



# The Guardians

**Director:** Xavier Beauvois

**Country:** France

**Date:** 2017

A review by Mick LaSalle for *The San Francisco Chronicle*:

“The Guardians” (“Les Gardiennes” in French) is either a masterpiece or a near-masterpiece — time will tell. But it takes its place among the best films of Xavier Beauvois, an eclectic group of exceptional pictures that includes the crime drama “Le Petit Lieutenant” (2005) and “Of Gods and Men,” about Trappist monks in Algeria.



Like “Of Gods and Men,” “The Guardians” is about people in a seemingly peaceful community who are, nonetheless, under siege. It takes place during World War I, in the French countryside, where a mother and daughter are trying to work the farm in the absence of the three men in their lives. Two sons are off fighting in the trenches, and so is the daughter’s husband. It somehow helps the movie — makes things more immediate, more poignant and more interesting to watch — that the mother and daughter are played by a real-life mother-daughter pair, Nathalie Baye and Laura Smet.

The film details three years in the life of a single family, from early in the war to war’s end, with a brief epilogue that updates the action through 1920. For Baye, this is one of her great showcases — and in a sense, the first of her old age. From the earliest days of her stardom, some 40 years ago, Baye has always depicted the sorrows and struggles of average women. Not a unique eccentric like Isabelle Huppert or Isabelle Adjani, Baye has always been normal, yet sad, a witness to the perfidies of men. Now, as the farm’s matriarch, she is striving in the face of the ultimate male stupidity, World War I.

The film presents a loving vision of the countryside, with beautiful, long pans across women working in the fields. These shots are like paintings in motion, with an intentional air of unreality — no one is dirty, no one speaks. It’s a vision of idealized memory, a celebration and appreciation of the women who, in their own way, suffered during the war years. The misery was considerable. The carnage at the front touched every town, and every family lived with the spectre of the knock on the door that could come at any time.

“The Guardians” documents this history, while at the same time hinting at the modern world soon to come, with heavy machinery relieving the physical toil of farming and modern mores rushing in on the tide of war. Iris Bry, as Francine, is a kind of unwitting emblem of the new, an orphaned farmworker brought in by the family, whose life course embodies the journey of women during this period of transition and upheaval.

The performances are extraordinary, as they often are in Beauvois’ films, with Baye a study in quiet suffering and Bry wonderfully enigmatic — seemingly simple, but hinting at a soul capable of expansion and adaptation.

From: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/movies/article/The-Guardians-a-masterpiece-about-French-12913554.php>