

A vibrant Mulligan brings historic struggle to life in 'Suffragette'

Review by JOCELYN NOVECK
AP National Writer

First the bad news: "Suffragette" isn't a Meryl Streep movie, despite what you may have seen in the trailer. She has but a few moments of screen time.

And now the good news: It's a Carey Mulligan movie.

Mulligan, like Streep, is simply a mesmerizing actress, one who can make even pedestrian material sing with the honesty, sophistication and nuance she brings to every role, on screen or stage (count yourself eternally lucky if you caught her recent Broadway run in "Skylight.") In "Suffragette," which without her would be a far, far less compelling movie, she doesn't merely entertain us with her skill. She brings to vibrant life an important part of our global history that's easy to forget — the struggle for a woman's right to vote.

The story of the "suffragettes" in early 20th century Britain may bring to mind the joyously daffy Mrs. Banks singing "Sister Suffragette" in "Mary Poppins." But even though that character spoke jovially of women chain-

ing themselves to wheels or being carried off to prison, "Suffragette" reminds us that the fight involved violence, hunger strikes, bombings, beatings, even death.

Though the movie, directed by Sarah Gavron, includes real-life characters like Emmeline Pankhurst (Streep) and Emily Wilding Davison (Natalie Press), who both have tiny but crucial roles, its main character is an amalgam. Maud Watts (Mulligan) is a 24-year-old mother who spends her days working in the same fetid laundry — awful chemicals, brutal hours, sexual abuse from the boss — where her own mother labored.

Almost accidentally, Maud falls in with a group of women activists whose fight for the vote is gaining steam — and desperation. A fellow laundry worker is due to testify before a government committee on the issue, but a beating has left her unable to appear, and Maud is drafted. ("Are you a suffragette now?" her husband asks, suspiciously.) Her simple, heartfelt answers move the male lawmakers, but the measure fails. When that defeat is announced publicly,

it leads to a melee in which women are beaten by police and dragged to prison, Maud among them.

Her furious husband (Ben Whishaw) insists that Maud never "shame" him like this again. (Like virtually every male character here, he is wholly unenlightened.) But soon enough, Maud is compelled to go hear a speech from the movement's leader, Pankhurst, who speaks briefly from a balcony before fleeing the police. Maud manages a quick word with Pankhurst as she's hurrying off: "Never surrender," the elder woman says.

And so Maud doesn't. She returns home to discover her husband has kicked her out, banning her from seeing their 4-year-old son. She finds quarters with fellow suffragettes and becomes more emboldened by the day. She attacks her abusive boss. Facing the police inspector (Brendan Gleeson) who pursues her like Javert pursues Valjean in "Les Misérables," she tells him that the suffragettes are waging war because it's "the only language men listen to."

Mulligan — whose portrayal is really the only tru-

ly nuanced one in the film, though Helena Bonham Carter gives fine support as a fellow warrior — finds a way to project determination and zeal but also sadness and hopelessness, all at once. The scene where she loses custody of her son is truly wrenching. As is the scene where she's force-fed in prison to thwart her hunger strike.

The film ends with a recreation of a shocking, seminal moment in the suffragette movement — one best not revealed here. And then, during credits, we're given a list of countries across the globe, along with the year they granted women the right to vote. (France: 1944. Switzerland: 1971. Saudi Arabia: "Promised.") If anything, "Suffragette" should have an impact the next time any of us are feeling too busy or tired to vote.

"Suffragette," a Focus Features release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for "some intense violence, thematic elements, brief strong language and partial nudity." Running time: 106 minutes. Three stars out of four.



Photos by Steffan Hill/Focus Features via AP

In this image released by Focus Features, Carey Mulligan portrays Maud Watts, center, in a scene from "Suffragette."



In this image released by Focus Features, Helena Bonham Carter portrays Edith Ellyn, center, in a scene from "Suffragette."

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