



Beau travail

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

The first time I watched *Beau travail*, on DVD, in my childhood bedroom, in the spring of 2014, I didn't know how it would end. My face split into a grin of disbelief as the credits rolled and I rewound the final scene. More than 20 years after its initial release, that set piece, soundtrack by Corona's 90s Eurodance hit 'The Rhythm of the Night', with its climactic burst of feeling, is as well-known as the film itself.

It started as a sort of joke. Claire Denis was commissioned by the TV network Arte to make a film about foreignness and so, wryly, provocatively, she made a movie in which her own people were the foreigners. In Marseille, Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant) reflects on his time as 'a perfect legionnaire' in Djibouti, East Africa, serving the French Foreign Legion. He and his soldiers, including the undeniably pretty and unusually well-liked Gilles Sentain (Grégoire Colin), perform highly choreographed military drills in the desert heat. Under the blazing sun, resentments simmer. In the evenings, the men dance at a nightclub with the local women, who are beautiful, modern and ambivalent. Djibouti, a former French colony, gained independence in 1977. These soldiers are irrelevant; the colonial project is obsolete. 'Unfit for life, unfit for civilian life' is how Galoup describes himself in his diary.

But feeling unmoored from one's purpose – feeling like a foreigner to your own life – is a timeless conundrum, and one that seems to resonate with both film lovers and filmmakers (Barry Jenkins has mentioned its influence on 2016's *Moonlight*). It remains Denis's only true crowd-pleaser.

Denis's great gift is her ability to evoke emotion with gesture and juxtaposition. In the Djibouti desert, water shimmers and ripples, naked shoulders perspire and black mosquito nets recall sheer lingerie. In a Claire Denis film, dialogue is sparse, but images are charged with meaning. 'Making films, for me, is to get rid of explanation,' she told the *Guardian* back in 2000.

The final scene is pure release: a wordless explanation after 90 minutes of tension. Visual references travel through quotations in other works and, in recent times, through the internet. Films are portioned up and divorced from their original contexts, re-appropriated and shared as memes. I wonder if the renewed popularity of *Beau travail* in this decade's Greatest Films poll is a result of its increased visibility among a younger generation, many of whom have likely encountered, or at least revisited, its euphoric dancefloor-set conclusion via their computers.

Simran Hans, bfi.org.uk

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 idéal*, 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, Tanais 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

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