



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)

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-Laue
2nd Assistant Director: André Flédéric
Script Supervisor: Annie Maurel
Original Scenario/Dialogue: Jacques Demy
Director of Photography: Jean Rabier
Camera Operators: Pierre Willemain, 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*)
Dorothee 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
Digital
* Uncredited

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

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The Umbrellas of Cherbourg

(Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)

Fri 1 Dec 14:40; Wed 13 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun 17 Dec 18:45; Wed 20 Dec 20:55

The Passenger

Sat 2 Dec 20:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sun 10 Dec 15:45; Wed 27 Dec 17:50

After Life (Wandafuru Ralfu)

Sun 3 Dec 12:45; Tue 12 Dec 17:15; Wed 27 Dec 14:40; Sat 30 Dec 20:20

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Mon 4 Dec 18:15; Thu 14 Dec 20:50; Thu 28 Dec 18:15

Five Easy Pieces

Tue 5 Dec 14:30; Sat 9 Dec 20:55; Tue 19 Dec 18:15; Fri 29 Dec 18:20

White Material

Wed 6 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by film curator Abiba Coulibaly); Fri 29 Dec 20:45

Boyz n the Hood

Thu 7 Dec 20:35; Sat 16 Dec 18:15; Sat 23 Dec 20:40

Meet Me in St Louis

Fri 8 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by writer Richard Dyer); Wed 20 Dec 14:30; Thu 21 Dec 18:10; Sat 23 Dec 11:50

It's a Wonderful Life

Wed 13 Dec 18:10; Sat 16 Dec 20:25; Mon 18 Dec 20:25; Wed 20 Dec 18:10; Fri 22 Dec 14:30, 20:25; Sat 23 Dec 18:10

The Shop around the Corner

Fri 15 Dec 18:20; Mon 18 Dec 14:30; Thu 21 Dec 20:45; Sat 30 Dec 12:20

Remember the Night

Sun 17 Dec 12:15; Tue 19 Dec 20:40

Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander)

Sat 23 Dec 14:20; Fri 29 Dec 13:30; Sat 30 Dec 13:00

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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