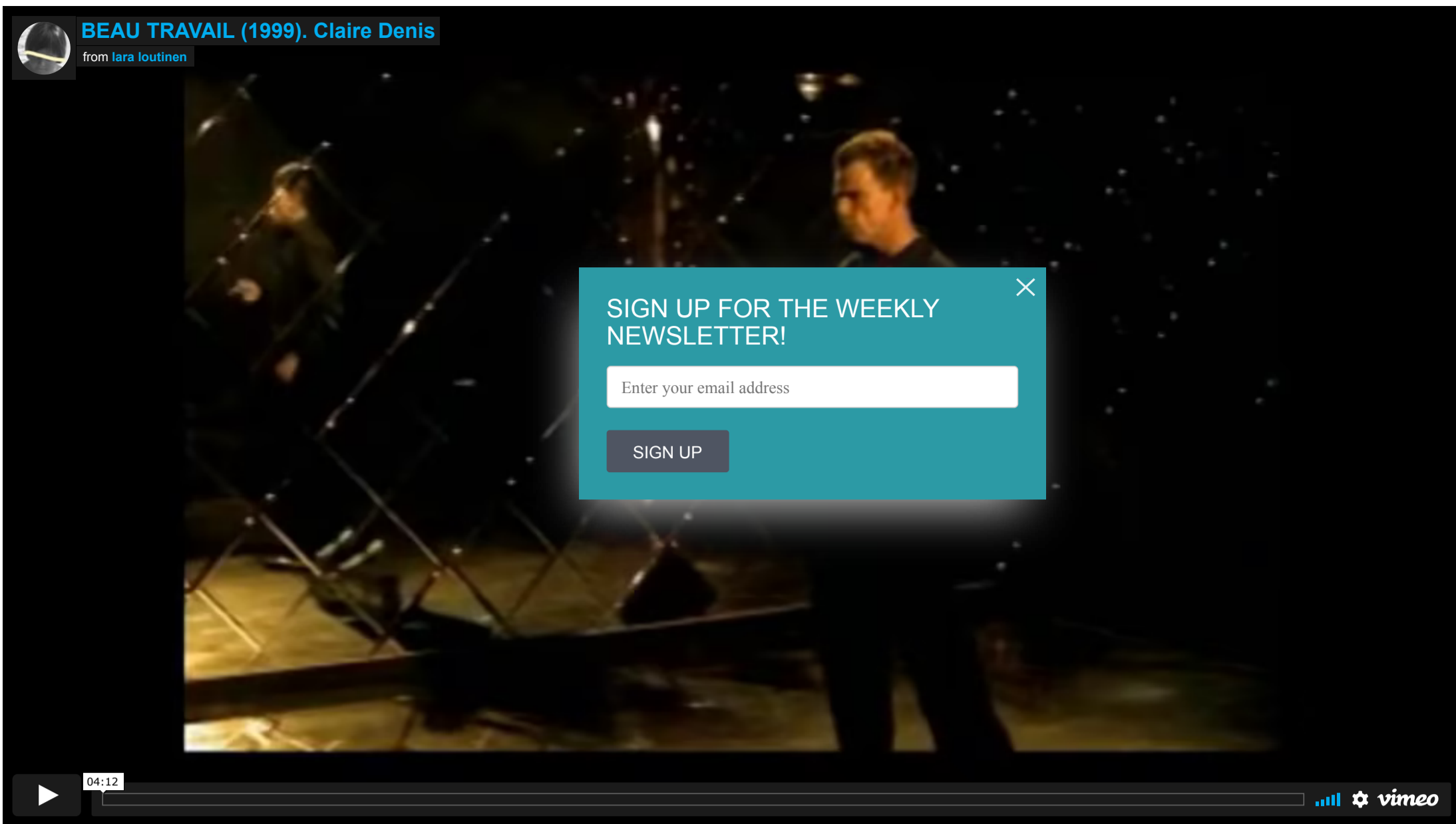


GOOD SH*T

A REASON NOT TO SKIP THE CLOSING CREDITS



WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

This is arresting cinema.

By Heather Hughes
JULY 9, 2015

French actor Denis Lavant has a slightly simian appearance. His face, dominated by a heavy forehead, deep-set eyes and a broad, blunt nose, can move quickly from melancholy to feral. His large head sits atop a small, wiry frame. In short, he's an unlikely leading actor, let alone a dancer; he doesn't have the classic, or classical, physiognomy of someone who works in a medium that frequently expects physical perfection to equal or exceed that of physical prowess and artistic interpretation.

Lavant's dancing isn't pretty or beautiful either; it's contorted, often frenzied, occasionally borderline grotesque, which makes it all the more mesmerizing, and never more so than during the closing credits of Claire Denis's *Beau Travail*.

A loose adaptation of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, *Beau Travail* centers on the destructive, career-ending — and, as the movie's final scene suggests, life-ending — [obsession](#) of a French Foreign Legion officer (played by Lavant) with a young recruit. The lead-in to the end credits begins with Lavant standing near a wall-length mirror in a [nightclub](#), although no one else is visible. The screen is Lavant's alone.

With one hand in his pocket and a cigarette held between two fingers of the other like a forgotten thought, Lavant has the kind of cool that is often mimicked but rarely achieved. As "The Rhythm of the Night," an early-'90s club hit, plays, he slides one arm along the mirrored wall and leans into it like he's assessing the (empty) [dance floor](#), then lowers his arm, fingers trailing across the mirror. He takes a few steps; he spins casually, almost like a throwaway gesture; he drops to one knee and rocks back and forth; he rises again, his movements becoming less casual and increasingly explosive as he swirls and whirls, all with that cigarette still in hand.

After the names of the lead actors have filled the screen, the movie cuts back to Lavant. The cigarette is gone now; and his prowl has become frenetic. He leaps sideways into the air, then collapses to the floor before leaping up again. He's like a possessed rag doll, or a marionette barely under the control of a spastic puppeteer.

I watched the credits scroll to the very end, which isn't unusual for me, but rarely do I watch impatiently, expectantly, hoping for another glimpse of one actor. But that's how I watched the credits of *Beau Travail*, waiting for a cut back to Lavant dancing. Even when the studio's logo and copyright info appeared on the screen, signaling the very end, I still hoped for one final shot of Lavant in motion.

Denied that, I downloaded "Rhythm of the Night" to my iTunes playlist, but by itself, the song lacked emotional propulsion. It was hollow, not hypnotic; it was surface without subtext. The song achieved resonance only with the visual accompaniment of Lavant in an empty club dancing frenetically, frantically, beautifully by himself.

Heather Hughes, OZY Author

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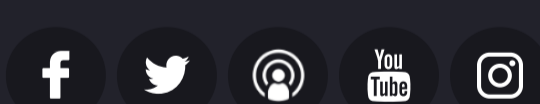
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