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JUNE 2, 2017

ANNETTE BENING
Personal connections in
20th Century Women

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suburban horror

SAMPA THE GREAT
Knocking down the
walls of self-doubt

WATCH THIS FACE

Shari Sebbens makes her mark



Filmmaker Mike Mills has mined his mother's story for another of his intensely personal movies, writes
JENNY COONEY CARRILLO

Writer-director Mike Mills didn't have to go far to find inspiration for his latest film. His 2010 film *Beginners* earned an Oscar nomination for actor Christopher Plummer, a character loosely based on Mills' father, who came out of the closet as a gay man aged 75. Now Mills has tapped into his mother's story for the poignant comedy *20th Century Women*, which stars Annette Bening as a feminist mother in 1979 struggling to raise her teenage son.

"I make personal movies because I feel like it's my best chance to make a good movie," says the 51-year-old filmmaker, whose own journey as a subcultural Renaissance man is fascinating enough to be a film in itself. "I like to write and think about people I love deeply, but who also confuse me deeply."

Born in the liberal city of Berkeley, Northern California, Mills moved to the conservative enclave of Santa Barbara when his father became director of the Museum of Art. As a teenager outsider, he formed a punk band.

At 18, he moved to New York to attend an exclusive arts school and initially found his calling in the alternative scene designing CD art. Then he co-founded The Directors Bureau with Roman Coppola, and the pair created award-winning commercials for clients such as Gap, Volkswagen and Nike. Mills also directed music videos for Moby, Yoko Ono and Everything but the Girl, as well as a string of documentaries and shorts. His feature film debut was *Thumbsucker* in 2005, about a teenager with an oral fixation, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival.

Mills, who is married to indie filmmaker Miranda July and has a five-year-old son, Hopper, insists he doesn't consider his films therapy.

all in the family



From top: Annette Bening and Lucas Zumann as mother and son in *20th Century Women*; Greta Gerwig as Abbie Deftl and Elle Fanning as Julie

"My parents have been gone for a while and I have a great therapist so that wasn't the point," he says.

"I was always thinking about the audience and how I could communicate these real feelings. I cried a lot when I wrote this script, so it's very emotional for me, but I wanted to turn those tears into something that is for you, who have never met my family, so you can have your own emotional experience."

20th Century Women is set in Santa Barbara and follows Dorothea Fields (Annette Bening), a 55-year-old single mother trying to raise her adolescent son, Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann), at a moment brimming with cultural change and rebellion. She enlists

the help of two younger women in Jamie's upbringing: Abbie (Greta Gerwig), a free-spirited punk artist living as a boarder in the Fields' home, and Julie (Elle Fanning), a savvy and provocative teenage neighbour.

When asked to describe his mother, Mills says, "Put Amelia Earhart and Humphrey Bogart together and you have a really good version of my mom. She was a real rebel and never wanted to be stuck in the feminine box that pre-war American society provided for her. I grew up with her and my two sisters, who are 10 and seven years older, and they really taught me how to be a man, so the genesis of this movie was just wanting to write a thank-you letter to them all."

Bening was immediately taken with the filmmaker and his script.

"I was 19 at the time that this story took place so it was very special for me because Mike's way of writing is very beautiful and makes a lot of personal connections," she says. "I found myself wanting to rummage around in boxes and ask, 'Do I still have that old macramé shoulder bag that my boyfriend gave me at that time?' I had all these associations and memories that came flooding back, being a fan of that whole culture and reading feminism literature for the first time at that age, so I couldn't wait to play Dorothea."

Mills recalls the connection he had with Bening on set when she suggested wearing jewellery belonging to his mother, who died of cancer in 1999.

"Every once in a while, these silver bracelets she wore, when they hit something hard, they made this clanging sound and it was like a rush, and I'd think, 'Mom is in the room!'"

"There was a moment towards the end of the shoot where I hugged Annette and she hugged back and we both started crying all of a sudden, because there was always a little explosion of how personal it was between us."

The 59-year-old, four-time Oscar-nominated actress and mother of four with actor-director Warren Beatty was unperturbed by the fact the story was written and directed by a male.

"I didn't have an issue at all, because some of the greatest writers for women have been men, going back to Ibsen, Shaw and Chekhov," she says. "Mike gives incredible complexity and dignity to the flaws and subtleties in women's lives, and that's what matters most."

...20th Century Women

- Genre Comedy drama
- Buzz Rave reviews and Golden Globe nominations for Annette Bening
- Rated M
- Release Showing now