

# HOW TO BE A GOOD WIFE

Directed by **Martin Provost**



1h48 - France / Belgium - 2.39 - 5.1

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## SYNOPSIS

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Paulette Van Der Beck (Juliette Binoche) and her husband have been running a homemakers institute in Boersch, Alsace, for many years. Their mission is to train teenage girls to become perfect housewives at a time when women were expected to submit to their husbands.

When her husband suddenly dies, Paulette takes over and discovers that the school is on the verge of bankruptcy. But while preparations are underway for the best homemaking competition sponsored by a popular TV show, she and her lively students start questioning their beliefs as the nationwide protests of May 1968 transform society around them. Reunited with her first love, André, and with the help of her eccentric sister-in-law Gilberte (Yolande Moreau) and a stern nun Marie-Therese (Noémie Lvovsky), Paulette joins forces with her pupils to overcome their subservient status and become liberated women.

How to Be a Good Wife is a humorous and satirical take on a universal story about solidarity and gender equality.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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I still remember the young couples' guide that lived in a drawer in the kitchen where, in the late 60s, my mother presided, whereas my father would read the paper in the living room while waiting to come to the dinner table.

That's how it was before '68. Women didn't yet have their say about certain centuries-old rules that dictated that a man should take a wife "keep his household in order", which said it all.

In addition to doing the grocery shopping, coming up with the menus, and dressing us, my mother also oversaw our homework and, while making dinner in the kitchen, would have us recite our lessons to her. Afterwards, we would help her set the table. But most importantly, I remember that my father – because he earned money – never lifted a finger, and would instead wait for us to call out "dinner!" to come sit at the table and serve himself first – and copiously – which infuriated my mother.

After dinner, my father would go back to the living room while we cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher that my mother had made him buy, after great insistence, because we still thought that it was an extravagance that would exhaust all of the planet's water resources. When she finally joined us in front of the television, which we got very late, the film had, of course, already begun.

I also remember that mother would occasionally recruit what she referred to as “young little girls” to look after us during vacations.

One could find those young girls in what were called housekeeping schools. They were always young girls from humble backgrounds, and usually from peasant stock.

In the 60s, France was still quite rural, and for these young girls, home economics schools were a means of escaping the harsh destiny of a farmer's wife through better marriage or a housemaid position in a large city. Most of the young girls that my mother hired had never seen the ocean. That has stayed in my memory because that was how it was in the 60s. Many men and women never ventured outside their counties.

The film is set in Alsace-Moselle during the 1967-68 school year, with most of the story unfolding at the Bitche home economics school on the German border.

At the end of the 60s, home economics schools - which, for over one hundred years, had trained armies of homemakers, housekeepers and nannies all over France - were living out their final years. It was the end of an era; one wherein there still existed a type of education reserved strictly for girls with the sole objective of confining them to the domestic arena with no prospects other than that of serving men and families. There, young students from humble backgrounds learned to manage a home and a budget, and to mend their husband's underwear and socks – but also how to butcher a rabbit, stuff a bird, scour a wooden floor, recover the bottom of a sauce pan, as well as the art of accommodating leftovers...

It is in this declining, antiquated system still clinging, with grace and sincerity, to its arcane vision of society that our heroine, Paulette Van Der Beck, presides with the utmost seriousness.

By overseeing the family housekeeping institution, Paulette is perpetuating a model that suffocates her, because her awakening won't come until after the death of her husband, Robert, when she reconnects with André, her first love that she thought had died in the war.

Is it the rekindling of a first love or the winds of freedom blowing in from Paris (the film ends in May of '68) that will enable Paulette, at the age of fifty, to experience her first orgasm and to begin questioning everything?

When the film begins, women have just won the right to open bank accounts in their own names, to work without prior permission from their husbands (the “loi 1965”), and to take the pill (the “loi Neuwirth 1967”) - not to mention everything that was still up for discussion: abortion, the notion of equal pay...

Of course, seen from the home economics school in the nether regions of Alsace-Moselle, the contrast with growing modernity is all the more striking.

The art of mending underwear suddenly seems pathetic and antiquated to Paulette and her young apprentice housekeepers. It is in coming to this surreal, absurd and comical realization

that our heroines will begin to struggle – and not without challenges - to obtain their desires and exist freely.

There were so many of these home economics schools that it seems incredible to think not a single one survived May of '68. Some were transformed into agricultural high schools; but others were erased from the French landscape altogether in less than two years.

Little by little, the patriarch has become an endangered species. Men have become used to sharing household chores with their wives - who also work – and taking care of the children. This unconscious dressage, which for centuries targeted their wives with a view to making them their slaves, now seems like part of another world.

A world that, for me, was just yesterday, since I knew it very well.

And yet...

For several years, the upswing in communitarianism and the influence of the far right have enjoined women to once again leave the public domain and return to their households. This of course means that they can no longer work or control their fertility, and can no longer be free. This leap backwards has slipped insidiously into numerous debates. Who would have thought that the right to an abortion would once again be up for discussion at the national assembly just months after the 2017 presidential election?

A funny, fast-paced and often jubilant film, *How To Be A Good Wife* is a musical score tailor-made for the three actresses I wrote it for: Juliette Binoche, Yolande Moreau, and Noémie Lvovsky. A deep and delicious comedy, it is a manifesto in defense of the evolution of a society from which it is impossible to imagine turning back.

But for me, it's also a means of furthering my research and tackling a register that is, if not new, at least different. And this with women, of course – women that are capable of radical transformation and evolution; women that, this time, I would like to take to a register where they can be carried away by laughter; but a laughter borne out of tragedy – the tragedy we all share. Because we must laugh at ourselves and at the human condition in order to better accept it; because our mothers and grandmothers all went through this, and if yesterday's world seems far away now - make no mistake, it is still quite near, and laughter is there to help us distance ourselves from it.

Rich in dialogue, the screenplay opens on the rigor of Paulette Van Der Beck as a form of instruction; obsessive, repetitive gestures – the gestures of the model housewife that every woman knows by heart, because they are still there, written in our collective sub-conscience. These gestures gradually become a dance at the heart of a choreography that I want to be very discreet at first - just a few steps when our young girls, along with Sister Marie-Thérèse, scrub with steel wool, wash clothes, peel vegetables, etc. Then, little by little, this takes off into a brisk choreography, like a hot air balloon filling up with air and flying away, so that the energy and joy of renewal supersedes constraint and the past; so that we bury the slavery and the negation of feminine intelligence once and for all – and all of this through dancing and singing in this final ballet that celebrates the liberating march toward the barricades of

May of '68; where Paulette and the “new” man, represented by André, in the lead, with all of the other protagonists in the film, find their place in freedom, equality, fraternity, with joie-de-vivre in their hearts, but also the desire to change the world.

## **DIRECTOR – MARTIN PROVOST**

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### **2016: THE MIDWIFE**

*Berlinale Official Selection - Out of Competition*

### **2013: VIOLETTE**

*Toronto TIFF - Special Presentation*

### **2011: THE LONG FALLING**

### **2007: SÉRAPHINE**

*7 French César, including Best Film, Best Actress, Best Screenplay and Best Photography*

### **2003: LE VENTRE DE JULIETTE**

### **1997: TORTILLA Y CINEMA**



## **CAST**

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## **JULIETTE BINOCHÉ** as Paulette Van Der Beck

### SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2019** : NON-FICTION - Olivier ASSAYAS
- 2018** : HIGH LIFE - Claire DENIS
- 2017** : LET THE SUNSHINE IN - Claire DENIS
- 2016** : SLACK BAY - Bruno DUMONT
- 2014** : THE 33 - Patricia RIGGEN
- 2013** : CLOUDS OF SILS MARIA - Olivier ASSAYAS
- 2012** : COSMOPOLIS - David CRONENBERG
- 2011** : ELLES - Malgorzata SZUMOWSKA
- 2005** : HIDDEN - Michael HANEKE
- 1996** : THE ENGLISH PATIENT - Anthony MINGHELLA
- 1993** : THREE COLORS : WHITE - Krzysztof KIESLOWSKI
- 1993** : THREE COLORS : BLUE - Krzysztof KIESLOWSKI

## **EDOUARD BAER** as André Grunvald

### SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2018** : BATTLES OF THE CLASSES - Michel LECLERC
- 2017** : MADEMOISELLE DE JONCQUIERES - Emmanuel MOURET
- 2016** : OPEN AT NIGHT - Edouard BAER
- 2015** : HOPEFULLY - Benoît GRAFFIN
- 2011** : ASTERIX & OBELIX : GOD SAVE BRITANNIA - Laurent TIRARD
- 2008** : WILD GRASS - Alain RESNAIS
- 2006** : I ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A GANGSTER - Samuel BENCHETRIT
- 2006** : THE TIGER BRIGADES - Jérôme CORNUAU
- 2002** : ASTERIX AND OBELIX MEET CLEOPATRA - Alain CHABAT

## **YOLANDE MOREAU** as Gilberte Van Der Beck

### SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

**2018** : REBELS - Allan MAUDUIT  
**2017** : THE SUMMER HOUSE - Valeria BRUNI TEDESCHI  
**2017** : I FEEL GOOD - Benoît DELÉPINE & Gustave KERVERN  
**2015** : A WOMAN'S LIFE - Stéphane BRIZÉ  
**2014** : THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT - Jaco VAN DORMAEL  
**2011** : CAMILLE REWINDS - Noémie LVOVSKY  
**2009** : GAINSBURG : A HEROIC LIFE - Joann SFAR  
**2009** : MAMMUTH - Benoit DELEPINE & Gustave KERVERN  
**2008** : MICMACS - Jean-Pierre JEUNET  
**2007** : SÉRAPHINE - Martin PROVOST  
**2003** : WHEN THE SEA RISES - Yolande MOREAU & Gilles PORTE

## **NOÉMIE LVOVSKY** as Sister Marie-Thérèse

### SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

**2018** : INVISIBLES - Louis-Julien PETIT  
**2018** : ONE NATION ONE KING - Pierre SCHOELLER  
**2016** : CHOCOLAT - Roschdy ZEM  
**2012** : CAMILLE REWINDS - Noémie LVOVSKY  
**2011** : HOUSE OF TOLERANCE - Bertrand BONELLO  
**2009** : THE FRENCH KISSERS - Riad SATTOUF  
**2009** : COCO - Gad ELMALEH  
**2007** : ACTRESSES - Valéria BRUNI-TEDESCHI

## **FRANÇOIS BERLÉAND** as Robert Van Der Beck

### SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

**2019** : SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE - Cédric KLAPISCH  
**2017** : LA CH'TITE FAMILLE - Dany BOON  
**2016** : SCHOOL OF LIFE - Nicolas VANIER  
**2005** : TELL NO ONE - Guillaume CANET  
**2003** : THE CHORUS - Christophe BARRATIER  
**2002** : WHATEVER YOU SAY - Guillaume CANET  
**2001** : THE TRANSPORTER - Louis LETERRIER (also in THE TRANSPORTER 2 & 3 : 2004 & 2008)

### **PRODUCERS** – LES FILMS DU KIOSQUE

FRANÇOIS KRAUS & DENIS PINEAU-VALENCIENNE

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### SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

**2019** : LA BELLE EPOQUE - Nicolas BEDOS

**2018** : LITTLE TICKLES - Andréa BESCOND & Éric MÉTAYER

**2017** : MR AND MRS ADELMAN - Nicolas BEDOS

**2016** : FIVE - Igor GOTESMAN

**2015** : STANDING TALL - Emmanuelle BERCOT

## SCREENWRITERS

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MARTIN PROVOST & SÉVERINE WERBA

## CAST

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Paulette Van Der Beck

Gilberte Van Der Beck

Sœur Marie-Thérèse

André Grunvald

Robert Van Der Beck

Annie Fuchs

Albane Des-Deux-Ponts

Yvette Ziegler

Corinne Schwartz

Christiane Rougemont

Juliette BINOCHE

Yolande MOREAU

Noémie LVOVSKY

Édouard BAER

François BERLÉAND

Marie ZABUKOVEC

Anamaria VARTOLOMEI

Lily TAÏEB

Pauline BRIAND

ARMELLE

## CREW

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Director

Martin PROVOST

Screenplay

Martin PROVOST & Séverine WERBA



Cinematographer  
Sound Designers

Guillaume SCHIFFMAN AFC  
Brigitte TAILLANDIER  
Ingrid RALET

1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Director  
Editor  
Production Designer  
Costume Designer  
Original Score  
Casting  
Script Supervisor  
Production Manager  
Unit Manager

Emmanuel CROSET  
Juliette MAILLARD  
Albertine LASTERA  
Thierry FRANÇOIS  
Madeline FONTAINE AFCCA  
Grégoire HETZEL  
Brigitte MOIDON  
Céline BREUIL-JAPY  
Christophe DESENCLOS  
Ignazio GIOVACCHINI

Production  
Producers

LES FILMS DU KIOSQUE  
François KRAUS & Denis PINEAU-VALENCIENNE

French Distribution

MEMENTO FILMS DISTRIBUTION

In Co-production with

FRANCE 3 CINÉMA  
ORANGE STUDIO  
UMEDIA

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CINÉ+  
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In association with

CNC

French Release

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