



Bruno Reidal

Confession of a Murderer

a film by Vincent Le Port

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SALES

INDIE SALES COMPANY

—
32 rue Washington PARIS 75008
FRANCE

+33 (0)1 44 83 02 27
sales@indiesales.eu
festival@indiesales.eu
<https://www.indiesales.eu/>

INTERNATIONAL
PRESS

WOLF Consultants

Gordon Spragg
Laurin Dietrich
Michael Arnon

+49 171 6466 970
hello@wolf-con.com
www.wolf-con.com
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BRUNO REIDAL
CONFESSION OF A MURDERER

A FILM BY VINCENT LE PORT

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WITH DIMITRI DORÉ, JEAN-LUC VINCENT,
ROMAN VILLEDIEU, ALEX FANGUIN

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SYNOPSIS

Cantal, France, 1905.

In the forest surrounding his native village, the young seminarian Bruno Reidal murders a boy before surrendering immediately to authorities. In prison, under interrogation for weeks, he faces a panel of three doctors attempting to understand his lethal impulse. They order Bruno to retrace his past by writing his life story, as they try to identify the events or the anomaly that could have led to such an atrocity.

THE BRUNO REIDAL CASE



The Reidal case, characterized as a case of congenital bloodthirsty sadism by the forensic report by Professor Alexandre Lacassagne, refers to the murder by decapitation of a 12-year-old young peasant, by Bruno Reidal, then 17 years old, in a village in the Cantal region of France at the beginning of the 20th century. Born in 1888, Bruno is the 7th of 8 children. His father, long suffering and alcoholic, was an educated and socially esteemed man who was mayor of the town of Raulhac from the time of Bruno's birth until the end of his life. His mother, a cantankerous and violent woman, was harsh in the education of her children and in the management of the household. She also suffered from alcoholism according to her relatives.

The physical examination of the accused by the doctors in charge of the medical report establishes the following profile: 1m62, 50kg, delicate appearance, weak build, narrow chest, small musculature, thin and stunted body, slightly stooped, the head tilted on the chest and leaning to the right side. The report concludes to a delayed physical development. Furthermore, Bruno considered himself to be clumsy, slow, emotional, unfit for physical tasks and play.

He was, however, a child with highly developed and above-average intellectual abilities who excelled at school and was destined for the seminary.



During his adolescence, Bruno remained a solitary and unsociable child, but his erudition earned him the nickname of "philosopher" from his peers. He was also a faithful and diligent believer: he followed Catholic teaching with fervor and confessed all his sins.

In his early teens, Bruno began to harbor feelings of jealousy and rivalry towards students who had similar intellectual faculties to him but who possessed something extra that he felt he lacked: beauty, social status, happiness... The forensic report suggests that the love/hate ambivalence for his fellow human beings retroactively echoed Bruno's traumatic memory of being confronted as a child with the annual tradition of killing a pig, which for him was associated with a big party.

The teenager's first fantasies were built around the desire to humiliate his rivals by bleeding them with a knife as one would bleed a pig. This was the beginning of an incessant inner struggle that would last for several years until the act: as a good Christian, Bruno condemned his sexual thoughts and tried to chase them away, but he could not resist the masturbatory frenzy that allowed him to relieve himself of the "evil" he carried within him. When the urge finally became too irresistible and tyrannical on a summer's day in 1905, Bruno gave in: beyond the sin, he foresaw and accepted the possibility of a liberation, an enjoyment that would deliver him from the weight of his overwhelming thoughts even if he had to be punished.

Determined to humiliate and kill, Bruno, during a walk, decapitated the young François Raulhac whom he said he despised and hated. As soon as he committed the murder, Bruno realized what he had done and turned himself into the police.

While the law on the separation of Church and State had just been promulgated, the case of a murderous seminarian who demonstrated "sexual perversity" made a lot of noise. The newspapers picked it up. The case was then entrusted to Professor Lacassagne, the most eminent criminologist of the beginning of the century, who asked the young man, as is customary with such prisoners, to relate his life in writing.

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If Bruno's memoirs are so fascinating and make his crime seem so human, it is above all because they reveal a definite literary talent combined with a sharp psychological analysis that reveals, with modesty, the deep and lucid suffering of a tragic fate. Bruno Reidal knew that he was condemned to murder, and throughout his youth he fought a battle that he knew was lost in advance. He was a boy with strong morals and a sense of honor, he aspired to "a regulated life" and in spite of everything, he had to lay down his arms in the face of the overwhelming power of the impulse.



It is this "knowingly" that makes him so close to us, that places us with him on the brink of a madness in which everyone can at one time or another feel caught up.

Bruno was not delusional. There is no sense of persecution in his words, no hallucinations on the horizon, no distortion of language. On the contrary, Bruno is an excellent writer with a perfect command of language and clear, sensible ideas, an intellectual with rigorous thinking and a keen awareness of his actions, and last but not least, an unstoppable logic. His self-examination is remarkably accurate, his confession spares no action, thought or affect.

Moreover, Reidal's alleged sadism does not fit in well with several salient features of his personality, the most important of which is perhaps the young man's judgment of his murderous fantasies. Bruno feels guilty about his evil thoughts, he is not unaware that they are against the law, social or religious. As he himself states, he will spend his entire youth fighting against the ideas that assail him, which they characterize as 'false'. Furthermore, in terms of his social relationships, Bruno is never described by his peers as aggressive or mischievous. On the contrary, his shyness and difficulties in socializing lead him to behave in a helpful and respectful way in his relationship with others.

But, faced with the insistence of the impulse, the fantasy of torture, gradually becomes a regulating idea, the horizon which, as Bruno rightly points out, could relieve him of his thoughts. Even during the act, Bruno will continue to perceive the limit imposed by the law and the guilt to which he is exposed. But the deliverance from the duty that commands him is priceless... Bruno finally seems to have fulfilled, in spite of himself, the prediction that a cruel mother made to her children at a very early age as a warning: « You will do precisely what you say you don't want to do [in life]. » •

INTERVIEW WITH VINCENT LE PORT

*How did you find out about Bruno Reidal's story?
What interested you in this news story?*

I discovered his existence in 2011 in the book *Serial Killers* by Stéphane Bourgoïn. Lost in the midst of famous, media-savvy serial killers, most of which are Americans from the second half of the 20th century, I found this young farmer from the Cantalien region at the end of the 19th century, who was not technically a serial killer since he had only killed once. I was immediately fascinated by the story and the personality of Bruno, by the unusual temporal and geographical setting, by the atrocity of the murder, which contrasted with the image that everyone had of Bruno (that of a good student, pious, shy, puny), and also by a rather inexplicable paradox, namely that the murderer apparently had no remorse, but that he had nevertheless turned himself in to the authorities.

I started to do research in Lyon, in the archives of Professor Lacassagne, the famous criminologist who had been entrusted with Bruno's forensic examination. And, among these archives, it was the discovery of the young man's

memoirs that was a trigger. What disturbed me was to witness a suffering that was so tangible, so obvious, yet so elusive. It was to see, behind the monster that the newspapers were describing at the time, a young boy who had been fighting

*"The paradox of the case
was that the murderer had no
remorse, but had given himself
up of his own accord to the
authorities. "*

against himself all his life. And where I thought the film should go beyond the news story is in this portrait of a hidden, invisible life, in the buried impulses he fought, in his inability to communicate or to achieve happiness, which can resonate with anyone, each on their own scale. And then it posed this question: how can we fight against what we are, intrinsically deep inside, can we "get rid" of ourselves? There was something in

his story about fate and free will that interested me.

*Did you decide from the start that Bruno would
be the narrator? You could have chosen to adopt
Lacassagne's point of view. Why did you make this
choice?*

No doubt because of the literary force of Bruno's text. The discovery of such a style in a young 17-year-old farmer in the Cantal region of 1900, his way of analyzing his environment so finely as well as his own impulses, thoughts and emotions, with this strange mixture of distance and interiority, is what gave the film its direction. This text is the testimony of a great intelligence, of a great lucidity, at the same time, a great detachment and an incapacity to really become aware of the scope of his act. If there is madness, it comes from this gulf between the power of the impulses that animated him and this rather cold way of relating them. There was also something novelistic that I liked, this way of showing a France that is not often shown in films, of transforming his life into a



sort of small fresco. At the very beginning, I envisaged a more fragmented structure, with a greater presence of doctors, the judicial and scientific apparatus. I think I changed my mind by delving deeper into Bruno's memories. That's where the film changed from "The Reidal case" to "Bruno Reidal", and the structure became much more linear and chronological.

The image is usually used to illustrate Bruno's story. There is very little gap between what is said and what is represented. And there is a literalness to the representation: what is said is always shown, not merely suggested. How did you envisage the relationship between image and voice in the film?

Indeed, I wanted there to be as little discrepancy as possible between the voice and the image, so that the veracity of Bruno's text would not be questioned. It's not the subject of the film to know if he's lying, if he's fixing the truth, if he's manipulating us, in short, I wanted to avoid the Keyser Söze side. We have to believe him. We have to believe in what we see. His testimony is sincere, he lays himself bare.

There is, however, a form of discrepancy that is brought in at certain moments, for example during the murder scene where Bruno's voice echoes a sentence said by the victim, or at the seminary where Bruno talks about his friends while we see him wandering away from the others. This is enough, I think, to remind us that what we see is also a mental reconstruction of his past. There are some finer shifts, such as when Bruno introduces his siblings, talking about them from the year he writes, 1905, when we see them in the picture as they were in 1894, or when we see him with his father and his voice tells us about his father's death. But this does not undermine the sincerity of his confession or the impression that what we see really happened. As far as the relationship between image and voice is concerned, I felt that it had to correspond to Bruno's writing, to transcribe this mixture of interiority and distance. With a few rare exceptions, the images are not mental projections, they are the testimony of a past that existed and is now over. And it is through the voice-over that Bruno injects his subjectivity and his outlook. The first shot in the past sums up the idea: Bruno looks at the camera and seems to be projected into a past that he has lived through but which will unfold as if in spite of himself, without his being able to change it.

"It posed this question: how to fight against what one is intrinsically deep down?"

Borges wrote that memory "makes each of us a spectator and an actor". The presence of Bruno's voice-over on episodes from his past puts him in the ambivalent position of being both an actor and a spectator in his life. This ambivalence is exacerbated in Bruno, who himself claims to appear all the more impassive for being tormented, and who can speak in a clinical and dispassionate way about the obsessions that have tormented him for years. In fact, the idea is not so much to be with Bruno as to be next to him, as if we were sitting with him on a bench, in front of a landscape, and he were describing his sensations and feelings to us. Then we are free to interpret them in our own way.

You also choose to represent Bruno's entourage (the family, the schoolchildren, the peasants, the doctors, the priests...) in a very peripheral way, giving them little to say. And even Bruno, appears almost as a stranger to himself, reinforcing a distance between Bruno's interiority (his story) on the one hand, and his body and his acts on the other. Why this bias?



In the script, the film was more extensive, more romantic.

The secondary characters all existed a little more. There are beautiful moments of "life" that we filmed, between Bruno and his mother, his sister, his father, more every day, more banal things, but in the editing process we got rid of them in order to re-focus the film on Bruno and on the trajectory that led to his murder. Nevertheless, these scenes were shot, they exist. And I believe that when the characters appear in the film, however furtively, they have an off-screen existence outside the film and the shots, and that this injects life into the film despite its rather "implacable" form.

And then, once again, it was a question of trying to follow Bruno's way of writing, as if I were adapting a classic literary work, and to find a way of being faithful to what the text says. Now, Bruno rarely goes into detail: he tells us about his teachers, the village priest, the superior of the seminary, a particular shepherd or a particular comrade, but without ever describing them physically or psychologically, and only very rarely even naming them. He writes pages and pages about Blondel, for example, without ever describing him physically even once. It is as if Bruno's people are reduced to their social

function, or that they are surfaces for projection, interchangeable potential victims. Only his family escapes this rule, hence their presentation in different portraits at the beginning of the film.

Bruno is a naturally quiet, shy, introverted character who observes the world more than he acts in it. Bruno was, by his own admission, taciturn, and no one had suspected that he could commit such a crime: his real life was inside, invisible to the eyes of all, and that is also what I found interesting in terms of cinema.

"I wanted there to be the least possible gap between the voice and the image."

The shots are reminiscent of paintings or snapshots of country life: the peasant family, work in the fields, religious procession, catechism, prayer, faces, landscapes, the interior of houses. Did you work on their composition from pre-existing material?

Our main sources of inspiration came from photographs and postcards of the period, which are "documentary", ethnographic, without being

taken on the spot. The technique of the time meant that the photographer often staged the situations, or the people photographed staged themselves. This creates a strange mixture between realism and constructed images, and I was interested in injecting Bruno and his torments into an imagery that is part of the collective unconscious, and which is often also an idealized image of peasant life and the past. The scenes in the primary school, for example, may remind us of Doisneau or a certain imagery of the "school of the Third Republic", but in the middle of this we have Bruno talking about torturing his classmates. This discrepancy seemed to me to be interesting to explore.

On the other hand, with a few exceptions, I wouldn't say that the film is constructed by paintings, but it is certain that the situations are fairly archetypal. The big writing task was to find these situations, since in his memoirs Bruno does not go into much detail and very rarely contextualizes what he evokes. I tried to find simple, clear, unequivocal situations, so as to free the viewer's gaze and allow us to concentrate on Bruno's text, but also on the faces, the lights and the sound, rather than on the situation itself.



The obviousness of the scenes should make it possible to think about the film as it unfolds, to follow the idea through to its resolution, to be able to create bridges or discover patterns yourself.

You could have constructed the story like a police investigation. But, by leaving the doctors on the sidelines, can we say that the film adopts the tone of a confession? There is a certain coldness of speech that finds an equivalent in the very precise and systematic construction of the shots and the editing. Did you want to remove the suspense of the murder?

Bruno turned himself in to the authorities a few hours after committing his crime. He did not flee, there was no stalking, no investigation. The crime, the identity of the murderer and the victim, the circumstances of the murder, all this was clear. Almost too clear. The mystery was elsewhere, and that's what needed to be explored. To avoid the suspense of the murder was therefore a strong desire from the start. To say from the start where, when, who, what, how, so that the most important thing remains: the why. As well as: who is the murderer? Not in the sense of Cluedo, but "who is he inside"?

And confession is indeed the right word. For Bruno, writing is not a weapon, nor a means of emancipating himself or claiming anything. It is more like a long confession, as if Professor Lacassagne were to take on the role of priest for him, and thus understand him, absolve him and grant him forgiveness. The frankness and honesty with which Bruno writes tends almost towards a form of innocence that reminds us of his

youth. At times, one also senses complacency in his memoirs, a form of self-pity, which I did not seek to erase, but on the contrary to accompany, even if it meant going into a lyricism or romanticism that may seem out of place, but which seemed to me the fairest and least sanctimonious way to be with him. Because behind the horror of the crime, it is above all the portrait of a child who has suffered from loneliness, frustration and prohibitions, and the film had to show without judgement the jolts of his soul.

The film gives no explanation, no rationalization of Bruno's act. Instead, it focuses on the genesis of his feelings (jealousy, humiliation), his fantasies and his reasoning that allows him to justify, in his eyes, the act. Even if sociological elements come into play (Bruno's social condition in relation to the other seminarians), you stick to Bruno's word as the sole source of truth, dismissing all psychological interpretations and all external explanations back-to-back. As Lacassagne says, "it is your story that interests us." So, if understanding the act does not seem to be on your horizon, can you explain what you wanted to achieve?

I wanted to embrace the horror in order to reflect on it, without necessarily understanding it. Since there is a dark area that will remain dark forever, for us as well as for him, namely the origin of his murderous impulses. A form of absoluteness that he himself can neither explain nor rationalize. Bruno offers no solution, and consequently no comfort. He leaves us in a state of shock. It is a morally troubled film, because it largely follows Bruno's point of view, who feels no remorse,

but who on the other hand, never shifts the guilt of his action onto a third person or institution. He never blames his family, his social environment, his rapist, justice, education, the prison system, religion or the moral taboos of society. He explains very well, almost in spite of himself, how all this has shaped him, but he does not blame anything or anyone in particular, in a mixture of fatalism and resignation.

In other words, if the idea was not to give an explanation by a+b, it was nevertheless necessary that, when the day of the murder comes, it seems almost natural to us that he is going to commit it, and that he must commit it. Like a curse. And not in order to manipulate and then judge the viewer, but in order to reduce the distance between Bruno and us, so that Bruno is not just a figure of the Other, of the Monster, but that we find in him, as was the case for me, common feelings and ideas.

Albert Camus wrote: "A man is prevented". This

"The idea is not so much to be with Bruno but to be next to him"



could sum up Bruno Reidal's story, that of a child who tried with all the best will in the world to restrain himself in order to become an adult, in order to be "normal", but who in the end did not know how to contain himself, to prevent himself, and who lost both his childhood and his adult life, in which he will never invest. The film must not make him a martyr, nor forget that the real victim of the affair is François Raulhac, but I wanted us to leave this film, which is dark and violent overall, a little like Lacassagne's, with an

" Our main sources of visual inspiration are photographs and postcards of the period. "

impression of trouble, or even empathy, rather than fear or rejection.

Several important pieces of information or events from the memoirs and the forensic report are missing or barely touched upon in the film. I'm thinking in particular of the parents' alcoholism, or Bruno's fall from a window, which was an important event in his history. Why did you leave out these elements?

I didn't want to reduce Bruno to a context or an accumulation of anecdotes, which his brothers and sisters had also experienced without becoming murderers. Of course, I am not saying that a certain determinism or his environment did not shape him, but to put too much emphasis on it would have reduced the absolute and irrational part of him. Regarding the mother, we reduced her physical and verbal violence, as well as her hysterical character, because she became too easily a scapegoat, an overly psychologizing explanation for Bruno's imbalance, as well as his parents' alcoholism or the fact that they had him late in life. I hope, however, that we feel where Bruno comes from, the fact of being confronted with death at a very young age, of having to work from childhood, the lack of love, the harshness of life...

On the other hand, I have stretched out moments that Bruno passes over very quickly, such as the rape he undergoes at the age of ten, which he mentions in a few words, whereas it seemed important to me to highlight this event in order to give a lead to the association he then made between the sexual act and the act of killing.

Then there were things we had to leave out for purely economic reasons. We had to reduce the story, concentrate things, and choose, for example, between the insolation and the fall. Each time, the choice was made for cinematographic reasons: sunstroke seemed to me more interesting than the fall, because it is linked to the elements, to the sun that we find on the day of the murder, it is more sensorial, and at the same time it allows us to show Bruno working in the fields from the age of 6.

Study and religion are the only safeguards against Bruno's acting out. The catechism and faith are not often represented as bastions against madness in cinema. Was this something that interested you?

Not at all! But I'm very happy if the film can be read in this way, because it proves that the film's primary aim - to embrace Bruno's thoughts and emotions, without judging them or distancing himself from them - is perhaps achieved. He himself thought he could find an escape in religion and studies, he thought it would channel him, and the film tries to show that in his context, and from his point of view, Bruno could legitimately believe that it could save him.

What was important to me, however, was to show that Bruno has no real vocation, no real thirst for learning. He says it himself: "If I worked, it was more to get a good grade than because I knew it was useful. "He uses religion and studies as frameworks, without faith or knowledge really being present. And while they can be seen as safeguards, they can also be seen as catalysts. Work allowed Bruno to overcome his social background, but it was also and above all a means of humiliating and crushing his peers.



As for religion, it can be seen as a release, or at least as the solution Bruno found it literally cleared his head, but also plunged him into a spiral of guilt and shame, while at the same time being a way for him to clear his name, to tell himself that whatever he did, God would forgive him.

There is a strange discontinuity between the three Brunos: each performer is great but embodies something quite different. What guided your choice of casting?

I was initially motivated by three things: firstly, by the physical resemblance between the main actor and the real Bruno; secondly, by the physical resemblance between the three Brunos; and thirdly, I wanted to find young people from the region where the film was shot, and from the rural world. In the end, only the youngest, Alex, comes from the Cantal, and the three don't look very much alike!

In all, we must have seen more than 500 children and teenagers during the wild casting we organized. Very quickly, with the casting director, Bahijja El Amrani, we said to ourselves that the physical resemblance between the three actors should take a back seat, that above all we had to find physiques, looks and energies that would complement each other and follow a certain progression.

For 6-year-old Bruno, we needed a child who could anchor the story in the period, and with his natural dark circled eyes, his taciturn and slightly lunar

"Little Gibus" side, Alex Fanguin brought with him the harshness and ruggedness of the end of the 19th century. His look was essential, because at this age the character is more in the observation of the world and others, and Alex had this singular look, this capacity to be alternately angelic and worrying, lively and lost in his thoughts, to be in all cases a little out of step.

"I wanted to to marry the horror to reflect it, without necessarily understand it. "

Secondly, Roman Villedieu is probably the most "contemporary" of the three, but this seemed to me to be the perfect way to bring him closer to us, to bring a "learning story" aspect to the film, and above all, behind his childlike appearance, to mark the abyss between the image he portrays and what is going on deep inside him. Roman knew exactly what he was playing, the ins and outs of each sequence, and he was incredibly mature in interpreting very complicated things, with a remarkable intensity and ability to internalize emotions.

As for Dimitri Doré, it was Jean-Luc Vincent, the actor who played Lacassagne, who had seen him in a play the previous year, and who advised me to meet him. Even though he is very different

from the character in real life, Dimitri is exactly the same height and weight as the real Bruno Reidal, his high-pitched voice was exactly what I had in mind, and the fact that he had never acted in a film appealed to me. And above all I could quickly see the extent of his acting, his ability to embody the different states of the character, to move from one emotion to another very finely. He immersed himself in Bruno's writings, looked for his voice, his approach, in a real work of composition, and it was very pleasant and very exciting to shoot with him.

The film is closely related to Moi, Pierre Rivière by René Allio. However, it differs radically from it in what it does and therefore in its direction. What role did Allio's film play in the development of Bruno Reidal? How did you gradually depart from his model?

Moi, Pierre Rivière is a great film, in my opinion one of the greatest in French cinema. At the beginning it was a burden, it even blocked me: what was the point of making another Pierre Rivière, when the first one was so successful? And then, as I did my research and started writing, I realized that the films would be as different from each other as Bruno is from Pierre. Their obsessions and their relationship to the world are very different.

Bruno Reidal did not want to kill a particular person



*" 'A man, is prevented' wrote
Albert Camus. This could
summarize the story of Bruno
Reidal. "*

but a type of person, whereas Pierre Rivière's "targets" were his mother, his sister and his little brother. Bruno was an ordinary child, without any history, whereas Pierre was stranger, his bizarre behavior was a challenge to those around him. And Bruno Reidal's relationship to sexuality and religion was almost non-existent in Pierre Rivière's. René Allio's film is much more naturalistic, anchored in everyday life, much more historical I would say. The way he deals with the family, daily work, the state apparatus is so successful that I said to myself that we had to go elsewhere. My references were more towards *Paranoid Park*, *Taxi Driver*, or *Sleeping Man*, the portrait of solitary, lost, offbeat individuals, films that stick to their characters from beginning to end, with a certain lyricism. If I had to categorize, I would say that *Moi, Pierre Rivière* has more to do with a tragedy, and Bruno Reidal with a drama.

VINCENT LE PORT

Born in Rennes in 1986, Vincent graduated from La Fémis in directing. He co-founded the production company Stank with which he develops his projects, including *Le Gouffre* (Jean Vigo Short Film Prize 2016). *Bruno Reidal*, for which he was awarded the Gan Foundation for Cinema, is his first feature film.



FEATURE FILM

Bruno Reidal, 2021

Jury Prize for Best Screenplay, organized by Hildegard with the support of the CNC and the David Hadida Foundation

SHORTS

Les Légendaires, 2017

Dieu et le raté, 2017

Le Gouffre, 2016

Jean Vigo Award 2016

Clermont-Ferrand Festival - Special Mention of the Jury

and Prix de la Presse Télérama

La Terre, 2012

Nouveaux nés, 2012

Danse des habitants invisibles de la Casualidad, 2010

Finis Terrae, 2009

Grand Guignol, 2008

Minotaure Mein Führer, 2008

CAST



BRUNO REIDAL,
17 YEARS OLD
Dimitri Doré



BRUNO REIDAL,
10 YEARS OLD
Roman Villedieu



BRUNO REIDAL,
6 YEARS OLD
Alex Fanguin



ALEXANDRE
LACASSAGNE
Jean-Luc Vincent



BLONDEL
Tino Vigier



LA MÈRE
Nelly Bruel

CREW

DIRECTOR, SCREENPLAY

Vincent Le Port

PHOTOGRAPHY

Michaël Capron

SOUND

Marc-Olivier Brullé

CASTING

Bahijja El Amrani

COSTUMES

Véronique Gély

MAKE-UP

Géraldine Belbeoc'h

SET DESIGN

Arnaud Lucas

EDITING

Jean-Baptiste Alazard

SOUND DESIGN

Charlotte Butrak

MIX

Romain Ozanne

DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION

Lucie Bouilleret

PRODUCERS

Roy Arida
Thierry Lounas
Pierre-Emmanuel Urcun

PRODUCTION

Capricci,
Stank

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