

A Fashionable Man is Captured in 'Yves Saint Laurent'

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Fashion is art, and the canvas is provided by the wearer of that fashion. The designer biography depicted in “Yves Saint Laurent” is one of tortured genius, as Saint Laurent influenced and commodified the world of clothing and accessory creation for over 50 years.

The focus of this French film biography is in the portrayal of Pierre Niney as Saint Laurent, following him from 20-year-old assistant to Christian Dior in 1950s Paris, to international private label superstar through the 1970s. Along the way the truths of his intense work ethic and ability to figure out the next trend is tied into his psychological problems and relationships, especially with his lover and business partner, Pierre Bergé. For lovers of fashion and design history, this is a must see. For the rest of us, it provides a glimpse into a business and art form that eventually filters down into the clothing that everyone wears during the day.

The design wunderkind Yves Saint Laurent (Pierre Niney) joins the Paris fashion house of Christian Dior in the late 1950s at the impossibly young age of 20. After proving himself to the master, he is asked to take over the clothing and accessory line after Dior unexpectedly dies. At the same time, he worries about his parents stuck in Algiers during wartime, being drafted for the same war and his own tenuous psyche. He is checked into a sanitarium.



The Title Character (Pierre Niney) and Model Victoire (Charlotte Le Bon) in 'Yves Saint Laurent'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

He is rescued from there by his friend Pierre Bergé (Guillaume Gallienne), who convinces him to start his own fashion line. After securing outside money, the legend begins, and Saint Laurent's creations affect trends that last for the next 40 years. In the meantime, Bergé and Saint Laurent become lovers, but their relationship goes through the trials of wealth, artistic pressure and fame.

The era of fashion before our modern intense focus on it – “what are you wearing?” – is fascinating, and the behind-the-scenes mechanics of actually producing wearable clothing that looks good on a runway is well represented. Saint Laurent is portrayed as the tormented trendsetter, not driven as much by ambition but his own need to feel necessary in the world. French actor PNiney creates him as humble and perplexed, and that indecisiveness bleeds into his personal life.

Saint Laurent's lover is vital to his story, and Gallienne as Bergé provides a near perfect counterbalance to the oft-distracted fashion guru. He is in essence the designer's caretaker, stepping back and allowing the genius to flow, while he takes care of the business. Guillaume adds just the right touch of pathos and snootiness to the role, which allows empathy from anyone who has been in such relationships.

The fashion designs of Saint Laurent are in essence a co-star of the film. His major runway shows in the 1960s and '70s are highlighted, and they are always triumphs, despite what state of mind the creator is in. Again, those eras seem almost innocent in our age of instant snarking, but it also shows how a classic point of view never goes out of “fashion” and the unique artistic side of Saint Laurent became an obsession for the ages.



Pierre Bergé (Guillaume Gallienne) Consults the Designer in 'Yves Saint Laurent'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The 106-minute film abruptly cuts off at a certain point in Saint Laurent's life – the middle age to old gazillionaire years – and that loss is felt at the end, especially in the sense of how fashion has changed, and how little mystery there is in the designer ethos in the modern era. Perhaps that was the point, to spotlight Saint Laurent at his peak creative powers, without the nastiness of accounting for the profits.

There is a telling part about clothes in the film “The Devil Wears Prada.” The roots of an out-of-fashion sweater are traced right back to the influencers and designers of years before. Everyone becomes a victim of their circumstances, and every life act of Yves Saint Laurent eventually ended up in our closets.

“Yves Saint Laurent” is currently in limited release in Chicago and elsewhere. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Pierre Niney, Guillaume Gallienne, Charlotte Le Bon and Nicolai Kinski. Screenplay adapted by Jalil Lespert, Laurence Benaim and Jérémie Guez. Directed by Jalil Gaspert. Rated “R”



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