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'Danish Girl,' 'Spotlight' to open Mill Valley Film Fest

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



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CAPTION (millvalley0916_suffragette) Maud Watts (Carey Mulligan), right, rallies with another voting rights activist in the historical drama "Suffragette." The film is the closing night movie of the Mill Valley Film Festival.
CAPTION CREDIT: Focus Features

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.

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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.”

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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 Music 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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