

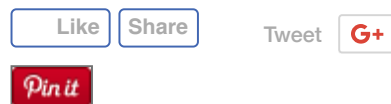


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Film Review: The Guardians

A magnificent Nathalie Baye reteams with Xavier Beauvois (after the 2005 'Le Petit Lieutenant') in a wrenching, exquisitely rendered drama about women grappling with the workload on farms during World War I, also featuring radiant newcomer Iris Bry.

By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93))_ May 2, 2018



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During World War I in rural France, it was the women who kept the farms productive, modernizing them over the long years of the Great War, while the men did battle on the front. This is the setting for the exquisite and moving, femme-centric new film from Xavier Beauvois, Grand Prix winner at Cannes for *Of Gods and Men*. It's hard to pinpoint what's so affecting about the films of Beauvois, and *The Guardians* in particular. Perhaps it's the confident unhurriedness, his uniquely classical style of cinema that never hammers its points or manufactures drama for the sake of effect. Perhaps it's also the filmmaker's focus here on a heroine of simple fortitude and goodness (yet free of piety), grateful for any crumbs life throws her. American filmmakers would likely make such a figure mentally challenged a la Forrest Gump.

The Guardians opens with a lateral tracking shot (a signature camera move in the film) over a battlefield strewn with the dead. It's 1916, the year of Verdun. Cut to the roughhewn Paridier farm (in what might be the Limousin) and Hortense (Nathalie Baye), its formidable matriarch, painfully laboring along a field behind a plow. Her daughter Solange (Laura Smet, Baye's real-life daughter) is tasked with keeping up the house and garden. Hortense's doddering older brother mostly brews

up Gallic moonshine in a creaky contraption. Glaringly absent are Hortense's three sons. Like others in the tightknit community who gather in church to mourn their dead, she lives in continual dread of bad news from the front.

With harvest season upon her and all the able-bodied men at war, Hortense hires young Francine, a hearty, fresh-faced orphan (red-haired newcomer Iris Bry, in real life a librarian, and inspired casting by Beauvois). Michel Legrand's poignant melody for woodwinds acts as her leitmotif. Francine quickly becomes almost—and "almost" is the operative word—a member of the family. The farm work—furloughing, threshing, sowing, milking—is dwelled upon at length, so you almost experience it in real time. Audiences hooked on a thrill-per-minute will grow antsy—but if you give yourself to the film's rhythm, these scenes offer rich rewards. In fact, the Paridier farm is virtually the film's central character, and it's portrayed with breath-stopping, painterly beauty in all its seasons. Scenes of the women sowing evoke Millet's *Le Semeur*, others Van Gogh; the misted farmhouse through fractured sunlight or snowbound in winter is pure Monet.

Daily rituals are shaken up when Hortense's sons periodically arrive home on furlough—traumatized and in varying degrees of shell shock. Solange's husband can't bear to be touched. The film's dramatic core centers on Georges (Cyril Descours), the dashing younger son, who instantly becomes smitten—maybe a tad too quickly—with Francine. She blooms under his attention; he writes her confiding letters from the front. Beauvois makes a scene involving their hands moving along a boulder more erotic than you might expect. But matters are complicated by the jealous rage of a village girl connected to the family, who feels she has a prior claim on Georges. Unstrung by the war, his gaze is strangely fixed; in a nightmare he inadvertently stabs his own brother in a manner suggesting a confluence of sex and slaughter.

Though Hortense heroically powers along, updating the equipment by acquiring a mechanical combine, loss hovers. In a wrenching scene, she's hoeing the kitchen garden at dusk when she senses, without turning around, the arrival of a villager/harbinger of death. She turns, blurts out, "*C'est qui*," and falls to the ground. The ensuing scenes transcend what can be evoked in words. Grief is expressed as the camera holds on the old brother's gnarled hands, twisting inconsolably; Hortense weeps while milking a cow, its tail flicking at her tears.

The film's dramatic tension hangs, of course, on the fate of Georges and Francine. Without giving too many spoilers, the emotions that roil Georges are all fastidiously prepared by what precedes: the disruptive presence in the town of roistering Americans who buy the old brother's hooch and eye the local beauties as prey. But most of all, perhaps, the stern and manipulative Hortense. Beauvois pulls off a stunning switch here, by revealing her insularity and passion to close ranks with family at the cost of lies and deceit—and upending viewer sympathy for the heroic matriarch. In a film that has consistently celebrated the efforts of strong women, Beauvois pivots 360 degrees by also indicting the mean small-mindedness of which provincial France is capable. And—lifting *The Guardians* into the 21st century—the xenophobia currently on display on a larger scale.

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