



Mockingbird's 'Scout' At Ojai Screening



Mary Badham with Gregory Peck in 1962, and today.

Badham to field questions at outdoor screening at Ojai Valley Inn Saturday

By Mary M. Long

As the haunting melody of Elmer Bernstein's one-fingered piano underscores the opening credits of the timeless movie, "To Kill a Mockingbird," so the sun will sink slowly in the western skies of the Ojai Valley and the gibbous waxing full moon will rise slowly over the fading "Pink Moment" of the Topa Topa Mountains. Nobody who has ever read the book, or seen the movie, is left untouched by its nostalgic tale of civil rights, morality and dignified courage, and few more than those who were involved in the filming. Fifty years after Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning book was published and 48 years after it was released on screen, the Academy Award-winning movie, starring Gregory Peck and Mary Badham, is being presented by the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa in concert with Diablo Magazine's Peter Crooks as part of their Outdoor Classic Film Series.

The movie is told through the eyes of 6-year-old tomboy Scout, played by Badham, who was the youngest actress ever to win an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress. Badham now resides in rural Virginia with her husband of 36 years, and takes time away from home to travel with "Mockingbird" to share its message, and her passion for literacy with another generation. Just as Peck's character, Atticus Finch, is remembered as one of film's greatest heroes, Scout has a special place in the hearts of American readers with children still named after the plucky tomboy many years after the film's release. The story revolves around an incident which was set in the 1930s involving the alleged rape and beating of a white Southern girl by a wrongly accused

black man. In the famous courthouse scene, the prosecutor asks, “What were you doing the night of Aug. 21?” Ironically, the Ojai Valley Inn booked the screening of “Mockingbird” Saturday, Aug. 21.

Although the date of the booking was entirely coincidental, one might ask if anything in Ojai happens by accident, or does this echo the very substance of the book in its complexity of life’s random circumstances.

Badham will be hosting a question-and-answer session before the screening, giving classic film buffs a rare opportunity to meet one of film’s most enigmatic personalities, for as she refers to Gregory Peck as Atticus, so entwined is she in the character of Scout, it’s impossible to tell if Badham defined the character or the character defined Badham. Badham responded to the following questions in a phone interview from her home in Virginia:

OVN: How did you get the part of Scout?

Badham: They had a big cattle call in Birmingham, Ala. They probably had interviewed 4,000 kids before they even got to Birmingham. They interviewed kids all throughout the South. They wanted Southern children ... they wanted real Southern accents.

OVN: Did they explain the story line to you? Were you aware of the racial message?

Badham: No, they didn’t explain it, I am not even sure we got full scripts. I don’t think I saw the full story until later.

OVN: I understand that your mom was an actress, and took you to the interview.

Badham: My mother had been the leading lady for years at the local theater where I tried out. She was the real thespian in the family, she and my brother, John. John wanted in the business in the worst kind of way. At the time he was at studying drama and philosophy at Yale and he got this phone call, “Guess what, your baby sister is going to be in a movie!”

OVN: Did your mom dress you up or cut your hair to look the part of Scout for the audition?

Badham: No, that haircut was the haircut that I had. I would rather have been mucking stalls, than dressing up and going to a party.

OVN: Do you ride horses?

Badham: Oh yes, that’s all I wanted to do. My goal in life was to be large animal veterinarian.

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OVN: “To Kill a Mockingbird” won the Pulitzer Prize. Was there a dog fight over the rights to produce it in Hollywood?

Badham: Oh no, as the story goes, the director and the producer ... took it around to the different studios and nobody wanted anything to do with it, so they started to shop it around to major actors. They sent it to Gregory Peck — and he couldn’t wait until morning to say, “If you want me I’m your boy.”

OVN: How did they decide who would do the script?

Badham: Horton Foote did the screenplay. He was a man of the South, he was a man of the age ... he said that when he met Harper Lee, that they were like matched souls ... because they so understood the times of the South.

OVN: Atticus Finch was named No. 1 film hero in 2003 by the American Film Institute. What qualities made him a hero?

Badham: In his most famous roles, he (Peck) played the guy trying to do the right thing. What made Atticus a hero, was the fact that he took this case, he didn’t really want it, but he knew there was nobody else in town that would give it their full effort. He put his life on the line, literally, and most of all, his children’s lives.

OVN: I have a theory the leading men of that time had a masculinity and “realness” about them because they were drafted into acting.

Badham: Oh yes, if you look at Gregory Peck, he was going to be a doctor when he was at U.C. Berkeley and then he got in with (was asked to join) an acting group and he realized, “Gosh, this is fun,” and he changed his major. People like Jimmy Stewart — gosh, there are so many of them that during the war, they went ahead and served. These guys today have studied acting, some make it, some don’t.

OVN: In “Mockingbird,” they describe courage as the will to keep fighting when you know you can’t win. There is a nobility to this that I think you don’t see as a theme in

many modern movies. Do you agree with this?

Badham: Yes, I think that you see it more in the independent films. The big blockbuster movies are just, blow them up and shoot them up. I feel like we need to dig a little deeper and the corporate heads need to step outside of the box and look at what the independents are doing. The independent filmmakers are hitting the nail right on the head and they are giving the public what they want to see.

OVN: Is there anything out there you can recommend?

Badham: I'll tell you a piece that I did a few years ago. It was a really great little film and the studios wouldn't touch it. It's called "Our Very Own" (2005) and it was a sweet picture by Cameron Watson who is an incredibly talented writer, producer and director. It was his story about growing up in Shelbyville, Tenn. He asked me to do the film, and I said, "Send me the script." I read it, and loved it and did it, with Allison Janney, Keith Carradine, and Jason Ritter (John Ritter's son). If I don't do anything else, it's a very nice little bookend for "Mockingbird."

OVN: When you say "bookend," are you saying it has similarities to "Mockingbird"?

Badham: Yes, it has all the same symbolism, it says all the same things ... it's a terribly good film, and there are so many alcoholic families. It couldn't find a distributor so they ended up putting it up for sale and Miramax bought it. That's a film that should have been in major theaters, in my opinion.

OVN: Tell me about Gregory Peck. I understand that you had a very special relationship with him that lasted a lifetime.

Badham: Yes, it was nothing for me to pick up the phone and call; he'd say, "Hi there, how're ya doing? If he was going to be back East he'd give me a call and let me know he was going to be here. Sometimes he'd pick me up from work and take me wherever he was going — or send me a plane ticket so that I could join him. He was wonderful, I was lucky to have such a great male role model when I was growing up.

OVN: You didn't stay in acting?

Badham: No, I retired when I was about 14.

OVN: Gregory Peck always said that "Mockingbird" was his favorite movie, why?

Badham: It brought in everything that he believed in, and everything that he was trying to make happen in the world was wrapped up in that film. The message of tolerance and all the basic principles of who we are as human beings resonated with him. Atticus was so close to who he was ... the Gregory Peck I knew was the Gregory Peck you saw in the film. Harper Lee said it best, "When he played himself he gave us himself." That's who he was.

OVN: How does it feel to watch yourself in "Mockingbird"?

Badham: It's difficult — when I was a little kid it was embarrassing. Now I can't watch the film because it's just too upsetting, almost everyone in it is gone. Those were all the people I loved. That's why that jail room scene was so hard to film, because I knew that was the last day of shooting and I thought I was never going to see these people again. I was devastated with having to let go — when you work so closely for five months, they become family like family. They were my family.

OVN: Fifty years after the movie, people are still naming their children after your character. I believe Bruce Willis' daughter, Scout, is named after your character?

Badham: Right, yeah (laughter) and I was almost in a film with them. They had come to Richmond and they were auditioning people. I thought if I saw them I would just walk up

casually and say, “Hey, you named your daughter after me, huh?”

OVN: You received an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor in 1962. You were the youngest person ever to receive a nomination for that award.

Badham: Yes, my mom was on cloud nine. Yeah, I went to the Academy Awards. I was all dude-ied up. I remember the dress because I wore it two more times. I think I had the same haircut because it was just so easy to care for. When you’re in Alabama and you’re out with horses and it’s a thousand degrees you want a haircut you can wash and run with.

OVN: Would you consider acting again?

Badham: I would not mind working in the industry again. It’s the greatest job in the world — how much fun to go and play somebody else. The difficulty is in finding a good script and a good crew to work with. As for now, this is my dream. I’m just so blessed, this farm, just to get up in the morning and see green grass and trees, it’s just so healthy.