

It's hard to be a fearless leader and a little cuckhold at the same time. It's enough to give a man a Napoleon complex.

The first question Francophiles will ask is why are a British director of Oscar-winning epics (Ridley Scott, *Gladiator*) and an American character actor (Joaquin Phoenix, *Joker*) collaborating on a bio/war film about a legendary, diminutive (5'6"), French leader? Possibly because the film's name alone sells itself and history buffs will be curious. Scott's rep for stylistic overblown extravaganzas is another calling card. (There will be blood—and war.) And the prospect of watching quirky Phoenix analyze the leader and put his spin on the character is another draw.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the island of Corsica, on August 15 , 1769, a descendant of Italian nobility. An outsider to the French monarchy, he aggressively championed the French Revolution in 1789. Rising from the military ranks, he ruled France from 1799 to 1804 as First Consul, then as its first emperor from 1804 to 1814. Bonaparte was heralded as a battle-hungry, military strategist who fought wars all over Europe. He and his troops invaded and conquered Iberia (Spain), Italy and forced Austria, Prussia and Russia to coalesce and quake under French domination. Basically, he made most of continental Europe his captive.

Aside from the warrior life, the conqueror had a wife named Joséphine (Vanessa Kirby, *Pieces of a Woman*), who was married before they met. She was sexy and he was smitten from the start. During one of their first meetings, they sat across from each other in a parlor. She suggestively opened her legs and purred: "If you look down, you'll see a surprise. Once you see it you will always want it." He did. They tied the knot; she became an Empress, but could never bear children and give him an heir. It frayed their relationship.

The script by David Scarpa, a screenwriter with a sparse resume, is a cliff notes approach to Napoleon's achievements. It's peppered with rivals, colleagues and friends that passed through the leader's life. It's like the writer aimed for a cross between a PBS historical drama, a sweeping *Doctor Zhivago*-type war movie and a backstairs at the palace soap opera. One where the empress beds a young man, which publicly humiliates her husband. The hodgepodge of subplots mixes, but not well. Scenes where Napoleon and Josephine make love don't add an erotic touch. It's like watching a mutt and the winner of the Best in Show at the Westminster Kennel Dog Club Show mating. And the dialogue isn't always a big help, either. Napoleon: "I found the crown of France in the gutter. I

picked it up with my sword and placed it on my head.” Really?

Scott seems miffed at finding ways to make the characters three-dimensional. Partial blame goes to Scarpa’s thin writing, which doesn’t match the gravitas, intelligence and imagination of David

Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson, the Oscar-nominated screenwriters of Scott’s Academy Award-winning *Gladiator*. That film made the Roman general Maximus larger than life,

and no one’s fool. It turned an esoteric historical figure into an icon. This one turns an icon into an esoteric and eccentric wart. Scott is notorious for placing style over substance, story and characters. Again, his towering production elements shroud the basics.

Noticeably, the first 30 minutes of the footage lack the exquisite lighting and saturated colors that would make the film visually stunning. That’s where cinematographer Dariusz Wolski (*The Martian*) comes up short. Nothing gels. He and Scott seem to pick up steam during the war scenes. Once the ferocious ruler steps onto the battlefield, with horses charging, swords waving, cannons exploding and soldiers fighting to the death, the film finds its footing. It’s strength. It’s splendor. Audiences craving verve and galvanizing battles get what they want. Scenes of soldiers crashing through the Satschan frozen ponds during the Battle of Austerlitz, horses being blown to bits and battalions swarming en masse are indelible

For all the money he was paid for this role (estimated \$10M), why didn’t Phoenix attempt a French accent. Yes, the movie is in English, and this isn’t a French production, but fake it. Make the audience believe in the littlest way that this man is from Corsica and not the U.S.A. The same can be said for the other cast members who play French military and political leaders, who don’t feign anything Gallic.

Kirby is English, doesn’t hide her home accent, but she deserves a pass. She’s the one actor in the entire film who is consistently mesmerizing, regardless. She works the lighting with her poses. Her softness as she speaks is so beguiling. Her Joséphine is the temptress that turned a world leader into a clown, embarrassing him greatly but not enough for him to completely fall out of love.

Abubakar Salim as General Dumas, the French army’s first four-star general, Edouard Philipponnat as Tsar Alexander the emperor of Russia during the Napoleonic Wars and Youssef Kerkour as French military commander General Davout also excel. Ian McNiece as King Louis XVIII, whom Napoleon displaced for 100 days in 1815, and Rupert Everett as British Field Marshall Arthur

Wellesley the Duke of Wellington, Napoleon's rival who ended 23 years of French domination in Europe at the notorious Battle of Waterloo, are excellent too.

Napoleon Bonaparte's excursions last for 2h 38m (editors Sam Restivo and Claire Simpson), which by Killers of the Flower Moon standards (3h 26m) makes it short and sweet. If film fans trek to their local cinema, the meticulously staged war sequences, played like chess games, will keep them intrigued. Especially in IMAX theaters where the horrors will be a gruesome spectacle and views of the Sphinx will amaze. The film may play well one day on streaming services too, but some of the movie's majesty will be lost. Napoleon was a man who nearly conquered the world. A husband who lost his dignity. An emperor/warrior who died in exile. Surely there was a better way to tell his story. A better way to make a petite man a giant.