



CANNES FILMFESTIVAL  
OFFICIËLE SELECTIE 2023  
BUITEN COMPETITIE



BENJAMIN  
LAVERNHE

# *l'ABBÉ* PIERRE

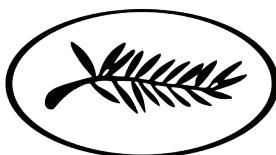
EEN FILM VAN  
FRÉDÉRIC TELLIER

*cinéart*

# PERSMAP

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## Synopsis

L'ABBÉ PIERRE is een Franse biopic over het buitengewone leven van Henri Grouès, beter bekend als Abbé Pierre en oprichter van de Emmausbeweging. De priester, uitgegroeid tot nationale volksheld in Frankrijk, wijdde zijn leven volledig aan de strijd tegen armoede en dakloosheid.

Henri Grouès wordt geboren in een rijk gezin, maar besluit op zijn 18e om zijn hele erfdeel te verdelen onder de armen. Na jaren in het klooster en als verzetsstrijder in de Tweede Wereldoorlog wordt hij gekozen parlementslid in Parijs. Daar gebruikt Abbé Pierre zijn inkomsten om de zwaksten in de maatschappij een toekomst en een thuis te bieden. Zijn woede over onrecht maakte hem opstandig en rebels, maar ook kwetsbaar en inspirerend.

De rol van Abbé Pierre wordt indrukwekkend vertolkt door Benjamin Lavernhe (JEANNE DU BARRY, THE FRENCH DISPATCH), wat hem een César-nominatie opleverde voor Beste Acteur. De film ging in wereldpremière op het Cannes Filmfestival.



## Interview with...

### FRÉDÉRIC TELLIER - director



#### **What led you to make a film about Abbé Pierre?**

The film's producers and I were thinking together about a topic. And we came up with the idea of Abbé Pierre.

This story did not seem to me to come out of nowhere. It could easily fit in into the continuation of the films I've already made. And enable me to forge ahead. I never stop asking myself about the meaning of evil and the strength of life. About the human condition. Why will one be lucky and the other not? Why will one suffer and another not?

Are loneliness and injustice unchangeable? Do we make up for the evil that hits us square in the face or do we transform it?

And then, spontaneously, certain points «interested» me in the Abbé, over beyond the icon he represents, starting with his revolutionary side.

Childhood memories also came back to me: the emotion with which a member of my family told me about a conference given by the Abbé which he had attended, for example. But all this is not enough to make a film. So before writing, I start reading everything I could get my hands on, from books to articles, about the Abbé.

#### **When did you manage to come up with the backbone for your film?**

It took time. A lot of time. To the point of worrying the producers to whom I had given nothing concrete to read for nearly a year. For everything I read was more or less just hagiographies, even legends written by the Abbé himself or his relatives. What interested me, what would interest the audience, I think, is how one single man could accomplish all that the Abbé did? What happened within him? Where did he go wrong? Did he feel lonely? Was he afraid? Did he have doubts? At what moment did he fall on his face? How did he experience this? Did he recover? I couldn't find the answers to these questions anywhere. So I couldn't see how I could go beyond the already well known symbol which he was. What I was looking for was an Abbé Pierre who was realistic, concrete, real. Not an icon. Not a legend. Then, Laurent Desmard (President of the Abbé Pierre Foundation, and Abbé Pierre's private secretary for 15 years), whom the producers introduced me to played a decisive part. I spent an enormous amount of time with him. He told me about moments, memories that are not to be found in the «official literature», which, I believe, he had never told a soul about before. He opened up an incredible treasure trove of memories, emotions, friendships... He gave me a glimpse and understanding into the private life of Abbé Pierre, his way of working, his origins.

in both the poetic and philosophical sense, as well as the political sense, of course. Transfiguring through poetic work the painful experience of the human soul, prey to the misfortunes of existence...

**But how can one avoid falling into hagiography?**

To do so, I started from the timeline I mentioned earlier. I began to put aside the parts that I found somewhat less striking. For example, his childhood, even if initially in my writing there was a whole section that took place in Lyon with his father who took him to visit the impoverished - a founding experience for him. Then, I concentrated on moments revealing a man who had doubts. A man who relied heavily on others. A man who had no great certainties. A man who learned to walk by walking, so to speak. And in that, spontaneously, I included his burnout, his eighteen months in a psychiatric hospital, and the controversies (accusations of anti-Semitism...). Everything that implacably makes him human at heart. Everything that makes it possible to go beyond the mere icon. I'm not saying that it was simple. Sometimes you have to force yourself, but writing as a team proved to be a major asset on this particular point. When one of us showed signs of weakness or lack of discernment in the hagiography, the other corrected him!

**The question of running time also arises given that there's so much to tell. Must one force oneself in this regard too?**

The idea was to enter into a sensorial project that would not go beyond 2 hours, while leaving room for length and emotion in certain scenes. Because I knew as soon as we got down to writing that I could balance these out over the whole of the film. So it happened quite naturally.

**This sensoriality that you bring up is reflected in your decision to open the film with a desert scene. Why this choice?**

Firstly because the Abbé loved the desert. He talks about it quite a lot in his writings. But also because this moment sets the tone for a film where I never actually talk about religion, only faith. This corresponds to what I felt about the Abbé through his writings and testimonies of those close to him. An ultra-sensitive man who, over and beyond God, had faith in Man, in something metaphysical... He was going to rebuild himself in the desert. He found peace there in the energetic force of the earth. He talked about it a lot, and took lots of photos of the desert.

During the preparation and writing, by visiting his room and communities where he stayed, I had the impression at times, fleetingly, strangely, that I had a feeling for this man. That's why I wanted to make a sensorial film to accompany and transmit what I felt.

**How did you work with your cinematographer, Renaud Chassaing, to create this atmosphere?**

This is the third film I've made with him. We discuss things well in advance. Based on my research, I construct an artistic dossier. I try to find examples in order to translate what I've got in mind into images for Renaud. And it's during such exchanges that we decide to use this or that tool, this or that framing, and in this particular case the use

of Lensbabies which are special photographic lenses that can be mounted on a camera, enabling one to decentre the depth of field around the central character, and thus by ricochet give an impression of closeness to him. This utilisation - used sparingly - of modifying the depth of field makes it possible to centre the audience's attention on what's in focus, while, at the same time strangely attracting them to what's blurred.

We also worked hard to create a «digital plug» to be able to «dig into» the image even more during post-production.

And then, still for this sensorial aspect, I relied on my memories of my grandparents (whom I thank in the end credits) and the never-ending coldness they endured during those winters, like the great winter of 54. It was essential for me that this was felt on screen. So with Renaud, we gave the image an aspect that could also evoke this sensation.

### **Did you also talk about film references?**

Mostly we talked about photographs, for example, pictures by Joel Meyerowitz, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, William Eggleston and Raymond Depardon. We also often discussed painters and paintings. I talked to him a lot about a Rembrandt masterpiece and his use of chiaroscuro.

Strange as it may seem, when we were talking about films, they were mostly... westerns! I wanted to develop at times this kind of atmosphere, especially in the scenes with the Emmaus Community.

We talked a lot about Robert Altman's «McCabe & Mrs. Miller», for example...

### **And how does one take up a moment as mythical and documented as Abbé Pierre's famous appeal for «help» during the winter of 54 on Radio Luxembourg and translate it on screen?**

It was one of the high points of the Abbé's existence and therefore of the film. This moment fit in perfectly with our initial desire with Olivier (Gorce) to make it a very up to date, very modern film, which thus required deconstruction. This is what was at work during this scene. I wanted us to hear the entire appeal, but backed up by flashbacks and flashforwards, that's to say deconstructed in time. From then on, as a director, the big question is to know where to place the emotion. At what moment do we hold it back, and at what moment it will burst out? We were lucky that the original audio archive, which had disappeared for a while, suddenly reappeared during the shoot. Benjamin (Lavernhe) worked a lot on it, spending hours and hours tracking down the smallest details. It turned out that the shoot was spread out over seven months. Most of it in the winter, the rest in the summer. Initially, we were supposed to shoot this scene in the winter period. But we had to postpone it. This left us with more time to work but at the same time it made us all more stressed (laughter) as the scene was putting so much pressure on us! We shot right in the middle of August and everything was done very simply. We locked ourselves up in a splendid wooden set and started rolling the cameras. It was filled with a very delicate, beautiful emotion, with very few takes over

So I began to write, taking an especial interest in the Abbé's family background, his failures and doubts. I understand what moved the Abbé and can clearly see how cinema can find its rightful place in the life of this son of a wealthy family who one day renounced everything and joined the Capuchins - one of the most rigorous religious orders - almost like a crisis of adolescence, without really having the physical strength or necessary capacity to resist. The first steps of an exceptional person who was to fail time and time again. As if he had gone down the wrong path. And who ended up wandering until the war and the Resistance. Finally the encounter with Lucie (Emmanuelle Bercot) and Georges (played by Michel Vuillermoz) changed everything. The meeting with Georges represented his first encounter with poverty. As I wrote the first few pages, all this resonated in me, and the beginning of a story seemed to appear. The Abbé was a man filled with passion. A passion for life. For others. For social ties. For emotional bonds. Someone who was pathologically sensitive. A sufferer and combatant at one and the same time. An entire life that no one really knew about, made up of goodness and struggles, as well as incredible rebounds, troubling paradoxes, unending doubts, wear and tear, and transgressions. A tiny man as fragile as porcelain, yet indestructible at the same time, carried along by a mission that he knew he could never achieve, one which has traversed an entire century of our history.

For me, it began to take shape, both the possibility of a cinematic epic, and the exploration of our history from a unique angle!

**After this first collaboration with Laurent Desmard, have you started writing on your own?**

Yes, at first. I usually write a first version with the structure in place, and a first draft of the dialogues. Normally around 50-70 pages. But I don't like to write alone for too long. I've been wanting to work with Olivier Gorce for years. And thought that this might be the right subject to work on with the man who co-wrote «The Measure of a Man» and «At War». So I went to see him and told him I had had a sign because I had come across a certain Olivier Gorce who had written a biography of the Abbé. Then he revealed to me that this was none other than himself! In his younger years. He accepted and we started to write together, trying to create a film that would go beyond the inevitably somewhat overwhelming symbol.

**The subtitle says it all: «A Life of Struggle». But how does one choose what to tell about a life that spanned 94 long years and now has to fit into a 135-minute film?**

I started by making a kind of timeline of his life before making the choices you mentioned. Very quickly, I knew that I didn't want to tell just one episode, one moment, but his entire life. For what fascinated me is the sheer longevity of this man, and his unbroken conviction over all those years. For me, it was an epic to be told. The saga of a man in the midst of the cognitive troubles of our society. My favourite subject, but this time observed from a singular point of view, that of a hero of the ordinary who became extraordinary amid the mental, social, societal and economic excesses and failures of human accomplishment. In the midst of dramas and tragedies that are unfortunately still all too relevant today. Abbé Pierre led a combat that cannot be won, but which would be totally lost if it were not fought. This struck a chord in me as an extension of the theme common to all my work: the exploration of the reason for human misery,

just a half day.

**You have just mentioned him. Benjamin Lavernhe gave a fascinating performance as Abbé Pierre. What prompted you to call on Benjamin for this role which was somewhat surprising for him?**

First of all, he's someone I like very much. I had the chance to work with him on «SK1». And if I have tenderness for all the actors I have had the luck to direct, he touches me in a very particular way, given all that I cannot fathom about him! I assure you, he's an unfathomable mystery for me! To play Abbé Pierre, we wanted a highly technical actor with his profile. Capable of creating mimicry while constructing composition. And capable of acting out the many long dialogues because I love it when actors become lost in the fever of the text. I also wanted one actor for all ages, thus someone young who would age on screen. Finally, an actor who's not a star so that he doesn't suck the lifeblood out of his character. So we held several casting calls with various actors, including Benjamin. We had them perform the speeches from the Winter of 54 and the Palais des Congrès. And straight off, I was impressed by the immediate quality and accuracy that Benjamin revealed, and I could clearly see through his energy how much he wanted the part. He tried to hide it, but I could see through his stage fright, and appreciate this sign of humility. From then on, he had to juggle his schedule at the Comédie Française but I'm delighted that we managed to pull it off.

**How did you work with him?**

I always work the same way with actors. We go through a kind of mutual psychoanalysis sessions (laughter). I need us to tell each other about our lives, where we come from. I need us to tell each other everything. For me, the real work starts with these exchanges. And then, after a lot of discussion, we begin to decipher the actual text. Analysing it. Deconstructing it. I try to translate all the sub-text that I wanted to put into it. It's a fairly long technical step at the end of which we begin to put intentions into it. Then, once everything is in place, I often feel like blowing everything up a little. I want to question everything we've been saying to each other for weeks on end. So as not to be overly comfortable. To be fragile once again. Sensitive. Naked. I knew that Benjamin's solidity would allow me to do this with him. We also saw a lot of each other between the two shoots. I wanted to lead him into this second phase towards something harder, how the Abbé, even if he was always surrounded, was probably very alone. I knew that Benjamin had it in him. And once again, he performed this in a truly impressive manner.



**Your film also highlights the character of Lucie Coutaz, who was Abbé Pierre's secretary from World War II until his death. You gave this part to Emmanuelle Bercot, whom you worked with again after «Goliath». Was she an obvious choice for you?**

Before plunging into the preparation and writing of this film, I didn't know Lucie and even less the fact that the Abbé would never have been the man he was without her. It was a partnership without her ever putting herself forward throughout their forty years together and the platonic admiration they had for each other. What an emotional story! In the end, this became the central axis of the film. The very strength of the story. And to play Lucie, Emmanuelle was indeed an obvious choice for me. I spoke to her about it even before the end of «Goliath». For over and beyond the fact that I love her deeply in life, she's an immense actress. And when I say «immense», I mean in its simplest, purest form. I find her truly immense. Limitless. Prodigious. She can play anything. And she's beautiful. Sensitive. Her very acting infinitely moves me. I knew she was capable of taking up the challenge of playing Lucie, spanning so many years, and accepting the required ageing.

And opposite these women, with the exception of Michel Vuillermoz, you chose not to call on well-known faces...

No, above all I was looking for new faces and temperaments with a little something extra, to embody the Companions. To prepare the film, I spent time in the Emmaus communities and their helping of the poor outdoors. I was struck by the faces of the Companions, which revealed the sheer harshness of their lives. Their deep set eyes. Their furrowed wrinkles. In my actors, I was looking for this very same authenticity, which I found of course in Xavier Mathieu, the ex-unionist who's also a splendid actor and poet. There were all the others: Maxime Bailleul, Massimiliano, Michel, Amélie Benady... all of them.

**What did you find the most complex in this whole adventure?**

I'd say this film was complicated on all levels. Not to mention the cold that I wanted to be present all the time with us, in order to be in the context of the period and the Abbé's major struggle! For me, it's always painful to make a film. I feel like I've been assigned to carry out a mission. It's «Platoon» all over again! (laughter) Which doesn't prevent, of course, moments of grace. What keeps me going is the grace of working with actors, creating with them. The tracking down of emotions, feelings, and human complexity. And human beauty as well.

**How did you experience the editing process after thirteen weeks of shooting?**

It was by far the most complex editing I've ever had to do. I interviewed various editors and Valérie Deseine was my number one choice. Wassim Béji had mentioned her to me as he'd just worked with her on Olivier Treiner's «Le Tourbillon de la vie». I quickly realised that we spoke the same language. I've always had a different editor on each of my films. So, each time, it's a leap in the dark... which I'm looking for, I think, so there aren't any automatic reflexes. Valérie has her own style of editing with flashes of brilliance and a very solid team around her, a bit like in America, and she likes challenges. In this film, there was nothing but challenges, so she got exactly what she was hoping for! For example, for the sequence of the conferences following the Appeal of Winter'54, I

wanted split-screens, as in «The Thomas Crown Affair» to evoke the dizziness of the moment, the acceleration of things, the ubiquity that the Abbé had to exhibit in order to be everywhere at once. But five images on screen means five edits. Ideally, we would have had to reserve 20 days on our schedule to do this, but we only had 4! But Valerie never panicked and was able to come up with a solution.

**Was it important for you to include shots of homeless people in the street today in the final stretch of the film?**

Yes, because in my eyes it was the only possible resolution of this story, which unfortunately remains relevant to this very day. And this symbolises what I was most interested in when first I embarked on this project.

The cinema tells us about the world. Films fill us with wonder, both artistically and emotionally, and also make us think, perhaps changing our outlook a little. With this film, I also wanted to talk about the world around us, in which we live in. The one we can still improve on a little...

Over and beyond recounting the journey of an extraordinary man, over and beyond offering a moving, spectacular epic, I also wanted to remind people that the situation remains problematic. Not to make a cold or controversial statement, but to say, on the contrary, that the struggle goes on, that of love and consideration for others! A struggle that will never cease. And if we fail to do so, in a certain way we leave humanity behind. For me, the deep subject of the film is the meaning of life through the Abbé's quest for identity and an almost sociological look at today's civilisation, as well its origins, turmoil and perspectives.

**Last but not least, you entrusted the soundtrack to Bryce Dessner, guitarist of the rock band «The National». Why did you choose him?**

I work with a music supervisor I love, Jeanne Trellu. I talk to her very early on about my plans. I've already composed music with Christophe La Pinta. But this time, I didn't want to handle it at all. So I had Jeanne listen to lots of references and we met with a few composers. I had in mind something unusual, like Neil Young's soundtrack for «Dead Man». Then one day, I had her listen to something highly improbable because it was highly precise: the additional music for Alejandro Iñárritu's «The Revenant». I explained to her that I adored it and would like to have some of this weirdness too. Jeanne explained to me that the author of this music was Bryce Dessner, who lives partly in the south of France, and she knows him well as he's none other than her neighbour! I went nuts cause I'm crazy about The National. So she introduced me to him. We chatted together. I could sense his immediate enthusiasm for the project, even though it's not his culture - he's American and doesn't know Abbé Pierre at all.

But I could clearly see that the subject appealed to him. To guide him, I had him listen to pieces of his that I like. It so happened that he was working at the same time on the soundtrack for Alejandro Iñárritu's new film for which he'd become the composer. He was also finishing The National's new album... Problem: he didn't have much time for me. But that didn't stop him. He sent me before the shoot a few piano and guitar pieces

that I loved, a bit like a western... but once I'm on the editing table, (it's a bit of a character trait of mine after all!!) I always want something else! I wanted to go back to his original strangeness. His very particular acoustic work. Extremely vibrant. I wanted him to compose not for me but for himself. Given his very tight schedule, and mine, this created a little tension. But then he completely changed his mind, stopped everything for a month, and devoted himself exclusively to Abbé Pierre, drowning me with music, including the main theme, which arrived fairly quickly. My task then consisted in receiving his compositions, and dosing out the music so that it accompanied the story and the emotion without being overly ostentatious. Working with Bryce was a great artistic moment for me.



## Interview with...

### BENJAMIN LAVERNHE - actor

#### **What did Abbé Pierre mean to you before you undertook this adventure?**

Benjamin Lavernhe: Fleeting memories of youth. Images of an angry, middle-aged man, possessed by his sense of revolt, teeming with his convictions when faced with poverty he couldn't resign himself to accepting. A man who was always surrounded, whether by the Companions and leaders of Emmaus, or even by men and women in exile, refugees, with whom he would come to share the night in the coldness of a church. A singular attitude as well when I saw him on television, often speaking with his eyes closed in a state of beatitude, as if in deep meditation. Thus his nickname, the «Meditative Beaver», which fit him so well. As he used to say to himself, he spent his whole life building and meditating. And if, in the end, his calling was more about action than meditation, he always assured everyone that none of this would have been possible without the eight years he'd spent with the Capuchins.

## **How did you react when invited to try out for a film that was being made about his life?**

It both amused and challenged me, as the offer came totally out of the blue. On the face of it, everything opposed us, starting with the height. I'm nearly 6 foot 4, while he was short. And compared to me, Abbé Pierre was an old man! Having discovered him only in his latter years, I forgot he too once had been young! Thinking back, I realise that in my early career as an actor, I'd already been offered the chance of playing two priests. Maybe if I'd got one of those two roles, I never would have been tapped to play Abbé Pierre... That said, I gradually began to see points in common: I was also a Scout and had received a religious upbringing, for example. And I come from a large family as well. The proposal intrigued me more and more and I began to understand why they had come to me. My friends even said to me, «Yeah, you really do look like him.» But I'm sure they were overdoing it. Moreover, I felt that this film adventure, the idea of traversing the life of such a man, portraying his words and values in his celebrated speeches that would make you weep, and mixing entertainment with activist cinema, all this triggered in me an immense desire and even a necessity. I wanted the part! And the cherry on the cake was that I already had a connection with Frédéric Tellier, having played a small role for him in «SK1».

## **What did the try-outs consist of?**

Two speeches: the one from the Winter of 54 and the mythical one at the Palais des Congrès. Two Himalayas: when immersing myself in Abbé Pierre's video archives, I was stunned by his incredible talent as a powerful orator, capable like few others of speaking from the heart, arousing incredible emotions and truly striking his audience. The bar was set very, very high. But at the same time it was all the more inspiring for an actor to embody such a man of words, especially when you're literally overwhelmed by his message. Form and content combined. On the day of the try-outs, there was of course something extremely out-of-step about playing all that, just wearing a beret and makeshift cape in a very small room at 10am, with a fake radio mike made out of whatever was on hand, in this particular case a music stand. It was like an episode straight out of Casting(s)! (laughter) But one must always know how to put such things aside and I threw myself into it as you'd throw yourself into the void, probably a little too willingly, a little too forcefully, but sincerely moved. I gave it my all, every ounce I had in me. And Frédéric was certainly moved by all my efforts.

## **What struck you when you read the script?**

I immediately saw the multiple-faceted film that Frédéric wanted to make. A great film like an epic - Abbé Pierre having lived a storybook life, chapter by chapter - and at the same time a great film with a message of peace, that could touch people's hearts without ever being radically militant or moralising. I was also moved by Frédéric's point of view, his angle of attack, his desire to speak of the man over and beyond the man of the Church. For this, a voice-over, that of the elderly Abbé, frames the film at the opening and at the end, immediately plunging us inside his mind and torments, as closely as possible to the man himself and all his complexity. I could clearly see that this would not be a classic biography of a saint, instead we'd approach his darker side, whether it was his ego, his temperamental character at times, or his relationship with

desire. I could also see that some of the words he'd uttered that caused such a stir at the time, such as «I prefer violence to cowardice», are in the script too. So I read a scenario that had relief, that didn't try to smooth things over or be evasive. It revealed the contradictions of the Abbé. His obsession both with being a great man and having a great destiny. He saw himself as a Napoleon or a St. Francis of Assisi. He overflowed with such ambition that it overwhelmed him, for he was ashamed as much as he was driven to perform miracles. And yet he experienced terrible frustration at feeling that he'd never done enough. He couldn't have achieved all that he did without this personality, but his hypersensitivity and unending dissatisfaction were truly exhausting. When reading the script for the very first time, I could clearly see the egoistic but vertiginous pleasure that I'd enjoy portraying him as an actor. This kind of opportunity only lands in your lap once in a lifetime.

### **The excitement thus outweighed the pressure that such a role can represent?**

Yes, undeniably. A bit like what I experienced when Denis Podalydès asked me to play Scapin at the Comédie française. But that's the magic of our profession too. You've got to have a touch of madness to jump into the void and not give a hoot about your fears.

### **How did the journey to this role begin?**

This role concerned me very quickly. It was a matter of responsibility. You have to honour the memory of and do justice to this «everyday combatant». By accepting as well that we were making a film with certain liberties, we had cinematic licence in a way, this not being a documentary. The first task was to approach this highly enigmatic, highly complex man. Encountering him in as many aspects as possible so that he would become a fellow traveller, like a guardian angel over my shoulder. To do so, I heavily relied on the vast documentation that Frédéric had made available, backed up by personal readings and high doses of viewings of INA archives. What greatly interested me as well was the way Frédéric talked about him, how he perceived him, and what he wanted to say about him. To play Abbé Pierre, I had to understand his character, complexity and sensitivity through the prism of the director's own sensitivity, and how he wanted to present him to audiences. Frédéric wanted us to visit the historic Emmaus Communities in Le Plessis and Neuilly-Plaisance and talk with the men and women at the very heart of the story.

### **From then on, you had to embody him physically. How did you deal with the inevitable question of imitation?**

The word «imitation» is not quite accurate, rather observing to find inspiration and trying to embody is all part of the job, especially when you have to play a character as he evolves over so many years. But it's never a matter of aping, as that would be purely superficial. You have to find the truth of the role. Fred explained to me right from the outset that he wanted one and the same actor to play the Abbé when he was both young and old, so as not to lose the thread, and I was in total agreement with him. So there was a «performance» aspect to this journey, as you had to be credible, even at the age of 92! An entire journey to be made, an incredibly exciting one, moving away from myself, bending down on my knees, pulling in my shoulders, not to mention 6 hours of makeup day in and day out. It reminded me of the masked acting classes

(Commedia dell'arte) at the Conservatory! But soon Frédéric said to me: «You've got the cape now, as well the beret, cane, and ears sticking out a little , that's enough. The silhouette's there. Now forget all about the obsession with resemblance and just act». It was like a contract we made with the audience: Benjamin is Abbé Pierre. You have to evoke, find the energy, a gesture, an attitude, a look, go through yourself to reach the other, it's all very mysterious. Sometimes you end up looking more like the other person when you're not trying to look like them. I kept in mind Joachim Phoenix playing Johnny Cash or Michel Bouquet, Mitterrand. They're not made up. There's never this obsession with resemblance and yet we can clearly recognise these characters. For half a second of magic, the other was there! To become Abbé Pierre, I first tried to capture his speech patterns, his delivery, his mixture of great concentration and immense anger. And then came the decisive phase of the first make-up tests and the questions to be resolved. What must be transformed? What should be kept of me? We chose not to modify my nose. Because if you notice an artificial effect, that's even worse. Above all you must not be able to see the fabrication or effort on the part of the actor as he tries his utmost to physically resemble the character. I'm convinced that it's by remaining as connected as much as possible to oneself and to one's own humanity that one serves the other better.

**Did a moment come when you thought you'd finally captured the character?**

Not in such a precise way. But the costume and make-up try-outs really represented a journey towards him. A manner of concentrating in order to reach a place where I started to believe, where I had the impression that I was beginning to talk a little like him, and I could understand him. From then on, you feel that you've captured his neuroses, doubts, anger and message. You're over the hurdle. Since I was able to understand him, I knew that I would be able to serve him in the best possible way. That's when I decided, for example, to speak with my lower teeth slightly forward and always walk a bit hunched over - even if it's hard to notice because I wore a cassock. But the goal was to no longer think about it. I'd make mistakes and lose momentum if I became overly obsessed with the idea of speaking exactly like him, for example. One should never force oneself.



**One of the highlights of the film, a compulsory and therefore expected passage, is the famous Appeal of Winter 54. Did you experience this as a film within a film?**

I was obviously nervous. But we had a well thought out work plan, situated at two thirds of the way through the second phase of the shoot, in the summer. Thanks to what I had been able to acquire thus far, I felt up to the challenge. This speech can be made in a thousand different ways. With Frédéric, we decided to start with something modest, something concentrated. Like a prayer, a murmur in front of the radio microphone, and not in a lyrical, fiery manner as one might at first imagine. Quite simply because at that particular moment, Abbé Pierre had no idea of the effect his Appeal was going to have. So I wanted to stick as closely as possible to this sincerity.

**You mentioned that the shoot took place over two seasons. Wasn't it difficult to get back into the part after several months of interruption?**

It was the very first time that I had to confront such a problem. Moreover, in between the two phases of the shoot, I played Scapin in a masked performance of Molière's «The Forced Marriage» at the Comédie Française. But I think it was rather liberating to do something else, to play the clown in a lighter manner... even if I didn't feel rested for all that! (laughter) During the second phase, the summer shoot, we started with the scenes of the Abbé in his old age. So we needed more time for makeup. Wake-up call at 2am, make-up from 3am to 9am, then shooting from 9am to 7pm. But we were so aware of the sheer importance of the subject, and were so connected to its values, that it gave everyone incredible strength. Like wings enabling one to surpass oneself! I was often so moved by the words I had to utter that I didn't even have to seek the emotion. All I had to do was put the beret and cape back on to reconnect ...

**What did you enjoy most about working with Frédéric Tellier?**

I've never had such a strong bond with a director before. Frédéric's a highly sensitive person and I loved the way he carried me along with him, his relationship with the Abbé, and his sense of spirituality of the heart. We truly made this film hand in hand. He immediately took me on board and infected me with his passion for the character. We felt that we had a mission. And knew that this was not a film like any other. The idea was that the audience should leave the cinema with something other than just the immediate emotion of the film, that this emotion should follow them and lead them to deep reflection and a change in the way people look at those in need. Even if we remain humble and in our place, we are not Abbé Pierre! We simply tell his story and bear witness. And if this experience has marked me in such a way, it was also due to Frédéric's way of making the set sacred, and having a very special and strong bond with his actors, one of whom was Emmanuelle Bercot, an immense actress who plays Lucie Coutaz. At the end of each take, I always sought out the director's eye. But even long before that, far upstream, he always listened to me. I was able to ask him everything I wanted to, and express my doubts and fears. Or put to him questions about the script.

**For example?**

The fear that if you deal with too many events in your life, you'll remain on the surface, you'll skim over the truth or be overly general. The fear of sometimes toppling over into pathos, into a feeling that should have been humble. A bit like the pitfalls of the biopic,

actually. Or the fear that, since the Abbé was always obsessed with the same things and constantly repeated them, he might come off as annoying or moralistic on screen. Frédéric was incredibly open to discussion. And I think it was helpful that we sometimes disagreed. In any event, I always prefer to put everything on the table so as not to have any feeling of frustration during the shoot itself. The stakes were too high. I can truly say that it was a real collaboration between the two of us. Frédéric has the ability to listen to the material that an actor can bring to him, compromise and engage in a totally fertile, passionate debate. He was generous enough to let me have this place, my creative space.

#### **How did you feel when you saw the finished film?**

I'm above all looking forward to seeing it again! (laughter) Because I first saw it only in a working copy, uncalibrated, without the definitive music, complete with 600 special effects shots, not to mention a 40° fever! But, despite everything, it moved me, and I realised that we had made an important film. I was able to look in the mirror and tell myself that I was proud of my work, and perhaps the Abbé would have been happy that his actions were spoken of in such terms. And that's priceless.

## **Interview with...**

### **EMMANUELLE BERCOT - actor**

#### **What did Abbé Pierre mean to you before you set off on this great adventure?**

Emmanuelle Bercot: He was really an extremely important figure when I was young as I was brought up in Catholic schools. And above all because at home, we adored the activist and rebel that he was. A man capable of driving the crowds wild, almost like a rock star, which was held against him at the time, as we can see in Frédéric's film. But yes, Abbé Pierre was a star in his own right on a par with Johnny. And that's what enabled his voice to carry so much weight. His outspokenness was striking. It was obvious that his speeches were in no way premeditated and he didn't use readymade formulas. He spoke with his heart, with his guts.

#### **When Frédéric Tellier spoke to you about the script, what was your first reaction?**

Emmanuelle Bercot: At first I was surprised because, although we are friends, he had never mentioned the project to me before. But obviously, I was thrilled to read it. And as I turned the pages, I discovered the real dimension of Abbé Pierre with whom I was only familiar through his public persona. In particular the fact that he suffered enormously physically, as his health had been extremely fragile ever since he was a boy, and he in no way had the stamina to accomplish all that he did. This makes his journey all more fascinating. Moreover, as the story unfolded, I also discovered the woman Frédéric wanted me to play, Lucie Coutaz, who was Abbé Pierre's partner for over 40 years and

cofounder of the Emmaus Movement. I'd never heard of this woman without whom Abbé Pierre undoubtedly never would have become the person he was. She was an essential pillar of the Emmaus Movement until her passing in 1982 at the age of 83, and yet nobody knows her name. She was a woman of the shadows in the full sense of the word, and did everything in her power to remain so. Her discreet nature and humility led her to be self-effacing, even though she possessed all the temperament of a leader.

### **How does one start working towards becoming Lucie Coutaz on screen?**

There's very little documentation on her. So I relied both on the dozen or so existing photos of her, as well as the opportunity I had to interview two people who had actually known Lucie and told me all about her. Moreover, we had the good fortune to stumble upon a treasure: a two-hour video recording of her 82nd birthday where a Companion has her tell her life story. It was as fascinating as it was instructive to hear her tell the story of her life, and be able to understand her personality a little better. Her modest, discreet side made her not wish to be filmed. But unlike the work that Benjamin (Lavernhe) had to do with Abbé Pierre, I didn't have to worry about imitating her or physical resemblance, since virtually nobody knows about her. This gave me great freedom. I was particularly interested in trying to grasp something of her posture and I constructed the character on that.

### **Who was Lucie Coutaz in your view?**

I had learned, thanks to one of the two people I mentioned, that she had been hurt by the manner in which Gaby Morlay had portrayed her in 1955 in Robert Darène's «The Ragmen of Emmaus», as an extremely authoritarian character in whom she totally failed to recognise herself. I took this into account in my composition and did my utmost to depict the person she truly was. But this was something that took me a long time to discover. Because in the nicknames that people gave her, such as «Control Tower» or «Lulu the Terror», I didn't find reflected the infinite sweetness of her look I'd seen in the photos I had of her. There was a gulf between the one sometimes described to me, and the one actually I saw. I finally understood she was filled with extreme goodness, great gentleness, and an absolute sense of devotion to those who were suffering. This did not, however, prevent her from being authoritative, because she had to deal with this community made up mostly of men, including the Abbé himself! (laughter) In any case, I chose to make of her a gentle person yet capable of firmness, whenever necessary.

### **Was it particularly difficult to portray a character over a span of 40 years?**

I was able to rely on the quality of the prosthetics and make-up work. All the more so as the various try-outs allowed me to get little by little into the character's skin, and work on her posture and voice. But I'm not going to lie. Seeing one's face aged before your very eyes is quite overwhelming. I only glanced at myself once in a mirror, and then as only fleetingly. I also worked with a speech therapist. But it was really the costumes and make-up that played a key role in this work. And the hair as well, which was among her key physical features.

### **Did you rehearse a lot with Frédéric Tellier and Benjamin Lavernhe before the shoot?**

Frédéric does not use rehearsals but readings instead. So I did some alone with him or

in trio with Benjamin. It was useful to understand exactly what Frédéric expected, see how the text sounded between us, and ask him all the questions I had so I wouldn't have to bother him again on set. It was a step that reassured everyone, and such moments represented the first stirrings of the film to come.

**What struck you about the scenes you shared with Benjamin Lavernhe?**

First of all, we were very close. This friendship necessarily helped create the parallel friendship that our characters had to develop on screen. Moreover, over and beyond the make-up that creates a resemblance, there was one thing that was absolutely not artificial: Benjamin's look! In it I could see real goodness, deep and unfeigned, and true humanity, which is totally part and parcel of his nature and upbringing, which, in my view, was essential to playing such a man. I was fascinated by Benjamin's virtuosity in composing this role, but when I peered into his eyes, I could only see Abbé Pierre.

**Did the Frédéric Tellier of «Goliath» change on the set of this shoot where the pressure was necessarily even greater?**

I didn't notice any difference. Frédéric's composure always fascinates me. Inside, he must be boiling over, but he never shows it. I look at him like some UFO because I'm the direct opposite of him in this regard. I have boundless admiration for his calmness, his delicacy, the total absence of tension on his sets and... his boundless love for his actors. He doesn't let anything get past him, but the way he looks at you, talks to you, and compliments you represent an incredible driving force.

**Looking back, what struck you the most about this whole adventure? What images of it will you keep?**

First of all, Abbé Pierre's eloquence through Benjamin's powerful performance. To hear once again these speeches, most of which I grew up with, and see them embodied anew to such a point was truly impressive. It was also a cruel reminder that there's no one like Abbé Pierre today. No one has ever taken his place at a time when he's needed more than ever. I will never forget either all the scenes depicting the creation of the first Emmaus Community amid the Companions and families living in the mud and cold. The sheer realism was for me as an actress and as a human being something both powerful and overwhelming to experience.



# Cast

L'ABBÉ PIERRE  
LUCIE COUTAZ  
GEORGES LEGAY  
FRANÇOIS  
PERE SUPÉRIEUR  
JEUNE FERMIERE  
AHMED  
MARLENE PORTE

PHILIBERT  
AUGUSTE  
PAUL 1  
PAUL 2  
JULES  
ALDO  
JANINE PORTE  
GÉGÉ PORTE  
SYLVIANE

Benjamin LAVERNHE  
Emmanuelle BERCOVITZ  
Michel VUILLERMOZ  
Antoine LAURENT  
Alain SACHS  
Leïla MUSE  
Malik AMRAOUI  
Chloé STEFANI

Djibril PAVADE  
Didier NOBLETZ  
Xavier MATHIEU  
Maxime BAILLEUL  
Frédéric WEIS  
Massimiliano DELSITO  
Suzanne-Marie GABRIEL  
Yann COTTY  
Amélie BENADY



# Crew

DIRECTOR	Frédéric TELLIER
SCRIPT	Frédéric TELLIER & Olivier GORCE
PRODUCTION	WY PRODUCTIONS Wassim BEJI
SND	
DOP	Thierry DESMICHELLE
ORIGINAL SCORE	Rémi JIMENEZ
MAKE UP VFX	Pierre-Louis ARNAL
EDITING	Eric GEAY
DIRECTOR ASSISTANT	Renaud CHASSAING AFC
CASTING	Bryce DESSNER
SCRIPT BOY AND GIRL	Frédéric LAINÉ
PRODUCTION DESIGN	Mélanie GERBEAUX
COSTUMES	Valérie DESEINE
MAKE UP	Frédéric BARBE
HAIRSTYLE	Christian ALZIEU
SOUND	Aurélie GUICHARD
	Marie-France MICHEL
	Laurent NOGUEIZA
	Charles JODOIN-KEATON
	Juliette BAUMARD
	Nicolas DE BOISCUILLÉ
	Charlotte BETAILLOLE
	Flore MASSON
	Milou SANNER
	Antoine DEFLANDRE
	Hervé GUYADER AFSI
	Nicolas LEFEBVRE

