

“She was in none of my history books in high school or middle school. There is very little information about her.”

— Mo’Nique, on playing “Mother of Blues” Ma Rainey in the long-gestating HBO project “Bessie,” which tells the life story of singer Bessie Smith



MOVIES

Director Vinterberg finds hope ‘Far From the Madding Crowd’

By ERIC ALTHOFF

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Danish director Thomas Vinterberg insists that the complexity of the characters in “Far From the Madding Crowd,” which opens Friday, attracted him far more than the Victorian tale’s historical and cultural contexts.

“I guess maybe it’s British, and very British indeed, but it’s also, to a certain extent, universal,” Mr. Vinterberg told The Washington Times.

An adaptation of the Thomas Hardy novel, the film stars Carey Mulligan as Bathsheba Everdene, a British ingenue who unexpectedly comes into a sum of money and a farm at a time when few women, if any, operated such property.

“She has this duality between strength and vulnerability that I think was so important for the character,” Mr. Vinterberg said of Miss Mulligan’s performance.

Innocent yet fiercely independent, Bathsheba is courted by three suitors, including long-suffering shepherd Gabriel Oak (played by Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts) and inveterate gambler Sgt. Frank Troy (portrayed by Tom Sturridge).

“These characters came to me the first time I read the script,” said Mr. Vinterberg, an avant-garde filmmaker widely celebrated in Europe. “I fell in love with the way [Hardy] treated these human beings, how he played around with fate, how he made this very modern and interesting portrait of a woman — which to some extent must have been very visionary at the time.”

As in Hardy’s other fatalistic stories, tragedy and surprise revelations ensue as the plot unfolds, most notably in the



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character William Boldwood (portrayed by Michael Sheen), a middle-aged landowner who has his eye on the much-younger Bathsheba.

Mr. Sheen said he found Boldwood to be a very “internal” character and a departure from his other portrayals such as David Frost in “Frost/Nixon” and Tony Blair in “The Queen.”

“[Boldwood] has this kind of unraveling journey that he goes on, and I thought that was really interesting to see a man who was so self-contained and so dignified” end up where he does at the story’s conclusion,” Mr. Sheen said.

He said it was Mr. Vinterberg’s idea to have the actors improvise scenes in character before the actual story begins. The novel states that Boldwood experienced an earlier painful rejection, but Mr. Sheen discovered through the improv exercise that the damage was far more central to Boldwood than the novel suggests.

“That made a huge difference to what I ended up doing in the film [of] being able to explore what made him get to the point that he’s at when the film begins,” he said. “So I was improvising scenes [of Boldwood as] a child and a teenager and a young man. This man has been wounded and hurt and has kind of withdrawn from the world of people ... and has kind of retreated into his wealth, but it’s a very lonely life that he’s got.”

A pivotal party scene shows that hope still resides beneath Boldwood’s veneer — an almost childlike exuberance, given the right circumstance. (Not coincidentally, the scene takes place at Christmas.)

“It goes back to the scene of the crime, in a way,” Mr. Sheen said. “He was much younger when this original kind of hurt was done to him. And my idea was that by the time it gets to that moment, he’s sort of almost re-creating the circumstances of the original grief. And that part of him was

so much younger then, and much more boyish, and that’s the part of him that gets activated in a way.”

The film was shot on location in Dorset, England, the setting of the novel, which Mr. Vinterberg said gives a “sense of authenticity.”

“I was humbled by these descriptions that Hardy had ... of landscapes,” he said. “They mean so much to the characters that I felt we have to go there; we have to breathe the air of that region and, in a humble way, try to achieve that beauty that he’s describing.”

Mr. Sheen added: “It always makes a difference where you’re going to spend a few months when you’re working on something. And there’s fewer places I would rather be than that part of the world. It’s so beautiful there.”

Despite the challenges and circumstances that Bathsheba, Boldwood, Oak and others endure, Mr. Vinterberg and Mr. Sheen said “Far From the Madding Crowd” ultimately is a hopeful work.

“There’s a sense of hope that love prevails, right?” Mr. Vinterberg said. “And I think also it’s, to some extent, the [classic] coming-of-age story. This woman, through all the pain she goes through, learns to devote to a man and yet still maintain her independence.”

Added Mr. Sheen: “I think it’s a very complex description of love or relationships. I love that, at the end of the film, Bathsheba and Gabriel have a kind of history together. They’ve gone through so much, and so, by the end of the piece, they have this bond and it’s real. It’s not a kind of a happy ever after. So I think it is hopeful in the way that real life is hopeful.”

Asked if people ever inquire whether he is related to American actor Martin

Sheen, the British actor said he occasionally has been called “Martin” and notes that his grandfather was named Charlie, coincidentally.

Thankful for Mr. Sheen’s performance, Mr. Vinterberg also heaped praise upon Mr. Schoenaerts in the crucial role of Gabriel Oak, despite the “risk” of a Danish director hiring a Belgian actor to play a British farmhand.

What’s more, Mr. Schoenaerts and Miss Mulligan together handled the task of portraying a man and a woman of the 19th century.

“I find that here’s a character who obeys a woman, who is able to listen to a woman, who respects a woman, and yet still be so much a man. He has this calm testosterone kind of being, but he’s very sensible,” Mr. Vinterberg said of Oak.

Mr. Vinterberg said that when he and fellow Danish director Lars von Trier founded the “Dogme 95” rules for filmmaking two decades ago, they were striving to capture “truth” by using only ambient light and handheld cameras. Similarly, “Far From the Madding Crowd” reaches for a cinema verite, he said.

“Now I’ve been trying to find the purity in a different way,” he said of his latest film, “[but] I’ve always been looking for the same: Get under the skin of the characters to make them ring as pure and true and honest as possible.”

“I think that’s why they hired me — to get into the question of the character, which, in its essence, is what we did with Dogme as well.”

Mr. Vinterberg considers “Far From the Madding Crowd” to be a far more optimistic film than any other he has done. Laughing, he said, “I consider this my first happy ending.”



Festival National Cathedral Flower Mart

You have seven days to pick out the perfect bouquet for Mom — or you could celebrate Mother’s Day a week early by taking her to the National Cathedral’s Flower Mart and let her pick out her own. This Friday and

Saturday, beginning at 10 a.m., the 78th annual event will take over the Cathedral’s grounds with flora from as near as local farms and as far as Asia for sale and display. In addition to purchasing plants for your home or getting some landscaping ideas, you’ll also enjoy live entertainment, food and beverages, booths with books and gifts for garden lovers and children’s activities including a rock wall, moon bounce and antique carousel. Proceeds will benefit the upkeep of the Cathedral’s grounds, gardens and woodlands, which you can tour throughout the weekend too. **Friday and Saturday at the Washington National Cathedral, Wisconsin & Massachusetts Avenues NW. 202/537-6200. Web: cathedral.org.**



Science Space Day

NASA made headlines recently when astronaut Scott Kelly took off for the International Space Station (ISS), where he will spend a year helping scientists understand the impact of long-term space travel on humans in anticipation of a mission to Mars. If you can’t get enough of Mr. Kelly’s Instagrams of his life in orbit and the incredible views from the space station, you’ll want to visit the Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum on Saturday for a free, family-friendly event exploring life as an astronaut and the latest space developments. From 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., enjoy robotics and model rocket displays, spacesuit demonstrations, arts and crafts, musical performances and even presentations by astronauts. While you’re there, you can also tour the newest exhibit, “Outside the Spacecraft: 50 Years of Extra-Vehicular Activity” with the curator, or learn about the first African-American astronauts. **Saturday at the Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum, Independence Ave. at 6th St. SW. 202/633-2214. Web: airandspace.si.edu.**



Get Out

The week’s pocket picks

By SAMANTHA SAULT



Horse Racing Virginia Gold Cup



The Kentucky Derby is Saturday, but if you can’t make it to Churchill Downs for “the greatest two minutes in sports,” you can still enjoy live horse racing and place a few bets during the Virginia Gold Cup. Virginia has hosted steeplechasing since the colonial era, and the very first Virginia Gold Cup took place in 1922. Considered “the crown jewel of American steeplechasing,” the event brings the who’s who of Washington to the Great Meadow in The Plains for a day of socializing (and schmoozing) in the sun. The gates open at 10 a.m. for betting on the Gold Cup or Derby, tailgate and hat competitions and a terrier exhibition before the races. The Virginia Gold Cup takes place at 3:30 p.m., but attendees are invited to stick around until Kentucky Derby post time at 6:36 p.m., which will be broadcast live throughout the Great Meadow. **Saturday at The Plains, Virginia. 540/347-2612. Web: vagoldcup.com.**

Concert ABC’s ‘Nashville’ in Concert

For fans of “Nashville,” ABC’s hit television musical drama that follows the lives of several country stars, Wednesdays at 10 p.m. can’t come soon enough. This week, however, you can get your fix on Sunday, when several of the cast members will perform in character live on stage. Fresh off filming the finale of the third season, the cast members will stop in just nine U.S. cities to sing favorite songs from the show and others they frequently perform in Music City. The participating cast members include Clare Bowen (Scarlett O’Connor), Chris Carmack (Will Lexington), Charles Esten (Deacon Claybourne), Aubrey Peeples (Layla Grant) and young sisters Lennon Stella (Maddie Conrad) and Maisy Stella (Daphne Conrad). **Sunday at DAR Constitution Hall, 18th St. & C St. NW. 800/745-3000. Web: ticketmaster.com.**

