

A CHRISTMAS TALE

(Un Conte de Noël)

Directed by

Arnaud Desplechin



Starring Catherine Deneuve, Mathieu Amalric, Anne Consigny,
Melvil Poupaud, Jean-Paul Roussillon, Chiara Mastroianni

France 2008 / 150 minutes / Scope

Certificate: 15

Winner Prix Spécial du 61e Festival, Cannes 2008

A CHRISTMAS TALE OPENS IN JANUARY 2009 IN THE WEST END AND
SELECTED CINEMAS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

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Director	Arnaud Desplechin
Screenplay	Arnaud Desplechin Emmanuel Bourdieu
Cinematography	Eric Gautier a.f.c.
Editor	Laurence Briaud
Music	Grégoire Hetzel
Casting	Stéphane Touitou
Sound	Nicolas Cantin Sylvain Malbrant Jean-Pierre Laforce (mix)
Production Designer	Dan Bevan
Costumes	Nathalie Raoul
Assistant director	Gabrièle Roux
Make-up	Sylvie Aïd Mina Matsumura
Hair	Eric Monteil Frédéric Souquet
Continuity	Agnès Feuvre
Location Manager	Cristobal Mathéron
Production manager	Benoît Pilot
Line Producer	Martine Cassinelli
Producer	Pascal Caucheteux

A Why Not Productions - France 2 Cinéma - Wild Bunch - Bac Films coproduction
with the participation of Canal+ - CinéCinéma - Centre National de la
Cinématographie with the support of CRRAV Nord-Pas de Calais - Région Nord-Pas
de Calais in association with Sofica UGC 1

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CAST

Catherine Deneuve
Jean-Paul Roussignon
Anne Consigny
Mathieu Amalric
Melvil Poupaud
Hippolyte Girardot
Emmanuelle Devos
Chiara Mastroianni
Laurent Capelluto
Emile Berling
Thomas and Clément Obled
Françoise Bertin
Samir Guesmi
Azize Kabouche

Junon
Abel, her husband
Elizabeth, the eldest daughter
Henri, the middle child
Ivan, the youngest
Claude, Elizabeth's husband
Faunia, Henri's girlfriend
Sylvia, Ivan's wife
Simon, Junon's nephew
Paul, son of Elizabeth and Claude
Basile & Baptiste, sons of Elizabeth
Rosalmeé
Spatafora
Dr Zraïdi, the oncologist

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SYNOPSIS

In the beginning, Abel and Junon had two children, Joseph and Elizabeth. 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 the little Henri was unable to help his brother, and Joseph died, aged 7.

After the birth of a fourth child, Ivan, the Vuillard family gradually began to recover from the death of their first child.

Years later, Elizabeth is now a playwright living in Paris. Henri goes from successful business deal to fraudulent bankruptcy and Ivan, the adolescent on the edge of the abyss, has become the almost sane father of two strange boys.

One day, exasperated by his excesses, Elizabeth solemnly 'banished' her feckless brother. No one else knows exactly what happened, nor why Henri disappeared, and today the family seems to have come apart. Only Junon's nephew Simon, taken in by Junon after the death of his parents, struggles to maintain the semblance of a link between the parents in the provinces, the virtuous sister and the two brothers, one uncertain, the other disgraced...

A CHRISTMAS TALE begins with the reappearance of the disease that took Joseph: Junon learns that she has leukaemia, and that chemotherapy will not work. Her only hope is to find a bone marrow donor amongst the members of her family. Her children and grandchildren are all tested. And Paul, Elizabeth's son, the oldest of the grandchildren and a tortured adolescent, allows himself to become overwhelmed by anguish.

Christmas approaches. The whole family gathers at the parental home at Roubaix. Even Henri accepts Paul's invitation and turns up with his latest conquest, Faunia. Elizabeth's husband Claude will join them later...

It's time for the settling of scores. But little by little, the storms calm.

Ivan's wife Silvia discovers the feelings Simon has had for her for years. Has she truly lived her life, or just its pale shadow?

Will Junon accept a dangerous transplant to cure an illness that may never develop further?

Will Paul's father Claude allow his son to become his grandmother's donor, and thus risk the responsibility for her death?

As for Elizabeth and Henri, what can be done when a dispute moves beyond all reason?

Interview with Arnaud Desplechin: A Midwinter Night's Dream?"

Positif, June 2008

Elise Domenach & Yann Tobin

A *Christmas Tale* gives the impression of enlarging the diptych of *Kings and Queen* to a choral dimension. Does this film have some continuity with *Kings and Queen*?

Arnaud Desplechin

No. I dream of each film as independent. It is not the story of two isolated persons, but of one family. What was enjoyable in *Kings and Queen* was to go to the limit of tragedy and burlesque without one perceiving whether it is drama or comedy... I find this mixture always troubling while attractive. With *A Christmas Tale* one is anchored in reality, in Roubaix, and this reality acquires a mythological dimension.

How did you go about writing the film: one scene after the other or by first constructing an overall structure?

For the most part one scene after the other, with no idea about the ending: that was decided in the actual shooting. Neither the ending nor the beginning was written out. We had some texts but no proper script. ... During the shooting, some things did not work; others became obvious. We stopped shooting four or five days ahead of schedule because the weather was too nice. At the end of February it was summer weather. Technicians on the set were stripping the trees but they were growing back very fast. I went back to it at the end of the year in order to film some exteriors, some inserts, and some shots without actors. And again with the actors during winter. The last scenes were shot in March 2007.

So for the actors the work was spread out over a long period of time?

Scripts written with Emmanuel Bourdieu always come with a considerable apparatus of notes and "varia" [variants]. This time, for certain scenes, we had more varia and notes than primary text. The presentation is simple. Scenes are scripted with twelve points. Then there are ten notes with gestures suggested, phrases that could be slipped in, and details of decor. And finally the varia. We sometimes had three or four for complicated scenes. These possible choices often correspond to real script problems. ... The varia system has repercussions on many scenes. It forces the adoption of one variant. Initial script readings were hard for the actors. ... The important thing is that the meaning be the same whatever the variant chosen.

The dialogue is then not so set as it appears: Simon's [Laurent Capelluto] lyrical declaration of love, Junon's cynical remarks...

Once we know what variant we're in, dialogues are written in the dressing room in the morning. And then they change with respect to the actors' disposition, their relation to the text. On the day itself, we are always introducing changes which freshen up the text.

You were in the middle of editing when you re-shot scenes.

I often do retakes. It's very hard. One is in a utilitarian relationship with the images, a relationship stripped of pleasure. I worked with a very talented young man, Toma Bacqueni, who does lighting, decor, and accessories. ... The difficulty is to be faithful to the first written line. It's for this reason that retakes are hard. One must maintain one's critical thinking as regards the film as a whole in order to preserve its unity...

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***Fanny and Alexander* seems to be a major reference point.**

Overwhelming even. Unfortunately I know the film very well. It's one of the most beautiful in the world. With Eric Gautier (the cinematographer) we posed the question about our legacy in an almost light-hearted way. He had the same feeling I did as regards the beauty of the lighting in *Fanny and Alexander*. We pondered it for the shifts from warm tones to blue tones and for the choice of lenses. We watched the film in detail: both the television and theatrical versions. It's now become part of my genes! I come out of that film.

What was the deepest impression the film made on you?

The fact that it's violent and you don't see it. It's very beautiful, very sweet, and extremely violent at the same time. What struck me was that you could make a Christmas film. One can be a Comencini and direct *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, or Bergman and do *Fanny and Alexander*!

***Fanny and Alexander* is filmed from the point of view of a child, your point of view is that of adults.**

It's true. Children and teenagers are 'off-film'. But the adults are so immature!

Junon is never sentimental. That makes for her charm. Once conceived, her character must have been pleasant to write...

It functions on its own, it's true! When Junon is in a scene, one finds out right away what she's up to. She is so unpredictable that one knows right away! That's the paradox.

There are very strong counterpoint effects between the characters: Junon and Abel [Jean-Paul Roussillon], Henri [Mathieu Amalric] and his sister Elizabeth...

The couples are all very tender. It is Abel and Junon who set the tone. They get on well. It disturbs their intimacy to have their grandchildren over. She complains about it, too. They are lyrical together, as when Abel whispers sweet nothings to Junon in front of the firework display, or when he recites erotic poetry to her. Sylvia and Ivan also get along well together. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is very alone. She says it: her love for her mother has taken over everything. Henri and Faunia [Emmanuelle Devos] are very in love: he is unpalatable when he makes a spectacle of himself, but with her he walks a straight line!

Henri is haunted by a tender and happy moment which is like a blind spot in the film: Madeleine.

Yes. I really like that idea. There's one more ghost. One thinks it's Joseph but for Henri it's his wife, whom, on top of everything else, the family has not met since she died right after their marriage.

The question of an unidentifiable absence is the film's dramatic driving force. In the beginning, Elizabeth confides to her psychoanalyst that she does not know who it is she is mourning. Where does this statement come from?

I don't know, but it's one of the first things I wrote. It echoes throughout the film. She is in mourning, not knowing for whom. There is no answer to this question in the script. The answer resides in the act of filming. ... It was irritating to write because we could not manage to do anything with the mourning, except for small moments of intensity. At the end of the film for example, Elizabeth asks her father: 'Dad, what have I lost?' She collapses. He replies: 'Your brother'. Abel, of course, is thinking of Joseph, but she is thinking of Henri whom she has banished. This misunderstanding was unnecessary. However, it makes for an interesting moment, moving both to perform and to watch.

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The film evokes tragic themes with grandiloquent words: filial recognition, banishment. Does the repertoire of tragedy come to mind when you're looking for solutions?

Bourdieu is well versed in Greek tragedy. I am more familiar with Shakespeare or Strindberg.

Shades of Bergman again! You have no doubt thought of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*?

Of course, because of the banishment theme, but it didn't help in the writing. We tried to work out of bits of dialogue and it yielded nothing. Because the film is more like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The end of the film takes up again the address to the spectator that concludes Shakespeare's play: 'If we shadows have offended, Think but this, and all is mended, That you have but slumber'd here'. You have directed a "Midwinter Night's Dream."

Many segments of the film echo the play: the ending, the prologue, the performance in the castle, Simon's transformations. I realized it after four months of editing! It is a sign of a lack of preparation. Ordinarily, I become aware of these slip-ups much earlier. I cultivate what ought to be, I brush the rest aside. Because films are made for people who will never read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*!

...

It seems that maturity allows you to let go, to renounce full control of meanings in advance. And the two parents are such strong characters that we know we will go to the end of the film with them.

... A woman comes from the kitchen and falls down. Her husband comes in.... For the woman it is awful to fall down. She is wearing a skirt, she is elderly; it is a bit shameful. Even if she behaves in a nasty way, what is enchanting is that she is the 'beloved'. That's how things are, from time immemorial. She has been loved by Abel who says it. He is the 'lover'; he does not need to ask her if she loves him. They get along perfectly together. The distribution of the demands of love has worked for them. In the scenes, as soon as we ask them to speak, things go really well. That's how they are as a couple.

She takes vengeance on the phrase from your film *La Vie des morts*: 'Everybody hates their mother'. Here, she hates her children!

Since the end of the great classical Hollywood cinema, children appear everywhere in comedy. It's tiresome. Since the 1980s, a sociological change has taken place: more and more cinema couples have children. It is harmful to female characters, it weakens them. Can you imagine *It Happened One Night* with children! It doesn't work at all! I love the shot of Chiara who tosses her knickers on her little boy's head before going to bed with that guy.

The lecture in probabilities on the blackboard resembles a logical conclusion of your varia method.

Yes, just like the question Sylvia poses: what is it that I know about my love if in fact I haven't had a choice? I don't know my own life, I haven't lived it because there is a variant which I have been prevented from considering.

Behind all these calculations, there's the divine wager, Pascal's wager, which one finds in the quote from Laurent Thirouin's book *Chance and Rules* [*Le Hasard et les Regles*].

It's true. At the same time the script is inspired by another book. At the outset, I only had a few themes: the scene of Elizabeth with her analyst, an entertaining scene with Junon, and the idea of Christmas. The film is born of a book, *Transplant: between Biology and Psychoanalysis* [*La Greffe*,

new wave films

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entre biologie et psychanalyse, PUF 2004], written by Jacques Ascher (a friend of my father), a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, and by Jean-Pierre Jouet, a renowned oncologist, also a professor at Lille, and a specialist in cancer of the blood. Bone marrow transplant is the type of transplant which creates the most psychiatric disorders, and this is very disturbing. It poses identity problems for people and induces many attacks of delirium: for the donor, the recipient, and the person unable to donate... For doctors, these cases are disheartening and difficult. There is often a psychiatrist in specialised units in order to put this 'disorder' into words, and to attend to the patient. It's a great book. Jean-Pierre Jouet was the medical consultant for the film. We shot scenes in his unit.

The characters sometimes address the camera directly, notably in introducing the scenery (as in *Kings and Queen*). Was this foreseen at the outset?

Yes, it emerged very quickly. Because the characters, (Ivan, Sylvia, Junon, Elizabeth, and Abel at the start) are all narrators at some point in the film. The character engages the camera and says: look, this is how the story went... Then tells the story from a personal point of view. Each is convinced that they are the hero in the film.

Why put Emerson's journal in Catherine Deneuve's hands?

Because many phrases in the films come from Emerson, by way of Stanley Cavell. Emerson's son, Waldo, also died at age 7. We managed (not without difficulty) to make a replica of his tomb at the Concord cemetery for Abel's son, at the beginning of the film. Abel's speech comes from there. Emerson said: 'I am not sad', and the people at Concord took offence. 'I have become my son's son'; or 'I am ever in defeat, and ever victorious'. This is in Emerson's journal. Ever since his son's death, this text has become Abel's fixation. And so, when Abel wants to give his wife a Christmas gift, he chooses this book....

Translation Diane Gabrysiak & Matt Hogan

ARNAUD DESPLECHIN – Filmography

1991 LA VIE DES MORTS

1992 LA SENTINELLE

1996 COMMENT JE ME SUIS DISPUTE (MA VIE SEXUELLE) (My Sex Life... or How I Got Into an Argument)

2000 ESTHER KAHN

2003 EN JOUANT 'DANS LE COMPAGNIE DES HOMMES' (Playing 'In the Company of Men')

2004 ROIS ET REINE (Kings and Queen)

2007 L'AIMÉE (documentary)

2008 UN CONTE DE NOËL (A Christmas Tale)