

Film Review: “Suffragette”

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The movie *Suffragette* is the first feature film that dramatically depicts the monumental struggle for women’s right to vote in pre-World War I England. (Please erase from your memory the horrible, and I mean horrible, portrayal of suffragettes in the Disney monstrosity *Mary Poppins*.)



Directed by Sarah Gavron, with screenplay by Abi Morgan, the project also had the support and star power of Meryl Streep in a brilliant-as-always portrayal of Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the militant suffragette organization, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU).

This film is a powerful and moving story of women’s struggle and sacrifice to win the right to vote and, in addition, to be considered citizens and treated with dignity. In twentieth-century England, there were two major suffrage organizations. One was the constitutionalist suffragist organization, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). The movie focuses on the activities of the more militant suffragette organization, The Women’s Social and Political Union, (WSPU) which was founded and led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her two daughters Christabel and Sylvia. The militants used in-your-face tactics, unheard of at the time, such as heckling politicians, conducting mass nonviolent civil disobedience, smashing windows and blowing up mailboxes and buildings, even the Brighton Pavilion. They used acid to etch “Votes for Women” on men’s golf courses. One suffragette debutante had the audacity to ask King George for the vote! The Liberal government responded by jailing the suffragettes, who then retaliated by hunger striking. Desperate and unwilling to deal with the basic demand for the vote, the government then began forced feeding (read: torturing) the women.

Not all women campaigning for the vote were middle or upper class. Some, like Emmeline’s daughter, Sylvia, were socialists. Many trade union and labour militants supported the women’s suffrage struggle, albeit warily. They were concerned that the middle-class suffrage fighters would support Tories and Liberals over the nascent Labour Party.

Suffragette takes place mainly in London’s East End, a diverse, working-class immigrant community. *Suffragette*’s protagonist, Maud Watts, is a married mother who works in a laundry. She embodies the experiences most working women faced and face today — long hours, back-breaking labor, sexual harassment and dangerous working conditions. She comes home to a tiny, dingy, poorly lit, badly heated flat to shop, cook, clean and take care of a husband and son. Maud, a very conventional working-class woman, is drawn into the WSPU’s orbit after witnessing (and enjoying) window breaking in the more middle-class West End of London. Maud ends up testifying about the horrendous working conditions women face in the East End, joins demonstrations and attends meetings. She meets other WSPU comrades but finds herself ostracized by some friends; her

husband kicks her out of their home and takes away her son. But Maud finds sisterhood and comradeship in the WSPU and the struggle, even as the suffragettes move away from mass militancy and more toward individual acts of property destruction. The movie ends with the martyrdom/death of Emily Wilding Davison and her massive funeral. There were no dry eyes in the theater.

As a historian of the British suffrage movement, I could quibble with some of the historical inaccuracies. But the strength of the movie, along with the brilliant performances, lies in its emphasis on the struggle, on sisterhood, on comradeship. The movie doesn't ignore the real class differences that existed in the suffrage movement, though it avoids exploring political differences between the suffragist and suffragette wings. The scene of forcible feeding was horrifically real. (And now, think of what the U.S. government is doing in Guantanamo.) There was not a whiff of the "lean-in" feminism, power-feminism, or anyone-can-do-it feminism that get touted these days. Even though Emmeline Pankhurst was quite an elitist, she believed fervently in women's inherent worth, dignity and emancipation. It is so clear in the movie that without women's feminist militancy there would be no women's suffrage. (Partial suffrage was granted in 1918; all women over age 21 gained the vote in 1928.)

U.S. women won the vote in 1920. (The U.S. activists called themselves "suffragists," while their detractors, seeking to belittle and diminish them, called them "suffragettes.") What galled me at the end of the movie was the thought that today, while women have the constitutional right to vote, the U.S. Congress, the Supreme Court, and state governments are taking the vote away from the poor, people of color, the elderly, youth and students. It's hard to believe that in this day and age, women have to take up the fight for birth control, contraception and the right to be sexual. For every gain women have made, thanks to suffragists and suffragettes and then women's liberation activists in the post-1965 era, we always have to be on the alert and always fighting to save what we have as we continue to demand more. Hmmmm, maybe it's time for some in-your-face window smashing.