



My afternoons with Margueritte

Director: Jean Becker

Country: France

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Review by Betsy Sharkey, Los Angeles Times, September 2011:

It takes a special skill to make a film feel as soft and light as a summer breeze, and yet that is what French director Jean Becker accomplishes with "My Afternoons With Margueritte," a glimpse into the everyday of two ordinary lives.

This little gem is all about the nature of chance encounters and how they can change us in unexpected ways. The one on which this story hangs begins on a park bench in a small village in the French countryside. It is a place patina-ed by the years, as are the two main characters, a fragile bird-thin woman named Margueritte (Gisele Casadesus) and a giant lump of a working man, Germain (Gerard Depardieu). For both, their encounters in the park become a respite from the troubles of their lives. She's about to be moved from the comfort of the residential facility where she's been living, her family no longer willing to foot the bill. He's locked in a lifelong struggle with the profound insecurity that comes from a mother who always pegs him the fool.

They are an unlikely pair. The refined and erudite Margueritte is portrayed with a simple grace by Casadesus, who was 95 when the film was shot. An oversized Depardieu is the coarse and little educated Germain, who must hint at a stirring intellect inside that lumbering bulk. Yet their connection is immediate and the two actors are playful with each other almost from the beginning, as Germain explains the names he's given each of the pigeons pecking at their feet and Margueritte begins to read to him from her book.

Solace comes from sharing ideas and emotions — Margueritte giving Germain the courage to not only read, but also to think, and Germain taking the time to become her friend. The script, which the director co-wrote with Jean-Loup Dabadie and is adapted from the Marie-Sabine Roger novel, creates a kind of effortless intimacy from the start. It truly does feel like we've stumbled into these lives in much the same way Germain first happened upon Margueritte in the park.

Though the film is small, tightly focused on its two main characters, there are big themes underpinning the narrative. The dialogue ranges from gentleness in the conversations between the aging woman and the still maturing man, to callousness in the way their families and the world are dismissive of their plights.

Nearly every shot underscores the personal nature of things. You feel the presence of either Margueritte or Germain or both in every frame, without the film ever feeling overly stuffed or hurried. Becker, working with director of photography Arthur Cloquet, plays with light to great effect as well. In the park it is usually sun-dappled, shifting as we follow Germain into the darker corners of his life. The pub, where he begins to try out some of his newfound observations on old pals, has a warmth in its shadows; in his mother's house the light is harsh even late at night, and the air is filled with the sound of her invective.

As is so often the case with advancing age and increasing enlightenment, Margueritte's life unravels just as Germain's is coming together, with a few surprises along the way. Not too many, but it doesn't matter much, for the film is a reminder of the pleasure to be found in simple things — reading a book, sitting on a park bench with a friend, spending an afternoon with Margueritte.

From an interview with Jean Becker at www.junioronline.com.au:

How did you discover Marie-Sabine Roger's novel and what made you want to adapt it?

I have someone who scouts for potential subjects for me and who showed me Marie-Sabine Roger's novel, *La Tête en Friche*. As soon as I'd read it, I fell under its spell. I was immediately attracted by the character of this nice guy, a bit rough around the edges, a victim of his own lack of education and who one might think is a little simple when there are plenty more who are far worse than him. And then, thanks to the fortuitous encounter with an extremely erudite old lady who reveals to him the riches of reading, he evolves. She cultivates his mind.

Is writing a pleasure for you?

To me, the best moments in the filmmaking process are writing and editing. I view the shoot with a certain anxiety because I'm always worried about not living up to what has been written and you have to be constantly as rigorous as possible to make sure you don't deviate from it.

Have you always experienced shoots in this way?

Of course, it's always nice to spend six weeks with the same little gang you've put together. But I have a confession to make: It can also be tedious to have to be constantly answering the same question, "What are we doing?" I always think of Sébastien Japrisot's answer, "I don't know but we're doing it well!" On a shoot, I'm pretty difficult, I'll admit it. I shout a lot, it's true, but once again I know that each mistake that's made will detract from my goal of doing justice to what has been written. Every detail is essential to my mind, because it can really put a shoot in danger. So I do a lot of upstream preparation to avoid that.

When did you think about Gérard Depardieu for the role of Germain Chazes, having worked with him on *Elisa*?

Very early on. Even before starting to write the script. I gave Marie-Sabine Roger's book to Bertrand de Labbey, my friend and agent. It was he who suggested Depardieu and asked if he could pass on the novel to him. Gérard called me three days later and talked to me with a lot of enthusiasm for over an hour, exploring the smallest details. I think he knows the book as well if not better than I do, which explains the fluidity and the power of his performance. In any case, it was his deep love for this story that reinforced my desire to make the film, as well as the chance to make it with him. And then to play the little old lady, we had an extraordinary 95 year-old actress in Gisèle Casadesus! After one projection, someone said to me: "Those two were made to act another!" and I was really delighted to hear that remark because it reflects the subject of the film exactly!

How did you want the direction of this film to go?

I like making simple movies. As my father often said to me, good directing is directing you don't notice. Otherwise, if you do notice, that detracts from the story because you're concentrating on something other than the essential. My way of directing is therefore all about accompanying the development of my characters as the plot is described, and each time with the same aim: That after people watch one of my films, they leave a little different from when they arrived in the theater.

Did *My Afternoons With Margueritte* change much during editing?

I tried to get rid of the moments when the viewer might guess what's coming in the next scene and think, "OK, we get it!" I never hesitate to cut. It's difficult in the start, when you make your first films, because your images are very precious to you. But you should never become infatuated with your own images as a director. I have learned to let go and to focus on the rhythm.

Were you anxious before the film was released?

They often say that once the editing is done, the film no longer belongs to you. But that's not true in my case. I am totally involved right up until the theatrical release. We put three years into bringing the film to life and I don't want a little detail like the film's promotion to ruin all our efforts when we're on the home straight. I owe it to myself to be involved. Then after that, when the film is delivered to the public, it's either a big or average success, or no success at all. And in all of these cases, you simply have to roll your sleeves up and start thinking about the next project.