



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Les Enfants terribles

Melville was something of a hero to the Nouvelle vague – Godard cast him in *Breathless* – and Truffaut, like many, admired this adaptation of Cocteau's novel for its fidelity, the serenity and strength of the direction, and the excellence of the performances. It concerns the fraught relationship between a young woman and her sickly brother who retreat into a private realm where jealousy and insecurity are rife.

**bfi.org.uk**

Even before it came out *Les Enfants terribles* commanded much critical attention. On-set conflicts between Melville and Cocteau were the talk of the town and, in order to scotch the (partly self-fuelled) rumours that it was his film, Cocteau told *France-Soir*, 'Although I worked with Melville hand in hand, the film is his, not mine.' Melville for his part stated on numerous occasions that Cocteau left him alone after he asserted himself on day one of shooting, ejecting Cocteau who had 'inadvertently' said 'cut' from the set. Cocteau reportedly directed one day of shooting, of scenes at the 'seaside' (in fact shot in a small town north of Paris, as is plainly evident). Still, this did not stop reviewers trying to apportion the relative inputs of the two men and, inevitably, in this game Melville was overshadowed by Cocteau.

On its release the film violently divided critical opinion, while box-office sales were average (its total of 719,844 tickets was significantly fewer than for *Le Silence de la mer*). Jacques Siclier noted that 'its career was mostly in film clubs'. From the left-wing *Combat* to the Catholic *La Croix*, Melville was deemed to have made an excellent adaptation of a canonical book, retaining its 'spirit' and 'making a very good job of a difficult task.' On the other hand his camera movements were felt by some to be excessive and Cocteau's voice-over overbearing. In several cases *Les Enfants terribles* was compared unfavourably to *Le Silence de la mer*. Actors' performances however united all critics, then and later: Nicole Stéphane's Elisabeth was universally lauded while Dermithe's Paul was comprehensively condemned.

The fiercest attacks, though, were directed at the film's contents, and therefore at Cocteau. *L'Écran français*, the leading specialist film journal of the Liberation, which had championed *Le Silence de la mer*, trashed the film, calling it a 'grotesque story' with a 'pseudo-poetic commentary crammed with wilfully obscure terms.' *L'Aube* condemned it for wallowing in the 'moral indigence of bourgeois bohemian youth' while *Franc-Tireur* described the bedroom as 'a dustbin in which lie, pell-mell, human detritus.' Homosexual and incestuous undertones were not picked up as such. This could be because they were toned down from the novel. Reportedly, a shot showing Elisabeth and Paul in a passionate embrace was cut, although there is no trace of this in the Censorship Commission files, a fact which suggests self-censorship in anticipation of what would be acceptable to the audience.' Instead, surrealism was the overt focus of attack. Whether favourable or unfavourable to the film, reviewers in such publications as *Le Monde* hated 'the hideous apparatus of Surrealism, the moustachioed statues, the artificial flowers and the convoluted objects dear to the creator of *Le Sang d'un*

*poète.*’ It is conceivable that these attacks may have been disguised homophobia since there were also veiled references to Dermithe’s ‘effeminate’ looks.

Two years after the film’s release, Noël Burch wrote a detailed textual analysis of it that can hardly be bettered. Burch exhaustively examines the complex camerawork, the role of music, the substitution of visual for verbal poetry and the use of objects. Burch’s originality was to claim full authorship of the film for Melville: ‘*Les Enfants terribles* may be a great film because of Cocteau’s novel, but it is that, especially in spite of, and beyond, the novel.’ For Burch, Melville was, ‘with Bresson, Franju and Tati, the only French filmmaker who was capable of making a film which is art, like a string quartet, a poem or a painting, independently of any intellectual or literary content.’ Burch thus perceived at the time the shift historians such as Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell later would chart: ‘*Les Enfants terribles* exemplifies the rethinking of the relation between film and other arts that was taking place in post-war modernism.’

It is worth noting that the re-release of *Les Enfants terribles* in the mid-1970s also attracted both violent attacks (being seen as indulgently bourgeois in the post-May 1968 context) and high acclaim. One writer who did praise *Les Enfants terribles* was Truffaut, who wrote in 1974: ‘When this Cocteau-Melville film appeared in 1950, it was unlike anything else being done in French cinema at the time. There is no need to carefully distinguish what is Melville’s and what is Cocteau’s in this four-handed concerto; the former’s calm strength is well served by the latter’s spirited writing. The two artists worked together like Bach and Vivaldi. Jean Cocteau’s best novel became Jean-Pierre Melville’s best film.’

**Extracted from *Jean-Pierre Melville ‘An American in Paris’* by Ginette Vincendeau (BFI, 2003)  
Reproduced by kind permission of Bloomsbury Publishing. ©Ginette Vincendeau**

---

#### LES ENFANTS TERRIBLES

*Director:* Jean-Pierre Melville  
*Production Companies:* Melville Productions, Organisation Générale Cinématographique  
*Producer:* Jean-Pierre Melville  
*Production Managers:* Jean-Pierre Melville, Jacques Braley  
*Unit Production Manager:* Philippe Schwob  
*Unit Manager:* J. Boussard  
*Stage Manager:* M. Dagonneau  
*1st Assistant Director:* Claude Pinoteau  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Jacques Guymont  
*Trainee Directors:* Michel Drach, Serge Bourguignon  
*Screenplay:* Jean Cocteau, Jean-Pierre Melville  
*Dialogue:* Jean Cocteau  
*Based on the novel by:* Jean Cocteau  
*Director of Photography:* Henri Decaë  
*Camera Operator:* Jean Thibaudier  
*Stills Photography:* A. Dino  
*Editor:* Monique Bonnot  
*Assistant Editors:* C. Charbonneau, C. Durand  
*Art Director:* Emile Mathys  
*Dresses:* Christian Dior  
*Make-up:* Arakélian  
*Music:* Johann Sebastian Bach, Antonio Vivaldi  
*Song, ‘Were You Smiling at Me’:* Melvyn Martin  
*Piano Players:* Jacqueline Bonneau, Andrée Collard, Geneviève Joy, Elaine Richepin  
*Orchestra Directed by:* Paul Bonneau  
*Sound Recording:* R. Durand  
*Sound Mixers:* Jacques Gallois, Jacques Carrère  
*Voiceover:* Jean Cocteau

#### Cast

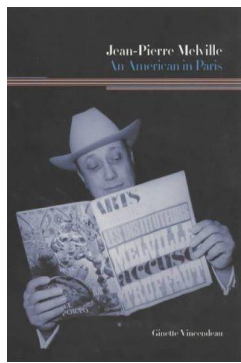
Nicole Stéphane (*Elisabeth*)  
Edouard Dermithe (*Paul*)  
Renée Cosima (*Agathe/Dargelos*)  
Jacques Bernard (*Gérard*)  
Melvyn Martin (*Michael*)  
Maria Cyliakus (*mother*)  
Jean-Marie Robain (*school bursar*)  
Maurice Revel (*doctor*)  
Adeline Aucoc (*Mariette*)  
Emile Mathys (*vice-principal*)  
Annabel Buffet (*mannequin*)  
Roger Gaillard (*Gérard’s uncle*)  
Jean Cocteau (*voice/train passenger/Paul’s heartbeat*)  
Jean-Pierre Melville (*train passenger in dining car*)\*  
Rachel Devirys \*  
Hélène Rémy \*  
Etienne Aubray \*

France 1949  
117 mins

\* Uncredited

---

Jean-Pierre Melville 'An American in Paris' by Ginette Vincendeau is available to buy from the BFI Shop: <https://shop.bfi.org.uk/jean-pierre-melville-an-american-in-paris.html>



## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### Les Enfants terribles

Tue 4 Jan 18:00, Sun 30 Jan 15:15

### Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta)

Wed 5 Jan 17:50, Wed 26 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by lecturer and writer Dr Julia Wagner), Sat 29 Jan 13:00

### Letter from an Unknown Woman

Thu 6 Jan 20:40, Sat 15 Jan 15:40, Mon 31 Jan 20:45

### Casque d'or

Fri 7 Jan 20:45, Wed 12 Jan 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic and historian Pamela Hutchinson), Sun 23 Jan 13:10

### Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Sat 8 Jan 16:00, Thu 13 Jan 18:10, Mon 17 Jan 18:20

### Ordet (The Word)

Sun 9 Jan 13:20, Tue 18 Jan 20:30

### Smiles of a Summer Night

Sun 9 Jan 16:00, Thu 20 Jan 20:50, Tue 25 Jan 18:10

### Bigger Than Life

Mon 10 Jan 14:30, Wed 19 Jan 18:05 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large), Wed 26 Jan 20:50

### Citizen Kane

Tue 11 Jan 17:50, Thu 27 Jan 18:00

### La Grande Illusion

Tue 11 Jan 18:15, Sun 16 Jan 12:40

### Twelve Angry Men

Fri 14 Jan 14:40, Mon 24 Jan 18:20, Fri 28 Jan 18:20

### Shadow of a Doubt

Sat 22 Jan 12:10, Tue 25 Jan 14:30

---

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://bfi.org.uk/join)

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)

## BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](https://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)