



PREVIEW

# High & Low – John Galliano

**High & Low – John Galliano**

Director: Kevin Macdonald

Production Companies: KGB Films,  
Condé Nast Entertainment

Producers: Kevin Macdonald, Chloe Macdonald

Cinematography: David Harriman,

Magda Kowalczyk, Patrick Blossier, Nelson Hume

Film Editor: Avdhesh Mohla

Music: Tom Hodge

France-USA-UK 2023

116 min

Digital

Courtesy of MUBI

## 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](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

## IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

**Preview: High & Low – John Galliano**

Mon 4 Mar 20:40

**Kinoteka Polish Film Festival Opening Night**

**London Premiere: Green Border** Zielona granica +  
Q&A with director Agnieszka Holland

Wed 6 Mar 19:00

**Woman with a Movie Camera International**

**Women's Day Preview: Banel & Adama** + Q&A

with director Ramata-Toulaye Sy

Fri 8 Mar 18:10

**Woman with a Movie Camera International**

**Women's Day Preview: Elaha**

Fri 8 Mar 20:45

**TV Preview: Inside No. 9: The Final Series** + Q&A

with Reece Shearsmith, Steve Pemberton and  
executive producer Adam Tandy

Mon 11 Mar 18:15

**Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI IMAX**

Mon 11 Mar 18:15

**TV Preview: Mandy** + Q&A with Diane Morgan

Tue 12 Mar 18:10

## MEMBER EXCLUSIVES

**Member Salon: Evil Does Not Exist** Aku wa sonzai  
shinai

Wed 6 Mar 20:15

**Member Picks: La La Land**

Sat 9 Mar 20:30

**Member Library Lates: The History of LGBTQIA+  
cinema**

Mon 11 Mar 18:00-20:00

Oscar-winning director Kevin Macdonald (*Marley*, *Whitney*) turns his camera towards the life and career of the gifted fashion designer and head of Dior, who caused outrage following a drunken, anti-Semitic tirade in 2011. Featuring the man himself, alongside figures from the fashion world, the film deftly investigates John Galliano's childhood, celebrated work, mental health and addiction struggles, and his long road to redemption.

[bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)

John Galliano is the fashion designer who should have earned a documentary for raising haute couture to a new level of daring, dazzle, refinement and esteem, but instead disgraced himself with antisemitic and other racist abuse of strangers in a Paris bar. Kevin Macdonald's film seeks to weigh not just his lopsided life story but our value system: how do you judge someone's accomplishments against their sins? Should we separate the art from the artist? How do we apportion power and opportunity – and responsibility and compassion? How do you atone, and who judges that?

*High & Low* is built around an interview Galliano gave Macdonald in his Mediterranean retreat: he speaks direct to camera, eyes imploring, a deep cigarette drag following his vow of candour, though he will prove a better raconteur of his life than analyst. He doesn't broach his motives for participation, which could be reputation or legacy management or perhaps a quest for understanding. Around that, dozens of talking heads bring testimony from across his 63 years: so many they sometimes become a cacophony, words detaching from speakers' identities, though that gives a sense of the mass-observing lens Galliano found himself under. The film doesn't hide the possibility that it could aid Galliano's redemption – it's co-produced by *Vogue* publisher Condé Nast, whose executives include Galliano supporters past and present, and his runway (and Brit jet-set) comrades Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell contribute. But Macdonald also consults family and former collaborators Galliano left behind, and a still-scarred victim of his abuse. And as we see, Galliano has already won a swift career reprieve – he was given the intriguing invitation to succeed the reticent founder of Maison Margiela, where he has now worked ten years.

It's a talky film, but rich in archive, too, reaching back to Galliano's apolitical, suburban south London youth in the Thatcher era ('He was into labels and stuff,' sniffs a tutor) and his creative coming out as a Central Saint Martins student, an ugly-duckling story of a repressed Gibraltar immigrant becoming, he says, a 'peacock'. (You might see Galliano's pride and fall as a parable of the New Labour years.)

The gear shifts of his career are marked: his 1984 graduation show, 'Les Incroyables', inspired by post-revolutionary French youth ('in the top five

## REGULAR PROGRAMME

**Art in the Making: A Sign is a Fine Investment** + intro by Steve Foxon, Curator of Non-Fiction, BFI National Archive + **Exit No Exit + 1 in a Million**

Mon 4 Mar 18:15

**Projecting the Archive: Dance Pretty Lady** + intro by Marc David Jacobs, writer and film nerd

Tue 5 Mar 18:30

**Restored: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde**

Tue 5 Mar 20:45

**Experimenta: The Blue Description Project: Blue** + discussion

Fri 8 Mar 18:15

**Filmmaking for Artists: Beginners Filmmaking Workshop**

Sun 10 Mar 10:30–16:30 (one session)

**Filmmaking for Artists: Intermediate Filmmaking Workshop**

Sun 31 Mar 10:30–16:30 (one session)

## SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine.

Subscribe from just £25\*

\* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: [sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk](http://sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk)



## 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](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

## 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.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](http://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)

fashion shows I've ever seen,' opines one critic); the 1994 shoestring 'Black Show' arranged by *Vogue*'s André Leon Talley and Anna Wintour to platform the bankrupt Galliano in Paris ('For the next ten years women went out in black slip dresses,' Wintour recalls); his hiring in 1995 by Givenchy, the first Englishman in a century to run a Parisian fashion house, and his move the next year to Dior. But it's the inspiration the student Galliano found in Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) that provides a visual through line and Macdonald's main directorial flourish. *High & Low* continually raids *Napoleon* for clips, dropping them in to illustrate the beats of Galliano's life with the satisfying neatness of puzzle pieces. What's not spelled out is what *Napoleon* meant to Galliano: pure style? Self-belief? Supremacy?

There's also a cinephile wink in another borrowing, *The Red Shoes* (1948), co-directed by Macdonald's grandfather Emeric Pressburger, whose infernal dance of creative devotion is used to suggest Galliano's own blowout under the weight of success and its demons: overexposure and corporate exploitation, workaholicism, drink, (prescription) drugs, isolation. The analogy captures the pathos in Galliano's story – a man trapped by his talent for fantasy and escape.

As for measuring Galliano by his offences, the film – a little like *Citizen Kane* (1941) – offers the audience depositions from past acquaintances. There are character clues throughout, notes of repression and recklessness and dependency, though no perfect keys. Most clearly, he had long been a nasty drunk; at his worst, he says, he was hallucinating, and he was banned from 20 London hotels. How to judge a drunk, and the hate he denies when sober? Interviewees speculate on received antisemitism, an urge to self-destruct, the worth of his public penance. The film finds trails of damage, received and wrought. The Jewish head of Dior talks of waiting more than seven years for an apology. But before the incident, Galliano was allowed to fire his secretary for sounding the alarm about his mental health. Philippe Virgitti – whose verbal abuse by him in a cafe has been magnified while the world works through Galliano's shame – volunteers his testimony again: his trauma shows. Marlene Dietrich's summation in *Touch of Evil* (1958) seems applicable. 'He was some kind of man. What does it matter what you say about people?' And when millions keep saying it?

Nick Bradshaw, *Sight and Sound*, April 2024