

Jacquot de Nantes (1991)

Jacquot de Nantes finished shooting on the 17th October 1990. On 27th of October, Jacques Demy, husband to Agnès Varda and whose childhood is the basis of the film, died from AIDS-related complications. Varda did not halt production. In the editing suite, she would sit with longstanding collaborator Marie-Josée Audiard and savour the footage of her husband moving across the frame, allowing herself to stay in his company for a little while longer.

This film would prove an act of remembrance like no other. Not only did Varda preserve the memories of Demy's early life through a bittersweet cinematic collaboration, but she created new ones for herself by intimately documenting her husband in his final months.

In spite of his rapidly declining health, Demy agreed to be filmed for these scenes but only by Varda, out on the beach. This setting was his tribute to his wife, a woman who saw seashores as an extension of herself and delighted in using them in her films.

Holding her camera by hand, with no viewfinder, Varda guides the lens closely over Demy's skin, his eyes, and his wedding ring. In one perfect shot, she catches him laughing, the camera intuitively resting directly on Demy's face despite Varda's inability to see what she was filming.

Her small camera savours every pore and wrinkle on Demy's weathered skin, a portrait that is at once both unsettling and disarmingly affectionate. This is truly a collaboration like no other, one only afforded by love and respect that has developed over decades.

When news broke of Demy's illness in February 1990, Varda galvanised a team of trusted friends and colleagues and began the hasty process of recreating the childhood of her beloved Jacques, the time before they'd met.

Shooting on location in Demy's father's garage, with his immediate family on set to help remember the things that he had forgotten, Varda created a rich and tender interpretation of a young dreamer who found joy in his art and sharing it with the people around him.

Raised in a cheerful, working class community, Demy the boy finds magic in the everyday, be it a glamorous, roulette-playing aunt from Rio or the Disney movie posters pinned up around Nantes.

Varda uses black and white for Demy's childhood scenes as an homage to the films of the 30s and 40s that he loved, but switches to lush technicolour when he sees inspiration in his surroundings that what later become scenes in his films. The sharp contrast not only signals a change in reality, it shows how she sees Demy's work; warm, vibrant, and larger than life.

Death takes many forms in *Jacquot de Nantes*. Jacques on the beach won't directly address his illness (AIDS at the time was considered a taboo), but describes the feeling of visiting his grandfather's grave, with whom he shared a name, and realising for the first time the fragility of life. He recounts air raids ravaging Nantes during the Second World War, a time he refers to as "the apocalypse" that fuels his hatred towards men and violence. In a childhood recreation, he discovers a local woman stone dead on the floor, the technicolour filter giving her a theatrical finishing act.

Demy's death was announced to the world before *Jacquot de Nantes* was released in cinemas. Watching it today, death hums throughout the film, touching every frame, but doesn't overshadow its thirst for living. It saturates his childhood scenes with a vitality that comes with knowing that Demy will be taken too soon, and celebrates everything that led him to Varda; his family, his films and his desire to bring art and music into as many lives as he could touch.

As an Agnès Varda film this is a visceral, accomplished addition to her oeuvre right from the opening shot; a sweeping pan of young Demy running around his father's garage, which Varda pulled off by borrowing a crane from a neighbouring shoot as they were pressed for time and resources.

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Though she is only audibly present once (an involuntary laugh off camera when Demy begins to sing a familiar tune) she is felt in every scene, in its respectful and loyal adaptation of Demy's writing that refused to mourn.

Demy wouldn't live to see the finished film, but would spend his last months on set, surrounded by family, watching his heritage being held in the capable, strong-willed hands of his partner.

- Beth Webb

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