



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Umbrellas of Cherbourg

*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* enjoys a legendary place as an all-but-unique curiosity in French cinema – the film for which the epithet ‘bittersweet’ was invented, less a musical (though French examples of that genre are rare enough) than an operetta in which everything is sung and there is not a line of spoken dialogue, a richly-coloured feast for celluloid chocaholics. Reviewing the film after many years, however, what is striking is not so much its uniqueness as its intersection with other French films of the *nouvelle vague* years – not only Demy’s *Lola* of three years previously (in which Roland Cassard makes his first appearance) but also works that dealt with the impact of the Algerian War on French society. Agnès Varda (Demy’s wife) had counterpointed the suffering of an individual woman to the drama of the call-up in *Cléo de 5 à 7* the previous year, and Resnais did likewise, though in a totally different way, in *Muriel* released in the same year as *Les Parapluies*. The addressing of a major political problem through a drama of lost love had of course been most memorably broached by Resnais and Duras in *Hiroshima mon amour* of 1959, and the rigours of Gaullist censorship had ensured that that was one of the few comparatively safe ways for the cinema to address Algeria.

This is not to turn *Les Parapluies* into any kind of *film engagé*, though Demy and Varda had been strong opponents of the Algerian War, but rather to try to explain why it seems nowhere near so sickly a work as might have been expected. Irony is obvious in the foamy musical setting of Guy’s row with his boss or the sight of the heavily pregnant Geneviève getting married in a white dress, but also present in a host of less perceptible ways, most notably through the character of Mme Emery. Her admission that, ‘when I married your father, I knew nothing’ is rueful rather than proud and her naiveté that Geneviève should not ‘waste her life’ as she herself had done becomes retroactively tinged with melancholy when we realise in the final sequence that Guy would have proved a far better match, in a France of galloping car ownership, than she expected.

The beleaguered stuffiness of the provincial petite bourgeoisie comes through in Emery’s failure to make a go of running an umbrella shop in Cherbourg, notoriously among the rainiest towns in France, as in Mme Emery’s stilted allusions to their straightened circumstances when Roland Cassard comes to dinner. As an evocation of the decolonising and quickly modernising France Kristin Ross analyses so well in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* has more to it than meets the eye. What does meet the eye, especially in this restored print, is at once as glorious and as knowingly gross as might have been expected – the lemon yellow of Deneuve’s first costume matched by the *citron pressé* the lovebirds virtuously sip on their date, the wallpaper like floral knickers from Marks and Spencer, the primary colours in all their rainbow stridency. The music basically consists of one big tune, during whose main appearance the lovers are seen gliding along the street in perhaps the film’s most truly Hollywood moment, plus shreds and bites of

melody. Still, given the film's unusual premise, it would have been unrealistic to ask for more, and indeed impertinent from a Briton since the UK's most successful musical films in that pre-*A Hard Day's Night* era starred the ineffable Cliff 'Two-Shags' Richard.

**Keith Reader, *Sight and Sound*, February 1997**

### **A contemporary review**

This utterly charming film is such an unequivocal spellbinder that one is tempted to suggest that, at least in the two respects that matter most with musicals (the music and the colour), a French film has finally forced Hollywood into second place.

It is, of course, a matter of taste. There is none of the exuberance characteristic of the best American musicals; unlike them, Demy's film never, so to speak, explodes. Instead there is sweetness, even sentimentality, with enough of an edge not to merit the epithet sugary. This edge is due to something more than the contrast between what is and what might have been – in any case, an inevitable feature of a story of a lost first love. It is a fundamental aspect of the direct clash between reality and unreality that must happen in a film where all the dialogue is sung.

This clash is what the film is made of, and Demy goes along with it from start to finish. With *Lola*, in which the now rich Roland Cassard lived his earlier emotional life, Demy presented reality as it might emerge through a dream. Here he gives us the reverse, a romantic dream extended as it were from the realities of life in a harbour town where men and women work in garages, buy and sell umbrellas, and make love.

*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* is, in fact, the slighter kind of dream from which the dreamer sooner or later awakens. It is like a glimpse of perfection in an imperfect world. Fundamental to its expression is Michel Legrand's haunting score – pop music of an unusually personal and complex kind, composed to be successfully sung with a metaphorical catch in the voice, or sweetly squeaked on a pitch sufficiently high to be taken up by the sound of a car screeching to a halt outside the umbrella shop.

In keeping with the film's technically brilliant air of artificiality are the actors' faces, never for a moment reflecting the effort of making this kind of noise, and yet creating an effect that would not survive a split second of imperfect post-synchronisation.

Most exciting of all is perhaps the fact that on turning from the music to the very Parisian colour, one finds exactly the same language being spoken. Visually this is a world where pink and brick red come together without actually screaming; where a girl can wear a dress in blue with a mauve floral design to match the wallpaper exactly; where the purchase of a black umbrella, interrupting an early farewell between the lovers, seems not without dramatic significance. In short, the aural and visual tones created by Demy, Legrand and Bernard Evein, are at the same time complementary to each other and abrasively alive enough to carry off the film.

**Monthly Film Bulletin, February 1965**

THE UMBRELLAS OF CHERBOURG  
(LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG)

Director: Jacques Demy  
Production Companies: Parc Film, Madeleine Films, Beta Film  
Producer: Mag Bodard  
Production Manager: Philippe Dussart  
Unit Manager: Maurice Urbain  
Location Manager: Charles Chieusse \*  
Production Secretary: Jeanne-Marie Olivier \*  
Production Accountant: Daniel Videlier \*  
Assistant Directors: Jean-Paul Savignac, Klaus Müller-Laué  
2nd Assistant Director: André Flédérick  
Script Supervisor: Annie Maurel  
Original Scenario/Dialogue: Jacques Demy  
Director of Photography: Jean Rabier  
Camera Operators: Pierre Willemin, Jean-Paul Lemaître  
Stills: Léo Weisse  
Editor: Monique Teisseire  
Assistant Editor: Gisèle Chézeau \*  
Art Director: Bernard Evein  
Assistant Art Directors: Claude Pignot, Jean Didenot \*  
Properties: Joseph Gerhard \*  
Costumes: Jacqueline Moreau  
Costumer: Agnès Soulet  
Gowns for Ms Deneuve: Real  
Umbrellas: ONM  
Make-up: Christiane Fornelli  
Hairstyles: Carita  
Music/Music Conductor: Michel Legrand  
Lyrics: Jacques Demy

Cast  
Catherine Deneuve (*Geneviève Emery*)  
Nino Castelnuovo (*Guy Foucher*)  
Anne Vernon (*Madame Emery*)  
Marc Michel (*Roland Cassard*)  
Ellen Farner (*Madeleine*)  
Mireille Perrey (*Aunt Elise*)  
Jean Champion (*Aubin*)  
Pierre Caden (*Bernard*)  
Jean-Pierre Dorat (*Jean*)  
Bernard Fradet (*gas station apprentice*)  
Michel Benoist (*umbrella shop customer*)  
Philippe Dumat (*garage customer, 1957*)  
Dorothée Blank (*girl in the sailors’ café*)  
Jane Carat (*Jenny/Geneviève*)  
Harald Wolff (*Dubourg*)  
Danielle Licari (*singing voice of Geneviève*)  
José Bartel (*singing voice of Guy*)  
Christiane Legrand (*singing voice of Madame Emery*)  
Georges Blanès (*singing voice of Roland Cassard*)  
Claudine Meunier (*singing voice of Madeleine*)  
Claire Leclerc (*singing voice of Aunt Elise*)  
Jean-Paul Chizat (*Pierre*) \*  
Patrick Bricard (*waiter*) \*  
Roger Perrinoz (*café proprietor*) \*  
Paul Pavel (*first removal man*) \*  
Gisèle Grandpré (*Madame Germaine*) \*  
Rosalie Varda (*Françoise Cassard*) \*  
François Foucher (*Hervé Legrand*) \*  
Michel Legrand (*singing voice of Jean/postman*) \*  
Jacques Demy (*singing voice of distracted customer/barman*) \*

France/West Germany 1964  
93 mins

\* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

**Lift to the Scaffold (Ascenseur pour l’échafaud)**  
Thu 1 Sep 18:30; Thu 15 Sep 20:55; Sun 18 Sep 15:50; Wed 21 Sep 21:00; Tue 27 Sep 21:00  
**Do the Right Thing**  
Fri 2 Sep 20:40; Sat 24 Sep 20:40; Wed 28 Sep 18:00 + intro by freelance writer and producer Kaleem Aftab  
**Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)**  
Sat 3 Sep 16:00; Fri 9 Sep 14:30; Tue 13 Sep 18:10; Sat 17 Sep 12:30  
**Psycho**  
Sat 3 Sep 20:45; Sun 11 Sep 15:40; Thu 15 Sep 14:30; Tue 4 Oct 18:30  
**The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle)**  
Sun 4 Sep13:20; Fri 9 Sep 20:45; Tue 13 Sep 20:30  
**In a Lonely Place**  
Sun 4 Sep 16:00; Wed 14 Sep 18:15 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large; Fri 23 Sep 18:00; Wed 28 Sep 20:50  
**The Bride Wore Black (La Mariée était en noir)**  
Mon 5 Sep 20:50; Fri 30 Sep 18:10; Mon 3 Oct 17:50  
**Accident**  
Tue 6 Sep 20:40; Sun 11 Sep 13:10; Tue 20 Sep 17:50

**Ratcatcher**  
Wed 7 Sep 18:15 + intro by Catharine Des Forges, Director of the Independent Cinema Office; Sat 17 Sep 18:00; Thu 29 Sep 21:00  
**The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)**  
Thu 8 Sep 20:45; Mon 12 Sep 14:30; Mon 19 Sep 20:45; Sun 25 Sep 15:30  
**Letter from an Unknown Woman**  
Sat 10 Sep 12:30; Wed 14 Sep 14:30; Wed 21 Sep 18:00 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large  
**The Motorcycle Diaries (Diarios de motocicleta)**  
Sat 10 Sep 18:00; Sat 17 Sep 14:45  
**Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)**  
Tue 13 Sep 14:30; Fri 16 Sep 18:00; Tue 20 Sep 20:50; Sat 1 Oct 12:30  
**Fargo**  
Thu 22 Sep 20:55; Sat 1 Oct 18:00  
**Last Year in Marienbad (L’Année dernière à Marienbad)**  
Mon 26 Sep 20:50; Sun 2 Oct 12:45; Tue 4 Oct 20:40

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