

Iron Jawed Angels (2004)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours min.

Our content ratings: Violence 3; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:40-42

If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

1 Corinthians 14:35



The women are the first group ever to protest outside the White House, even refusing to disperse when the nation enters WW 1. (c) 2004 HBO Films

Although there are many good films dealing with the Civil Rights movement, there are relatively few about the struggle for women's rights. Thus we should be glad that HBO saw fit to produce this film for Women's History Month in March of 2004. At first glance it might seem strange that German filmmaker Katja von Garnier was chosen to direct a movie about the American Suffragette movement—unless one had seen her previous film *Bandits* which dealt with strong women. (It centered on

female convicts who form a band and then flee captivity when they get a chance.) Someone at HBO must have seen the film and realized her ability to direct a female cast. Someone was very right.

Ms. von Garnier has taken the work of the three women and one man listed (at IMDB) as authors of the script and fashioned it into a compelling narrative that brings to light a largely unsung heroine of the almost eight years just before and after the election of President Woodrow Wilson and the First World War. And she has garnered the services of some top female actresses to bring the script to life, making her film, as the US President who is a semi-villain in this story allegedly (but probably apocryphally) said about a far different film, "It is like writing history with lightning."

Hilary Swank plays Alice Paul, or, as the suffragette preferred, "Miss Paul," the woman largely responsible for writing the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, often referred to as "The Equal Rights Amendment." That it was not an easy task, the film well shows. Alice Paul not only had to battle die-hard MCP's ("Male Chauvinist Pigs," in case, you haven't seen the term that was once popular in the 60s and 70s)—Woodrow Wilson is not let off lightly in this film—but she had to fight even against fellow suffragettes who thought her too radical.

The film begins in 1912 when the two friends Alice Paul and Lucy Burns (Frances O'Connor) are meeting with Carrie Chapman Catt (Anjelica Huston) and Anna Howard Shaw (Lois Smith), heads of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Though the older women have misgivings about their plans to stage a March, they agree to hire the applicants and send them to Washington. Despite the fact that President Wilson (Bob Gunton) was to arrive in Washington for his inauguration on the same day, the two stage the march as planned. Their friend and colleague Inez Milholland (Julia Ormond) makes a striking

picture as a Joan of Arc-type warrior mounted on a horse at the head of the marchers. Jeering opponents resort to violence, the parade ending in chaos, but the widespread publicity makes the nation more aware of the issue. During the grueling cross-continent campaign that follows, Inez, now an icon for the Movement thanks to the photos of her mounted on her horse, is sent around the country. Exhausted, she tries to drop out for a while, but Alice persuades her to fulfill her duty. When she dies as a result of her run-down condition, Alice is filled with guilt, but fortunately has Lucy on hand for support.

The women appeal to President Wilson for support of a Constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote, but the otherwise liberal politician tells them that there are more important issues, such as revising the tariffs that demand his attention. In other words, he does not want to expend his political capital with Congress on an issue he regards as peripheral. There is a reference later in the movie to this same view back in Civil War days. Then women and Abolitionists had worked together to abolish slavery as well as for the equality of women, but when the battle in Congress began, the men dropped women's suffrage to concentrate on obtaining black men the right to vote.

The women decide to picket and display large banners at the main gate of the White House, much to the dismay of opponents who fear that the Republicans will benefit. Even when the US enters the European war, the women refuse to stop their public display. In one scene Alice reads excerpts from the President's speeches about democracy and then disdainfully tosses the paper into the fire roaring in a barrel in front of her. Critics expect the women to falter under the frequent attacks and insults hurled at them by angry bystanders and advent of winter, but as the months pass, the women show up despite rain, snow and cold temperatures.

By this time Alice and Lucy have broken with the conservative

American Woman Suffrage Association and set up their own single-issue organization, The National Women's Party. Carrie Chapman Catt becomes almost as vociferous a critic of Alice and Lucy as any of their male enemies. Both radicals are arrested and jailed, first Lucy, and then Alice. The prison conditions are horrible, from the maggoty food to the forced labor at sewing machines to the brutal ways in which the women, especially Alice, are treated when they resist. Alice goes on a hunger strike, something she had done during the period when she worked in the women's suffragette movement in England. The scenes in which she is strapped to chair and food forced down her throat are difficult to watch. More upbeat is the sequence in which a psychiatrist is brought in to examine Alice, apparently in the hope that she will be declared insane so that they can lock her away in an asylum. No doubt to the authorities dismay, the examiner finds her with her faculties totally intact, comparing her to Joan of Arc, who would die for her convictions.

Word about her tortuous treatment is leaked out, the news of her courage bringing many around to her side. This includes former enemy Carrie Chapman Catt, who in a pivotal scene threatens President Wilson with withdrawal of her crucial support if he does not agree to sponsor an amendment in Congress. His subsequent speech before both houses of Congress is eloquent and decisive in garnering the votes that will send the proposed Amendment to the states for ratification.

As historical films go, this one is fairly accurate, except for the introduction of a fictional would-be beau for Alice, one that panders too much to popular tastes—Miss Paul never married. Also, there was no Senator Thomas Leighton and wife Emily (Joseph Adams and Molly Parker), but their addition demonstrates a typical couple of the time and how they were affected by the movement. I especially appreciated the true to history scenes involving the great African American crusader Ida Wells-Barnett (Adilah Barnes) who demands that she and her

women not be relegated to the tail-end of the 1913 March. Even though raised by Quakers and thus imbibing their values of racial equality, Alice refuses, explaining to her that their southern ladies, whose support they badly need, have refused to march if the parade is integrated. Ms. Wells-Barnett will have none of this: on the day of the parade she and her small contingent wait on the sidelines until Alice and Lucy march by, at which point the African Americans insert themselves into the ranks. I wish the script had included more on their relationship.

This is a film that should be seen by every American who treasures the progress that genuine democracy has made in this country. I wrote above that Alice Paul is an "unsung heroine." The only book on this subject I have had through the years is the well-illustrated *Ideals* Publication *Women in America*. The slim 80-page volume does a fairly good job of raising up important women, all the way back to Queen Elizabeth and Pocahontas, but it devotes just two pages to Women's Suffrage in the early 20th century. And nowhere will you find Alice Paul's name, the authors giving Carrie Chapman Catt the entire credit for getting the 19th Amendment passed! This powerful drama corrects this wrong.

The title of the film, a label originally made up, as I recall, by not so sympathetic journalists, certainly describes well the strong determination of the suffragettes. Indeed, their backbones had to be more like steel in order for these brave women to stand against virtually everyone who held power at the time. In the story found only in Luke's gospel, we see that Jesus favored Mary's seeking education over her sister Martha's socially approved domestic duties. It was a sad development of history that the male church leaders who came after Jesus and Luke gave in to the prejudices of the times, even the apostle of Freedom in Christ in some of his letters putting woman "in her place." The result was that the church in Alice Paul and Lucy Burns' time was part of their problem,

as it had been for centuries. We are still trying to catch up to Christ in this regard—and many others.

This film with a set of discussion questions will be in the September 2015 issue of VP.