



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Les Demoiselles de Rochefort

Following on from the success of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* comes *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* – Jacques Demy’s large-scale tribute to the Hollywood musical featuring screen legend Gene Kelly. The story centres on twin sisters Delphine and Solange (played by real-life sisters Catherine Deneuve and Françoise Dorléac) who, tired of their humdrum existence, dream of finding success and romance in Paris. The superb ensemble, also featuring Danielle Darrieux, Michel Piccoli, Jacques Perrin, George Chakiris and Grover Dale, weave and wander around the town, looking for and just missing the love of their lives.

bfi.org.uk

With a plot of pure Shakespearean farce, witty dialogue and lyrics by Demy, and a magnificent jazz score by the late, great Michel Legrand, *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* is an effervescent celebration of life that is sure to captivate and uplift.

As the follow-up to his all-sung musical drama *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), Jacques Demy created something even bigger and brasher – *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort*, a slightly tongue-in-cheek tribute to the classic Hollywood musicals of Vincente Minnelli, Stanley Donen and Jerome Robbins. Shot entirely in the Atlantic port-city of the title – repainted for the occasion in DayGlo colours, and with Rochefort’s expansive Place Colbert co-opted as a giant sound-stage – *Demoiselles* bounces with irrepressible vitality from the get-go. The presence in the cast of Gene Kelly and George Chakiris (*West Side Story*) underlines the Hollywood link.

The plot is minimal – twin sisters dream of escaping to Paris, a carnival breezes into town, three sets of lovers are kept apart by contrivances until the final reel – but Demy misses no opportunity for explosions of song and dance on every corner. Unlike its predecessor, the film does include spoken dialogue, although one dinner-party scene plays out in rhymed couplets. Both song and dance are seamlessly integrated into the action; a character will walk along the street and be whirled by successive anonymous passers-by into brief dance routines.

It’s a lesser achievement than *Umbrellas* – it often feels self-conscious, Demy’s lyrics tend towards the cheesy, and a minor plot-strand about an axe murderer is jarringly out of place. With the exception of Danielle Darrieux as the twin girls’ mother, singing voices are dubbed. But the all-pervasive charm, seasoned with a touch of Demy’s characteristic melancholy, wins through. Michel Legrand’s jazz-tinged score seduces the ear, and the performances – especially Michel Piccoli as a lovelorn music-shop owner – are appealing. It’s also the only film to team real-life sisters Catherine Deneuve and Françoise Dorléac: the latter met a tragically early death in a motor accident only a few months after *Demoiselles* was released. They’re delightful together.

Philip Kemp, *Sight & Sound*, February 2020

A contemporary review for the dubbed version of 'Les Demoiselles de Rochefort'

The dubbed version of *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* is a very coy film; an anthology of sentimental cliché, in which the inventive details of narrative and imagery only pour ironic fuel on the chocolate-box extravagance. A film I admire, on the other hand, is the original, which has been showing in Paris for several months. The problems of translating Jacques Demy's gentle *marivaudage* into an English idiom, of reproducing a particular Gallic tightrope walk between tenderness and whimsy, plus a catastrophic decision to show the film on the Cinerama screen: these, more than the familiar vicissitudes of dubbing, have sunk the English version.

It must be allowed that Demy is an habitual offender on the count of sentimentality, and there are embarrassing lapses in this musical, as there have been in his previous films; yet he is capable of a tender, unsentimental euphoria more intoxicating than any other film work in the field of sentimental farce. And there is one strain of this delicate rapture that belongs to French art alone, ethereal, all too fragile, declining to coyness much as Ustinov's charm dissipates into eastern European whimsy: suddenly the miracle of the farce rose becomes the contrivance of outworn convention, the merriment becomes forced gaiety and weary schmaltz, vulgar and insensitive. And Demy, never far from cliché, is precipitated into these lapses by translation: the economical dialogue, the enchanting lyrics turn banal; and Cinerama distorts the exquisitely balanced frames in a particularly unfortunate manner – Demy's candy-floss carnival is mocked by the big curving screen as crooked mirrors mock a fairground crowd.

Just as the dialogue is converted into all the simple-minded corn which Demy had modified into an entrancing simplicity, the theatrical fantasia of Rochefort, painted a musical-comedy dreamscape, is distorted from a subtle delirium into the grotesque self-parody Ghislain Cloquet had painstakingly avoided. What Coutard did for *Lola*, Cloquet had done for *Demoiselles*, a magical spell of light and shade which offset the fairytale narrative to perfection. As the visual poise is disturbed, the density of the narrative is dissipated in the English version: all Demy's films are highly concentrated, full of minute correspondences and parallels, most of which have disappeared in the banal exchanges that now drag the narrative to its familiar conclusion (little encouragement to pursue the added intricacy of Demy's plots, intensified by serialisation – characters overlapping from film to film, so that each story unfolds more than one multiple farce, with subtle anticipations and echoes only more enjoyable on repeated viewing). Even the actors' air of enjoyment seems strained, the narrative complexities seem artifice, the pictorial inventiveness a luscious joke... like *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, the film comes across as garish, synthetic, and coy. But in fact the colour is less hysterical, the Legrand score less schmaltzy, the plot less sentimental: the original *Demoiselles de Rochefort* marks a return to the imaginative poise of *Lola*.

Whatever this dubbed version may indicate, Demy is still capable of prodigious achievements; he can be trite and affected, but he can create miracles of un-self-pitying poignancy in the highly stylised world of the operetta, where few artists tread with such Mozartian felicity – not merely charming or amusing, but profoundly moving.

Carey Harrison, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1967

(NOTE: This review was written before the distributors decided to let London see the French version as well as the dubbed one.)

LES DEMOISELLES DE ROCHEFORT
(THE YOUNG GIRLS OF ROCHEFORT)

Director: Jacques Demy
Production Companies: Parc Film, Madeleine Films
Executive Producer: Mag Bodard
Producer: Gilbert de Goldschmidt
Production Accountant: Jean-Marc Garrouste
Production Manager: Philippe Dussart
Unit Managers: Michel Choquet, René Pascal
Location Unit Manager: Charles Chieusse
2nd Unit Director: Charles Chieusse
1st Assistant Director: Michel Romanoff
Director’s Assistants: Alain Franchet, Jacques Barratier, Claude Miler, Bernard Gilson
Script Girl: Annie Maurel
Original Story and Screenplay: Jacques Demy
English Adaptation: Julian More
Director of Photography: Ghislain Cloquet
Camera Assistants: Emmanuel Machuel, Jean-Paul Lemaître
Key Grip: Bernard Largemains
Chief Electrician: Pierre Cornier
Stills Photography: Hélène Jeanbrau
Special Effects: Louis Seurat
Editor: Jean Hamon
Assistant Editor: Claudio Ventura
Set Designer: Bernard Evein
Assistant Set Design: Georges Glon, Claude Pignot
Set Dresser: Louis Seuret
Tapestry by: Roger Fresca, Josette Jover
Properties: Angelo Rizzi, Joseph Gerhard
Costumes: Jacqueline Moreau, Marie-Claude Fouquet
Robes: Jean-Marie Armand
Hats: Jean Barthet
Dressers: Odette Le Barbenchon, Laurence Clairval, Christiane Fageol
Make-up: Aida Carange, Janine Jarreau, Luc Durand, Christiane Sauvage
Hairdressers: Carita, Edina Habib
Music Written and Directed by: Michel Legrand
Lyrics: Jacques Demy
English Lyrics: Julian More, W. Earl Brown
Choreography: Norman Maen
Assistant Choreographers: Pamela Hart, Maureen Bright
Sound: Jacques Maumont
Boom Operator: Jean Gaudelet

Cast

Catherine Deneuve (*Delphine Garnier*)
Françoise Dorléac (*Solange Garnier*)
George Chakiris (*Etienne*)
Grover Dale (*Bill*)
Danielle Darrieux (*Yvonne*)
Michel Piccoli (*Simon Guillotine*)
Gene Kelly (*Andy Miller*)
Jacques Perrin (*Maxence*)
Jacques Riberolles (*Guillaume Lancien*)
Henri Crémieux (*Dutrouz*)
Patrick Jeantet (*Boubou*)
Geneviève Thénier (*Josette*)
Pamela Hart (*Judith*)
Leslie North (*Esther*)
René Bazart (*Pépé*)
Dorothée Blanck (*a passer-by*)
Agnès Varda (*a nun*)
Daniel Mocquay (*a sailor*)

the singing voices
Anne Germain (*Delphine*)
Claude Parent (*Solange*)
Romuald (*Etienne*)
José Bartel (*Bill*)
Donald Burke (*Andy*)
Jacques Revaux (*Maxence*)
Georges Blaness (*Simon*)
Claudine Meunier (*Esther*)
Christiane Legrand (*Judith*)
Jean Stout (*Guillaume*)
Olivier Bonnet (*Boubou*)
Alice Gerald (*Josette*)

the dancers
Peter Ardran
Sarah Butler
Jane Darling
Lindsay Dolan
Keith Drummond
Taira Fernando
Johnny Greenland
David Hepburn
Alix Kirsta
Tony Manning
Connel Miles
Nicky Temperton
Wendy Barry
Ann Chapman
Tudor Davies
John MacDonald
Maureen Evans
Sarah Flemington
Leo Guerard
Bob Howe
Jerry Manley
Tom Merrifield
Albin Pahernik
Barrie Wilkinson
Maureen Willsher

the singers
Sue Allen
George E. Becker
W. Earl Brown
Ronald D. Hicklin
Frank Allen Howren
Thomas D. Kenny
Judith E. Lawler
Bill Lee
Diana K. Lee
Gilda Maiken
Gene Merlino
Joseph A. Pryor
Ronald T. Reeve
Sally Stevens
Sara Jane Sallman
Robert Tebow
Jackie Wa

France 1967
126 mins

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates.
Not yet registered? Create a new account at **www.bfi.org.uk/signup**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**