

THE GUARDIANS (Les Gardiennes)

France (2017) 135 minutes

Director: Xavier Beauvois

Cast: Nathalie Baye (Hortense), Iris Bry (Francine),
Laura Smet (Solange), Cyril Descours (Georges)



Screening 20 November 2019 at Swindon Arts Centre

Synopsis

France, 1915. On the Paridier farm the women grapple with the workload under the watchful eye and deft hand of Hortense, the family matriarch. Most of their menfolk, including two of her sons, are away at war. Reluctantly Hortense brings in an outsider, the orphan Francine, to help with the chores. With new tools, new skills, and strength from their independence, the women triumph over the land. But emotions are never far from the surface, especially when there is news from the Front.

Reviews



Like a series of Monet paintings come to life, this historical drama luxuriates in lush, widescreen images of the French countryside. World War I is raging elsewhere, but this segment of the country remains unspoiled and fertile — thanks to the hard work of the women who've been left behind to manage the family farm while their husbands, brothers and sons are off fighting, and sometimes not coming back.

Director and co-writer Xavier Beauvois takes his time introducing us to this place and these people. His pace is unhurried, allowing us to breathe in and appreciate the beauty of the painterly light as it bathes the trees, wheat fields and hillsides in a colorful glow. We catch a glimpse of the horrors of war at the very beginning as he pans silently across a battlefield, with lifeless bodies strewn about in the mist. But Beauvois is far more interested in how the loved ones of those men struggle to continue living. He has made an intimate epic, as contradictory as that sounds.

Christy Lemire, RogerEbert.com

The gender divide of this movie, and its whole point, are clearer in the original French title ***Les Gardiennes***, the female guardians... This richly compassionate, fiercely acted and beautifully shot period drama is about a second conflict, the battle of wills on the home front, as its characters struggle to maintain a family farm in the Deux-Sèvres region of western France.

A way of life, with its Hardy-esque seasonal rhythms of sowing and reaping, is minutely, sumptuously depicted. But all the time in the background - in the letters home, in the muttered hints of the grim-faced men on leave and their shell shocked dreams - is the horror of war. Those seasonal rhythms come to include regular visits from officials with telegrams.

...The beauty and the pathos of the film are vivid in every frame....

Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian

Film Facts

- Director Xavier Beauvois is also known for his 2010 film ***Of Gods and Men***, previously shown by SFS.
- The movie starring Nathalie Baye and her real life daughter Laura Smet was released in France the very same day Johnny Hallyday died. He was the ex-husband of the first and the father of the second.
- The 1924 novel by Ernest Pérochon on which the film was based has never been translated into English. Pérochon was a teacher, Goncourt-winning author and First World War veteran who in 1940 refused to collaborate with the Vichy regime, had his books banned and finally died of a heart attack brought on by the stress of daily Gestapo harassment.