

Like a Michelin-starred meal that someone forgot to season, Ridley Scott's beefy account of Napoleon's rise to power looks great, is served with some panache, but crucially lacks flavour. The legendary Brit – who kicked off his career with a more bite-sized but much saltier Napoleonic tale in *The Duellists* – is already promising a four-hour director's cut. This might be one of those rare occasions where another 80 minutes makes all the difference.

Napoleon has too much history and not enough story. In a performance that lacks dynamism, Joaquin Phoenix gets 32 years of Napoleon Bonaparte's life to embody, from witnessing Marie Antoinette's execution to dying in exile in the South Atlantic. But by prioritising a conveyor belt of battles, coups and revolutions over a more forensic investigation of its subject, the film too often leaves him feeling more like a passenger than instigator.

Aristocratic beauty Josephine de Beauharnais is Napoleon's – man and movie – main preoccupation. Played with a feline purr by Vanessa Kirby, her poise and elegance reduces the great man to gawkiness, then boyish jealousy, and finally frustration at her inability to provide him with a son. Napoleon has great fun with Boney's frisky bedchamber antics – he signals his desire like a pig hunting for truffles – but doesn't give Josephine much inner life as a reward for putting up with all the amateurish thrusting.

There are lots of enjoyable historical details here – some of which may have happened; others (like the cannon-balling of the Pyramids) absolutely didn't. At Waterloo, a British sniper draws a bead on Bonaparte only for Wellington (Rupert Everett, perfectly cast) to order him not to pull the trigger. 'Generals are far too busy to waste time trying to kill each other,' the Iron Duke splutters at this unsporting behaviour.

Like much in *Napoleon*, though, it's not really a commentary on how the power games of great men are paid for in the blood of the lower ranks. It's film without a clear point of view. A pre-end-credits honour roll counting the vast human cost of Napoleon's military ambitions – four million men – suggests an altogether more sober movie than the action-packed epic you just watched.

Of the cast of mainly English thespians, the highlight is Paul Rhys (aka *Saltburn*'s terrifying butler) as Talleyrand, France's chief negotiator at Europe's high table. He plays it with the half-smirk of a man whose primary job is to translate Napoleon's rude utterings into palatable diplomatic language, but can't quite manage it. He warns the Austrian king that he will 'suffer the consequences of a man bent on peace at any cost'. Phoenix, by contrast, gets to bellow at France's would-be adversaries: 'You think you're so great because you have boats!'

That line got a big laugh at my screening, though I couldn't say whether the movie intended it. Scott's *All the Money in the World* writer David Scarpa's screenplay strains to show the clumsy side of this conqueror of nations, a man prone to sulky insecurity, especially over Josephine, and petulant outbursts, but overeggs it.

Having everyone speak with English accents (including even French-Algerian actor Tahar Rahim as political ally Paul Barras) robs it of a major source of dramatic tension: the fact that Napoleon wasn't French but a Corsican, an outsider in a land he feared would reject him at any moment. What drove him to keep fighting for pre-eminence in this unwelcoming land, beyond his famously self-professed 'destiny' and the quest for an heir, proves elusive.