

Conversations with My Gardener

Dialogue avec mon jardinier

Cert 12A France 2008 109 mins

Crew

Director	Jean Becker
Screenplay	Jean Cosmos Jacques Monnet Jean Becker
Based on novel by	Henri Cueco
Cinematography	Jean-Marie Dreujeu
Editor	Jacques Witt
Art Director	Therese Ripaud

Cast

Daniel Auteuil	The Painter
Jean-Pierre Darroussin	The Gardener
Fanny Cottençon	Hélène
Alexia Barlier	Magda
Hiam Abbass	The Wife
Élodie Navarre	Carole
Roger Van Hool	Tony

Synopsis

A middle-aged Parisian artist (Daniel Auteuil) returns to his old family home in provincial France after his parents' death. He advertises for a gardener to maintain the sprawling land and to recreate his mother's vegetable garden, and finds the first applicant (Jean-Pierre Darroussin) is an old school friend he hasn't seen since childhood.

An intimate friendship develops between the two as the painter builds up an impressionist's canvas of the gardener whose honest and simple view of the world is uncluttered. As they see everything through each other's eyes, they find a beauty they have never seen before. After all, a gardener grows things for others, just as a painter paints for others to see.

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Review

In outline *Conversations With My Gardener*, an adaptation of Henri Cueco's novel *Dialogue Avec Mon Jardinier*, might sound like a recipe for a sentimental character study. Auteuil plays the Parisian painter who has inherited his childhood home in an idyllic region of southern France. Placing an advert for somebody to rejuvenate the property's unkempt garden, he encounters an old schoolfriend (Darroussin), whom he hasn't seen for decades since a prank involving an exploding cake and the headmaster.

Ever since, the men's lives have followed very different paths. A man of modest tastes and means, the gardener has stayed close to his roots, working as a labourer for the French railway system and always taking the same annual holiday to Nice with his wife (Abbas) of 27 years. Meanwhile problems are mounting for the artist: he's feeling creatively blocked, his wife wants a divorce, his daughter wants to marry somebody much older, and his girlfriend Magda (Balmier) is seeing another man.

There's an instant warmth however in this sunny environment between the two unnamed protagonists: they affectionately refer to one another as 'Dupinceau' and 'Dujardin', and are genuinely curious about one another's experiences.

Conversations With My Gardener is an unobtrusively crafted work in which, save for some fleeting flashbacks, the story unfolds in a linear manner. There are a handful of set-piece moments - including a gallery exhibition in Paris, a trip to the Louvre and a comical incident at a wake - but for the most part Becker is content to observe his two main characters chatting and spending time together outdoors.

The women here remain peripheral figures with the focus trained on the interactions between the two men. Despite this imbalance, it's a pleasure to watch Auteuil and Darroussin inhabit their roles and provide such credible and complementary performances.

The phlegmatic, practically-minded Dujardin knows all about the values of camaraderie from a life of manual work while his artistic pal Dupinceau is quicker to express his emotions.

Tragedy eventually intrudes into *Conversations With My Gardener*, although Becker handles this potentially clichéd plot development with considerable sensitivity and discretion. And the film deserves its poignant coda which both celebrates the supposedly simpler things in life and illustrates how our friends, even after their passing, can help us see the world anew.

Tom Dawson, *Film Four*