

France, 1970. Not Rated. 100 min;
Cast: Catherine Deneuve, Jen Marais,
Jacques Perrin, Micheline Presle;
Music: Michel Legrand;
Cinematography: Ghislain Cloquet;
Producers: Mag Bodard; Director:
Jacques Demy

How many directors can get legendary French actress Catherine Deneuve to wear a donkey skin and head?

Well, Jacques Demy was able to for his recently restored "Donkey Skin" (1970, "Peau d'Ane"), which will be screening from Jan. 14 to Jan. 20 at the Brattle Theater in Harvard Square. Based on a fairy tale by Charles Perrault, the film tells the story of a princess that must escape marrying her father and then, must win the heart of the prince she loves.

Deneuve described the movie in the French edition of Elle magazine in 2003 as "a single alliance of realism and kitsch."

"In films of Jacques Demy," she said, "there is always an artisanal (sic) aspect, combined with a great rigour (sic). ... A red kingdom, a blue kingdom? The horses will be painted. Jacques Demy always sought simple solutions. ... The marvellous one, for me, it was also to play in a film, in music, songs, costumes. And what costumes! Heaviest was the (donkey) skin. A true skin of animal, which I had at the same time on the body and the head. The mouth of the animal, especially, weighed its weight!"

A fringe member of the French New Wave, director Jacques Demy was interested more in the self-contained fantasy world of fairy tale and musicals. Unlike the black-and-white work of other French New Wave directors, Demy typically used color and music. The director was born on June 5, 1931 in Pontchateau, France, and died on Oct. 27, 1990 in Paris. He studied film and art before working with animator Paul Grimault and filmmaker George

Rouquier.

His first feature film "Lola" was released in 1960, and featured Anouk Aimee as a cabaret singer. It was dedicated to, and influenced by, famed director Max Ophuls. His second film, "Bay of Angels," featured Jeanne Moreau as a compulsive gambler. Many of Demy's recurring elements appeared in these first works: chance encounters, fate, long-lost love, and song.

Demy's opus arrived in 1964 with "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg." It starred Deneuve and Nino Castelnuovo and paid homage to the Hollywood musical. Demy once said that he never intended to copy the American film musical, but rather cre-



ate a new musical form "owing nothing to American musical comedy," wrote film critic Caroline E. Layde at SenseofCinema.com. "Umbrellas" tells the story of a mechanic and a shop girl. According to film lore, "Umbrellas" was one of the first film musicals in which every line of dialogue was sung. The movie earned the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in France and received Oscar nominations for screenplay and score.

One of the most memorable details of "Umbrellas" is Demy's use of color. Agnes Varda, co-director of "Young Girls of Rochefort" and Demy's former wife, told TalkingPictures.co.uk that

"Umbrellas" cost about 80,000 English pounds in 1964. She explained that the look of "Umbrellas" was created from three negatives, one each in red, blue and green. Varda described it as an early precursor to Technicolor. Demy, she explained, had to mix the three prints, re-recorded the sound and, then ask the film's composer Michel Legrand to re-mix the music.

She added that the allure of Demy films like "Umbrellas" was the way her former husband handled the combination of movement, cameras, music and actors. "(And) nobody is suffering from Catherine Deneuve being 20!" she added.

Deneuve starred in Demy's most regarded films of the 1960s, including the "Young Girls of Rochefort" in 1967 and "Donkey Skin" in 1970. She said that Demy marked her public image more than any other director – including Luis Bunuel. She explained in an interview with Cinema magazine in 1981 that he launched her career with his 1964 film, "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg."

She said that Demy was a very determined director who knew exactly what he wanted. "'The Umbrellas of Cherbourg' decided my career basically," she said. "Demy is very demanding with a very precise vision which it is useless to want to correct as little as it is. For 'the umbrellas', it obliged me to cut the fringe of hair, which I carried on the face. I was horrified. It is as if he had said to me: 'You strip.' ... Undoubtedly I had guessed that with this film Demy was going to influence my personality. I had, for my part, to enter the vision that is made Demy of the woman, of his type of preferred heroine."

Deneuve also wrote in the French edition of Elle in 2003 that her role in "Donkey Skin" was one experience that never left her. She said that the film is carried by Demy's humor and romanticism.

- Jason Nielsen