

Ridley Scott is an unstoppable machine. He pit Sigourney Weaver against an alien in 1979; now, 44 years – and many classics – later, he pits Joaquin Phoenix against the world in the epic *Napoleon*. Choosing broad brushstrokes over intricate details, Scott and screenwriter David Scarpa attempt to condense the titular character's entire complex life into a two-and-a-half-hour narrative. The result, while flawed, is glorious: majestic, atmospheric, visually stunning, led by two charismatic leads. Scott, at 86, shows the young 'uns how it's done.

The narrative begins in 1793, when a young Napoleon (Joaquin Phoenix), still an officer, observes Queen Marie Antoinette (Catherine Walker) beheaded by a guillotine. Soon, he proves himself to Paul Barras (Tahar Rahim), a politician and revolutionary leader, by fighting off the British, followed by a series of battle victories, executed with ease and finesse. Ambitious from a young age, Napoleon does not even attempt to hide his overinflated ego nor his grand aspirations.

He finds himself entranced by Joséphine de Beauharnais (Vanessa Kirby), a coquettish widow; before long, they get married. Her public infidelity drives Napoleon to abandon his troops in Egypt after winning the Battle of the Pyramids. Yet he does not divorce Joséphine – not yet, at least. Her inability to birth him an heir eventually leads to the collapse of their marriage.

Scott's film may be overstuffed and unwieldy, but it's also never boring and unexpectedly hilarious. He and Scarpa zoom through major historical events: Napoleon's coronation, the Battle of Austerlitz, the Battle of Borodino, the failed invasion of Russia, the battle of Waterloo, and Napoleon's exile. Interestingly, the filmmakers focus more on the central relationship, some of the explosive film's most powerful scenes involving the two leads quietly exploring their power dynamics, the nuances of their weirdly symbiotic relationship.

Phoenix is magnetic, per usual, utterly inhabiting the central character while avoiding the pitfalls of playing a larger-than-life personality. In fact, he goes in the opposite direction, that of introspection, which renders his performance that much more enigmatic. Kirby, too, sidesteps the usual clichés of a female supporting character in a predominantly male feature, not only holding her own but forming the heart of the otherwise steely affair. Also, thank heavens they didn't de-age them for the earlier sequences; I'd rather buy into a 49-year-old Phoenix playing a 24-year-old Napoleon than be distracted by the pixels all over his face.

The battle sequences are, of course, jaw-dropping in scope. Legendary cinematographer Dariusz Wolski's camera glides over dark-green hills or foggy wintry terrain, eyeing the clashing armies with a perfectly calibrated balance of indifference and reverence. (One particular instance with a horse is bound to get the audience riled up.) The battle of Austerlitz, with its bombardment of a frozen lake, may mark the standout, for it's not the exploding ice that astounds the most – it's Bonaparte's eyes, viewing the destruction with the mix of pride and nonchalance that Wolski captures so well.

The film explores what drove Napoleon, avoiding gimmicks or easy targets (it never even mentions his height): his ego, his love of his people and country – and, of course, Joséphine – and, well, something else, something that Phoenix leaves for interpretation. He's both kind and heartless, devoted and self-absorbed. It's definitely not your typical portrayal of a famous historical figure, and the better for it.