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'Jeanette: The Childhood of Joan of Arc': Film Review | Cannes 2017

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Courtesy of Cannes
Directors' Fortnight

The Bottom Line

Joan of Arc Superstar.

French auteur Bruno Dumont ('Humanite,' 'Slack Bay') directed this song-and-dance take on the story of Joan of Arc's spiritual awakening.

Love them or hate them, the films of Bruno Dumont never cease to confound.

For a long time the 59-year-old auteur was known for his uncompromising — and uncompromisingly bleak — early works like *The Life of Jesus* and *Humanite*, which featured amateur actors and were set in the darkest corners of northern France.

Then the director switched gears about five years ago with the Juliette Binoche-starrer *Camille Claudel 1915*, following that up with the surprisingly hilarious TV miniseries, *Lil' Quinquin*. After another stab at comedy with *Slack Bay*, which played in competition last year, Dumont is back at the Cannes Directors' Fortnight with an attempt at, well, musical comedy in the bizarre yet often exhilarating spiritual *Jeanette: The Childhood of Joan of Arc* (*Jeanette, l'enfance de Jeanne d'Arc*).

Imagine a high school stage production set in the 15th century and featuring an electro-rock score that's equal parts Meatloaf, Skrillex and Cannibal Corpse (with a bit of French hip-hop thrown in for kicks) — all of it captured by Dumont's impeccable filmmaking acumen, with regular DP Guillaume Deffontaines doing another impressive job behind the camera — and you can get a vague idea of what's in store.

Unlikely to win over new converts but surely to please the choir, *Jeanette* can be both tedious and cinematically uplifting. It feels closer to the austere works of Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet than anything Dumont has ever done, asking the viewer to simply have faith in what's up there onscreen. As such, this Arte-financed production, which will also be released on TV, should find a few risk takers on the international art house circuit.

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Adapted from two versions of a theater piece by French writer Charles Peguy, the film follows the travails of young shepherdess Jeannette (Lise Leplat Prudhomme, then Jeanne Voisin), who lives in a countryside populated only by bushes, sheep and a few other kids. The year is 1425 and France is in the thick of the Hundred Years' War, with the British army on the verge of occupying the land unless someone fights back.

From the opening scene, when Jeannette walks straight up to the camera and belts out her first number, and then afterward busts into a sort of medieval EDM dance, it's clear that Dumont is not offering up your typical Joan of Arc biopic. (Although between screen adaptations by Carl Dreyer, Otto Preminger, Jacques Rivette and Luc Besson, there's probably never been such a thing as a typical version of her story.)

Through a series of musical sequences, each one a bit more insane than the last, Jeannette expresses her hatred of the English invaders ("Curse it and curse those/Who brought war to France") her religious awakening ("Everything is Christian under god's gaze") and growing desire to sacrifice herself for god and country ("To give up my soul to his suffering," "I'll go to the Dauphin, raise the siege of Orleans").

As this is a Dumont movie, the performers are all unknown but definitely have some pipes — except perhaps for one rapping teenager (Durand Lassois) who plays Jeannette's uncle, and who seems to have emerged straight out of Dumont Central Casting. Luckily he's also there to provide some comic relief, including a classic horse-and-saddle gag, as well as a scene where, as composer Igorrr's music blares on the soundtrack, the kid dabs and hands-spins in the background while someone plucks a chicken.

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But *Jeannette* isn't all fun and games, even if it's hard to tell at times whether Dumont isn't slightly mocking Peguy and his deeply Catholic-nationalistic beliefs by having his play interpreted by a bunch of kids dancing around in costumes. On the other hand, the utter seriousness, if not devoutness, with which those kids perform, can be fairly mesmerizing to watch, especially when the music accelerates into a speed metal jam and Jeanette starts to headbang, her hair swinging up and down in religious ecstasy.

After all, the line between headbanging and praying is perhaps more pervious than one would think, and what emerges from *Jeannette* is something like a divine faith in the power of film to capture Joan of Arc's gradual spiritual awakening, however ridiculous it may seem to both the audience and those around her. The acting outside the singing is often on the level of a class play, and the repetition of musical numbers and kitschy dances can grow tiresome to say the least, but you have to give Dumont credit for making something so silly seem so filled with conviction.

The fact that the director once again displays a true mastery of his craft, from Deffontaines' exquisite framing to the decision to record all the songs live rather than having them lip-synched (apparently one of the only times this has been done since Straub-Huillet's 1975 movie *Moses and Aron*), makes for a transfixing, if sometimes excruciating, cinematic experience. Some viewers will surely be driven from their seats, but those who stick around until the end may find themselves believing.

[1]

Production companies: Taos Films, Arte France, Pictanovo, Le Fresnoy

Cast: Lise Leplat Prudhomme, Jeanne Voisin, Lucile Gauthier, Victoria Lefebvre, Aline Charles, Elise Charles, Durand Lassois

Director: Bruno Dumont

Screenwriter: Bruno Dumont, based on the play "Les Mysteres de la charite de Jeanne d'Arc" by Charles Peguy

Producer: Jean Brehat

Director of photography: Guillaume Deffontaines

Production designer: Cedrid Ettouati

Costume designer: Alexandra Charles

Editors: Bruno Dumont, Basile Belkhiri

Composer: Igorrr

Casting director: Clement Morelle

Venue: Cannes Film Festival (Directors' Fortnight)

Sales: Luxbox

In French

115 minutes

Links:

[1] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/topic/cannes-film-festival>