



Strike Won

In 1968, women fight for equal pay

MADE IN DAGENHAM: Directed by Nigel Cole. Written by Billy Ivory. Cinematography, John de Borman. Music, David Arnold. Starring Sally Hawkins, Miranda Richardson, Bob Hoskins and Rosamund Pike. Sony Pictures Classics, 2010. R. 113 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

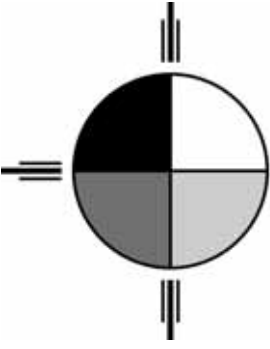
Made in Dagenham is the story of the Ford seamstresses who, during the summer of 1968, went on strike when they were reclassified as unskilled labor. Their job was to stitch seat covers, which is hard enough to say,

let alone do, over and over without making a mistake. While the actual participants of the sewing machinists' strike were employed at two different assembly plants, *Made in Dagenham* (rhymes with bubblegum) takes a cozier point of view, imagining a more coherent group housed conveniently under one roof. If only the convenience ended there. Loose, frilly and as morally complex as an episode of *Laverne and Shirley*, *Made in Dagenham* takes an epic struggle for equal rights and drenches it in melodrama and cliché.

It didn't have to be this way. While director Nigel Cole (*Calendar Girls*) has made a career out of loopy, conventional comedies, this time around he's enlisted Sally Hawkins (*Happy-Go-Lucky*) as his leading lady. Hawkins, a slight brunette who resembles a young Lily Tomlin, specializes in perpetually befuddled women who discover their hidden strength. In *Made in Dagenham*, Hawkins portrays Rita, a competent, self-deprecating seamstress whose quivering voice is at odds with her extroverted peers. Note her early, brief confrontation with her son's abusive schoolteacher, after which she's left speechless by his arrogance. We're intended to see her as an afterthought, as a bystander in the upcoming labor dispute,

but even casual viewers won't be fooled: This is the first and last time Rita will be dumbstruck in *Made in Dagenham*. So it follows that, in the very next scene, she's asked by her supervisor (a lively Bob Hoskins) to represent her fellow machinists at the union bargaining table. Based on what qualifications we can only guess, although guessing what comes next is all too easy in *Made in Dagenham*.

Such overly constructed, overly pat plotting is part of what holds back the film. To its credit, while *Made in Dagenham* is light-hearted, it's also large-spirited in its treatment of the seamstresses, a cheeky bunch who are aided by a wealthy insider (Rosamund Pike, *Never Let Me Go*) and Secretary of State Barbara Castle (a wry Miranda Richardson). But the men of *Dagenham* are such oafs, such morons of universal thick-headedness, that their incompetence actually undermines the women's eventual victory. In short, these men are trampled too easily. *Dagenham* is hobbled by a movie version of history in which a couple of short, well-timed speeches can change people's outlook — and change the world. What's more, the film adheres to its era like a pair of hot pants, at times seeming overly preoccupied with its day-glo costumes and "Woolly Bully" soundtrack. In other words, *Dagenham* resorts to old stereotypes about short skirts, tall hair and using sex to get men's attention. It's not a bust so much as a collection of busts in search of a better movie. **EW**



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