



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

THE GUARDIANS (15)

Director: Xavier Beauvois

Starring: Nathalie Baye, Laura Smet, Iris Bry, Cyril Descours, Gilbert Bonneau
France, 2017, 2 hours 15 minutes SUBTITLES

The original French title of this film (*Les gardiennes*) is telling in terms of gender. It refers specifically to the women who worked the land in France during the first world war, while the menfolk were away in the trenches of the front line. This is a war film but one set on the Home Front as its characters struggle to the family farm in the Deux-Sèvres region of western France, at once a stunning depiction of rural life and the changing of the seasons.

The film, based on the novel by Ernest Pérochon, a schoolteacher who writes from first-hand experience of the front during World War I, is directed by Xavier Beauvois, whose quiet but devastating story of a group of monks under siege in the Atlas Mountains *Of Gods and Men* played at Borderlines in 2011. Nathalie Baye is the widowed matriarch Madame Hortense who, with the support of her daughter, Solange (played by Baye's own daughter Laura Smet) and their young hired help Francine, must hold everything together while her sons perform their duty on the distant battlefield.

You depict time in a really fascinating way. The war years move slowly and flow comfortably together, then post-war sections are shorter, choppy, and a little more jarring. Was that built into the book, or were you deliberately contorting time for the temporal medium of film?

It's more a reflection of what this kind of rural life was like. It's something that's timeless. People would wake up with the sunrise, go to sleep when the sun sets, and you'd still have to go outside and milk the cows. It's something that never changes, and the slowness in that part is a reflection of that. It's what their peasant farmer life was like. Also, for women at the time, their hands were always active—never empty. If you had a woman who went out to feed the pigs, she'd come back bringing in some logs for the fireplace. If you had a woman cooking, during that time, she would also be sewing.

You talked recently about liking the French production style of being able to improvise on a script beyond the synopsis provided to get financing. Were you making any significant improvisations on *The Guardians*?

Francois Truffaut said, "The film is the critique of the script, and the editing is the critique of the shooting." I think that, for me, a great deal happens during the editing because it's the real tool for making the film. For example, I improvised a lot with the singing, because I didn't know the actress I had chosen was able to sing at the time that I cast her. So once I knew that, I was able to incorporate it into the film. And I also felt the beginning of the film was much too talkative, so I started taking out pages and pages of dialogue, just replacing them sometimes with simply a look or a glance.

Extracts from interview with Xavier Beauvois by Marshall Shaffer, **Slant Magazine**