

Review #95 : *Donkey Skin* (1971)

SYNOPSIS

Once upon a time in a magical kingdom, there lived in a castle a king (**Jean Marais**) and his beautiful queen, who had an equally beautiful daughter, the princess (**Catherine Deneuve**). Life was good, and the king would enjoy get-togethers in the courtyard, where the princess would play her organ and his pet donkey had pride of place due to its ability to produce



gold and jewels. Sadly the queen took ill and died, but before she passed away, she made the king promise to remarry a woman more beautiful than herself. *All prospective princesses being definitely too old or too ugly, so who would the king eventually choose ?*



Well, there's a rather unsavoury answer to that question : his own daughter, the princess. And you thought the donkey was weird^^. Anyway, she is understandably reluctant and on hearing of his intentions hurries off to see her fairy godmother (**Delphine Seyrig**) for assistance. The godmother first comes up with gentle ways to put him off, challenging him to make impossible dresses for the princess : a dress of the colour of the weather, then

a dress more sparkling than the moon, and finally a dress that glows like the sun.

The princess secretly loves all these frocks, and is beginning to warm to her father's suggestion, so the godmother comes up with a more radical solution : skin the donkey, wear its pelt, and become a scullion. From that moment on, the princess learns a lesson about humility and how not everything in life is easy. She is put in the employ of a mad old woman who spits frogs and made to carry out the most menial tasks. However, a prince falls in love



with her after seeing her as she really is, but is unable to persuade anyone that she is the woman for him...

REVIEW

Donkey Skin is told with the simplicity and beauty of a child's fairytale, but with emotional undertones and a surrealistic style that adults are more likely to appreciate. A child and a parent seeing this movie will experience two different films.

In adapting it into a musical, French New Wave legend **Jacques Demy** was probably thinking of Jean Cocteau's surrealistic masterpieces and thus he does bring Charles Perrault's storyline to life with an **incredible sense of style** and originality :

- **The scenery and sets are fabulous** – the King's large white cat throne, the Princess's garden bedroom, the stereotypical wretched woodcutter-style hut in the woods that Peau d'Âne lives in, some views of the Château de Chambord and the Château du Plessis-Bouree. It's all straight out of a fairytale book...
- **The pseudo-Renaissance costumes** (except for the Lilac Fairy who sports peek-a-boo negligees) are mostly kitsch, with very vivid colours, but some of Catherine Deneuve's dresses are quite splendid.





The music by Michel Legrand is catchy to listen and rhymes nicely. Catherine singing while baking the famous cake with the ring inside for her beloved is one of my favourites. I also love Deneuve and Jacques Perrin's charisma together gliding down a placid river on a painted barge, torches burning bright in daylight... No need to mention the Prince's song of course, every girl is bound to remember it...

Of course, there are also incongruous elements that I doubt were found in the 17th-century original, including a helicopter, a woman who spits toads, doorways so low everyone must



stoop to get through them, and a royal throne that looks like *Hello, Kitty* ! It may be a little too crazy and surrealistic but it does provide a **visual feast and fanciful imaginations**, and Deneuve was then, as she was before and since, a great

beauty with the confidence such beauty requires. **It does not matter how old you are.** Many mature adults, men and women, loved it. It's a must-see and a true work of art. You will feel shamefully hooked...

