



Re-releases

La Maison des bois

La Maison des bois The House in the Woods

Director: Maurice Pialat

Production Companies: ORTF - Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française, RAI, Son et Lumière

Producer: Pierre Long

Director of Production: Edmond Lemoine

Production Consultant: Yves Laumet

Screenplay: René Wheeler

Adaptation: Maurice Pialat, Yves Laumet

Dialogue: René Wheeler, Maurice Pialat, Arlette Langmann

Photography: Roger Duculot

Camera Operators: Robert Schneider,

Claude Saunier

Camera Assistants: René Schneider,

François About

Editors: Arlette Langmann, Martine Giordano

Assistant Editor: Pierre-Alain Beauchard

Set Designer: Isabelle Lapierre

Properties: Claude Cheutin

Costumes: Georges Combes

Sound: Norbert Gernolle

Cast:

Pierre Doris (*Albert Picard, the gamekeeper*)

Jacqueline Dufranne (*Jeanne Picard*)

Agathe Natanson (*Marguerite Picard*)

Henri Puff (*Marcel Picard*)

Hervé Lévy (*Hervé*)

Fernand Gravey (*Marquis de Fresnoye*)

Paul Crauchet (*Hervé's father*)

Ovila Légaré (*parish priest*)

Henri Saulquin (*beadle*)

Charles Mallone (*lieutenant*)

Maurice Pialat (*M. Laforet, the teacher*)

Brigitte Perrier

Magali Vachet

Michel Tarrazon (*Michel*)

Albert Martinez (*Albert 'Bébert'*)

Serge Kovacs

Stéphane Kovacs

Jean Mauvais (*Mahu, café owner*)

Albert Michel (*Old Cottin*)

Alexandre Rignault (*Old Birot*)

Philippe André (*Jacques, Marguerite's fiancé*)

Micha Bayard (*Mme Latour, Michel's mother*)

Marie-Christine Boulart

(*Mme Pouilly, Albert's mother*)

Michel Charrel

Sylviane Combes

Eliette Demay (*Michèle*)

Monique Deval

Pierre Duncan (*gendarme*)

Georges Durban

Barbara Laage (*Hélène, Paul's fiancée*)

Yves Laumet, Marcel Derache (*soldiers on leave*)

Jean-François Magnain (*cabinet maker*)

Janine Boisrond (*housemaid*)

Jean-Pierre André (*Felix*)

Pascal Mandon

Dominique Maurin (*postman*)

Juliette Mills

Paul Pavel

Joël Quentin

Jean-Roch Rognoni

Charles Mallone (*flight-lieutenant*)

Michel Tugot-Doris (*sergeant pilot*)

France-Italy 1971

Eps 1, 2 & 3: 149 mins

Eps 4 & 5: 111 mins

Eps 6 & 7: 122 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

A Janus release

As a filmmaker, Maurice Pialat was a late bloomer. From the mid-50s to the mid-60s, when he was in his thirties, he shot several shorts and, before that, had attempted to realise his artistic ambitions through painting; neither venture yielded much success. Yet with the help of filmmakers François Truffaut and Claude Berri, who acted as producers, Pialat finally directed his feature debut, *L'Enfance nue* (1968), when he was 43 years old. Though it proved a box-office disappointment, it won the Prix Jean Vigo, garnering its director significant notice in the French film industry.

An offer for a follow-up project came from an unlikely source: the Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française (ORTF), France's national department for public television and radio from 1964 to 1975. The agency commissioned Pialat to direct a dramatic miniseries called *La Maison des bois* from a script penned by René Wheeler, best known for cowriting the hit caper *Rififi* (1955). Wheeler's initial teleplay followed a small-town family that takes in three Parisian boys whose fathers are serving at the front during World War I. Consulting producer Yves Laumet thought of Pialat because of his stellar work with children in *L'Enfance nue*.

Family and friends, including Truffaut and filmmaker Claude Chabrol, warned Pialat against accepting the offer. Though the French New Wave had waned by 1969, the movement's ethos of uncompromising creative integrity still resonated among up-and-comers, who sought to emulate the fiercely independent paths blazed by mavericks like Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. These filmmakers had rebelled against the corporatisation and institutionalisation of cinema and thus, as Rose Baldous points out in her study of *La Maison des bois*, considered television an artistic graveyard, where directors often found themselves stuck helming middle-of-the-road commercial content.

Heeding these suspicions and determined to maintain creative control, Pialat accepted ORTF's offer with one major stipulation: he would rewrite Wheeler's script, which the director believed to be too sentimental. Pialat enlisted Arlette Langmann, cowriter of *L'Enfance nue* (and sister of Berri), to help him balance the teleplay's focus on Hervé, a foster child who emerges as the series' protagonist, with a collective portrait of a small town in the department of Oise – the distinct personalities, the interconnected social strata, and the effects of the Great War on the lives there. Pialat and Langmann also pared back the script to foster improvisation during the shoot. Because of these changes, Wheeler ended up removing his name from the credits and, during production, wrote a novel to more effectively realise his vision of the story.

Maison was accorded a budget of roughly three million francs, with funding split among ORTF and, eventually, the production company Son et Lumière. When a seventh episode was added – as a result of Pialat and Langmann's incremental, improvisatory construction of the narrative – the Italian broadcasting network Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) came to the rescue with an additional 600,000 francs. ORTF producers recommended most of the cast for the series. In a surprising decision, comedian Pierre Doris was chosen for the mostly dramatic lead role of Albert Picard, a simple yet sweet father of two who becomes a surrogate dad to others during the war. Jeanne, Albert's gentle wife, is played by Jacqueline Dufranne; unlike Doris, a veteran of French television, the 44-year-old Dufranne then had only a handful of major credits to her name. The marquis for whom Albert works as a gamekeeper is portrayed by Fernand Gravey, a debonair leading man of the 30s and 40s who, at one point, had flirted with Hollywood stardom as the top-billed performer (under the name Fernand Gravet) in *The King and the Chorus Girl* (1937). Pialat admired the actor and was especially pleased that he was hired; Gravey would pass away in 1970, not long after the shooting of *Maison*.

This 4K restoration was completed in 2024 by the French National Audiovisual Institute (INA) from the 16mm negative image and 16mm magnetic tape

The screening of Episodes 1, 2 & 3 on Sun 16 Aug is presented by A Nos Amours, with an intro by David Thompson

A Nos Amours is a collective founded by Joanna Hogg and Adam Roberts dedicated to programming, promoting, understanding and enjoying over-looked, under-exposed or especially potent cinema

Re-releases

Akira

From Fri 14 Aug

La Maison des bois The House in the Woods

From Sat 15 Aug (Sun 16 Aug 12:00 presented by A Nos Amours, with an intro by David Thompson)

Three Films by Maurice Pialat

À nos amours To Our Loves

Fri 14 Aug 18:00 (presented by A Nos Amours, with an intro by David Thompson); Mon 17 Aug 14:30; Thu 20 Aug 20:50

L'Enfance nue Naked Childhood

Sat 15 Aug 16:00; Thu 20 Aug 14:30; Sun 23 Aug 12:10

Passe ton bac d'abord... Graduate First

Sat 15 Aug 20:45; Tue 18 Aug 14:30; Fri 21 Aug 18:30

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Crucial to the sprawling ensemble were the boys taken in by the Picards. The central role of Hervé was given to newcomer Hervé Lévy. Another unseasoned performer, Albert Martinez, was chosen for the role of Bébert (Maison would prove his sole credit). Michel Terrazon, who had already appeared in Pialat's *L'Enfance nue*, would play Michel in *Maison* but drop out of the profession soon after, in 1973. For his child actors, Pialat preferred authenticity over polish, opting for near-total novices in the hope of catching their unselfconscious reactions to the many improvised scenarios.

Indeed, Pialat prized spontaneity among not only his cast but also his crew, who worked collaboratively, almost *en famille*, in order to collapse the boundaries between reality and fiction. Thus the child characters were named (or, in the case of Martinez, nicknamed) after the actors portraying them, and the shoot involved an intense degree of lived-in-ness, with Pialat often spurring the boys to play among themselves so that he could have a cameraperson covertly film their interactions. The loose, participatory spirit behind the scenes was one major reason that Pialat eventually looked back on *Maison* as the only happy experience among his productions.

But even *Maison* was marked by the tumultuousness that would become common throughout Pialat's career, which continually saw charged confrontations between the exacting director and his collaborators. Early on, ORTF producer Roger Van Mullem considered firing Pialat because the director's profligate relationship to time in the service of maximum spontaneity was pushing the shoot past its schedule – and because Pialat insinuated that Van Mullem was having an affair with a business partner. Yet Laumet supported Pialat, not only guaranteeing his creative freedom but also removing any obstacles to it. In the end, Van Mullem was the one who got the axe: his company, Maintenon Films, was replaced by Son et Lumière, and producer Pierre Long took over his role.

Pialat also found himself at loggerheads with Langmann, as both struggled under the pressure of the daily script rewrites required to build upon improvised material. After Langmann hid from Pialat on the set, he threatened to stop the production if she left. Yet this by-the-seat-of-one's-pants screenwriting process (featuring occasional contributions from Laumet) ultimately helped solidify Pialat's patented approach to filmmaking.

Broadcast on ORTF's second channel, *La Maison des bois* aired from September 11 until October 24, 1971. The series met with hosannas from French critics – but without serious promotion by ORTF, few viewers ultimately tuned in. The gap between the series' creative merit and its sparse audience was highlighted by Philippe Aubert in a contemporary review:

La Maison des bois was broadcast on Sunday evenings on the second channel, competing with the film on the first. Needless to say, this punitive measure significantly diminished its impact. For once, a French series is of high quality, its subject matter has the potential to captivate millions of viewers without dumbing them down, and it's confined to an unfavourable time slot. *La Maison des bois* is therefore a true symbol of our television. On the one hand, talent, quality, and intelligence that many foreign television stations can only envy. On the other hand, programming and a level of contempt that are among the worst in Europe, and probably the world, for a public television station.

Yet when Pialat became increasingly recognised as one of the country's greatest directors, the series was rebroadcast several times on French television: in 1974 (in a monochrome version), 1980, 1985, 1990, and 2003. *La Maison des bois* has also been aired in Italy, Canada, Monaco, Switzerland, and Belgium. This 4K digital restoration provides a tremendous occasion to rediscover Pialat's finest moment as a director and one of the greatest television shows of all time.

Janus Films

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged | Browse online at theb.fi/programme-notes

Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk