

Female-Centric Stories ‘Widows,’ ‘The Favourite’ Blaze Trails This Oscar Season

By [RANDEE DAWN](#)



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The old adage goes, “Behind every great man is a great woman.” But a quick look at many of this year’s awards season films suggests that saying needs an update — perhaps to: “Behind every great woman is a man getting in her way.”

It’s not a stretch to look at such films as “[Colette](#),” “[Widows](#),” “[The Favourite](#),” “A Private War,” “Leave No Trace” and “The Wife” that way. Each features a female protagonist struggling to make her mark in the world, in spite of the obstacles men throw in their way. And in the current societal zeitgeist of #MeToo, it lends added resonance and a higher profile to each one of them.

“There’s a huge historical culture of women being silent, and in this moment, it feels like women are roaring — and consequently, work is being made that celebrates fantastic women in the past,” says Rebecca Lenkiewicz, who co-wrote “[Colette](#)” with director Wash Westmoreland and Richard Glatzer. “There’s a real hunger for these stories right now.”

For Steve McQueen, "Widows" director and co-screenwriter (with Gillian Flynn), the tale of the women left to clean up a debt after their husbands die in a heist is timely today — as timely as it was in the 1980s, when the story was originally told as a TV movie.

"It's bittersweet for me," he says. "I'm remaking a TV show that came out 30 years ago, and it's still very prevalent. Women continue to be overlooked and deemed not capable."

In some ways, it was ever so: "The Favourite" goes 300 years back to the reign of Queen Anne of England to tell its story of Anne, her intimate adviser Lady Marlborough and the young woman who comes between them. And it's the male politicians jockeying for power behind the scenes who bear the brunt of the satire.

"There's a comicalness to their desperation," says screenwriter Tony McNamara of the male antagonists. "They're trying a bit too hard and struggling because it's so hard for them to accept that they are not in power. In part, it's about how they deal with that."

Writing the men as antagonists in these stories could be tricky, because to make them monstrous would have made the women's stories less emotionally effective.

"It was a real change to make you understand what their marriage was about," says Westmoreland about his titular character, Colette, and her husband, Willy, who put his name on her works. "It's important to understand the hold men have over women isn't just cultural; it's personal, emotional and sexual."

"I have great empathy for the character of Joe Castleman," says "Wife" screenwriter Jane Anderson. She also scripted an antagonist that assumed the talent of his significant other, but ensured that the audience understood how his wife, Joan, was complicit in that deception. "I can empathize with what it feels like to have a passion for writing; to be brilliant but have no talent. It's tragic."

Yet for the father-daughter relationship in "Leave No Trace," the obstacles dad Will imposes on daughter Tom are not meant to hinder her existence in the world. As director and co-screenwriter (with Anne Rosellini) Debra Granik says, it's about Tom's coming of age and deciding to live within the world, rather than hiding out in the wild.

"Cleaving yourself from someone who has been the core person that you've interacted with and learned from, that's a very intense and charged thing," she says. "We need positive examples of when men are invested in women's success; we have so many examples of when that's not happening."

Though no one could have expected the ongoing cultural importance of #MeToo when any of these films were first being made, there's a good chance they'll have a more far-reaching impact in theaters because of the discussions being had today.

"It's a bit overdue," says Arash Amel, screenwriter of "A Private War," about war correspondent Marie Colvin. "Cultural shifts don't necessarily happen when they need to happen — so writers need to be there to write these stories. The dam has started to crack and crumble, so hopefully we'll see more like this."

Anderson certainly feels hopeful. She can still remember working on "Wife" as far back as 2004, when agents insisted their male clients would never take the role — though producers believed she could get it made if it was called "The Husband."

"I was even called a man-hater," she recalls. "It makes me weep to think of the assumptions that were made of me as a writer, when I was just writing a really interesting drama."

But, she adds, there is always hope, as evidenced by the fact that "Wife" is now a critically acclaimed awards season contender.

"If I get to send out any message to a fellow writer, man or woman, it's that your voice will be heard eventually," she says. "It may take many years, but it will happen. Your story will be told."



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