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Suffragette (12A)

TUES 14 JUNE, 19:15 - FILM CLUB

Dir Sarah Gavron/2015 UK/148 mins/ English / Carey Mulligan, Anne-Marie Duff, Helena Bonham Carter

The film pointedly tells an unfinished story, one that ends on a bittersweet, equivocal note. It takes place in 1912, at an important moment in the British suffragist movement and very much in the middle of the long journey toward equality. Agitation for the vote had been going on for decades, and the franchise would not be extended fully to women until 1928. In “Suffragette,” demonstrators fill the streets of London and militants carry out acts of vandalism, smashing windows and blowing up mailboxes. The chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, holds hearings on a parliamentary amendment. The cause of voting rights is embodied by Emmeline Pankhurst, who is seen in newspaper photographs and briefly seen in the person of Meryl Streep.

Ms. Streep is on hand more to supply a benediction than to play a fully dramatic role. One of the ways “Suffragette” escapes the traps of its genre is to focus not on the leadership but on the rank and file, on an ordinary woman whose life is changed by political engagement. Her name is Maud Watts, and she’s played by Carey Mulligan with sombre determination and inspiring pluck. Maud works in an industrial laundry, alongside her husband, Sonny (Ben Whishaw), and scores of women for whom dangerous labour, low pay and sexual harassment are matters of daily routine. Maud accepts her lot, finding happiness with Sonny and their young son, George. She is caught up in suffragist activities almost by accident, out of curiosity and loyalty to a co-worker (Anne-Marie Duff). Before long she is attending clandestine meetings in the back room of a pharmacy run by Edith Ellyn (Helena Bonham Carter).

“Suffragette” unfolds partly as an Edwardian thriller, with a Special Branch detective (Brendan Gleeson) chasing after the militants as they plot their actions. It also has a strain of melodrama, as Maud is forced to make terrible sacrifices for the cause. What joins these narrative strands is the feminist insight that the subjugation of women extends from the highest reaches of government through the workplace and into the domestic sphere. They have no voice in Parliament, on the factory floor or at



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home, and while nobody — least of all Maud — supposes that the vote will solve everything, it will at least be a start.

This does not mean that the film depicts all men as monsters, though Maud’s supervisor (Geoff Bell) is a fine portrait of male depravity. But “Suffragette” also avoids the all-too-common tactics of placing a sympathetic member of the oppressor class at the centre of the drama or making it all about the awakening of a man’s conscience. Instead, it shows the limits of solidarity even when the sympathetic ties of family or class are involved. It also underlines the viciousness with which power reacts when it is challenged.

A.O Scott, New York Times

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