

The Red Balloon | Le Voyage en Ballon

Picture this: Oscar night, 1957. Up for Best Writing, Best Original Screenplay for 1956 are *The Ladykillers*, *La Strada*, *Julie*, *The Bold and the Brave*, and *The Red Balloon*. And the winner is – Albert Lamorisse, *The Red Balloon*. Yes, you heard that correctly – the winner of the best original screenplay was a thirty-five minute short film from France. What are the odds of that ever happening? Well, look it up and tell me how many other times it's happened. I'll save you the trouble – never. Such was the popularity, love, and affection for that short film. It captured everyone's hearts and imagination all around the world, this simple, tiny, perfect film about a young boy who finds a red balloon one fine day, and the relationship that ensues, a true and wonderful friendship between boy and balloon. And since its release it has certainly become one of the most beloved films of all time, each new generation discovering its beautiful story anew.

The Red Balloon is almost completely devoid of dialogue (the handful of lines are just throwaways), many scenes play with music only, and some play with natural sound only. Albert Lamorisse, the film's writer/director, just tells his beautiful little tale as simply as he can. That he makes us believe that a balloon is a real character is a testament to the magic spell he weaves from beginning to end. In its thirty-five minutes it has everything – laughter, tears, and one of the most moving and beautiful finales in the history of the movies.

Lamorisse had previously made his first short film, *Bim*, in 1950, but it was his second short film, *White Mane*, made in 1953, that brought him prominence and which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes for Best Short Film. *The Red Balloon* also won that same award. After *The Red Balloon*, Lamorisse made his first feature, *Le Voyage en Ballon* in 1960. It won an award at the Venice Film Festival and was acquired for distribution in the United States, where it was titled *Stowaway in the Sky* and had added narration written by S.J. Perelman and spoken by Jack Lemmon, which did the film no favors.

After that, Lamorisse made *Fifi la Plume* in 1965 (titled *Circus Girl* in the U.S.)

and several documentaries. A little known but fun fact is that in 1957 he also invented a hugely popular board game, which Parker Brothers bought – *Risk*. Sadly, Lamorisse died in a helicopter crash in 1970 at the age of forty-eight.

The Red Balloon featured Lamorisse's son Pascal as Pascal and his daughter Sabine also appears. The gorgeous Technicolor photography was by the wonderful French cameraman Edmond Séchan, who would go on to photograph several of Philippe de Broca's classics, including *That Man from Rio* and *Up to His Ears*. And the music, which gives the film so much of its heart, was by Maurice Le Roux.

Le Roux's first score had been for Lamorisse's *White Mane*. He went on to score films for Truffaut, Godard, Nicholas Ray and others. Le Roux's music for *The Red Balloon* hits all of the film's emotional bases and does so simply, effectively, and beautifully. The film begins with his gorgeous, lyrical main theme, then segues directly to Pascal finding the red balloon. It's a masterful sequence in terms of its scoring – the music curious at first, then establishing the immediate bond between boy and balloon. The rest of the score is equally adept, one moment playful (the balloon tormenting the headmaster of the school, the magical sequence of the red balloon flirting with a little girl's blue balloon), the tension when the bullies steal the balloon and finally end its life, and then the stunning sequence that follows, when all the balloons of Paris unite and find sad Pascal, and lift him into the skies for his joyous, exhilarating ride over the city.

The natural companion piece is, of course, Jean Prodromidès' incredible score to Lamorisse's *Le Voyage en Ballon*.

Prodromidès began his film scoring journey in 1955 – he scored Vadim's *Blood and Roses*, and Vadim's portion of the omnibus film *Spirits of the Dead*. His final score was for Andrzej Wajda's film *Danton*. His score for *Le Voyage en Ballon* is filled with beautiful themes that, like the film itself, take flight whenever they appear. It's fascinating to hear

the main them, whose first few bars are very close to what Burt Bacharach would come up with for his classic song, "What the World Needs Now Is Love."

A little personal history with *The Red Balloon*, if I may. I first saw *The Red Balloon* at the Lido Theater in Los Angeles (one of three nearby neighborhood theaters). I was intrigued by the poster and immediately wanted to see it, but it was weirdly playing on a double bill with *Diabolique* and children were not allowed to see *Diabolique*. I was very upset and I told the box office lady that I would pay, watch *The Red Balloon*, and then leave immediately. She finally took pity on me and let me in, with the proviso that I absolutely keep my promise. And so I went in and like most people, fell in love with *The Red Balloon*. Oh, and I forgot I was supposed to leave and so I also saw *Diabolique* and let me tell you that movie gave me nightmares for days.

I saw *The Red Balloon* many times over the years – it was shown on TV (first airing as an episode of *General Electric Theatre*, where it was introduced by that show's host, Ronald Reagan), then in revival houses, and I owned a beautiful IB Technicolor print that I acquired in the 1970s. Another thing I also acquired in the 1970s was a collection of reel-to-reel tapes made from acetates. One of those was *The Red Balloon*. I've had the tape for many years, but never wanted to do anything with it because I was just too concerned about the sound quality. But after Chris Malone did the unbelievable work he did on Kritzerland's release of *A Place in the Sun*, and more importantly, *It's a Wonderful Life*, I knew if anyone could make this sound wonderful it was him. And I was right, and so finally we have the complete *The Red Balloon* on CD sixty years later. It is a glorious score and a score for the ages and of course it will make you want to see the movie again immediately.

— Bruce Kimmel