

# Les parapluies de Cherbourg (A) France 1964

14 May 2018

DIRECTOR: **Jacques Demy**

Running time: 91 minutes (French with English subtitles)

LEADING PLAYERS: **Catherine Deneuve** (Geneviève Emery), **Nino Castelnuovo** (Guy Foucher), **Anne Vernon** (Madame Emery), **Marc Michel** (Roland Cassard), **Danielle Licari** (Geneviève Emery's singing voice), **José Bartel** (Guy Foucher's singing voice), **Christiane Legrand** (Madame Emery's singing voice), **Georges Blaness** (Roland Cassard's singing voice).

SCRIPT: **Jacques Demy**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Jean Rabier**. EDITING: **Anne-Marie Cotret** and **Monique Teisseire**. MUSIC: **Michel Legrand**.

*Les parapluies de Cherbourg* was the first of Jacques Demy's through-sung musical dramas, or 'singspiele', as the Germans would have it. It followed *Lola* (1961), with Anouk Aimée, and *La baie des anges* (1963), with Moreau, and represented something of a departure stylistically. Whereas those first features owed much to the French *Nouvelle Vague* in their use of locations, economic black and white cinematography and adoption of a heterogeneous tonal style, *Parapluies* is in saturated Eastmancolor and enjoys a formal unity.

The action, as in many of Demy's films, takes place in a seaside town (the director himself hailed from Nantes on the Atlantic Brittany coast) and concerns a sixteen-year-old seamstress (Deneuve) working in her mother's umbrella shop, and her life's love, a young mechanic (Castelnuovo). The plot, in four acts, furnishes, like an Italian opera, the obstacles that stand in the way of their happiness. I shall not provide the details here, except to say that, in common with many of Demy's films, the schmaltzy treatment is at odds with a poignant realism as to the playing out of human relationships.

Music had earlier held an accessory role in his films but it here takes centre stage. Like many of the New Wave directors, Demy adored American cinema culture. *Lola*, for instance, has a character pull up in a Cadillac and sporting a Stetson. In particular, he loved the Hollywood musical form, and his next film, *Les demoiselles de Rochefort*, in addition to acquiring the on-screen expertise of Gene Kelly and George Chakiris, bears a passing resemblance to *On the Town* (1949).

The device of having characters sing their dialogue, as opposed to merely bursting into song when they

have something emotional to say, is, of course, a departure from Hollywood norms, and represents a discourse of realism that both takes us further away from reality, while bringing us closer to the psychological realism of the characters. For the spectator, after a modicum of adjustment, it is oddly immersive, even though in meta-cinematic terms it drives a wall between ourselves and the actors, who are voiced; consequently, we do not hear the principals' own voices at all in the film!

None of this would have been possible without the contribution of Demy's long-time collaborator, composer Michel Legrand, who provides the constant musical accompaniment and word-setting. His light, tuneful style may be an acquired taste, especially if you prefer something more full-throated, but is undeniably better suited to the quotidian settings. Also, worthy of mention are Jean Rabier, whose colour cinematography positively glows in this restoration, and production designer Bernard Evein, who provided every necktie and paper-hanging in collusion with Demy and Rabier. The result is that the film screams artifice at us at the same time as speaking of petrol stations and the Algerian war, unwanted pregnancy and upward mobility.

If you have not gathered already, *Parapluies* is a 'Marmite film'. However, if you love musicals, France, or are just a sucker for romantic melodrama, you should respond to its verve and professionalism. Undeniably, it is a celebration of everything that makes the seventh art unique, and as such is an ideal way to close the season.

**David Clare**