

## THE GIRLS CAN'T HELP IT: JACQUES DEMY'S *THE YOUNG GIRLS OF ROCHEFORT*

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Being on the move toward serious change was the concern of a film produced just prior to *The Model Shop*, namely, *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967) (*The Young Girls of Rochefort*). It also conducts a large voltage of protestation about “love,” but with this major difference: its rhapsodizing comes wrapped in song.

As you would expect, the scenario serves up a requisite vein of factors on behalf of the daunting discoveries discernible in the compass comprising *Kiss Me Deadly*, in order to flush away the generally rewarded ways of the world. The leather-encased box containing primordial dynamics is recalled by the spray of elementary school equipment out upon the road, from a book bag caught up in a squabble between a ten year old boy and his attractive, much older sister, Solange, into whose efforts to redeposit the contents obtrudes none other than Gene Kelly in the guise of Andy Miller, “successful” composer and concert pianist, unbeknown to her but crucially completing the circuit for both of them falling instantly in love. Solange has an equally striking sister, Delphine, whose ascetic, cash-flow canny, gallery-savvy entrepreneurial boyfriend (soon to be ex-boyfriend) we first meet firing a target pistol to release *blue* paint upon a canvas. This distant replay of the tensions between Delphine Syrig and Sacha Pitoeff in *Last Year at Marienbad* speaks to the (perhaps equivocal) passion of both demoiselles for the reservoir of greatness that is Paris. Delphine is a dancer, Solange a musician; and the leap to the City of Light is only a few days away. Their mother is the proprietress of a cafe-bar in the town square whose all-glass cladding, and all-formica and fake-wood furnishings would not exercise any haven-status upon them, though it does have its regulars—an old cipher who makes balsa-wood airplane models, and a sailor, Maxence (where have we seen a sailor with maximum accents?) about to be “demobbed” and to depart for Paris to pursue a career as a painter. Though for the most part an abstractionist, he has produced a portrait of Delphine (whom he has never met) solely on the strength of an idealization of what a cogent lover should be.

This may be a poky little seaport, but the charge of longing under high pressure is not to be quickly discounted. Moreover, like a bracing breeze off the Atlantic, there rolls into town a travelling fair whose young and winsome carnies favor song and dance, as propelled by musical compositions, by Michel Legrand, which provide a glimpse of encyclopaedic sensual overtures, there for the taking. Attaching to this many-faceted modernist initiative (which includes a hard-sell for Honda motorcycles), is a peculiar homage to the era of rattletap vehicles, including bicycles, by way of coinciding with the touching disarray of Jacques Tati's *Jour de Fête* (*A Day at the Fair* or *The Big Day*) (1949). (Even before the convoy boards the ferry into town, we notice it going by a beach hotel-restaurant like the one where, in *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* [1951], Tati introduced a week of uproarious chaos to a little band craving repose.) This makes some sense of the incongruous pair of horsemen with guitars over their shoulders (white outfits, white horses). Rochefort comes across as a slick metropolis by comparison with the extreme remoteness and inexperience of that village all agog about the bunting and the carousel and the newsreel trumpeting the motorized dynamism of the U.S. Postal Service. Tati's bicycle-powered mailman, “François,” inspired to rise to the challenge of a new world, after wreaking havoc, especially upon himself, subsides into a bucolic ineffectuality brimming with charm. For those familiar with this distinguished study of shortfall, Demy's film's well-appointed thrust into loving cataclysm comes to be seen as decking itself out for trouble along lines of a subtle inflection, just as, later, Solange blithely disregards her slip showing despite being told of it several times.

What is very noticeable about the “effervescence” of the hustle and bustle to set up the brief expo (on the barge and then in the square) is a rather tired and timid conventionality of the dance-while-you-work. This disappointment of shortfall within the purview of a musical score pushing far ahead trajects to the children's ballet class conducted by Delphine as accompanied by Solange. After shooing out the toddlers they expatiate in song and dance about their taste in art and love, and the insupportability of their present situation. Once again the score outperforms the delivery. Over at the cafe, Maxence warms to the idea of finding his “Botticelli lover.” “I know she exists.” The fire he emits, however, is something more suited to a marshmallow roast than all that comes with breaking away from venerable confines. Delphine, in unbeknown duet with him, chirps about her dreamboat as, “A philosopher in love with democracy.” This momentum of mishap extends even so far as to the zone of that master of incandescence, Gene Kelly, who drives a little white convertible and settles into the role of an “And-y” (another tired facsimile of Mike). Solange declares, “We're not going to rot here!” But her composition, a page of which pops out with the schoolbag disarray, to be found by Andy, who loves it, is a trite confection. Her mother has broken off a romance with the little boy's father on the grounds that his name was Simon Dame and it would be too embarrassing to be

known as “Madame Dame.” This sensitivity has not prevented her from choosing “Bou-Bou” as the name for the boy.

The reflective goldmine of this work comprises the closing in on success in love by those affable, universally handsome underachievers. The girls sing, “I know what reason says/But my heart can tell me more.” But in the O.R. illumination of the construct’s sub-basement and the lushness of its superstructural cinematography and musical invention, their “heart” undergoes a surgical exploration which, while not hostile, remains amazingly ruthless for a surface so easy-going. Hinting at this concealed energy is the incident whereby one of the cafe’s regulars, “Subtil Dutrouz” (subtle arithmetic, machination) is arrested for the axe-murder of a woman named, “Lola, Lola,” who had spurned his affections for forty years. Andy observes, in conversation with his old music school chum, M. Dame, “Stupidity has left me demoralized.”<sup>1</sup> The carnie honchos who always wear white boots, have hired Delphine and Solange to do a musical number in lieu of two girls who have up and quit (to run away with a couple of sailors). In this work the demoiselles wear scarlet evening gowns, like Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, singing about “Little Rock,” at the outset of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and, though very pretty, they look anaemic by comparison. Their employers, who strike the girls as “sweet,” want to sleep with them. Maxence, in a blue suit, carrying blue bags, now a free man, says, “It’s time to live.”

Demoralized or not, Andy finds Solange, her mother finds M. Dame, and they all do some shuffling about the square (Legrand’s musical fireworks still detonating), now vacated by the carnival. Delphine, hitching a ride to Paris with the wandering sweethearts—the cortege still preceded by those two cowhand-misfits—is finally joined by Maxence, hitchhiking on the highway. Their big moment is shot from the road, at a distance, only showing him getting into the truck. In addition to the spent forces on board, there was one other hitchhiker, the adolescent waitress at the cafe. She does look excited.

And yet, that alone leaves unsaid one important feature of this work, namely, that, in spite of its cruelly efficient minefield, leaving every one of the cast of characters maimed for life, it delivers a haunting joy. This is a movie you could see a hundred times because it has seen fit to give its due to the ways by which materiality gives us a pass into the real deal, however fitfully.

Gene Kelly speaks of being “dehumanized” by his choices. But Andy’s sickly professionalism cannot prevent us delighting in his 1940s Technicolor attire and the way he scoots it about in dazzling, breezy sunlight amidst structures of such chromatic radiance as to bring, flooding back, one’s earliest arrestment by life. Even before the camera gets to feast upon those streets, there is, in the aerial ferry haul of the carnival crew, an unexpected altitude. True, the little dance number there lacks spice, but in the showing of the dancers against expanses of sky and water, it gains a remarkable bounce, pushed along by Legrand’s open road motifs. (The languorous stretching figures carry us to the awakening siren of *Jour de Fete*.) Once arrived in Rochefort, there is double-barrelled propulsion. First, the show people can’t flop, even though their dancing is almost as wretched as that of Delphine’s students (and that of Delphine, herself, for that matter). The construction of the gala on the square has merely to connect--- however feebly--- to the keening of Legrand’s score and to the rocketing of the summer sky and the correspondingly enchanted town. Accordingly, portly moms in vivid pastels park their babies by the (rather dangerous-looking) fountain and lumber about. Then the twins, first seen as inhabiting something like a Raoul Dufy canvas and belting out a gleefully defiant anthem of breaking free--- “*Aimez la vie! Aimez le fou!*”--- (Their theme song includes the lines, “Give it heart/ And a bit of sorcery...Enchant and astonish us.”) When they hit the streets, the spirit, if not the letter, of their longing for love and adventure does come alive. Delphine was not entirely deluded in suiting up their stage show in the perspective of high-voltage Hollywood stars. Shadows of the stage struts may be playing across their bodies as they vamp in the sunshine, but look closely at their eyes and listen for the conviction of their little ode to sunshine, and see how it all rivets that crowd. (Getting under the public’s otherwise elephantine skin also flares up at the restaurant, where Maxence and, later, the carnies, move drably dressed customers to put in a chorus as moved by the former’s musical care for true love and the latter’s musical care for the freedom of the open road.) The gusto may only come in gusts, but that is enough to introduce a strange, compensatory synthesis into this tale of settling for second best. Boubou, after the eruption and hasty repair of the school bag, snarls in the direction of Andy, “That guy’s got some nerve!” And that’s Demy’s gift to a populous drastically unnerved. French to the core, he would have noted that, gauche as dinner conversation may become, the subtly glorious architecture of inspired cuisine and wines can endow modest enclaves with traces of elusive nobility.

Though happy to share such potent treasure, Demy was strongly impressed by the fact that an equally potent volatility would reduce such rapture to near-farce. Though at the outset Delphine and Maxence maintain torrents of nicely observed homage to love’s unique resonance (he even comes up with his beloved’s “stride, like a childhood memory”), by the late stages he is punning like a clodhopper about a trip home to Brittany as his military discharge becomes “immi-Nantes,” and remarking that, for Doutroux, Lola “was too big a thing in his life,” and she is weighing whether to have an affair with one of the carnies in lieu of a “dream man” entailing a lot of bother. Both

Maxence and Andy assent, apropos of their dream girls, “Virtue means nothing to me. I’m an artist.” Though not an artist, Subtil also could quickly downgrade composure. The sporadic presence of soldiers from the local base, marching along the streets in sombre battle fatigues, introduces a wider social sphere for that challenge of perdurant resolve, and conveys Demy’s misgivings about resting content with the ephemeral festivities of personal sagas. One such parade, at the beginning of the film, passes in the opposite direction the circus entourage as it enters Rochefort. The latter includes, in a quick glimpse, what looks like midget clowns in toy cars, a far from flattering prospect upon the amusements to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon’s realization that Andy is crazy about Solange, whom *he* is fond of, recalls the crisis in *An American in Paris*, and further insinuates that these charmers are headed for predictability, however gracious.