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Demy's childhood inspired 'Jacquot' director

By HILLEL ITALIE

Associated Press

NEW YORK — With a 16mm camera and a crew consisting only of herself, Agnes Varda three summers ago began shooting footage around the house and by the ocean of her husband and fellow director, Jacques Demy.

She was making "Jacquot," a dramatization of his early years that includes his on-screen recollections and scenes from "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" and his other films. The gentle master of French musicals had been jotting down childhood stories and Varda thought them an ideal basis for their first professional collaboration.

But there was a reason her husband had been thinking about the past and a reason Varda wanted privacy while he discussed it: Two years earlier Demy had been diagnosed with leukemia. Despite optimism he would live to see the finished work, he died in the fall of 1990, at age 59.

"I cried during the editing," Varda, 65, recalled during a phone interview from the Paris home she shared with Demy for nearly three decades. "As a filmmaker, I was in some ways a schizophrenic. I could still work very lucidly, use my knowledge, my wits to make it work as a filmmaker. But as a person I was rather unhappy."

"He sometimes worried about being ill, but it was an exciting thing for him to have that film growing, a subject that was so near his heart."



Sony Pictures Classics

FILMMAKER JACQUES DEMY, right, sits with the three actors who play him at different stages of his life in "Jacquot." The movie is directed by his wife, Agnes Varda, who is in the background.

People would come to say hello to him and ask him questions and the kids (in the film) loved him. He was surrounded with the world of cinema he loved so much."

While "Jacquot" includes images of an ailing Demy letting sand slip through his fingers, Varda will tell you, forcefully, that the film should not be viewed as the story of a director's death or of a director's life. If seeing "Jacquot" makes you curious about Demy and his work, very well; Varda insists it is essentially a "film about a remarkable child."

Demy was born in 1931 in the village of Pontchateau, west of Nantes, where his father owned a garage and where much of "Jac-

quot" was shot. He later studied at the Technical College of Fine Arts in Nantes and at the Technical School of Photography in Paris.

As Varda's film makes clear, this dark-eyed boy with the beret and skinny legs had a sense of wonder stronger than any Luftwaffe bomb. His hands were darkened by cars at the garage and from the inner tubes

Profile

Who: Agnes Varda

What: Director of "Jacquot"

he rolled through the streets. But his mind was brightened by puppets and music and movies.

Three young actors are used to play Demy as he evolves from a smiling child to a moody adolescent. By the end of the film, he has lost interest in school, the garage and even his girlfriend. His real love is a 9.5mm camera acquired in exchange for five children's books and a No. 4 Erector Set.

"That's what makes me feel he was an original kid," Varda said. "I really believe that it is rare to be so sure that he is able to do this. He could have said, 'I'll never succeed,' or 'I don't have the background,' or 'My family's poor.'"

"There are thousands of books about how Hemingway started, about Victor Hugo and about what happened in the youth of Chekhov," Varda said. "I think in cinema there is a kind of contempt about films. It's very rare to have explanation or sources related to the youth of a filmmaker."

They may have lived together and raised two children, but the careers of Varda and Demy couldn't have been more apart. Demy, the dreamer, filmed life as he knew it wasn't. "Lola" and "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" were reality sweetened by imagination and movie memories, fairy tales not unlike the current hit "Strictly Ballroom."

But Varda, whose features include "Vagabond" and "Cleo From Five to Seven," films life as she believes it to be. She began her career as a photojournalist and documentarist, and still says the present, not the past, is what matters to her work.

"I know very little about my childhood. I just have a bad memory," she said.