‘Danish Girl,’ ‘Spotlight’ to open Mill Valley Film Fest

By David Lewis  Published 11:00 pm, Monday, September 14, 2015

Long a showcase for future Oscar contenders, the Mill Valley Film Festival unveiled a potent lineup Tuesday that is sure to enhance its lofty autumn tradition.

“We are really excited about the 38th,” said Mark Fishkin, the festival director who founded the Marin County event in 1977 and turned it into an internationally renowned film destination. “We have a well-balanced program, with 183 films from 50 countries – 13 world premieres, five North American premieres and 23 U.S. premieres.”

The opening night program Oct. 8 will feature the highly anticipated “The Danish Girl,” based on a true story about Lili Elbe, who underwent gender reassignment surgery a century ago. Oscar winner Tom Hooper (“The King’s Speech,” which opened the Mill Valley fest in 2010) directed the film; top billing goes to Eddie Redmayne, an Oscar recipient for “The Theory of Everything,” which played at the festival last fall before landing a best picture nomination.

Also on this year’s opening night marquee is “Spotlight,” a story with shades of “All the President’s Men,” except the journalistic target is the Catholic Church and its cover-up of abusive priests. The formidable acting ensemble includes Michael Keaton, Liev Schreiber, Mark Ruffalo, Rachel McAdams, John Slattery and Stanley Tucci.

Other high-profile selections include Steven Spielberg’s “Bridge of Spies,” a Cold War thriller with Tom Hanks; “Carol,” Todd Haynes’ love story that features Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara; and “I Smile Back,” in which Sarah Silverman portrays a drug-addicted housewife.
The festival — which will show films at multiple venues in Mill Valley, San Rafael, Larkspur and Corte Madera — will close Oct. 18 with " Suffragette," a historical drama about the struggle of British women to secure the right to vote. The film is headlined by Carey Mulligan, Meryl Streep and Helena Bonham Carter.

The special premieres and “Big Nights” of the festival will focus on attendees Mulligan, Hooper and Silverman; director Marcel Ophuls (whose classic “ Sorrow and the Pity” will get a screening); director Barbet Schroeder (whose “ Amnesia” is the festival centerpiece); director Catherine Hardwicke (at the fest with “ Miss You Already”); director Thomas McCarthy (“ Spotlight”); Brie Larson (“ Room”); the “ True Detective” director, Oakland-born Cary Fukunaga (“ Beasts of No Nation”); Taryn Manning (“ A Light Beneath Their Feet”); and Jena Malone (“ Angelica”).

“It’s an incredible year, actually,” said Zoe Elton, the festival’s director of programming. “The big films are interesting, engaging, provocative. And the international films are fascinating.”

The bevy of international work includes Cannes award-winners “ Son of Saul” (Hungary), “ Dheepan” (France) and “ Rams” (Iceland). The always-impressive documentary field features Gillian Armstrong’s “ Women He’s Undressed,” about legendary Hollywood costumer Orry-Kelly, and “ CODE: Debugging the Gender Gap,” about the lack of women in high tech.

There’s a couple of new twists to this year’s edition of the festival. For starters, there will be music nights almost every day at the Sweetwater Musi Hall in Mill Valley. Among those to perform are the Brothers Comatose, Dean Ween Group, the Mother Truckers, Olive and the Dirty Martinis, Tommy Igoe and Stroke 9.

The festival has had a long habit of programming its share of women directors, but this year it’s putting women even more in the spotlight with its “ Mind the Gap” program, billed both as a celebration and call to action to get more women in front and behind the camera. This theme will be a strong undercurrent in screenings, classes, panels, Q&A sessions, and tributes to artists.

And last, but not least, Mill Valley will have expanded screening opportunities this year.

“ We have reached the point where we have full daytime schedules not only on weekends, but also on weekdays,” Fishkin said. “That’s very exciting to us.”

David Lewis is a Bay Area freelance writer.

The Mill Valley Film Festival runs Oct. 8-18 at various venues in Mill Valley, San Rafael, Larkspur and Corte Madera. For more info: mvff.com
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