

## Blu-Ray Review: Louis Malle's Heartbreaking 'Au Revoir Les Enfants'

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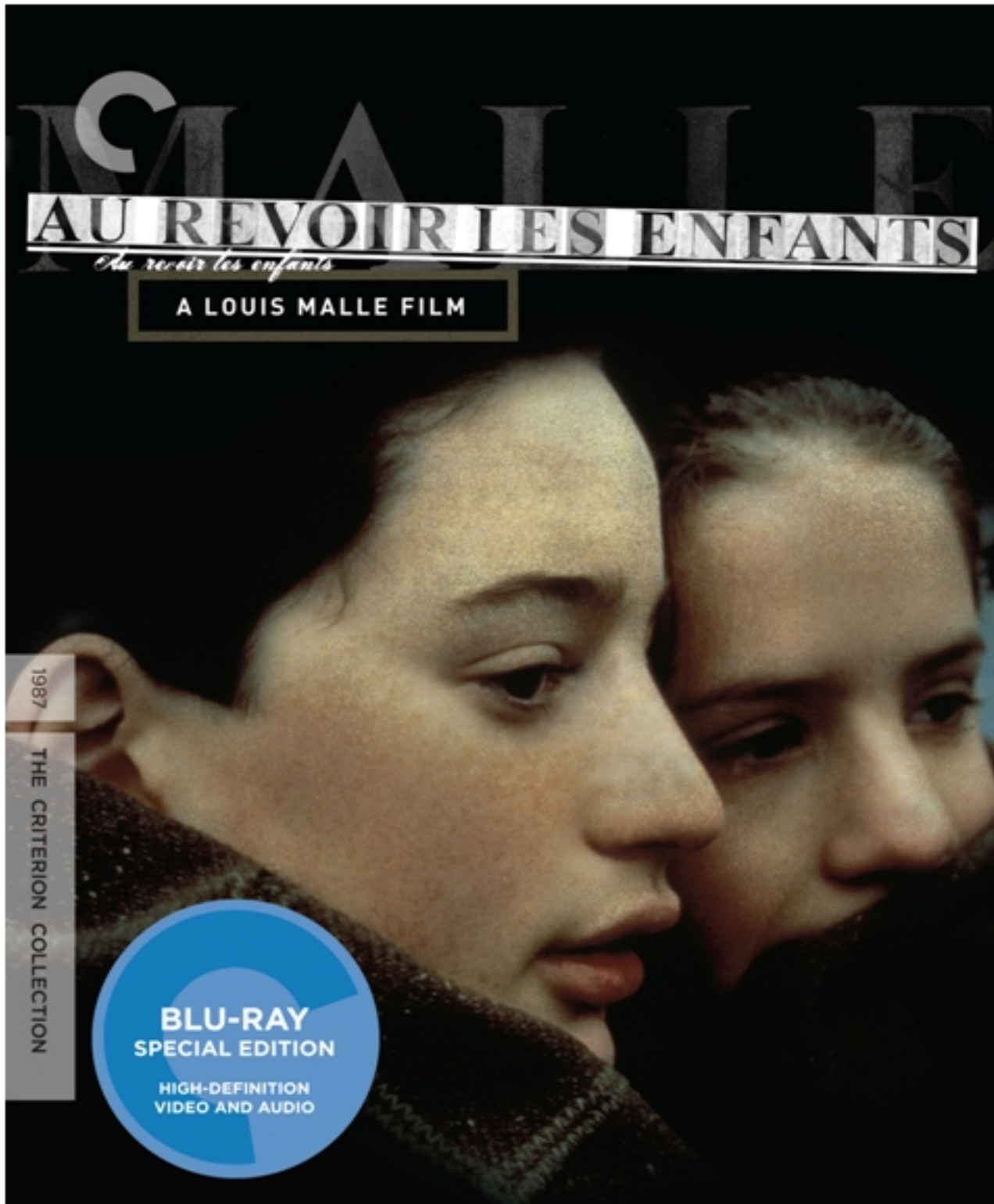
CHICAGO – It's difficult to find a thematic trilogy with a conclusion as triumphant and potent as "Au Revoir Les Enfants." The 1987 fact-based drama emerged as one of the great masterpieces in the career of Louis Malle, a giant of the French New Wave perhaps best known for his intimate two-character piece, 1981's "My Dinner With Andre." His films possess a purity and authenticity unmatched by many of his peers.

After a few critical and financial disappointments in America, Malle decided to get back in touch with his roots as a documentarian in the mid-80s (he won the Palme d'Or at age 24 for co-directing Jacques Cousteau's "Le monde du silence"). Soon afterward, he returned to France and finally tackled the project he had promised to make once he was ready to do it justice. The plot of "Enfants" was directly inspired by an indelible memory from the director's childhood.



Blu-Ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Like Malle's controversial one-two punch of 1971's "Murmur of the Heart" and 1974's "Lacombe, Lucien," "Enfants" explores the struggles of young men as they attempt to grapple with weighty issues previously outside their realm of comprehension. Julien Quentin (Gaspard Manesse) is a classic Malle protagonist fueled by a rebellious spirit, yet utterly confounded once his preconceptions about life are subverted by a startlingly harsh reality. The film's inherently bleak subject matter may have resulted in a solemn dirge, but Malle's remarkable sensitivity and subtle eye for detail transforms the material into an extraordinarily moving portrait of budding friendship in the face of dehumanizing evil. Nearly every moment in the picture takes place within the isolated confines of a French boarding school in 1944, where the illusion of normalcy continues to be maintained despite the ever-present rumblings of war. Headmaster Pre Jean (Philippe Morier-Genoud) keeps up a stern front but emerges as a man whose compassion is as fearless as his honesty. He discourages kids from entering the priesthood, labeling it "a sorry job." He's well aware of the risk involved when living a life at the service of others.



Au Revoir Les Enfants was released on Blu-Ray on March 15, 2011.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

Into this insular community emerges a new schoolmate, Jean Bonnet (Raphael Fejtö). His peers welcome him with the usual taunting and ridicule traditionally heaped upon an unfamiliar face. Yet Jean's mysterious past and uncommon skills make him an object of fascination and ultimately affection for Julien. There are moments of tenderness and jubilation that light up the screen, particularly when the children enjoy a Charlie Chaplin comedy featuring the Statue of Liberty, which clearly represents a beacon of hope in the midst of their grim surroundings. Manesse and Fejtö deliver astonishingly unaffected performances, effortlessly inhabiting their characters' skin as if it were their own. Some of the most haunting images are simply the close-ups of the children, as they endure a rude awakening to forces beyond their control. The very last shot is certainly among the most heartbreaking and unforgettable in the history of cinema.



A remarkable young cast led by Gaspard Manesse star in Louis Malle's 1987 masterwork Au Revoir Les Enfants.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

"Au Revoir Les Enfants" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.40:1 aspect ratio), and includes an illuminating analysis from film critic Pierre Billard, who reveals the film's autobiographical nature. Malle was born in a bourgeois Catholic family, and attended a boarding school visited by the Gestapo in 1944. He witnessed the arrest of his headmaster and three Jewish students enrolled under false names, though Billard claims that the filmmaker had lied about befriending one of the students and learning of his identity prior to the arrest. Yet in an excellent 53-minute seminar recorded at AFI in 1988, Malle says that he "remembers every detail of what happened to [the real] Bonnet." No video interviews with Malle are included on the disc, but the extended audio Q&A from AFI includes a wealth of insight into his evolution as a filmmaker. He discusses his close collaborations with screenwriters and cameramen, while voicing his dislike of overtrained child actors. During his work with Sven Nykvist, Malle recounts how the longtime Bergman cinematographer shared with him that it took twenty years to drop his unnecessary tricks and achieve simplicity. Malle clearly related to Nykvist's goals, since he always strove to make his camera as invisible as possible, refusing to make it a character unto itself.

Filmmaker Guy Magen offers a brief but provocative reflection on the troubled character of Joseph (François Berléand), who was "looking for a target of greater scorn than himself." In some ways, Joseph is a continuation of the young antihero in "Lacombe, Lucien." One of the disc's greatest highlights is Chaplin's entire 1917 two reeler, "The Immigrant," which is as laugh-out-loud funny as ever. Perhaps the most touching extra is a 13-minute interview with Malle's widow, Candice Bergen. In archival footage, Bergen is visibly emotional on the set of "Enfants" and in the audience of the '88 Césars, where Malles won three accolades while surrounded by filmmakers still harboring a grudge against him for leaving France to work in America. Malle had always longed for an artistically uncompromised commercial success (don't we all?), and Bergen says that it was his restless intellect that caused him to move through genres, always aiming for documentary-like realism. "Enfants" is such a fully realized and authentic vignette that it could easily be embraced as factual, even if its particulars are fictionalized. A possible clue to Malle's approach is found on the first page of his script in the form of a handwritten line that states, "Memory is a fertile ground for the imagination."

*'Au Revoir Les Enfants' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Gaspard Manesse, Raphael Fejtö, Francine Racette, Stanislas Carré de Malberg, Philippe Morier-Genoud, François Berléand, François Négre and Irène Jacob. It was written and directed by Louis Malle. It was released on March 15, 2011. It is rated PG.*



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