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# films

by Andrew Sarris

Jacques Demy's **"THE YOUNG GIRLS OF ROCHEFORT"** tries to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, but too often it gets tangled up in its fancy footwork. The imitation Jerome Robbins slouch-shouldered choreography is ludicrous enough in a Gallic context, but the casting of Gene Kelly (too late) and George Chakiris (too smilingly slight) is fatal to the spell of this latest Demy-monde. "The Young Girls" is less graceful than "Lola" and less lyrical than "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg," but it is curiously charming just the same. Demy has not really revitalized the musical form. He has merely taken from the musical those liberties and contrivances that serve his own poetic sensibility. In his Odyssey from Nantes ("Lola"), to Cherbourg ("Umbrellas") to Rochefort ("Girls"), Demy

comes ever closer to the glossy sophistication of Paris.

There is an increasing urgency and desperation from film to film as if Demy were trying to remember something he would never have time to realize on the screen. Even within the film itself, the sister act of Catherine Deneuve and Francoise Dorleac is shadowed by the offscreen death of Miss Dorleac in an auto accident last year. Demy keeps referring to characters from his earlier films, but he can only cite names of characters. The faces are all mixed up. Long before Lelouch's "A Man and a Woman," Demy wanted Jean-Louis Trintignant to appear with Anouk Aimee in "Lola." The director settled for Marc Michel instead, and used Michel again for "Umbrellas." Demy wanted Danielle Darrieux for the mother role in "Umbrellas," but had to make do with Anne Vernon. He took over the town of Rochefort and repainted it to his aesthetic specifications, but he didn't have enough money to repopulate it with singing-dancing sprites of all ages, genders, and callings.

In a sense, he had too much money but not enough.

Demy did not really "use" Rochefort the way he used Nantes. Rochefort remains more a set than a place, partly because Demy's sense of color is too functionally expressive and partly because dancers tend to transform real space into abstract space. Once a dancer begins gliding down a street in pursuit of the camera, the street loses its spatial coordinates. To make matters worse, the choreography in "Young Girls" seldom advances or even enhances the plot. George Chakiris and Grover Dale romp about (with faceless female partners) with all the narrative relevance of station breaks.

Fortunately, the "straight" people are more effective. Michel Piccoli is particularly affecting as Simon Dame, the failed composer and music store proprietor, the man with a name so ridiculous for a prospective wife (Madame Dame) that he is jilted by Danielle Darrieux as the mother of twins (Deneuve and Dorleac) who grow up to find their romantic destiny in an abstract painter (Jacques Perrin) and an American composer (Gene Kelly alas) respectively. In Rochefort, as in Nantes and Cherbourg, there is the feeling of irrevocable destiny. There are the people who venture forth and the people who are left behind and sometimes the people who have ventured forth come back to the people who have been left behind. Making it, in the world of Jacques Demy, is a sad, futile business. Wherever you go and whatever you do, you inevitably end up in a bistro somewhere telling stories about some lost love or cherished ideal. Legrand's music has been criticized by some critics for its excessive sentimentality, but I thought it was just right for the feeling of yearning it sought to express. If the dramatic people—Piccoli, Darrieux, Perrin—are infinitely superior to the musical people—Kelly, Chakiris, Dale—the Rochefort girls themselves fall somewhere in between. For some reason, Demy has directed Deneuve and Dorleac with more brass and pizzazz than they seem capable of absorbing. When they do their big slinky, sleazy red dress number, there is some-

thing of the put-on in the production. There is none of that marvelously knowing female rapport Bardot and Moreau projected in Louis Malle's "Viva Maria." Somehow Bardot and Moreau managed to be more themselves by sharing their private joke on all males.

With all that is wrong with "The Young Girls of Rochefort," it is amazing how much pleasure it provides. I have enormous respect for Demy's effort simply because it is so much easier to make a cosmic statement full of open-ended ambiguities than to turn out a reasonably entertaining musical. Jean-Luc Godard's "La Chinoise" may be more successful in what it sets out to do, but it is not one-tenth as ambitious as "The Young Girls of Rochefort." Intellectuals have always been baffled by the mystique of the musical. The more serious film histories barely mention the subject, but the fact remains that while the aesthetes were moaning about the loss of pantomime and visual metaphor back in 1929, the musicals burst upon the scene with an unappreciated poetic force. People who talk about cinema as a visual art form seldom acknowledge the enormous debt

the "purest" cinema owes to music. Fellini is taken seriously largely because he knows how to exploit Nino Rota's imitation Chaplin melodies without implicating himself in their sentimentality. Everything is passed over as lower-class pathos, middle-class nostalgia, or upper-class satire. The so-called Brechtian musical of our time prides itself on its conscious ironies because it is catering to an audience that feels superior to musicals. Demy deserves credit for making a musical at all in this poisonously self-conscious atmosphere, and even more for discovering the source of poetic enchantment in all musicals.