

Claire Foy + Sarah Polley on the Moments of ‘Actual Euphoria’ That Shaped ‘Women Talking’

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Photo Source: Emily Assiran

Sarah Polley felt “very regulated” going into “Women Talking,” the first film she’s directed since 2012. She had been exercising every day, doing a lot of meditating, and studying Buddhist thought. But then the cast arrived on set. Each actor—Rooney Mara, Jessie Buckley, and Claire Foy among them—climbed the ladder of a re-created hayloft to play a group of Mennonite women debating how they should respond to a series of rapes in their isolated community. “I just went into a white-hot panic,” Polley says, speaking from her hometown of Toronto.

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Foy is also on the call. “I was like, What the fuck did I think I was going to be able to do?” she recalls. “I’m going to shoot with all these people at the same time? For all of the mapping out, thinking, and planning I’ve been doing for years, I was like, I have no idea how this is going to work.”

Polley, who wrote and directed “Women Talking,” is uniquely suited to unpacking its emotionally and technically challenging material. She began her career as a child actor and made her feature directorial debut in 2006. An empathetic filmmaker, she’s always delved into thorny questions, whether she’s making a rom-com about a woman exploring satisfaction outside her marriage, as she did in 2011’s “Take This Waltz,” or examining her own family history in the 2012 documentary “Stories We Tell.”

“Women Talking” is an adaptation of Miriam Toews’ 2018 novel of the same name, which is based on real-life events. In the 2000s, multiple women were drugged and sexually assaulted in a Bolivian Mennonite enclave over the course of years. Like the book, Polley’s film focuses on the aftermath of a similar event. Instead of homing in on the pain of the act itself, the movie centers on the discussions that follow among female members of three families as they decide whether they should leave, stay and confront the men responsible, or do nothing. Further complicating their decision is the fact that these women cannot read or write and have no knowledge of the outside world.



To help her execute this challenging, talky, thoughtful piece, Polley recruited actors like Foy. She plays the rageful Salome, for whom fighting back is the only thing that makes sense. “I could not love her more,” the actor says of the role. “I think she’s the character I’ve loved the most.”

Polley deadpans: “You’ve just offended monarchists everywhere, but go on,” referring to Foy’s Emmy-winning work as Queen Elizabeth II on “[The Crown](#).”

The actor’s commanding presence is just one element that makes this ensemble powerful; but before Polley could assemble her cast, she needed the screenplay to capture how Toews’ novel made her feel. “I thought a lot about the impact of the book on me,” she says. “It felt like a bullet going through me. There was nothing extraneous. It felt so searing.”

Released shortly after the start of the #MeToo movement, the novel introduced complex questions into a cultural dialogue that was, according to Polley, “necessarily simplified” in order to hasten sweeping change. The director was drawn to a very specific emotion that Toews, who was raised as a Mennonite herself, inspired with her fiction. “I felt such hope seeing how these women could talk to and listen to each other, and such hope thinking about what they wanted to build, [rather than] just wanting to destroy,” she says. “That was also something that was missing for me in the [#MeToo] conversation.”

Producers Dede Gardner and Frances McDormand (who has a small role in the film,) acquired the rights to Toews’ work before Polley came on board; but they gave her space to figure out the material on her own terms. She rewrote the script more times than she has on any other project, re-centering the film’s point of view on each character in turn. “The trick for me was making sure that no one’s perspective got lost,” she says. “And then that would emerge more in the rehearsal process, as we’d find characters were alive in moments I hadn’t imagined they’d be in. Sometimes, the silent responses [shared] between two people were more important than what was being said onscreen.”

As she untangled the script, Polley was also unpacking details of her own life. Her collection of personal essays, “Run Towards the Danger: Confrontations With a Body of Memory,” was released in March of this year. In the book, she writes about traumatic events that shaped her life, from being assaulted at age 16 by Canadian radio host Jian Ghomeshi to navigating safety issues on the set of Terry Gilliam’s “The Adventures of Baron Munchausen” when she was 8. She says that her experiences and those of the characters in “Women Talking” “did start speaking to each other at a certain point. There are definitely things that ended up in the film that wouldn’t have if I hadn’t been in that process.” She points to a line in which a character explains that the men made the women doubt themselves, which felt worse than the physical pain they endured.

Polley's research caused her to consider safety measures on her own set, as well. Before she wrote about her initial decision to not go public about her experience with Ghomeshi, the filmmaker had contemplated making a documentary about why women don't come forward after an assault. Through that process, she found a psychologist to work with her cast and crew on set: Dr. Lori Haskell, an expert on the trauma that can emerge from experiencing sexual violence.



Polley continued her acting career as she grew up, moving from childhood roles in “Baron Munchausen” and on the Canadian series “Avonlea” to adult turns in Atom Egoyan’s “The Sweet Hereafter,” Doug Liman’s “Go,” and Zack Snyder’s “Dawn of the Dead.” But these days, she never considers stepping back in front of the camera. “I don’t think about acting very much,” she says. “I really don’t want to do it.” She does, however, bring her past experience into the casting process, which she undertakes alongside her brother, casting director John Buchan. (Their late mother, Diane Polley, was also a CD.)

Polley recalls a meeting with “American Psycho” director Mary Harron about a part in a film that never got made. Though she went in for one role, during the meeting, Polley kept talking about another: a woman described as “massively tall,” messy, and drunk. Clocking her interest, the director shifted and offered her that part instead. The encounter comes up when Polley discusses recruiting Foy for “Women Talking.” The director initially approached the actor about playing a different character: the sweet, beatific Ona, a role that ultimately went to Mara.

“There’s just something in Claire that’s like Salome. Claire will be the person who brings up the thing that’s actually deeply uncomfortable for everybody that they’re not addressing.”

“I was like, ‘Listen, I will take anything you give me, Sarah,’ ” Foy recalls, laughing. “ ‘You want me to try to squeeze myself into the shape of Ona? I will do it.’ ” But the actor wasn’t drawn to the calm optimist of the group; rather, she kept bringing up the palpably furious Salome, a role she recognized herself in. “I just love the fact that she makes the emotional weather in every room that she’s in,” Foy says. “I can’t hide any of my emotions. I’m absolutely terrible at it. And she does that, but she sort of owns it. She takes up space.”

Foy is best known for her turns as emotionally suppressed characters like Queen Elizabeth II on the “The Crown” and Neil Armstrong’s sturdy wife, Janet, in “First Man.” But Polley responded to the actor’s instinct, having internalized what she learned from her conversation with Harron all those years ago. “There’s just something in Claire that’s like Salome,” the filmmaker says. “Claire will be the person who brings up the thing that’s actually deeply uncomfortable for everybody that they’re not addressing.”

The actor also has a background in theater, having performed Off-Broadway and on London’s West End. It’s something Polley was looking for in the film’s performers, among them the Olivier Award–winning Buckley and two-time Tony recipient Judith Ivey. As the title implies, “Women Talking” relies heavily on argument. Foy herself was tasked with delivering “two big monologues,” which she notes felt more intimidating than exciting. The actor describes the role as the most technical performance she’s ever done; but she also gave herself over to the story in a way that went beyond the script. “The job basically became about listening—listening to the other women, seeing the other women, seeing the interactions, feeling someone else breathing next to you,” she says.

Once Polley had assembled her actors, including Emmy winner Ben Whishaw as the lone man in the room, they had two weeks to rehearse: one via Zoom and another on set—a soundstage re-creation of a barn located outside of Toronto. There, they also worked out the actors’ choreography—a puzzle in its own right, given the amount of coverage Polley would need to get. Sharing that environment shaped the movie as much as the text did.



“The story is also the collaboration of making the film,” Foy says. “All the energy that we had about suddenly being in the space—none of us in masks, discussing things we’ve never discussed before—bled into the fact that we were suddenly lots of actors in a room who’d never worked together before; and we were talking about things we never talked about before. By the end of the shoot, we were in a completely different dynamic than we were at the beginning.”

Even small moments, like a look or a sigh from another actor, could shape a scene. When it came time to perform Salome’s last monologue, a heartbreaking account of where her fury might lead her, Foy “desperately” wanted Polley to give her instruction; but the director refused, leading the actor to make surprising choices that enhanced the action. Counter to what was in the script, Foy remained seated, directing her speech almost entirely to her character’s mother, Agata (Ivey).

Polley, in turn, found new layers in the way Foy envisioned the confession. “There’s so much more power in the fact that she’s not shouting and standing; she’s bringing everyone to her,” the filmmaker says. “The power in the room goes down to the floor where she is, and there’s also this vulnerability in the way she’s looking up at her mother.” Filming Foy from overhead, Polley says, added theological context to the scene. “[Salome is] talking so much about God, and we’re above her,” she says. “There’s that relationship [for] somebody who has grown up with all this conversation about God, challenging so much of what they’ve learned. There’s stuff I would have never discovered if I had this preordained way of how it should be done.”

Polley’s hands-off approach was another lesson from her days in front of the camera. “As an actor, the best work I ever did was with directors who did think I knew the part better than they did,” she says. It also taught her the value of having a “happy, safe place for people to work,” and she made providing that a priority. “I probably just learned that the hard way, by being an actor on so many sets where I didn’t feel that anybody cared at all,” she adds.

The filmmaker says that the relationship among the cast members of “Women Talking” was “unusually harmonious.” There were no big egos, and the actors shared lots of laughs despite the difficult subject matter they were engaging with both onscreen and off. “I think we were a really happy community; but I will say when there was disagreement, and when there was conflict and when someone spoke out of turn, there was always a kind of magnificent repair and apology and a moving forward,” she adds. “That was even more exciting for me than the fact that everyone got along so well.”

Foy calls the film a “completely contained, extraordinary experience.” But she also knew that she would ultimately have to leave it behind.

During her preparation for the role, she realized she would need to create a wall between herself and what her character has gone through, even if she wanted to explore it through an acting lens. Both Salome and her 4-year-old daughter, Miep (Emily Mitchell), whom she carries on her back into town to get antibiotics the little girl needs, were assaulted. “I can’t even explain [it],” Foy says. “There was, like, a really physical, metal barrier going on. I couldn’t put myself through some of those things as a person.”



Polley, on the other hand, couldn't shake what had occurred when she'd gathered her actors together to make the film. After the cast left, she returned to the hayloft, sitting alone in what now felt like a sacred space. "I think the main job was figuring out who would be in that loft, and then it was being alive and making sure I didn't miss anything," she remembers. "I had a certain amount of trust and faith in what was going to happen. When I look back on that time of shooting it, my main memory is that every day, I had a moment of actual euphoria."

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