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PRESENT



THE SAFE HOUSE

A FILM BY Lionel Baier

2025 – SWITZERLAND, LUXEMBURG, FRANCE – COMEDY – FRENCH – 90'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Paris, May '68: A 9-year-old boy is thrilled to stay a few extra days with his grandparents in their perennial apartment, joined by his two lively uncles— a visual artist and an aspiring intellectual—and his colourful great- grandmother from Odessa, while his parents join the historical protests. As the country is turned upside down, the family is forced to confront the past when an illustrious guest seeks shelter in their venerated hideout.

INTERVIEW WITH LIONEL BAIER

David Miller: Christophe Boltanski's novel, *La Cache*, tells the story of his family, and spans more than a century. Why did you choose May 1968 as the departure point for your adaptation?

Lionel Baier: It's true. Especially since that period takes up no more than half a paragraph in the book! If I'm not mistaken, Boltanski simply mentions that his uncle, Christian, was misfortunate enough to have his first painting exhibition open on May 3rd, 1968. Needless to say, hardly anyone showed up to see his work! To me, the events of that unique month stoked French passions to unprecedented heights. Just 23 years after WWII, with all the strikes and shortages that followed, France's collective unconscious resurfaced, both on the left and the right. Whether it was a libertarian desire for social change or one for authoritarian conservatism, everything became visible both in the streets and in people's words. This made it possible to explore many of the themes that had moved me in the novel, like one's heritage, the need for fiction in shaping one's identity, anti-Semitism, things left unsaid... And it's a fascinating era to film because it's the very root of our current period. For better or worse.

DM: What do you mean by "the need for fiction in shaping one's identity"?

LB: Like Christophe Boltanski's family, mine also originates from Odessa. My great-grandfather met my great-grandmother there. He was Polish, she was Swiss and working as an *au pair* for a Russian family. The rest is the usual immigration story. When I filmed *Comme des voleurs (à l'est)* in 2005 in Poland, I tried to learn more about my family. But since the archives are incomplete, entire periods of their lives are undocumented. What I did find, though, was how my ancestors adapted their "truth" to get integrated in Switzerland. False documents, contradictory declarations, geographical approximations –it's all quite banal, and even expected. So, I decided I would only take what was useful to me from this genealogy and leave out what was burdensome. Christophe Boltanski does the same in his book. He tells his family's *story*, but not necessarily their *truth*. I did the same in the film, weaving elements of my own history into it.

DM: But the hiding place and threat of deportation aren't fictional...

LB: Of course not! That was one of the main reasons I wanted to take on the impossible challenge of adapting this text. In movies, the Holocaust is often portrayed as an historical event frozen in time. But to me, it's an ongoing process that began in 1933 and continues to this day, whether we acknowledge it or not. This catastrophe is still immanent in our daily lives. The construction of the European Union, our relationship to religion, the war in the Middle East – all of it is connected to the Holocaust. The novel conveys this very skillfully. Everything in the Boltanskis' everyday life seems to be tied to something unspoken. What is *not* said is exactly what I seek to show. I have always wanted to make a film about this historical period, but never wanted to film a Nazi uniform – and certainly didn't want to be on set asking for better lighting on a skull insignia on someone's cap! In the novel, the characters always refer to "before" and "after" when speaking about the war. In the novel, we understand that the Boltanskis' guests are all former deportees, from the wave-obsessed patient at the beginning to the art critic. But all these people talk about everything except the Holocaust. This silence is a historical reality. Discourse on the deportation among deportees came much later. It's as if to speak is to plunge back into horror. I was very impressed by this

in the book. It was only because “Mère-Grand” didn't trust the collaborationist Vichy regime that she prevented her husband from registering with the Paris Council of Jews. He trusted France. These lists were used for the deportation in July 1942. She also had the idea for the cache in which her husband hid. I saw a Lubitsch-like elegance in that, which I wanted to capture.

DM: Speaking of Lubitsch, why did you make *La Cache* a comedy?

LB: Precisely because it's all so serious! You should only laugh at what you don't understand or what frightens you. Otherwise, you're just mocking – or worse, sneering. And that's detestable. Boltanski's novel is, in fact, very funny and tender. That was the only thing I swore to stay true to when starting the adaptation. Christophe Boltanski put total trust in me, and gave me complete narrative freedom, for which I will always be grateful. In return, I tried to live up to his elegance. He visited the set several times, and even brought his father. At times, it felt like we were playing in his house. It was all very joyful.

DM: Did you shoot in the Boltanski's actual apartment?

LB: My God, no! Christophe wanted to show it to me, but I always refused. I didn't even want to step through the building entrance to see the courtyard. The apartment was entirely re-built in a sound stage in Luxembourg. Actually, I should simply say *built*, because it was a pure creation by our production designer, Véronique Sacrez. It's a mix of things we'd observed in Parisian apartments: Simone de Beauvoir's office, my parents' flat, and, as always with me, colours and motifs found in Félix Vallotton's paintings – his deep oxblood red, his crushed-pistachio green... Some of the furniture and props belonged to my great-grandmother and actually came from Russia. I love this aesthetic of the life-like – or rather, *larger-than-life-like*. Patrick Lindenmeier, the cinematographer, spent a lot of time lighting the 500-m² set to make the illusion as real as possible, while ensuring it remained an illusion, of course. This only heightened the emotions expressed by the actors. And we needed that space to belong to us, the film crew, and no one else. The actors appropriated corners of the set as if they were their own dressing rooms. With over three tonnes of books, it didn't smell like fresh paint anymore, but of paper and dust. The parquet floors creaked, the doors wouldn't close properly... it truly felt like we were in our own, lived-in family home. There were layers of paper, piles of files and photos. Every shot had to reflect the family's rich history. I drew a lot of inspiration from the work of the illustrator Franquin, whom I love. I wanted to be able to transition from a dialogue scene in flat-tint, monochrome to a page overflowing with overdue letters-to-the-editor at the *Spirou* editorial office, just like in the *Gaston* comic books. Both Gaston and the family in *La Cache* share a certain quirkiness, a sense of justice – but also an almost-deliberate embrace of failure, as if to keep themselves from ever getting too arrogant when they're victorious... There are also the empty plots of land, the grumpy neighbours, the car that breaks down (*voiture à malice ?*), and nearly a cat. I would tell Pauline Gaillard, the editor: let's shift to something else in order to say the same thing, just like Franquin would by going from one speech bubble to the next. But you need only watch the film to know what I mean. I always cite my sources...

DM: Can you tell us about the cast?

LB: We had to form a family – a single, unified body, while preserving each individual’s uniqueness. We started with the grandparents. I’ve admired Dominique Reymond for many years now. I had the chance to work with her onstage in *Foucault en Californie* in 2022, where she played the philosopher. She’s an extraordinary actress, and not seen enough in film. Maybe because, in France, we tend to notice actors who move horizontally through the frame. Dominique, on the other hand, stands upright; her movement flows vertically. Everything else – time, events, actions – unfolds around her, while she remains at the centre.

Mère-Grand is truly the pillar of the family: she’s the authority without being authoritarian. Aurélien Gabrielli caught my attention in *Le monde après nous*. I loved his deadpan delivery and his ability to convey emotion without being sentimental. He’s the most British Corsican I know! He makes me nostalgic for a certain French cinema that would reinvent, with every film, the rules of acting for the camera.

William Lebghil had the hardest lines to “convey”: presenting long monologues on linguistics and semiotic theories to de Gaulle. We needed someone who could say them, while also having a glint of doubt in his eyes. William has a talent for doing do that before the camera. He has a certain casual air that makes seriousness possible.

Liliane Rovère seemed like such an obvious choice for the role of Arrière-Pays that I didn’t dare offer it to her right away. When we met, she shared a memory of being in France’s *zone libre* during WWII, hiding in a wheelbarrow, while a smuggler threatened her parents to turn them over to the Krauts if they didn’t pay up. She was 8, then, and was afraid to laugh! Liliane has kept within her this revolt against the impunity of the powerful. Her past as a little Jewish girl continues to infuse her political action. She campaigns against the extreme right, is still revolted by the rise of intolerance and continues to demonstrate in the streets of Paris. She said to me: I’m lucky, because history is like a pendulum. I was born when things were really bad, but I spent most of my life when things were better. Now that the pendulum is swinging back into horror, I feel sorry for you. We haven’t lived the same life as Liliane. Everything about her presence is summed up in that memory – her grandeur, her wit, her sense of history, and her refusal to burden others with it. I’ve never seen an actress so determined not to posture, not to fake it, even when everything around her was absurd. She searches for truth everywhere and refuses to repeat anything she’s already done. I’m incredibly proud that she agreed to be part of *La Cache*.

Ethan Chimienti, the little boy, was acting in a film for the first time. I loved *acting* with him – which is very different from *directing* him. On set, he was busy writing his own script for a film and casting the actors and crew members. I was offered the role of a dolphin that followed a pirate ship. The pressure was intense!

DM: And then there’s Michel Blanc.

LB: There’s so much to say about him. Everyone knows, and could see for themselves, that Michel was an extraordinary actor. At first, he tested me a bit – from one director to another. He wanted to know how I planned to frame the scene, what I intended to keep in the final cut. But very quickly, we started talking about music and our shared love of precision in performance. “We understood each other,” as de Gaulle would say! I learned so much from him—about the way words should be spoken (he was an incredible writer of dialogue), about *andouillette* sausages (he was a true foodie!), but also about audience expectations: how to satisfy them while keeping viewers on their toes. Every morning, he arrived on set with a look that seemed to say, “Should I trust you?” And every evening, he’d leave with a smile, which I

took as a silent validation of this tacit contract. If there was one person I didn't want to disappoint on this film, it was him. I'm devastated by his passing – but also so deeply grateful. We worked together in March and April 2024. He used to say, "You're completely crazy, but you don't act like you're out of control." Even after we wrapped, he'd call me now and then to check in on the editing. He was always so thoughtful. The final image of the film, which is also the last one of *him* in his incredible filmography, captures him perfectly: whistling Brahms on a long, open road, while walking next to a child – he, who once dreamed of being a classical pianist, but became, like Chaplin, both a filmmaker and an actor.

DM: Did de Gaulle really visit the Boltanskis on May 29th, 1968?

LB: That remains a secret. And the film is full of secrets.

ABOUT LIONEL BAIER

Born in 1975, Lionel Baier was Head of the Cinema Department at ECAL/Lausanne from 2002 to 2021. He co-founded Bande à part Films with Ursula Meier, Jean-Stéphane Bron and Frédéric Mermoud (2009). He produced *Le Vénérable W.* and *Ricardo et la peinture* by Barbet Schroder and *Dog on Trial* by Laetitia Dosch. In 2014, he was awarded the Grand Prix de la Fondation Vaudoise pour la culture, honouring personality who has enriched the country through a powerful body of work. He is also Vice-Chairman of the Foundation Board of the Cinémathèque suisse and a member of the Visions du Réel committee. In 2022, Lionel Baier made his theatrical debut with *Foucault en Californie*, starring Dominique Reymond in the title role. In September 2023, Lionel Baier was appointed Head of the directing department at the Fémis.

FILMOGRAPHY

2025 THE SAFE HOUSE

Feature-length fiction film. Official Competition Berlinale 2025

2023 UNE MAIN COUPEE

Short film.

2022 CONTINENTAL DRIFT (SOUTH)

Feature-length fiction film. Official Selection Cannes Film Festival (Director's Fortnight) 2022

2018 FIRST NAME : MATHIEU

Feature-length fiction film. Berlinale 2018 - Panorama

2015 VANITY

Feature-length fiction film.

Cannes Film Festival (Acid) 2015; Official Selection Locarno International Film Festival 2015

2013 LONGWAVE

Feature-length fiction film. Official Selection Locarno International Film Festival 2013

Trophée francophone du cinéma 2014

2012 EMILE, DE 1 A 5

Short film.

2012 EN ONZE

Short fiction film.

2011 BON VENT CLAUDE GORETTA

Feature-length documentary.

2010 LOW COST (CLAUDE JUTRA)

Feature-length fiction film.

2008 ANOTHER MAN

Feature-length fiction film. Official Competition Locarno International Film Festival 2008

2008 LAUSANNE BELLERIVE

Short film.

2006 STEALTH (EAST)

Feature-length fiction film. New Directors, New Films 2007, New York

2004 STUPID BOY

Feature-length fiction film.

2002 MON PERE, C'EST UN LION (JEAN ROUCH, POUR MEMOIRE)

Short film

2001 LA PARADE (NOTRE HISTOIRE)

Feature-length documentary.

2000 CELUI AU PASTEUR (MA VISION PERSONELLE DES CHOSES)

Feature-length documentary. Official Selection Visions du Réel Nyon

INTENTION NOTE

When I met Christophe Boltanski in 2016, he immediately told me: I believe my book is impossible to adapt! I saw it as an author's affectation, but I quickly realized he wasn't wrong. A world-novel, *The Safe House* uses the Boltanski family's apartment on Rue de Grenelle as its narrative structure. We move from the living room to the bedroom, leaping effortlessly from 1930 to 1975, without concern for temporal coherence. Since my aim was not to create a historical fresco, I had to focus on a period in which the portrait of this eccentric family could fully unfold. May '68 became an obvious choice, even though in the novel, this historical moment occupies only half a paragraph. The events of that spring resonate with our present-day reality, whether it be the return of war, the persistence of anti-Semitism, or authoritarianism in power.

To stay true to Christophe Boltanski was to approach his family's story with humor, that is, not to take it lightly.

ABOUT MAY 68'

In the spring of 1968, France experienced one of the greatest social upheavals in its modern history. Under the leadership of General Charles de Gaulle—world-renowned for leading the French Resistance during World War II—the country appeared stable and prosperous. Yet, a wave of rebellion was brewing among the youth. What began as student protests in Paris quickly escalated into a nationwide movement, paralyzing the country. Massive strikes, clashes with the police, revolutionary slogans—for several weeks, students and workers alike dreamed of a new world, challenging the established order.

More than just a political crisis, May '68 was a moment of rupture—an explosion of freedom that would leave a lasting mark on French society. However, beyond the barricades and ideological battles, these events serve as a backdrop in *The Safe House*, a vibrant setting rather than the film's central focus. Instead of recounting May '68 itself, the film immerses itself in this era of change to explore more intimate journeys—those of characters caught between family legacies, buried secrets, and the desire for emancipation.

CAST

Grandmama	DOMINIQUE REYMOND
Grandpapa	MICHEL BLANC
Great-Uncle	WILLIAM LEBGHIL
Little-Uncle	AURELIEN GABRIELLI
Hinterland	LILIANE ROVERE
The boy	ETHAN CHIMIENTI
The boy's father	ADRIEN BARAZZONE
The boy's mother	LARISA FABER
General de Gaulle	GILLES PRIVAT

CREW

Director	LIONEL BAIER
Screenplay	LIONEL BAIER, CATHERINE CHARRIER FREELY ADAPTED FROM THE NOVEL BY CHRISTOPHE BOLTANSKI "THE SAFE HOUSE" FEMINA PRIZE 2015 © EDITIONS STOCK 2015
Cinematography	PATRICK LINDENMAIER
Editing	PAULINE GAILLARD
Music	DIEGO BALDENWEG with NORA BALDENWEG and LIONEL BALDENWEG
1 st Production Assistant	GIORGIA DE COPPI
Sound Design	RAPHAEL SOHIER
Sound Engineer	CARLO THOSS
Sound Mixing	MAXENCE CIEKAWY
Production Design	VERONIQUE SACREZ
Costumes	ISA BOUCHARLAT
Make-Up	LAURA PELLICCIOTTA
Casting	STEPHANE BATUT
Producers	AGNIESZKA RAMU, LAETITIA GONZALEZ, YAEL FOGIEL, VINCENT QUENAULT, JEANNE GEIBEN

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