In Silence Deep the Legions Stream

By Mark Fitzgerald

Clare Denis has a remarkable understanding of what works well on screen. Her latest film, *Beau Travail,* is a visual *tour de force* both in range and rhythm. Set on a remote East African outpost in Djibouti, Denis gives this arid coastal landscape a language that speaks for itself. Indeed, there isn't much dialogue, so one can assume that the sound of the land—accentuated through an adaptation of Benjamin Britten's Opera—has a pulse to it much like the throbbing sun that beats on the heads of the men who train here. There is a beauty to the contrast of the volcanic desert and the blue-green waters that Denis juxtaposes with the movements of the French Foreign Legion—played principally by Denis Lavant (Galoup), Michael Subor (Forestier), and Grégoire Colin (Sentain). It helped, of course, that Agnès Godard, who has worked with Denis before and has an impeccable eye for detail, was the cinematographer, and that Bernardo Montet, who also played one of the legionnaires, helped stage and choreograph some of the drills.

The film, which Denis co-wrote with Jean-Paul Ferguson, is loosely based on Melville's, *Billy Budd,* and, like the narrator in that novella, assumes an almost foreboding distance to its characters. Though the camera stays with Lavant for most of the film's ninety minutes, and though at the start we see Lavant in Marseille looking back on his legion days in Africa, Denis's foreigner's stance never really allows us to feel sure that it's his story that's unfolding. Maybe this is why hardly anyone speaks throughout: the emptiness of the wasteland has taken hold of the mindset. Like Melville, Denis gives us a world where nothingness is the pervading mood; only it's taken a step further: nothing happens, plot and character development are almost completely imperceptible, and the tension that builds on the often long droughts of silence—any moment we feel something is going to snap—simulates an expectation that tarnishes our appreciation of the cinematography, which, by the way, had enough poetry and *raison d' être* to launch the film into the Venice, Toronto, and New York Film Festivals last year.

One of the most beautiful displays of camera work is the image of the Red Sea superimposed over the movement of a hand writing in a journal: the waves and the pen flow together in a serene motion that reflects the pale tone of Galoup's meditation: "Maybe freedom begins with remorse," he says twice over. Galoup is the sergeant of the Foreign Legion and can be compared to Melville's John Claggart, just as Bruno Forestier, Galoup's superior officer and the commander of the Legion is based on Captain Vere,

and Gilles Sentain, the handsome and compassionate legionnaire is analogous to Billy Budd. So the contrasts in characters are as conspicuous and contiguous as the desert and the ocean. Galoup is as evil as Sentain is good, but is cloaked in a position of respectability, which allows him to seem sane, although his contempt for Sentain, like Claggart's for Billy, is entirely alienated from reason.

It is not that difficult, however, to connect the dots: Sentain rescues a drowning man from a helicopter crash and wins the favor of Forestier, whom Galoup, in his own stoic manner, admires and follows. Out of resentment, Galoup drops Sentain in the middle of the desert and gives him a faulty compass, a trap set by Galoup that plays on the sympathy Sentain shows for a fellow legionnaire who has been unfairly disciplined. But the compass is recovered by a group of natives and somehow—we never quite know how—Forestier discovers that Galoup was responsible for Sentain's supposed death (actually, he is rescued by some natives, and after collapsing on the shoreline—a striking closing image—becomes immersed in salt) and discharges him from the legion dishonorably. This is a reversal of *Billy Budd* (Claggart is killed accidentally by Billy who is hung as a martyr) not just because it's more the antagonist's story than Sentain's, but also because as Galoup lets loose at the end to an overworked version of Corona's "Rhythm of the Night" the implication is that at long last he's free.

Although Lavant's and Subor's and Colin's performance seems hardly worth mentioning—the nature of Denis's conceptual approach seeks to resist that kind of analysis—it is worth noting that the main cast filmed exceptionally well under the desert sun and even appeared graceful in the taciturn parts they played. Lavant, who has made a name for himself in America with his lead roles in three of Leos Carax's films (most notably *Bad Blood* in 1986), perhaps most closely resembles the character he's supposed to be; he has a pug-faced, sinister look and a pallor that, as Melville has said of Claggart, indicates "something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood."

Subor's name, Bruno Forestier, links Denis to Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat,* a benchmark of the *Nouvelle Vague* that swept through France in the early sixties. In that movie, which was banned in country when it was first released, Subor played an army deserter whose name was also Bruno Forestier. So he has the age and wisdom to make credible a captain that is as austere as he is equitable.

At the apex of the triangle is Colin, who in 1997 played in Denis's *Nenette and Boni,* but ironically offers the weakest tie to Melville and his vision of Billy. Someone like Romaine Duris might have pulled it off better. He has enough looks and charisma to command the respect and admiration of a legion. Maybe the problem with Colin is that he never makes us accept that he can be all that popular and threatening to Lavant. This

probably also has to do with Denis's minimalist mode and the fact that it is Lavant, not Colin, who for the bulk of the film, basks in the limelight.

Denis grew up in Africa and spent some time in Djibouti before it gained its independence in 1977, so she knows the lay of the land and even what it felt like during the period of turbulence and unrest when it was still a French colony. The African women, portrayed throughout the film as witnesses to the Legion's presence, are more than just the *cinéma vérité* of what has too often been assumed to be the backbone of fine filmmaking. Denis curves an ironic frame around the meaninglessness of the Legion and its activities in a postcolonial Africa. The space the native women inhabit is much different from the outpost the legionnaires have installed. Yet, in many ways, they are the noble guardians of what is good and just; for it is they who save Sentain and denounce the compass, which has certain derangement about it that is unmistakably evil. The Legion is still as callous and unforgiving as it's ever been, but it has outlived itself. The isolation it tries so hard to embrace falls short of achieving any real relevance in the postcolonial world.

There's also a gaze at the activities of the Legion that generates a homoerotic strain, making it feel as though Denis is preparing us for a confrontation or conflict that is more than just a suggestion. We see the men crawling under barbed wire, scaling walls, tightrope walking thirty feet above the ground, and hurling themselves at each other bare-chested in a way that is both violent and amorous; there's even a showdown dance where Lavant and Colin slowly circle each other without ever loosing eye contact. This is military ballet at its best and the camera angles are exceptional, but where does it lead us? There were large doses of footage that bordered on monotony. Whenever there is pure and unrestrained action, such as Colin's valiant rescue swim or his heated blow to Lavant's jaw, Denis simply mutes the sound or slows down speed, depriving us of the true sensation and energy of the moment.

At least in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* the postmodernist gaze offered some idiosyncrasy to the voices and engaged us in the immediacy of the action. But Denis emphasizes the prelude and upshot to the point of blandness. Where is the here and now? Yes, subtlety has always been a hallmark of French filmmaking, and nothing about *Beau Travail* is really all that hard to figure out, but there's a difference between asking someone to leap from point A to point C (B, of course, is eliminated because that's too easy or it's been done too many times before) and presuming that they will.

Sentain is left out in the middle of nowhere and walks futilely until he drops, yet we don't see any of his anguish. And where is that remorse Galoup promised us? The suggestion of suicide is hardly a fair one: the camera moves slowly across his body as he grips his 32

caliber and stretches out on the perfectly tucked bed he just made. But we never see his face. A rare moment, indeed, because it is his face more than anyone else's that Denis centers on, and it has a way of staying with you long after the film is over.

In short, *Beau Travail* places too much faith in its imagery. It's not a film for everyone, and I don't just mean those who don't care for clip after clip of ambiguity. After all, even Melville once said that "honesty prescribes directness, sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier." Denis's frontier is a challenge for postcolonialism and a later France.