



DREAM PALACE

Beau Travail

With a pre-recorded introduction by director Kirsten Johnson.

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Directed by Claire Denis, and scripted by Denis and her regular writing partner Jean-Pol Fargeau around a loose riff on Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd*, *Beau Travail* is set in a remote coastal outpost in the former French colony of Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa. Here a battalion of Foreign Legionnaires spend their days enacting gruelling training regimes on desert terrain, and their evenings circling girls at the local nightclub. Commander Bruno Forestier (Michel Subor) is admired by his men; less so is his prickly, solitary second-in-command Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant). Galoup is more interested in being 'the perfect legionnaire' than in being popular – at least until the arrival of sweet-natured new recruit Gilles Sentain (Grégoire Colin).

Quite what winds Galoup up so much about Sentain isn't clear, but it seems to be the latter's apparent contentment and ease in living. These are, implicitly, untoward character traits in a legionnaire, who ought to have been driven into exile by some stigma, trauma or misdeed. 'He had no reason to be with us in the Legion,' Galoup notes in the account that we see him penning after the events, heard as voiceover. By joining the Legion, Galoup deliberately isolated himself in a context where dysfunctionality is the norm – where he would meet no resistance to his theory that 'we all have a trashcan deep within.' The arrival of a loveable kid capable of using conventional social graces poses a threat to Galoup's alternative social structure. Into this kingdom of the blind has walked a paragon possessed of perfect vision, and Galoup is none too keen on the prospect of being seen.

In which case we can't help but note that he is very much in the wrong film. Movement, gesture and glance tend to reveal at least as much as dialogue in the films of Claire Denis. Nowhere else in her work does she push this visual language as far as in *Beau Travail*, a near-ballet of a film that's at least as much a work of choreography as of verbal storytelling. But if Galoup's scribbled notes are clearly his subjective account, it's not clear whether his memory is our only guide. It's tempting to assume that the film's most abstract and movement-driven sequences represent material that Galoup has retrodden so many times in memory that it's fragmented and become surreal: a fight with Sentain transfigured into something akin to a tango; combat training moving into what amounts to a mass bout of ritualised hugging.

Throughout her body of work, Denis has toyed with subjective and objective realities – with whether her characters are living through externally manifested events, self-protective imaginings or symbol-heavy dreams. Like the legionnaire whose original identity is masked behind a false name, *Beau Travail* is cagey about the point of view it occupies. Recourse to *Billy Budd* offers some illumination, but Melville's text – a brief work from the unproductive late period of his career, left incomplete at the time of his death in 1891 – has plentiful ambiguities of its own, compounded by posthumous publication and multiple revisions.

Set aboard a late-18th century British man-of-war, *Billy Budd* tells of a sailor whose beauty and popularity stir fascination in all who meet him, and

destructive envy in the master-at-arms Claggart, who frames him for fomenting mutiny and ultimately ensures his execution. The prelapsarian innocence so fetishised in Billy (who ‘in the nude might have posed for a statue of a young Adam before the Fall’) represents a beautiful but weak position, one powerless against the machinations of the already fallen. Billy finally incriminates himself because he lacks the sophistication to defend himself: at the crucial moment a debilitating stutter prevents him from forming words.

Whether or not Melville’s main impetus was the expression of thwarted gay passion, *Beau Travail* – emerging as it did at a time of assertive queer cinema and queer reading of apparently straight texts – inherited the interpretation, and indeed arguably compounded it through its knowing deployment of queer-identified imagery. Certainly the intensity of Galoup’s obsession with Sentain mimics the symptoms of love, particularly love as it tends to be experienced by those film noir protagonists who identify it as an emotion not dissimilar to murderous rage.

A further significant tendency of 1990s cinema that’s identifiable in the make-up of *Beau Travail* is referentiality. Denis’s film is haunted by pre-existing texts: *Billy Budd*; Benjamin Britten and E.M. Forster’s 1951 opera of the same, which surfaces in the film in snatches of half-heard music; poems by Melville, which Denis reportedly gave to her cast in lieu of a script; *Othello*, with its recognition of the savage potential of envy; Fassbinder’s *Querelle*, which knitted elements of *Billy Budd* into its frankly erotic take on Jean Genet’s novel *Querelle de Brest*; *Beau Geste* (itself famously filmed in 1939, with Gary Cooper) and its sequels *Beau Sabreur* and *Beau Ideal*, if only in their association of the word beau (‘good’ but also ‘beautiful’) with the Foreign Legion’s traditional conflation of nobility and physical elegance.

Whatever else is implied by the exhilarating and befuddling final sequence, in which Galoup dances alone in a mirrored nightclub to Corona’s ‘Rhythm of the Night’, it certainly points at a final bid for personal freedom – if one that’s ironically characterised by a cheesy club anthem and a mannered, self-regarding routine. Perhaps Galoup is dead. Perhaps, in imagining himself back at the nightclub in Djibouti, he has found release in recognising his own physical grace, instead of obsessing over that of Sentain: freedom through narcissism. Or perhaps he’s imagining an out gay life, in the only terms that his limited life experience provides.

At its close, *Beau Travail* is still inviting us to guess – to feel rather than learn the rhythms of its storytelling. It’s this audacious looseness, this elegant unfixability, that keeps Denis’s ‘beautiful work’ so fresh – and asserts it as one of cinema’s most compelling and original meditations on the need for, and simultaneous resistance to, intimacy.

Hannah McGill, *Sight & Sound*, May 2012

BEAU TRAVAIL

Director: Claire Denis
©/A co-production of: La Sept ARTE, Tanaïs Com, SM Films
With the participation of: CNC - Centre national de la cinématographie
Presented by: La Sept ARTE, Unités de Programmes Fiction,
Pierre Chevalier
Producers: Jérôme Minet, Patrick Grandperret
Unit Production Manager: Salem Brahimi
Unit Manager (Djibouti): Ali Mohamed Hamadou
Unit Manager (Marseilles): Bruno Mérieux
Production Manager: Éric Zaouali
Production Co-ordinator: Danielle Vaugon
Collaboration/Choreography: Bernardo Montet
Assistant Directors: Jean-Paul Allègre, Moussah Hassan Moussah,
Flore Rougier, Murielle Iris
Actors Research: Nicolas Lublin
Screenplay: Jean-Pol Fargeau, Claire Denis
Director of Photography: Agnès Godard
Underwater Photographer: Patrick Grandperret

Editor: Nelly Quettier
Art Director: Arnaud de Moléron
Costumes: Judy Shrewsbury
Make-up: Danièle Vuarin
Music: Eran Tzur
Sound: Jean-Paul Mugel, Dominique Gaborieau
Sound Editor: Christophe Winding

Cast:
Denis Lavant (Sergeant Galoup)
Michel Subor (Commandant Bruno Forestier)
Grégoire Colin (Gilles Sentain)
Richard Courcet, Nicolas Duvauchelle, Adiatou Massidi,
Mickael Rakovski, Dan Herzberg, Giuseppe Molino, Gianfranco Poddighe,
Marc Veh, Thong Duy Nguyen, Jean-Yves Vivet, Bernardo Montet,
Dimitri Tsiapkinis, Djamel Zemali, Abdelkader Bouti (the platoon)
Marta Tafesse Kassa (young woman)

France 1998©
93 mins

DREAM PALACE: THE FILMS THAT CINEMAS WERE BUILT FOR

Beau Travail + pre-recorded intro by Kirsten Johnson
Sun 23 May 18:40; Sun 30 May 18:20
Mirror (Zerkalo) + pre-recorded intro by Malgorzata Szumowska
Mon 24 May 17:50; Wed 9 Jun 14:30
Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat)
+ pre-recorded intro by Chaitanya Tamhane
Mon 24 May 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 17:50
Goodbye, Dragon Inn (Bú sànn)
Wed 26 May 18:10 (+ intro by Peter Strickland); Wed 2 Jun 20:50
The Gleaners & I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse)
+ pre-recorded intro by Zhu Shengze
Thu 27 May 18:15; Fri 26 Jun 14:30
Hair + pre-recorded intro by Kleber Mendonça Filho
Fri 28 May 17:45
The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet)
+ pre-recorded intro by Mike Williams, Editor Sight & Sound
Fri 28 May 20:50; Wed 30 Jun 14:30
The General
Sat 29 May 12:45
Footloose + pre-recorded intro by Francis Lee
Sat 29 May 18:00
Winner of the Dream Palace Audience Vote: Portrait of a Lady on Fire
(Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)
Sun 30 May 12:20
Broadcast News
Sun 30 May 15:40 (+ intro by Sarah Smith); Sat 19 Jun 20:20

Car Wash
Mon 31 May 18:50
Blow Out
Tue 1 Jun 20:40
The Shout + pre-recorded intro by Mark Jenkin
Thu 3 Jun
The Wonders (Le meraviglie) + pre-recorded intro by Mark Cousins
Thu 3 Jun 20:30
Magnificent Obsession + Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)
Sun 6 Jun 18:40
Black Narcissus
Mon 7 Jun 17:50
David Byrne’s American Utopia
Mon 14 Jun 18:00
The Elephant Man + pre-recorded intro by Prano Bailey-Bond
Tue 15 Jun 17:45; Sat 19 Jun 12:00
The Warriors
Mon 21 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia); Mon 28 Jun 14:30
Beginning + pre-recorded intro by Luca Guadagnino
Tue 22 Jun 20:30
The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover
Thu 24 Jun 20:30

In partnership with:



BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.
We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view. See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup