région Nord-Pas de Calais
In association with: Sofica UGC 1
International Sales: Wild Bunch
Executive Producer: Martine Cassinelli
For Why Not Productions: Pascal Caucheteux, Dany Soralach'ti
Unit Manager: Cristobal Matheron
Production Managers: Benoît Pilot, Isabelle Tillou
Administration: Sylvia Pain
Post-production Supervisor: Béatrice Mauduit
Assistant Director: Gabrièle Roux
Script Supervisor: Agnès Feuvre
Child Casting: Astrid Mouget
Scenario/Dialogue: Arnaud Desplechin, Emmanuel Bourdieu
Script inspired by La Greffe by: J. Asher, J.P. Jouet
Director of Photography: Éric Gautier
Camera Operators: Newine Béhi, Arnaud Carney, Raphaël Douge, Fabienne Octobre, Nathalie Lao
Steadicam Operator: Kareem La Vaullée
Stills Photographer: Jean-Claude Lothar
Visual Effects: Mac Guff Ligne (Paris)
Special Effects: Sfxworks, Olivier de Laveleye, Marie-Pierre Franckx
Pyrotechnics: Serge Gasparollo, Amar Lakroum
Editor: Laurence Briaud
Assistant Editor: Tuong-vi Nguyen-long
Art Director: Dan Bevan
Costume Designer: Nathalie Raoul
Costumes: Isabelle Blanc, Mahemiti Deregnacourt, Geneviève Danguis, Charlotte Dubois
Make-up: Sylvie Aïd, Mina Matsumura, Helen Murphy
Hairstylists: Eric Monteil, Frédéric Souquet, Jean-Marie Cuvilo
Titles: Mac Guff Ligne (Paris)
Colour Timer: Isabelle Julien
Music: Grégoire Hetzel
Electronic Music: Max Guiguet
Arranged by: Grégoire Hetzel
Music Consultant: Max Guiguet

Sound [Recordist]: Nicolas Cantin
Sound Mixer: Jean-Pierre Laforce
Sound [Editor]: Sylvain Malbrant
Additional Post-synchro/Sound Effects: Jean-Max Morise, Lionel Le Bras, Jean-Louis Le Bras
Foley Artists: Philippe Penot, Jacques de France
Foley Recordist: Didier Lesage
Stunts: Daniel Vérité, Pascal Guégan
Publicity: Agnès Chabot

Cast

Catherine Deneuve (*Junon Vuillard*)
Jean-Paul Roussillon (*Abel Vuillard, Junon's husband*)
Anne Consigny (*Elizabeth, their oldest child*)
Mathieu Amalric (*Henri, their middle child*)
Chiara Mastroianni (*Sylvia, Ivan's wife*)
Melvil Poupaud (*Ivan, their youngest child*)
Emmanuelle Devos (*Faunia, Henri's lover*)
Hippolyte Girardot (*Claude, Elizabeth's husband*)
Laurent Capelluto (*Simon, Junon's nephew*)
Emile Berling (*Paul, Elizabeth and Claude's son*)
Françoise Bertin (*Rosaimée, Abel's mother's friend*)
Samir Guesmi (*Spatafora, family friend at Roubaix*)
Thomas Obled (*Basile, Ivan and Sylvia's son*)
Clément Obled (*Baptiste, Ivan and Sylvia's son*)
Azize Kabouche (*Doctor Zraïdi, oncologist*)
François Regnault (*analyst*)
Thierry Bosc (*prosecutor*)
Hélène Roussel (*judge*)
Miglem Mirtchev (*Henri's lawyer*)
David Frenkel (*Elisabeth's lawyer*)
Romain Goupil (*psychiatrist friend*)
Beata Nilska (*anaesthetist*)
Philippe Morier-Genou (*freemason friend*)
Père Mathieu Bakanina (*priest*)
Marie-France Jaskula (*member of congregation*)
Jean-Pierre Jouet (*'Experts' president*)
Stéphane Touitou *

France 2008©

152 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Apartment

Wed 1 Dec 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by critic and improviser Tara Judah); Mon 13 Dec 14:30; Wed 22 Dec 20:40; Tue 28 Dec 18:10; Thu 30 Dec 20:30

Remember the Night

Thu 2 Dec 14:30; Mon 27 Dec 13:00; Thu 30 Dec 18:00

Meet Me in St Louis

Fri 3 Dec 20:45; Sun 19 Dec 12:20; Wed 22 Dec 18:00; Tue 28 Dec 12:20

Miracle on 34th Street

Sat 4 Dec 15:50; Sat 11 Dec 18:00; Fri 17 Dec 14:30

A Christmas Tale (Un conte de Noël)

Sun 5 Dec 17:50; Tue 28 Dec 15:15

Scrooge (aka A Christmas Carol)

Mon 6 Dec 18:30; Thu 16 Dec 21:00; Fri 17 Dec 18:20; Sat 18 Dec 18:10; Sun 19 Dec 15:40; Mon 20 Dec 18:10; Tue 21 Dec 14:30

Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas

Tue 7 Dec 18:30; Sat 11 Dec 16:00; Tue 21 Dec 21:00; Thu 23 Dec 20:45

Gremlins

Wed 8 Dec 17:50 (+ intro by Justin Johnson, Lead Programmer); Sat 18 Dec 20:45; Wed 22 Dec 20:45; Wed 29 Dec 20:50

Bad Santa

Fri 10 Dec 20:45; Mon 13 Dec 20:50; Fri 17 Dec 21:00

It's a Wonderful Life

From Sun 12 Dec – Thu 23 Dec

Tokyo Godfathers (Tokyo goddofazazu)

Tue 14 Dec 20:45; Mon 20 Dec 20:45

Carol

Wed 15 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 18:00; Thu 30 Dec 14:20

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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