

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: The Umbrellas of Cherbourg

France, 1964. Not Rated. 87 min
Cast: Catherine Deneuve, Nino Castelnuovo, Anne Vernon, Marc Michel, Ellen Farner; Music: Michel Legrand; Cinematographer: Jean Rabier; Producer: Mag Bodard; Director: Jacques Demy

Forty years have passed since electric Eastmancolor umbrellas opened over the port city of Cherbourg; since Jacques Demy persuaded Michel Legrand to compose music for an experimental film that would be entirely sung; since a 19-year-old Catherine Deneuve took the role that would launch her career. Forty years have passed since *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* opened to widespread praise in France and America, and what a relief it is to watch even the opening credits and to realize that all of the film's potency has been preserved in the canister. We can see immediately everything that is lovable: an auto mechanic singing brightly to his customer; an amorous young couple making dreamy plans for their future; a yellow bicycle coasting into a green alleyway. It's irresistible, but what is it?

First, it's a musical, although not the usual kind. When *Umbrellas* was released, in 1964, some said Demy's creation might pose a serious challenge to the supremacy of the Hollywood musical, that distinctly American form whose popularity had peaked in the 1930s and 1940s and faded in the 1950s. But *Umbrellas* was too much a product of the special vision of its director to become a prototype. Demy himself said he wanted to make a film "that borrowed nothing from American musical comedy, nor from French operetta, a film entirely sung in free verse, the dialogue of which would be clear and direct, with themes that are simple and—why not?—popular and generous, a little as if opera had followed the evolution of jazz." This

strange hybrid is precisely what Demy created, but who could be asked to follow such a model?

The result of this combination of styles is a film that is at once fantastical and realistic. Since the elements of fantasy are evident everywhere, what stands out immediately is the real: Madame Emery (Anne Vernon) instructing her daughter Geneviève (Deneuve) to eat a piece of fruit; foolish, giddy conversations between young lovers; familiar frustrations and disappointments. The film is so unrelentingly charming—it's difficult not to smile at the wild-patterned wallpaper and catchy music, no matter



how serious the situation—that we can be swept along without realizing how deeply we are feeling the emotions of the characters. Only in the short periods of silence (for instance, when Madame Emery fidgets with her collar after Geneviève leaves her shop) do we feel the burden of a complex and uncertain world.

There is an intimacy, too, that distinguishes *Umbrellas* from the grand film musicals of the past, and even from the Broadway screen adaptations that were becoming popular in the 1960s. (*West Side Story* was a hit in 1961 and *My Fair Lady* in 1964.) Most scenes include only two or three characters, talking in a room. The dialogue is colloquial and filled with non-sequiturs, just like ordinary conversation (or an

episode of *Seinfeld*). Madame Emery notices her reflection in a mirror and realizes she needs a haircut; Geneviève teases her boyfriend (Nino Castelnuovo), a mechanic, for smelling like gasoline (his response is cleverer than average: "It's a perfume like any other"). In these intimate moments we also see the characters wrestling with real decisions (can Geneviève afford to wait for her love to return from war?) and destroying as many illusions as they create. "I, who would have died for him—why am I not dead?" wonders Geneviève during her love's absence. It is a serious question to her, and a heart-breaking one.

Of course fantasy is as vital to *Umbrellas* as realism, and much was done to spin the story into a beautiful fairy tale. The residents of Cherbourg, where the entire film was shot, permitted the production designer Bernard Evein to paint their city in lively colors and, at one point, to fill it with artificial snow. Michel Legrand composed a score of jazz, tangos, mambos, and ballads and worked separately with a recording-studio cast who would provide the actors with their voices (his sister Christiane sings the part of Madame Emery). But at the center of this confection are characters with mundane goals: Roland Cassard (Marc Michel), who appeared in Demy's 1961 film *Lola* as a lovesick idealist, returns bruised to *Umbrellas*, just hoping to settle down. Guy Foucher, Geneviève's love, says earnestly, "I don't have much ambition, but if I could just realize this dream: to be happy with a woman in a life that we had chosen together." By the end of the film some dreams come true and some don't, and we're not sure what to wish for; happily, a crescendo of instruments, voices, and artificial snow carry us away.

- Joshua J. Friedman