

## Suffragette (2015)

*A compelling historical period drama about women, by women*

★★★★

By Olivia Foster

The Suffragettes are a vital part of female history, [known] for their invaluable efforts towards change in voting legislation. The movement consisted of members of the Women's Social and Political Union, well known for their militant action. At the forefront at this movement was Emmeline Pankhurst, who believed that 'deeds, not words' would guide their movement.

The movie is exceptionally inspiring to watch because of the focus on the working women who were part of the Suffragette movement. It is this narrative angle taken in the screenplay that makes it such a captivating watch. As women in the filmmaking industry, Sarah Gavron and Abi Morgan, have delivered cinematography that encapsulates the celebration of the female voice, in its dedication to detail in research.

Director Sarah Gavron bases *Suffragette* on the suffrage movement in the pivotal years of 1912 and 1913, where she gives a voice to the 'working women' of the time.

The movie was shown recently as part of Film4's month long 'Phenomenal Women in Film' series, which concluded on International Women's Day. Such a day provides an opportunity to reflect on how women are in a place where they can contribute to literary culture.

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The screenplay, written by Abi Morgan, features the protagonist as a mother and laundry worker, named Maud Watts

(Cary Mulligan).

Her character becomes immersed in the Suffrage movement in a powerful scene where her realisations of injustice overcome her during a speech to David Lloyd George.

Through inspiring influence from other suffragette members, such as Violet Miller (Anne-Marie Duff) and Edith Ellwyn (Helena Bonham Carter), Maud's radicalism takes the form of hunger-strikes and the bombing of pillar boxes. Moments in the movie that depict such actions are striking, as a forceful reminder of what women in the twentieth century sacrificed.

A consistent obstacle to the success of women throughout the movie are men, demonstrating prejudice and sexism in the workplace, as well as the home. The sequence of these problematic events leads up the iconic event at the Epsom Derby that resulted in the death of Emily Davison. The performance from Mulligan (*The Great Gatsby*, *An Education*) is emotive in a way that is timelessly empathetic for modern women in the wake of the #TimesUp movement. The director shared that she hoped the movie 'will provoke discussion', which is inevitable in the current political climate, provoked by the insanity of such cinematic content.

A sense of inspiration in the movie comes from the choice to point the lens at the 'foot soldiers' of the cause, despite having multi-Oscar award winner Meryl Streep portraying Emmeline Pankhurst. This decision from the writer and director is one that demonstrates genuine compassion and dedication to resurrecting the voice of the suffragette.

Gavron is successful in avoiding romanticising the harrowing struggles of suffrage, through her attention to research.

As a graduate of English from York University, it is encouraging that the director looked to the publishing of *The Suffragette* newspaper for first-hand accounts. *The Suffragette* was published regularly by members of the Pankhurst family, with illustrations depicting the suffragettes as victims of press, and force feeding in prisons. The Newspaper was an effective use of propaganda. Most significantly so in 1913 for an illustration depicting Emily Davidson as an angel, and therefore a martyr for the cause.

Gavron shared that they had access to '[...] folders of unpublished letters in the library of the Museum of London'. The access to literary and visual aids from such organisations makes the film an undoubtedly beneficial viewing experience.

In propaganda and striking acts, the working women of the Suffragette movement are an inspiration that is reinforced by Gavron and Morgan.

After a memorable reminder of these women, the filmmakers do not miss an opportunity to inform viewers of countries that still do not have the vote.

In western cultures where women can freely work without prejudice, the movie consolidates its message in that final moment. *Suffragette* is a voice for working women, past and present, that must be heard.