

The Guardians [15] 2017 | France | 138 min

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| UK release date | 17th August 2018 |
| Director | Xavier Beauvois |
| Screenplay | Xavier Beauvois, Marie-Julie Maille, Frédérique Moreau (novel by Ernest Pérochon) |
| Cinematographer | Caroline Champetier |
| Cast | Nathalie Baye (Hortense); Laura Smet (Solange); Iris Bry (Francine); Cyril Descours (Georges); Gilbert Bonneau (Henri); Olivier Rabourdin (Clovis); Nicolas Giraud (Constant); Mathilde Viseux (Marguerite) |

The gender divide of this movie, and its whole point, are clearer in the original French title: Les Gardiennes, the female guardians, the women who worked the land in France during the first world war. This richly compassionate, fiercely acted and beautifully shot period drama is about the 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 shellshocked dreams – is the horror of war. Those seasonal rhythms come to include regular visits from officials with telegrams.

Nathalie Baye gives a performance of effortless authority as the widowed Madame Hortense, the matriarch who must impose her will on the running of the farm. Her daughter Solange (played by Baye's real-life daughter Laura Smet) is her most important worker, given that her father-in-law Henri (played by non-professional Gilbert Bonneau) is too elderly to do much. Smet plays Solange as a passionate woman who, like her mother, has accepted the patriotic duty of reining in her emotions. Her husband Clovis (Olivier Rabourdin) comes home from the front, angry at the hypocrisy and cruelty of war. The Germans, he tells them all, are just like them: workers, husbands, fathers.

This is not quite what Solange's enlisted brothers have to say on their visits home. Constant (Nicolas Giraud) is a decorated officer, a teacher in civilian life. Most importantly, there is Georges (Cyril Descours), whose longed-for visits put into motion the film's tragedy.

Hortense has just hired a new worker, Francine, played by newcomer Iris Bry, who instantly impresses with her hard work and cheerful attitude. Georges is clearly smitten with the pretty, charming Francine; they agree to write to each other when he returns to the front, and watchful Hortense is not displeased with this turn of events. She can imagine this young woman as a permanent addition to the household and even as a daughter-in-law. But Francine is an outsider, and the courtship enrages Marguerite (Mathilde Viseux), a longtime intimate of the family who had regarded herself as his intended. And then the Americans turn up: swaggeringly handsome young soldiers who are the source of terrible sexual tension and cause Hortense to make a dreadful mistake. Francine is to become a living victim of war.

The years are flashed up on screen as the time goes by: the harrowingly important years of 1914 and 1918, but then, without any great fanfare, we get 1919 and 1920. There is no war's-over scene with dancing in the streets – or farmyard. Hardscrabble life goes on as before. Beauvois concludes the film with an affecting, melancholy song. It is the music of regret and acceptance.

After: Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian, 16 August 2018

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