

"Napoleon," a technically impressive epic with grandiose battle sequences featuring gritty set designs and legions of miserable-looking extras, is a 158-minute roast of the titular historical figure whose 60 battles throughout his two decades in power have been boiled down to six of Scott and writer David Scarpa's choosing. The inclusion of Waterloo, the battle that marked the end of the Napoleonic Wars, was obvious. The Battle of Austerlitz was another jazzy win for the French leader with an incredible sequence that found Napoleon Bonaparte (Joaquin Phoenix) dunking his foes in the frozen water as they attempted to retreat. But the battle that takes up a majority of the film's attention is Napoleon's turbulent relationship with his wife Josephine (Vanessa Kirby) whose erratic behavior, frequent infidelity and inability to provide him an heir was enough drama to be a full-time job. Napoleon was no Casanova, at least not according to Phoenix's portrayal and Scarpa's writing who attribute the emperor's rise as a result of the tumultuous post-revolution landscape and good, ol' fashion right-place, right-time. Napoleon had some impressive military operations — the movie portrays a few of them — but they are undercut by his spoiled, schoolboy obsession with his wife. "Napoleon" opens with the gruesome execution via guillotine of the infamous French queen Marie Antoinette, a seminal event in the French Revolution and one that marked an opportunity for Napoleon, then a scheming military strategist and war general, to gain popularity and seize political power. He finally crowned himself emperor in 1804, a ceremony portrayed in the film with a reckless tyrant throwing tradition aside and pulling the crown over his own head, a symbol of his unyielding control of France. On paper, it sounds thoughtful and powerful. In Phoenix's hands, the scene is a gag, and Napoleon is another over-indulgent, petulant royal. Told through letters to Josephine, "Napoleon" does do an incredible job with setting the scene, drawing audiences into the epic battles Napoleon fought throughout his career. The battlefield sequences are brutal. Audience members can almost taste the mud that flicks up after the horses. The rudimentary quarters for the commanding emperor wreak of bodily stink and misery. "Napoleon" thrives under Scott's ability to command his own army of camera operators, set creators and the thousands of workers to bring the scenes to excruciatingly visceral life. Unfortunately, the film is far more interested in the dramatic and mercurial relationship between the lead and his much older wife who had been previously widowed with two children than it is in deep diving into the famous historical figure's professional triumphs and failures. Josephine had been a mistress to a number of other newsworthy men, and the legally binding document did not stop her from continuing on as an adulteress. Kirby, for her part, is wonderfully miserable as the confused temptress-empress, though the film never truly dives too deep into her background or gives her enough meaningful attention. As far as straight biopics go, "Napoleon" is a weird one. The film, like its subject, is temperamental and rash. Scott hones in on the small details in Napoleon's life that make the historical figure out to be less cunning and calculating than his notoriety and long-lasting legacy would imply. Then, in Phoenix's hands, Napoleon turns completely childish, rash and imbecilic. Phoenix's penchant for dry, understated performances turns this one into a downright comedy, a Wes Anderson character study trapped in a Steven Spielberg period drama. Is this meant to be funny? Is it funny at all? Where does Napoleon start when Phoenix never seems to end? This will work for some viewers as an unexpected dram-com; it does not work for me. Instead, I found the scope of the film's budget, the beauty of its set design, the intricacy of its costumes and the many details that make it an exceptional output by a first-class director to be utterly undermined by a nonsensical script that focused on comedy jabs and laconic vignettes to tear down a famous figure who, as it happens, doesn't need any help being the vertically challenged butt of every joke, even 200 years later.