



NEW RELEASES

Petite maman

An extremely small and exactly perfect film, Céline Sciamma's *Petite maman* might at first appear dwarfed by her last title, *Portrait of a Lady of Fire*. But come closer – and this is a film that beckons like a forest path – and there is much that is similar. There's the luminosity of the filmmaking – an introvert radiance made extrovert by the unshakable assurance of Claire Mathon's camerawork and Sciamma's own directorial certitude. And there's a kinship between the stories, one about romantic love, the other about a mother-daughter bond. Both are really about the beautiful tragedy of love, even when fully reciprocated: that you can never truly know anyone, however much you care for them. *Portrait*, more epic though it was, hinged on the tiny revelation of a finger marking a significant place in a book, and *Petite Maman* may yet turn out to be the page 28 in the ongoing novel of Sciamma's career.

Nelly (Joséphine Sanz) is eight, and her maternal grandmother has just died. With her mother, Marion (Nina Meurisse), and her father (Stéphane Varupenne), Nelly has taken leave of the other residents of her grandmother's care home, and is being driven to her grandmother's old house, where Marion grew up. From the backseat, Nelly wordlessly pops snacks into her mother's mouth while she drives, even offering her a sip from her juice box – mute acts of care that speak volumes about their closeness, and about Nelly's unusual empathy for her grieving *maman*.

It's a current that flows both ways. Later, Nelly confesses her feelings of confusion and guilt at not having said a proper goodbye – this story is also a superb evocation of a child's first encounter with death – and so she and Marion reenact a proper farewell, with Marion as her own mother's proxy.

In the house, a kind of fairytale nook next to a forest, Dad's presence is peripheral but kind. There are lovely scenes in which Nelly helps him shave or asks him to tell her a secret. But mostly this is about Nelly and Marion, and the fascination Nelly has with stories her mother tells her about her own life at Nelly's age, in particular a hut she built in the adjoining woods around the time she had an operation to correct an inherited condition.

When Marion is gone before Nelly wakes the next day, her father tells her it's not for long, and so she swallows her worry and goes to play in the woods. There, she meets an eight-year-old girl who looks a lot like her (Gabrielle Sanz: the young actresses are twins) and is building a hut. Her name is Marion, and she lives in the same house Nelly is staying in, only accessed a different way, fully furnished and inhabited by the younger version of Nelly's grandmother (Margot Abascal).

The children, often colour-coded in primary hues amid the blazing russets and oranges of the autumnal forest, recall Red Riding Hood or Hansel and Gretel, and like with many fairytales there are wish-fulfilment aspects here, as when child-Marion reassures Nelly that she is not responsible for her adult mother's sadnesses. But alongside moments of precocious wisdom, there is a precise naturalism to the girls' interactions. They both accept their little miracle unquestioningly, and behave like any girls whose sudden friendship blossoms over the course of an afternoon. They muck about with rowboats and pancakes and act out hilariously intricate make-believe scenarios.

This gives the film some joyous scenes, but never at the cost of Nelly's curious, wondering and occasionally fearful interior life. There may be a lot of knowledge about the world that she has not yet accrued, but her heart – like the hearts of all the children in the films of Céline Sciamma right back to 2011's *Tomboy* – is fully formed, and fully as able to break or heal or beat in time with someone else's as any adult's.

'Secrets aren't always things we try to hide – there's just no one to tell them to,' says Nelly, perhaps voicing the vague loneliness of many of us who have had fewer people to tell our secrets to lately. In addition to all its other bright, polished pleasures, Sciamma's film embodies a scintillatingly simple solution to the conundrum of filmmaking under lockdown conditions: if circumstances dictate that the scale becomes smaller, zoom in. *Petite maman* is a tiny suspended moment within time, magnified at high resolution until the microscopic becomes momentous, and the mystery of a child's love for her mother becomes the mystery of all love.

Jessica Kiang, *Sight and Sound*, March 2021

Céline Sciamma on 'Petite maman'

Petite maman is a time-travel fantasy, a dream movie or a supernatural fairy-tale, however you prefer to read it, about an eight-year-old girl who meets her own mother as she was in her childhood – briefly, magically, becoming her best friend.

Petite maman seems an unlikely project for Sciamma, who has tended to be very much a realist director. Yet the film is absolutely of a piece with her previous depictions of female experience at different ages – whether depicting the shifting identities and burgeoning desires of teenagers in her debut *Water Lilies* (2007) and her breakthrough film *Girlhood* (2014) or investigating nonconformist gender identity at an earlier age, in her altogether ahead-of-its-time *Tomboy* (2011). It was 2019's ambitious *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – a lesbian romance set in the 18th century – that confirmed her international auteur renown and that also made her a prominent figurehead in contemporary women's cinema (even a name emblazoned on T-shirts). But *Portrait* also marked a shift from conventional realism into a stripped back, imaginative realm of poetic filmmaking, an investigation she pursues further in the concise (73-minute), sparsely crafted *Petite maman*.

Petite maman is based on a simple but deeply fertile idea – in effect, that the child is mother to the woman. What Sciamma loved about the premise was its warmth, she says: 'It was a very striking idea, but very simple. It felt like it didn't even belong to me, but to some very ancient mythology, maybe in matriarchal society – it felt timeless.'

Even while it's about a mother and daughter *Petite maman* is a parable of sisterhood and friendship. The ambivalent title makes you wonder which girl is mother to which, with Nelly comforting her own mother as a child just as, early on, she's tenderly solicitous to the adult Marion. 'Even at the beginning of the film, we can see the kid taking care of her mother, feeding her, nurturing her. I tried to ask myself candidly, if I met my mother at the same age, would I be a mother, would she still be my mother, would we share the same mother – that is, my grandmother and her mother? Would we be sisters?'

That last question, Sciamma says, is why she decided to cast siblings. She put out an ad for sisters, specifying that twins were welcome to apply – although her long-time casting director Christel Baras originally felt the idea was too much like a gimmick. In fact, says Sciamma, Joséphine and Gabrielle Sanz ‘don’t even consider themselves twins – they consider themselves sisters born the same day. We weren’t looking for resemblance at all, just a strong sense of equality.’ But the moment the pair walked in, right at the beginning of the search, she knew they were right for the roles. ‘They just came walking towards me – and the way they walked was really important in the film. Right away it was: “OK, here’s Nelly and here’s Marion – if they want to do the film, it’s gonna happen”.’

As for their extraordinary, no-frills performance style, it came about partly through Sciamma’s very specific instructions. ‘I was not asking for their emotion, ever. I was always talking about emotions in cinema. For example, when Nelly goes into the room as a spy to check on the mother, I wouldn’t say, “You’re scared”, I’d say, “This is a spy film.” It was always about cinema. “When you’re running in the forest, it’s an action scene, you’re like James Bond.” I think it’s a great way to work with kids – and with actors in general.’

The very personal dimension of *Petite maman* comes from the film’s design and its shooting, which reconnected Sciamma with her own past. The two girls’ identical houses, their interiors created in the studio, were a fusion of the homes of Sciamma’s own grandmothers, while the exteriors were shot in the woods of her childhood home Cergy, where she herself once built a treehouse. Cergy is a 1960s new town, its specific style of implantation in the landscape giving it a particular filmic quality that made it a memorable location in Éric Rohmer’s 1987 film *My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend*. ‘I was as old as the town I grew up in,’ says Sciamma. ‘It was a very special childhood, to live in a place that’s brand new, with no past – it’s like you’re inventing it. It was a very experimental town, I had an experimental childhood in a way.’

Céline Sciamma talking to Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, December 2021

PETITE MAMAN

Directed by: Céline Sciamma
©: Lilies Films, France 3 Cinéma
Production Company: Lilies Films
In co-production with: France 3 Cinéma
With the support of La: Région Île-de-France
With the participation of: Canal+, France Télévisions, Ciné+
In association with: Pyramide Distribution, MK2, P28
Presented by: Lilies Films
Produced by: Bénédicte Couvreur
Unit Production Manager: Claire Langmann
Production Manager: Monica Taverna
Unit Manager: Gary Spinelli
Location Manager: Alissia Blanchard
1st Assistant Director: Delphine Daull
2nd Assistant Director: Jérémie Debord
Script Supervisor: Cécile Rodolakis
Casting: Christel Baras
Assisted by: Lola Diane
Written by: Céline Sciamma
Director of Photography: Claire Mathon
1st Assistant Operator: Fabienne Octobre
2nd Assistant Operator: Nathalie Lao
Gaffer: Ernesto Giolitti
Key Grip: Marc Wilhelm
Visual Effects: La Compagnie Générale des Effets Visuels
Special Effects Supervisor: Benoît Talenton
Editing: Julien Lacheray
1st Assistant Editor: Charlotte Bouché
2nd Assistant Editor: Fanny Klingler
Art Director: Lionel Brison

Set Dresser: Dan Bevan
Properties: Géraldine Scaramèla-Vallet
Visual Researcher: Pierre-Emmanuel Lyet
Costumes: Céline Sciamma
Wardrobe: Agathe Meinemare
Key Make-up: Marie Luiset
Titles: Guillaume Sciamma
Original Music: Para One
Music Recording: Diane Prieur
Music Mixer: Daniel Sobrino
Production Sound Mixer: Julien Sicart
Sound Editor: Valérie De Loof
Dialogue Editor: Sarah Lelu
Foley Artist: Vincent Milner
Foley Recordist: Xavier Thieulin
Post-synchronization: Daniel Sobrino

Cast

Joséphine Sanz (*Nelly*)
Gabrielle Sanz (*Marion*)
Nina Meurisse (*mother*)
Stéphane Varupenne (*father*)
Margot Abascal (*grandmother*)
Flores Cardo (*1st old lady*)
Josée Schuller (*2nd old lady*)
Guylène Péan (*3rd old lady*)

France 2021
73 mins

A MUBI release

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