



JANUS FILMS

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## LA MAISON DES BOIS

Epic yet intimate, sweeping yet personal, *La maison des bois* (1971) stands as one of the greatest achievements in the history of television as well as legendary director Maurice Pialat's magnum opus. Commissioned by French TV, Pialat crafted a seven-episode, nearly four-hundred-minute miniseries about the impact of World War I on a simple French family living in the countryside. Applying a naturalistic focus to their subject, Pialat and screenwriter René Wheeler capture both the historical scope of the conflict and the subtle ways that a small town's quotidian routines and rituals—church, school, tavern—are indelibly touched by it. At the center of this richly detailed narrative are the Picards, headed by Albert (Pierre Doris), a game warden for the wooded estate of a local marquis (Fernand Gravey). Albert and his gentle wife, Jeanne (a heartbreaking Jacqueline Dufranne), raise two teenagers—Marcel (Henri Puff), at risk of being drafted, and Marguerite (Agathe Natanson), contemplating marriage—but also shelter three abandoned boys for the duration of the war. Most rambunctious and soulful among them is Hervé (Hervé Lévy), whose journey from childhood to adolescence, all while becoming a surrogate son to the Picards and hoping for a reunion with his soldier father, lends a beating heart to *La maison des bois*—a panoramic tale that explores the longing, loyalty, and resilience that sustain humanity amid times of earth-shattering loss.

*The 4K restoration was completed in 2024 by INA, the Institut national de l'audiovisuel from the 16 mm negative image and 16 mm magnetic tape.*

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France | 1971 | 379 minutes | Color | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

As a filmmaker, Maurice Pialat was a late bloomer. From the midfifties to the midsixties, when he was in his thirties, he shot several shorts and, before that, had attempted to realize 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 forty-three 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 corporatization and institutionalization 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 realize 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 six hundred thousand 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



## CAST

Albert Picard .....	Pierre Doris
Jeanne Picard .....	Jacqueline Dufranne
Marguerite Picard .....	Agathe Natanson
Hervé Gardy .....	Hervé Lévy
Le marquis de Fresnoy .....	Fernand Gravey

## CREDITS

Director .....	Maurice Pialat
Writer .....	René Wheeler
Consulting producer .....	Yves Laumet
Cinematography .....	Roger Duculot
Editors .....	Martine Giordano Arlette Langmann
Production design .....	Isabel Lapierre
Costume design .....	Georges Combes

veteran of French television, the forty-four-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 thirties and forties 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*.

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 unfavorable 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 recognized 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 U.S. theatrical premiere, in a 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. ●



## MAURICE PIALAT BIOGRAPHY

Maurice Pialat was born in Cunlhat, a village in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of France, on August 31, 1925. His middle-class parents encountered frequent financial difficulties and often abandoned him to his grandparents—a traumatic upbringing that would inform his debut feature, *L'enfance nue* (1968).

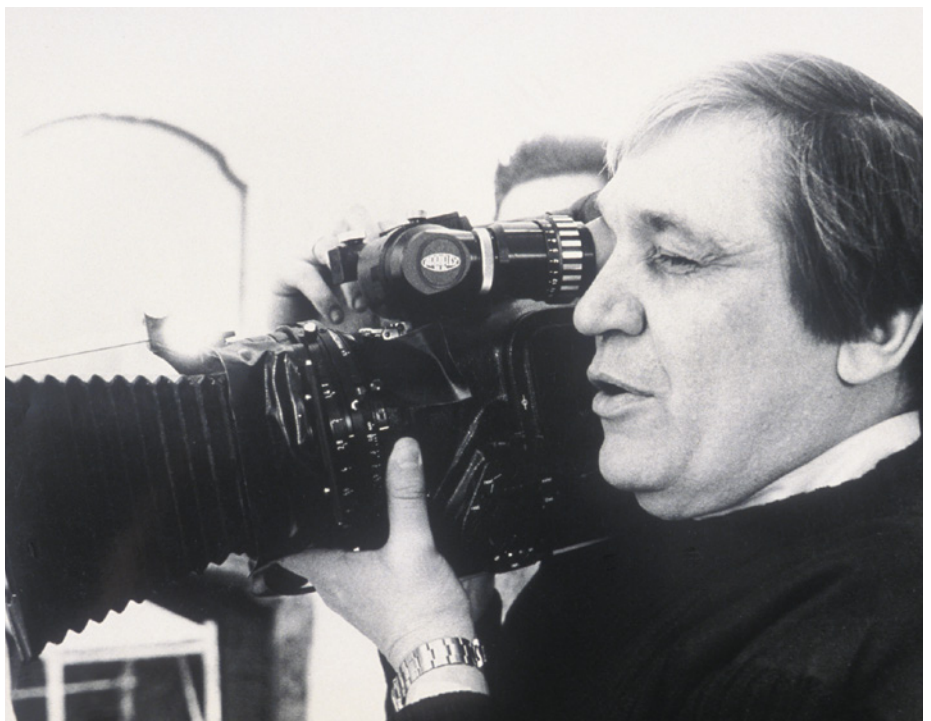
After studying painting at the École des arts décoratifs and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Pialat struggled to make ends meet in his original creative vocation. He eventually fought through a depression and committed himself to a series of sales positions, including for Olivetti computers and Volpi shampoo; his first directorial efforts were comic shorts for a company party. In the midfifties, he quit painting to write and act for the theater, a brief but unsuccessful phase. Then, to Pialat's infinite resentment, the French New Wave mostly passed him by while he failed to launch a substantial film career. His biggest splash was *L'amour existe* (1960), a documentary short about dead-end youth in the Paris suburbs, which won several festival prizes. Eventually, after years of television shorts and government commissions, Pialat secured enough funding and support from industry giants like Claude Berri and François Truffaut to complete *L'enfance nue* at the age of forty-three.

Though *L'enfance nue* didn't make much of an impression on the French moviegoing public, it won the Prix Jean Vigo and attracted the notice of the Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française (ORTF), which selected him to direct a miniseries. Seldom seen until now, that work, *La maison des bois* (1971), is frequently cited as one of the greatest television shows in French history. For his next project, Pialat adapted his own novel *We Won't Grow Old Together*. The 1972 film fictionalizes (in excruciating detail) the disintegration of Pialat's relationship with a woman twenty years his junior; Jean Yanne won the Best Actor award at the Cannes Film Festival for his role.

Pialat again drew on his life for *The Mouth Agape* (1974), based on his mother's death from cancer. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its bleak subject, the film was one of Pialat's least successful at the box office; however, it is now often ranked among his best works. *Graduate First* (1978), his follow-up, is lighter but nonetheless retains Pialat's dedication to unflinchingly capturing the discomfort and awkwardness of life, in a group portrait of bored, adrift bourgeois teens who attempt to forestall their unpromising futures.

Pialat arrived definitively on the international scene with *Loulou* (1980), which was nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes. The film stars Isabelle Huppert as a woman who leaves her longtime relationship for amour fou with Gérard Depardieu (in the first of the actor's four collaborations with Pialat), playing a man who has failed to outgrow his juvenile delinquency. The coming-of-age drama *À nos amours* (1983), about a teenage girl using promiscuity as a way of escaping her broken home, brought even more acclaim to its director (who also plays the girl's father on-screen), winning the Louis Delluc Prize for Best Film and the César Award for Best Film.

*Police*, a gritty crime drama about a detective who falls for the girlfriend of a criminal, followed in 1985. Pialat's only attempt at genre film was nominated for two Césars and won



Depardieu the Venice Film Festival's Best Actor award. But only two years later came the most notorious moment of the director's career. *Under the Sun of Satan*, his brilliant adaptation of George Bernanos's novel about a conflicted, tormented priest, was met with jeers when it won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. Already infamous for his combativeness—he frequently butted heads with collaborators and lambasted his colleagues in the press—Pialat responded by yelling, “If you don’t like me, I can tell you that I don’t like you either!” Lost in the moment was the fact that Pialat had attained one of the highest achievements in cinema.

Pialat directed two more films. *Van Gogh* (1991) is an unconventional biopic about the haunted Dutch painter; for the title role, Jacques Dutronc won the 1992 César Award for Best Actor. *Le garçon* (1995) presents another tale of arrested development, with Depardieu once more playing a man-child who loses his family because of his ceaseless immaturity. Unsatisfied with the finished film, Pialat planned to reedit it, but illness prevented him from doing so. His health continued to decline until he died from kidney failure on January 11, 2003, at the age of seventy-seven. However, he had already secured his legacy as one of cinema's fiercest explorers of emotional truth. ●

## MAURICE PIALAT SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 1968 *L'enfance nue*
- 1971 *La maison des bois* (*The House in the Woods*)  
(television series)
- 1972 *We Won't Grow Old Together* (*Nous ne vieillirons pas ensemble*)
- 1974 *The Mouth Agape* (*La gueule ouverte*)
- 1978 *Graduate First* (*Passe ton bac d'abord*)
- 1980 *Loulou*
- 1983 *À nos amours* (*To Our Loves*)
- 1985 *Police*
- 1987 *Under the Sun of Satan* (*Sous le soleil de Satan*)
- 1991 *Van Gogh*
- 1995 *Le garçon* (*The Boy*)

