



## The Main Feature

Season 45 – Issue 7 – Screening 11<sup>th</sup> December 2025



### *A Christmas Tale (Un conte de Noël)*

|                   |                                                          |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| France            | 2008                                                     |
| 150 mins          | Certificate 15                                           |
| Director          | Arnaud Desplechin                                        |
| Screenplay        | Arnaud Desplechin,<br>Emmanuel Bordieu, Jacques<br>Asher |
| Cinematography    | Eric Gautier                                             |
| Production design | Daniel Bevan                                             |
| Music             | Grégoire Hetzel, Mike<br>Kourtzer                        |
| <u>Cast</u>       |                                                          |
| Junon Vuillard    | Catherine Deneuve                                        |
| Abel Vuillard     | Jean-Paul Rouissillon                                    |
| Elizabeth Dédalus | Anne Consigny                                            |
| Henri Vuillard    | Mathieu Amalric                                          |
| Sylvia Vuillard   | Chiara Mastroianni                                       |
| Ivan Vuillard     | Melvil Poupaud                                           |
| Faunia            | Emmanuelle Devos                                         |
| Claude Dédalus    | Hippolyte Giradot                                        |
| Simon             | Laurent Capelluto                                        |



What is it about Christmas that causes such tension in families? Perhaps it's the raised expectations, especially among the children. Or it's bringing together members of the family who may not get on all that well (you don't choose your own relations, after all, let alone your in-laws). Could it be unspoken events and repressed resentments from the past? Feelings can be intensified because everybody is confined in a small space, and the weather is often too poor to go outside. Lastly, as they say in Scotland, drink may have been taken. There's no doubt the scriptwriters of soap operas see much potential in Christmas as the time for a showdown: Dirty Den gave divorce papers to Angie in the 1986 Christmas episode of Eastenders.

The family in tonight's film *A Christmas Tale* (*Conte de Noël*) would feel out of place in Albert Square. They are bourgeois and live in a large house in Roubaix, not far from Lille. The backstory is complicated: Abel (Jean-Paul Rouissillon) et Junon Vuillard (Catherine Deneuve) are a mature couple who have a strong and loving relationship despite having been through some difficult times. They have two children, Joseph and Elizabeth (Anne Consigny). Victim of a rare genetic condition, Joseph's only hope was a bone marrow transplant. As they and Elizabeth were incompatible, his parents conceived a third child in the hope of saving their son. But little Henri

(Mathieu Almaric) too was unable to help his brother, and Joseph died, aged 7. Abel and Junon manage to get back to something like normal after the devastating death of their eldest son, and to have a fourth and final child, Ivan (Melvil Poupaud) who has a difficult adolescence. But Elizabeth is still inconsolable because of the death of her elder brother, and her feeling that Henri should have been able to save him. Later events lead her to banish Henri from the family.

Now, in a repeat of the previous story, Junon has fallen ill and her doctors have diagnosed a lymphoma which will not respond to chemotherapy and so she needs a speedy bone marrow transplant from one of her children or grandchildren. The family gathers for a Christmas get-together and the scene is set for some going over the past, and recriminations. And as one of the outsiders comments 'What a family of weirdos! The Vuillards pretend they're normal, but they're not.'

Junon, the matriarch of the family, is played by French acting royalty, Catherine Deneuve. Born Catherine Fabienne Dorléac in Paris in 1943, both her parents were actors, and because her elder sister Françoise was already forging an acting career when Catherine followed her onto the screen, she took her mother's maiden name. She has made more than 125 full-length films, including her early successes in Jacques Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* in 1964 (see page 3) and Luis Buñuel's *Belle du Jour* (1967). She is no stranger to matriarchal roles, such as: Gaby, the wife of the victim Marcel in Francois Ozon's *Eight Women* (shown by the club in 2003); the Queen Mother in *Palais Royale* (2005, directed by and co-starring Valerie Lemercier); a widow who takes over running an umbrella factory in *Potiche* (2010, directed by Ozon again); and Bernadette Chirac, the wife of the former French President in *Bernadette* (2023), written and directed by Léa Domenach.

Some critics found *A Christmas Tale* rather confusing. The Guardian said 'The extraordinary and baffling thing about this film is that again and again, the characters can discuss the most agonising things about their lives with a smile - an arch smile, or a droll smile, or a smile of seraphic acceptance. Junon and Henri's avowed mutual detestation seems to manifest itself in barbed raillery, not obviously different from the terms in which she converses with the rest of her children. Henri's lover Faunia (Emmanuelle Devos) listens to Junon describing her family tragedy with the same oddly inappropriate smile. The effect is strange, disconcerting - but never dull. I think what Desplechin has created is not a conventional drama, but a sort of dream-ensemble masque: a choreographed parade of ideas, emotions, personae. A film to ponder, and to savour.' The New Yorker said 'Watching *A Christmas Tale* is like getting to know a family other than your own by leafing through its scrapbooks and laughing at its photograph albums, while it bickers in the next room over stuff you may never understand.' Others found it a tad long, overstaying its welcome like an awkward Christmas guest. Having said that, the film won Best Supporting Actor for Jean-Paul Rouissillon as Abel at the César awards.

As we approach the festive season, some of us will be gearing up to family gatherings of our own. I do hope your Christmas isn't as complicated as the Vuillard's.

Michael Hipkins



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Club website: [www.wncc.org.uk](http://www.wncc.org.uk). Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to [reactions@wncc.org.uk](mailto:reactions@wncc.org.uk) by Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> December  
**Discs of most of our previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.**

## Deneuve and Demy

In her long and distinguished career, Catherine Deneuve made four films with Jacques Demy as director. Demy (1931-1990) made his first feature *Lola* in 1961. Shown by the club in 1993, it stars Anouk Aimée as the eponymous cabaret performer, with music by Michel Legrand. It was followed by *La baie des anges* (*Bay of Angels*) in 1963, starring Jeanne Moreau, a romance set in the world of the casino and gambling.

Demy is perhaps best known for his third film, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*) which came out in 1964. Set in 1957, the story recounts the relationship between Geneviève (Deneuve) who works in her mother's struggling umbrella shop and the mechanic Guy (Nino Castelnuovo) before and after he is conscripted to fight in Algeria and Geneviève discovers she is pregnant. Demy's innovation in this heart-breaking romantic tragedy was to have all the dialogue sung (to music by Legrand), and to use saturated colour with every detail chosen for its visual impact.

In an interview<sup>1</sup>, Deneuve said: '[Jacques Demy] gave me confidence most of all. *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* was a very different film. It was a musical; it was like an opera. It was such a wonderful incredible story. I realised cinema could be that, and it's because of that film that I decided to go on making films, because of him, the way he directed me, the way he looked at me, and put me in that situation. A major decision, yes. A major thing in my life.'



Deneuve co-starred with her elder sister Françoise Dorléac in Demy's 1967 musical, *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (*The Young Girls of Rochefort*) which also featured Gene Kelly and George Chakiris (who had appeared in *West Side Story*). Bertrand Tavernier observed in a documentary about the production made 25 years later by Agnès Varda, Demy's wife, 'I think Jacques found something in Deneuve he'd been searching for – the actress with star quality.' Tragically, the year of the film's release became one of the saddest in Deneuve's life when Françoise died in a car accident.

Deneuve's third musical film with Demy was *Peau d'âne* (*Donkey Skin*, 1970), a visually extravagant but decidedly dotty adaptation of a seventeenth-century fairy story by Charles Perrault in which a widower king (Jean Maris) seeks a new wife to ensure his dynasty but, unable to find a worthy woman in his kingdom, proposes to marry his own daughter (Deneuve). She (naturally) prevaricates and makes impossible demands which her father finds a way to satisfy, so – helped by her fairy Godmother - she escapes disguised in a donkey skin to a neighbouring kingdom where she is discovered by and marries the prince. Demy said 'Long ago, when I was a child, I especially liked the story of *Peau d'âne*. I have tried to make my film from this point of view, through my eyes when I was seven or eight years old'.



The final film Deneuve made with Demy was the 1973 comedy *L'événement le plus important depuis que l'homme a marché sur la lune* (*A Slightly Pregnant Man*) in which a single mother (Deneuve) and her fiancé (Marcello Mastroianni) discover, to their surprise, that he is pregnant (it was the hormones in chicken he had eaten, since you ask). He finds fame and money as the face of an advertising campaign for a new line of maternity clothes. An Italian-French co-production, it bizarrely had different endings for the Italian and French releases.

Michael Hipkins

<sup>1</sup> <https://multiglom.com/2020/03/24/catherine-deneuve-the-2017-interview/>

Comments and reactions to: **Jimi – All By My Side** (shown 27<sup>th</sup> November 2025)  
 No of reaction slips received = 26 Average score = 4.77

Score 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
 ~ 4 ~ 2 5 3 5 7 ~ ~ ~

| Position | Film                     | Score | Reactions |
|----------|--------------------------|-------|-----------|
| 1        | Conclave                 | 8.15  | 34        |
| 2        | Frantz                   | 7.91  | 32        |
| 3        | The Dressmaker           | 7.73  | 26        |
| 4        | Perfect Days             | 7.34  | 29        |
| 5        | Maria                    | 6.16  | 25        |
| 6        | Jimi - All is By My Side | 4.77  | 26        |

Just not my type of film. I didn't like how the film was produced. Didn't like the black screens

**Great music of its time and beyond. Film a bit disjointed**

Unusual editing that didn't quite work! A few flashes of a good film but not enough to make it an overall enjoyable experience

**Rather disjointed. It's a pity that Jimi's music couldn't be used. Not sure I enjoyed it**

Very disjointed – didn't enjoy the film

A bit slow but the music wasn't bad

**Confusing at time. I felt I learned something about Hendrix but not really entertained**

Took a while to settle into but was then both intriguing and frustrating, and ultimately moving

**I loved learning so much about Jimi – surprising traits – not what I expected of him**

Well-made film but spoilt by the fact that the real Kathy Etchingham says they had a great time together, the abusive relationship shown is complete fiction

**Thought the film itself was badly shot, left me wanting more**

I enjoyed the film. Very evocative of the music scene at that time

**Not a subject I had thought of visiting but very well done**

Interesting to find out the early years of Jimi's life, which was obviously rather eventful!

**Rather disjointed**

**Well-acted and cast**

Disappointedly most about his lady friends rather than the magic of his music

**Very disappointing film on a genius influencer. He was inspirational. This film was NOT**

If Jimi had any musical talents this film did nothing to recognise them other than his tremendous influence on the music scene

**Not as bad as it was panned. Some inaccuracies but quite enjoyable (if you were there at the time – I was)**

Disturbing viewing with unappealing characters

Our Next Film - 8<sup>th</sup> January - **Mr. Burton**



If for no other reason this film is worth watching for the performance of Toby Jones as Philip Burton - the teacher who started Richard Burton on his way to super stardom – IMDB reviewer

It's a bold movie that tries to find a feelgood drama in the life of Richard Burton, but such is the pitch of this tender biopic – The London Times

Marc Evans's film is a lovely thing. [Toby] Jones and [Leslie] Manville are predictably excellent – The Irish Times

[A] heartfelt, vigorously acted, enjoyable, if slightly naive movie – The Manchester Guardian