

Un Bon Petit Diable

("A Right Little Devil")

France : 1983 : dir.

: ? min

prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:

[Paul Courtois](#)

Adult cast unknown

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ≠ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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The hero protests his aunt's incessant beatings to the town mayor, who is anything but sympathetic. These very indifferent frame-grabs from a Spanish TV broadcast, evidently.

Source: indeterminate website

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

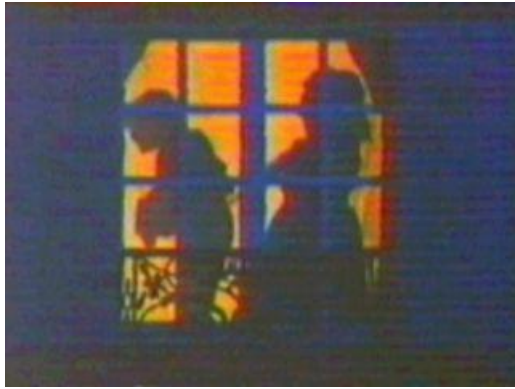
This bizarre production, from a semi-classic children's tale, is a veritable feast of sado-masochism – at least for the first half, the second half is an entirely conventional pastoral romance. I saw it in French with Dutch subtitles, so I have to allow there were nuances of plot I missed entirely, but it is little more than a catalogue of spankings and spanking-avoidance strategies, played out like a po-faced Dickensian melodrama. It could all be the feverish nightmare of a **Just William** or a **Penrod**, except that the boy in the story is not especially mischievous or wilful, and it just seems to be that his aunt enjoys fustigating his behind.

Set in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (?), Courtois plays an orphan of 9 or 10 living with a despotic maiden aunt. She finds innumerable occasions to beat him, whisking his naked bottom daily with the diligence of a housewife dusting a prized ornament. Their maidservant, taking pity on the boy, conspires with him to plant two black handprints across his buttocks so that his aunt will fear the devil has been at work there (!), but the subterfuge is discovered. On another occasion, the boy clambers into the local mayor's carriage as he drives through the village, to protest his maltreatment. When the mayor makes light of it, the boy displays the offended area for proof. The mortified mayor hurries on, unmoved by his plight. An onlooking crowd chuckle indulgently.

Undeterred, Courtois commissions a local blacksmith to make a leather shield he can tuck down the back of his breeches, and that night's tanning goes mysteriously unaccompanied by howls for mercy. Suspecting foul play, the aunt sneaks up to the boy's room while he sleeps, discovers the leather shield, and promptly hoists up his nightshirt to spank him again on the bed, for good measure marching him downstairs and locking him for the night in the pig-pen, which terrifies him.

Deliverance seems at hand with the aunt's sudden death, but the boy is taken off to a grim institution. On his arrival there he hears a boy being soundly beaten upstairs, and next morning, as the sleepy waifs stagger down into the open courtyard to wash in an ice-encrusted water-barrel, latecomers are lined up against a wall to hoist their nightshirts and have their backsides heated with a small birch. Indignant beyond enduring at this persecution of the child posterior, Courtois leads his fellow inmates in an uprising – a la "**ZERO DE CONDUITE**" – and returns to his native village, where mayday celebrations are taking place, at which point the film abruptly changes mood into a bucolic love story.

If this all sounds a tad overstated, I can only assure you that the film is every bit as piquant and obsessional as described. I understand the authoress was noted for her penchant in this direction – a kind of Astrid Lindgren for young flagellation devotees. Of course, "**OLIVER TWIST**", "**DAVID COPPERFIELD**" and young Pip in "**GREAT EXPECTATIONS**" each took their share of beatings – in the natural course of Victorian melodrama - but they were not constantly dropping their breeches for the purpose, and there were other strands to the storyline than that. Young Courtois is spanked on four or five occasions in the first half hour, and between times is engaged in averting the next one.



Lest I should be thought to exaggerate – more scenes from the first half hour of the film. What is particularly striking (if one dare use that phrase here) is that in 1983 it was all shot with a bawdy nonchalance and full camera close-ups. Even a continental director would not dare to film such scenes today, and that volte-face has been accomplished in less than twenty years. The naked bottoms of children are radioactive now, and corporal punishment is *only* to be depicted as emblematic of male violence. Female beatings of children are excised from all modern renditions of **"TOM SAWYER"**, **"GREAT EXPECTATIONS"** etc. They are "off message".



Surely a bit much of a good thing, even for enthusiasts of that sport. And whereas the floggings in Dickens films are played as simple brutality, the punishments that are so much a feature of **"UN BON PETIT DIABLE"** are handled in the most desultory, matter-of-fact way - like some wearisome domestic chore the boy must perform. It is all the more bizarre when one realises that France was among the first Western countries to ban physical punishment in schools, and expressly upon the buttocks, having accepted the argument that this could both gratify sexual appetites in the adult (female as much as male) and promote masochistic appetites in the recipient. What modern French audiences made of this film, and its blasé treatment of the theme, I cannot imagine.

All of this aside, it is not an especially memorable story or production, and certainly no tragedy of an unloved child in the style of **"POIL DE CAROTTE"**. Nothing else is known of Paul Courtois, who shrugs it all off with a gallic nonchalance. For an English-language counterpart of this (in tone at least), the best I could suggest would be the Jimmy Edwards boarding school romp **"BOTTOMS UP!"**.

See also the 1923 silent version starring Jean Rauzéna (the boy from Abel Gance's **"NAPOLÉON"**) and subject index under **CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, CRUELTY / NEGLECT / MALTREATMENT, HISTORY, ORPHANS / ADOPTION / CHILDREN'S HOMES** and **RASCALS & SCALAWAGS**.