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Author(s)	Philip Strick
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Conte d'hiver (A Winter's Tale)

rance 1992

irector: Eric Rohmer

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ıe Winter's Tale:
ierre-Jean Larroque
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Cast
Charlotte Very
Félicie
Frederic Van Den Driessche
Charles
Michel Voletti
Maxence
Hervé Furic
Loïc
Ava Loraschi
Elise
Christiane Desbois
Mother
Rosette
Sister
Jean-Luc Revol
Brother-in-Law
Haydee Caillot
Edwige
Jean-Claude Biette
Quentin
Marie Rivière
Dora
The Winter's Tale:
Roger Dumas
Leontes
Daniele Lebrun
Paulina
Diane Lepvrier
Hermione
Edwig Navarro
Perdita
François Rauscher
Florizel
Eric Wapler
Gaston Richard
Lords
Maria Coin
Flute Player

10,278 feet
114 minutes

After an idyllic summer with Charles, whom she meets on holday in Brittany shortly before he goes o work in the US, Félicie accidentally oses touch with him. Five years later, aving given birth to his daughter, lise, she works as a hairdresser in a aris suburb, clinging to the hope that omehow she and Charles will meet gain. She is courted by a librarian, oïc, with whom she lives when not isiting her mother, who looks after lise; at the same time, she is having n affair with her employer, Maxence, /ho has taken over a new beauty salon ı Nevers and wants Félicie to join him. ccepting an invitation to visit him ast before Christmas, she is charmed y Nevers and by Maxence's acceptance f her dedication to Charles, and ecides to move.

Back in Paris, she breaks the news to er mother, who doubts the wisdom of , and then to Loïc, after a dinner arty he has unexpectedly arranged vith two friends, Edwige and Quentin. le is angry and upset, but they part on riendly terms.

On arrival in Nevers on the day after hristmas, Félicie finds speedy disillusionment. Maxence is attentive, but his usiness takes priority, and any time élicie takes to look after Elise causes roblems. Unhappy in her new surroundings, Elise demands attention; élicie takes her for a walk and they isit the cathedral where, with sudden nsight, she realises they must leave immediately while a clean break is still possible.

Apologising to the astonished Maxence, she returns to her mother in Paris, lines up a new job, and visits Loïc at his library. Welcoming her back, although she refuses to move in with him, he invites her to the Théâtre Gérard Philippe that evening to see Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Félicie is greatly moved by the final scene, which she interprets as an affirmation of her own faith that Charles will be returned to her. Amused by and resigned to her continuing obsession, Loïc persuades her to bring Elise for the weekend, and they spend a contented couple of days sightseeing among the festive crowds.

Loïc wants her to join him and his family for their New Year party, but Félicie refuses to risk giving the impression that they are anything more than friends. On New Year's Eve, after some window-shopping, she and Elise catch the bus for home; they realise that the man in the opposite seat is Charles, who recognises Félicie in the same instant. In a panic that his companion, Dora, must be his wife, Félicie gets off at the next stop, but Charles follows. He explains that Dora is only a friend, that he is unattached, and that Félicie has been all that ever mattered. Joyfully they go home to Felicie's astonished mother, determined never to be separated again.

Taking his cue from Shakespeare, Rohmer tells a 'winter's tale' both in the sense of it being a tall story and as the exploration of a frozen emotional solstice. Where Shakespeare, in what was one of his Last Plays, balances the dark despair of his drama's first half against the restoration of light and hope in its second in distant variation on the Greek myth of Ceres and Proserpina, Rohmer too, now in his 70s, studies the gulf between a lost summer and the promise – if not quite the springtime – of a new year. Carefully described in the screenplay as a yarn in which "lots of fantastic things happen", and in the play itself as "so like an old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion", *The Winter's Tale* in Rohmer's translation turns out to be an intricate account of accident and coincidence that dares to the full the disbelief of its audience.

Including an extract from Shakespeare's final scene in his film, Rohmer has admitted to some amendment. It is the moment when Leontes, whose wife has been hidden from him for sixteen years following a burst of unjustified jealousy on his part, is presented with her 'statue' (actually the lady in person) which 'magically' comes to life before his grateful eyes. Accentuating the miraculous aspect of this event, rather than its dependence (in the Shakespearean comic tradition) on game-playing and gullibility, Rohmer tailors the reincarnation to suit the confidence of Félicie who, weeping in the audience, takes it to mean that her faith in her own lost love will be rewarded – that, in effect, the portrait

Woman on the move: Charlotte Very

of her vanished partner, Charles, will similarly resume a living form. And so it does, in that he is immediately recognised by the daughter he has never met, thanks to the framed photograph that has always stood in her nursery.

What Félicie does not remark on is the scene's other subject, a regular Shakespearean text about reconciliations between children and parents – here specifically between daughter and mother. This theme has taken an erratic course through Rohmer's own work, in which single parents are customary, and substitute fathers are in considerable demand. In *Conte d'hiver*, the hunt for reunion is not a matter of Félicie rediscovering *her* mother, who (as with the mother in *Le Beau Mariage*) is tolerantly resigned to getting an earful whenever she offers advice, but that of reconstructing a family unit for the sake of Elise, daughter to Félicie and the missing Charles.

The film is in fact about three trial partnerships – with Maxence, with Loïc and with Charles – and in all three, Elise plays the decisive role, even though Félicie does most of the talking. Based as it is on the exchange of anecdotes between the characters, to which Elise herself contributes several rambling fragments, the fairy-tale nature of the quest (king, queen and princess strive for perpetual partnership) develops with an appealing logic from Elise's insistence on seeing the Nativity crib in the cathedral, to a series of encounters with puppets and toys, and her ride on the white charger of a fairground carousel.

The cause of all the trouble is what Rohmer generously terms a 'lapse' on Félicie's part, when she gives Charles the wrong address (or rather, the right address – for Victor Hugo could never be inappropriate – but in the wrong part of Paris). "I have no explanation for this", says Rohmer, and builds some clumsy support for the mistake by having Félicie corrected for a couple of mild malapropisms – she has a habit, she admits, of mixing up her words. Interviewed in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (February 1992), Rohmer avoids the most obvious explanations: that Félicie gets the address wrong because, subconsciously, she wishes to put their love to the test, or – in keeping with Shakespeare's Greek romance – because the gods decide to test it for her.

Referring us to a Platonic rathe than Catholic concept of destiny Rohmer also refuses to commit himsel on the subject of Charles' miraculous reappearance. His characters are sel dom churchgoers (a brief candle notably fails to attract divine attention in *Le Beau Mariage*), and Félicie's sudden 'conversion' in the cathedral at Nantes could be nothing more than an instant of intellectual clarity (and, perhaps, remorse at her treatment of the well meaning Maxence) were it not foı Rohmer's soundtrack clue – three phrases on a plucked string which are later repeated by the flute player who brings the 'statue' to life. The clear implication of the cathedral event is that by obeying the insight she has received, Félicie will regain her lover. The hint is there – for those who wish to see the entire fable as an illustration of faith vindicated – that, rather than being a patchwork of 'lapses', this is a startlingly devout parable about supernatural manipulation.

Sceptical we may be – and Rohmer claims that he doesn't take sides, that he is merely an observer – but there is every indication that he shares Félicie's amusement at the bookish Loïc ("If I say I love you, you'll look it up in something to see if it's true"), and her exasperation at the plodding Maxence, and that her stubborn innocence has his entire sympathy. Like so many of her predecessors in Rohmer's stories, Félicie is tiresome, petulant, indecisive, the despair of her men, and forever on the move between several alternative homes. Filmed with the usual precision – through windscreens, against windows and virginal white curtains, amid conciliatory historical landmarks – her impulsive wanderings are viewed with a redeeming irony, curiosity and tolerance. Fittingly, Rohmer's winter story has an affirmative inner glow.

Philip Strick