

MOVIES

Review: Joan of Arc Is a Young Headbanger in 'Jeannette'

Jeannette: The Childhood of Joan of Arc | NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Bruno Dumont

History, Musical | 1h 45m

By GLENN KENNY APRIL 12, 2018

Joan of Arc, a figure both inspiring and mystifying, is depicted frequently in film, but rarely has her girlhood been given a credible cinematic imagining. She was put to death at 19, and most of the actors who have played the saint were well above that age. Most famously, Ingrid Bergman was 32 when she portrayed the 16-to-19-year-old Joan in a 1948 film. So it's salutary that, with "Jeannette: The Childhood of Joan of Arc," the writer and director Bruno Dumont casts two genuinely young performers to play Joan at key stages of her life.

This is not the most unusual aspect of the film. "Jeannette" is also a musical, albeit a formally unconventional one. The characters do not break into song so much as adapt their declaiming styles to music when it crops up, which it does in a sometimes arbitrary way. As for the music, it would not be entirely accurate to call it "metal." Yes, there are abundant power chords and intimations of guitar shredding, but the riffs draw on medieval folk and international modes like flamenco; the rhythms, often with prominent electronic micro-beats, recall dance-music genres like drum-and-bass.

"Jeannette" has a small cast, and its production values are minimal compared to most period pictures. Mr. Dumont chose to shoot the movie in the North of France, not the Eastern Meuse region where Joan was from; late in the film, in a scene ostensibly set in winter, the cottage where Joan lives with her family is covered in thriving ivy. So certain aspects of verisimilitude are

dispensed with, without making a big deal over it.

What the movie is left with are the performers enacting the characters and their dilemmas. Lise Leplat Prudhomme, 8 years old at the time of filming, plays young Jeannette in 1425, the year she had her first vision. (Here, too, the director takes liberties, as most histories of Joan say she was 13 that year.) Skipping in a stream, she chants a variant of the Lord's Prayer, bemoaning the fact that God's name is "so far from being hallowed." Mr. Dumont adapted his script largely from Charles Péguy's late-19th-century poetic theater work "Jeanne d'Arc," and the way the characters switch from speaking to singing, as well as the sparseness of the settings, sometimes give the work the feel of an oratorio.

Except the characters don't only sing, they dance, and in astonishing ways. Ms. Prudhomme twirls, cartwheels, stomps and headbangs, as does Jeanne Voisin later on as the teenage Jeanne, who's dropped the "ette" from her name. It's a bit funny, but it's also more than that.

Between the music and the dance, the temptation is to conclude that Mr. Dumont is trying to "modernize" Joan's story, as she becomes determined to follow her visions and create an army to save France. Given that the very act of filming is a modernizing factor, that's true in a sense. But his artistic aim is, I think, the inverse of that. "Jeannette" throws the modern back at the medieval, making no distinction between religious ecstasy and that experienced in certain contemporary contexts of music and ritual. It's a provocative proposition that yields a film of genuine spiritual dimension.

Jeannette: The Childhood of Joan of Arc NYT Critic's Pick

Director Bruno Dumont

Stars Lise Leplat Prudhomme, Jeanne Voisin, Lucile Gauthier, Victoria Lefebvre, Aline Charles

Running Time 1h 45m

Genres History, Musical

Movie data powered by [IMDb.com](https://www.imdb.com)

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Not rated. In French with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 45 minutes.

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