

# A Long Talk With Women Talking

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For the past few days, I've seen the *Women Talking* team everywhere: Mingling at a welcome brunch deep in the mountains, rushing down Colorado Avenue on the way to their next thing, taking their seats for the *Empire of Light* premiere. They travel in a pack, often with big smiles and bigger laughs. And why wouldn't they? **Sarah Polley's** powerful new film, swiftly met with raves after its premiere here in Telluride, has been the talk of the festival, and represents creative highs for everyone from its Oscar-nominated writer-director to its peerless ensemble. None of them, even legendary producer-star **Frances McDormand**, have had an experience like this before. The film is fully made by and centered on women, and has been unveiled to the world with the team behind it united as a collective, a group of artists rightly proud of what they've done.

Adapted from the **Miriam Toews** novel, *Women Talking* is set in a remote, present-day Mennonite colony operating under an archaic patriarchal system. The story's catalyst arrives as young Autje (**Kate Hallett**) catches one man brutally attacking a woman; the women of the colony are finally awoken to the violence and cruelty they've been subjected to throughout their lives, that they'd been led to believe were random acts of God. And so now, they must gather and talk about it, in an isolated hayloft—to decide whether to stand their ground and fight the men who've so wronged them, or leave together toward the great unknown. Out of this setup, which Polley renders with rich and surprising cinematic intensity,

characters prove distinctive in their beliefs, faith, and dreams—from **Jessie Buckley**'s cynical Mariche to **Claire Foy**'s ferocious Salome to **Rooney Mara**'s measured Ona. A cathartic conversation emerges, about asserting one's personhood (specifically, womanhood) while working methodically toward rousing collective action, with hope for a better tomorrow.

As I sat with the *Women Talking* team on a few benches under a tent, just outside the Werner Herzog theater on a warm Sunday afternoon, I was struck by how much our discussion mirrored what we see in the film: The laughs shared between these collaborators, the tears shed at one point. There was even a lone man (disclosure: this writer) listening to and recording what they have to say. (In the film, it's **Ben Whishaw**'s sensitive ally, August, who takes the meeting's minutes.) Indeed, entering this new territory for all of these women has translated to a movie, and a conversation, like we've never seen.

Michelle McLeod stars as Mejal, Sheila McCarthy as Greta, Liv McNeil as Neitje, Jessie Buckley as Mariche, Claire Foy as Salome, Kate Hallett as Autje, Rooney Mara as Ona, and Judith Ivey as Agata. Michael Gibson

**Jessie Buckley:** I've never been on a set where I get to not just play, but to experience, with nine extraordinary women. Explore what that relationship means between us in a world, and how we can move forward together—not just on our own, but with people that we love, and move out of the place we're in. We don't know what we might find within ourselves and between each other. I've never read a script like that, yeah, where I can explore the complex, rich, knotty, difficult, beautiful parts of female friendship like that, and actually use it as catharsis, as something to understand between each other and from each other.

**Frances, you've made quite a few films, and in this case of course had more of a behind-the-scenes role. What about this felt special and unique for you?**

**Frances McDormand:** I'm 65. I'm the oldest.

**Sheila McCarthy:** [Raises hand] 66.

**McDormand:** Damn it! [Laughs] Well, we have four or maybe even five generations—decades—of experience here. That's a huge part of it. I've been in ensemble films before. I've never been in ensemble films where it was mostly women, but I've always abhorred "women films" where they end up singing into a hairbrush or wooden spoon, because I don't do that with my friends. We actually talk about science and the economy and things of that nature. The exciting thing that happened in the development was, our producing partner **Dede [Gardner]** and I would often use sports-movie metaphors with Sarah. "Where's the big triumph?" She kind of went, "I don't think women's stories are told that way." So then, "What's the alternative?" This movie is the alternative. You haven't seen it before because it hasn't been explored.

We were just having a whole long conversation about films that were seen in the festival that have main female protagonists but are still trapped in the old paradigms of storytelling. It's unknown territory and we're out there. We're swimming in it along with you and everybody else.

**Sarah, I was at the tribute screening on Friday and one of the themes that emerged is your interest in how we tell stories. This movie feels like a kind of statement in that regard. Can you talk about the attraction to the material, and getting to this point as a filmmaker, in that context?**

**Sarah Polley:** I love that so much of the film is them finding words for things, or saying things that capture a collective feeling around a different kind of experience or challenge. Why I was so interested in this book is that it's also about, How do you tell this story of where you're going, which is where you come from? We're getting better, culturally, at telling the stories of where we've come from and where the harms have been, and we have to continue to do that until there's a full picture. The act of imagining, "What's the story that we want to move toward?" is one that gets largely left out of the conversation. I was thrilled by the hope in that and the imagination in that.

**What I love about this movie is that each of your characters are so distinctive, they all bring their own voices and perspectives and arguments to the central question of the movie. You had a few weeks of rehearsal. In the getting-to-know-each other, did you develop roles within the ensemble along similar lines? Claire, I see you're laughing.**

**Claire Foy:** Yeah. It happens naturally in any group, but I had never been in a group where all of those people in those roles—the leader, etc—was a woman. I found it dynamic and unpredictable and really, really deep at moments. I went to spaces I don't think I ever would've gone if the environment would have been different. We all had something different to offer. That could lead to conflict, but that was really interesting, that we were able to do that within an environment where we were all offering something. It didn't feel like Sarah was some sort of megalomaniac director. There was a conversation, constantly.

**McCarthy:** We were also in the confines of COVID world. So we were all locked together for all these months. Literally we saw nobody else.

**You got to know each other well.**

**McCarthy:** We did. And so what was happening in our one big general group dressing room was also happening on set, our relationships really bled into the filming, I think as well.

**Polley:** Dr. Lori Haskell works in trauma and with memory. Her work is incredibly important. She was a huge resource to all of us, both in terms of the research for the film but also as a presence and a container for a lot of us.

“Claire had done that monologue at full tilt, *full tilt* off camera 120 times.” —Sarah Polley

**To that point, you’re running many long, intense scenes here. How many takes would you get on average?**

**Polley:** I’ll give you an example of one scene, which is where Claire has her first big monologue when the camera pushes in. We didn’t do tons of takes on each person, but just the number of relationships we need to cover in dynamics—we shot that scene for two and a half days, and we realized at the end of it that Claire had done that monologue at full tilt, *full tilt* off camera 120 times. So it wasn’t humane actually. And then I remember that night watching this video of the captain of the Canadian women’s soccer team, who kept on playing through a broken nose, and the team was crowding around her and hugging her, thanking her. I was just thinking, “It’s Claire.”

**Foy:** But then we learned after that. That was what was amazing about it, strategically going, “There’s this big bit that’s coming up, let’s try and stop shooting there so that the next day we can come back and everyone’s fresh,” as opposed to someone having to do these massive pages of dialogue together. But those first few days...

**Polley:** I had to change the way I was shooting it after that. I think that was an eye opener for me, where I was running 15-page scenes over and over and over again. There was one day where Sheila—and this just reveals it would be good for me to shadow an episodic television director at some point—came up to me and went, “Hey Sarah, do you think we could do a pickup for this one?” And I went, “Oh, oh sure, no problem. Thank you, Sheila.”

**McCarthy:** Like, “It’s just for Jessie’s closeup. Do you really need me to get there?”

**In these heavy scenes, characters recount some of their darkest experiences in the colony. Claire, your last monologue is particularly remarkable, I would say, to watch. When I saw it at the tribute screening, you could hear a pin drop. It was just complete, utter silence and focus. How do you get to that place as an actor?**

**Foy:** I’d spoken to Sarah about that quite a lot. It was quite interesting because she would just say, “I trust you.” And I’d go, “No, I need you to tell me how to do it.” We were all really prepared as actors, I think because we knew the scale of the task, but also we knew how much we all depended on each other. I was continually surprised by the things I was seeing the other actors in the room do, which helped me to no end: seeing people and how they had interpreted the material on what they were doing.

That scene, I knew I couldn’t do it a million times and I’d already said that to Sarah. We only did it like three times, I think. Knowing that it was okay, that after that I didn’t have to be like, “Ahhh!” But I don’t know—I genuinely don’t really know what happened. Really. It was one of those things that, I just did it. I did it and trusted it and trusted that it would be all right and that it was all there.

**McDormand:** And it's interesting how often we don't get to trust it as actors go into things, how often we have to protect ourselves from things that aren't as well-grounded and well-written and well-directed and well-led. We have to learn how to trust every time.

**I have a thing about laughter in movies, where a lot of times it feels very forced to me. And in this one, every time you all break out into laughter, it is so incredibly authentic and gratifying, I think, for the audience. I've never heard an audience laugh with all the actors as much as in that screening. Michelle, I know you have a comedy background: What were those moments like and what, from your perspective as an actor, was so important about releasing that tension?**

**Michelle McLeod:** Well, that's exactly what it is. You have to have that lightness to all of this as well. That does break the tension. Rooney Mara is a genius. She brought a fart machine on set but no one guessed it was her for a very long time. We heard this fucking raunchy fart out of nowhere. I thought for sure, it was a crew member. I almost peed my pants laughing. And then I couldn't figure out where these noises were coming from, and I looked over at Rooney—she's very quiet. Nobody knows. And she starts laughing, and finally she reveals, she has hidden a fart machine.

**Rooney Mara:** Laughing is harder than crying. So much harder. And after doing that scene 120 times, I was like, How are we supposed to laugh? Over a hundred takes. It's just going to be so fake—and it's so important that it's real. So I ordered a few different fart machines.

**McCarthy:** This whole article's going to be about fart machines.

**Mara:** We pulled that thing out later on in the hayloft set, too, when we really needed it. But I will say that Michelle has one laugh in the movie that's not from my fart machine.

**Polley:** They would all help each other with laughing in different scenes. And at some point I said to Ben, who was helping Jessie laugh in quite incredible ways, "Oh, Michelle has a laugh coming up. Can you help?" And then after the first take, he's like, "She doesn't need my help."

**McLeod:** I think I just generally can entertain myself. People may say I'm crazy. But honestly I tell myself jokes all the time and I laugh.

**McDormand:** Sarah asked Miriam really early on, "What do you want? Give me your directive?" And she said, "Remember the women's faith and their sense of humor." That's what the collective does. You don't just get the laundry done. You keep yourself afloat.

"I was like, How are we supposed to laugh? So I ordered a few different fart machines." —  
*Rooney Mara*

**Kate and Liv, you play the children in the hayloft, listening in and observing these women and their conversation. What did you take away from the experience?**

**Hallett:** I felt like I learned by being there and they were all just so open to answering questions. I went up to Rooney after one day and I was like, “How do you even do that?” And she was just like, “I don’t even know. I just kind of do it.” I was like, “That is a great approach.”

**Liv McNeil:** I feel like we embodied our characters as well because Neitje and Autje are outside observers, and that’s exactly what Kate and I were the entire time, just sitting and watching and learning. My character was pretty disconnected. I was kind of forced into just listening, and I felt like that shaped it for me.

**McDormand:** Your reading of “this is so *boring*” was so good. And I’m thinking, now, Were you ever bored?

**Buckley:** Oh my God.

**McDormand:** Well, you’re all in a big room together, but you have to sit there for a long time! It must have been boring sometimes.

**Kate:** It’s hard to be bored when you’re watching them. [*Group laughs*]

**Polley:** It was very interesting. It felt like there was this constant theme for me of watching actors surprise themselves. You’d see something happen and then you could see a look in there, like, “I didn’t know I was going to do that.” And that was so thrilling because there were just these moments that nobody was expecting to come out of them.

**Did you have such a moment, Jessie?**

**Buckley:** Yeah, many. And I wanted to have that experience. Even though all these characters have very particular points of view, I didn’t want to prejudge what they might experience in the moment when you’re working with such incredibly truthful, brilliant, amazing people in a room where you really can let yourself just go and let yourself be surprised.

**McDormand:** Constructive competition. [*Group laughs*] We were rehearsing at one point and we realized that it was going to always be this concentrated circle, and that August was always going to be over there at his table. At one point, Ben came over—and nobody was struggling with their look at all; everybody was really into their look—and he was just like [mouths, “You’re beautiful, you’re beautiful.” So genuine. He meant it. And then he went back to his corner.

**McLeod:** Ben has heard things no man ever has.

**Foy:** He could write a book.

**Sarah, can you talk a little bit about changing the narration from August's, as it is in the book, for the movie? And particularly ending on a poignant line that sums up the movie really beautifully, I thought.**

**Polley:** That was a really collective process between Fran and Dede and me and Kate and **Christopher Donaldson**, our editor. There was a point in the edit where we realized we needed to hear it through a woman's voice and we were trying to decide who that is. It was Chris who went, "You keep wanting me to get the camera on Kate. What about Kate?" Hearing it from the youngest person in the room and the idea of telling the story of this future—I was really scared of it at first and it required me to go into a lot of space by myself and go into my thoughts at 16. And I'd been wanting to keep the film here and my life here, and that was where my life bled into the film a little bit. Writing that narration for me was the hardest part, and then hearing it through Kate's voice was the best part. Writing that narration was a whole film into itself for me.

**Sheila, you have one gorgeous scene in which you apologize to Jessie, who plays your daughter, Mariche. It's incredibly complex. To your early point, Fran, it illustrates generational differences between these women. Very broadly, how did you go into it? What was it like playing it together?**

**McCarthy:** In the hayloft we were allowed such freedom and such truth with each other, and having been there for two days and seeing the hurt and finally, maybe for the first time, understanding what [my daughter] been going through, it was an enormous penny dropping for a mother to have spent her whole life with this child. She's been in love with this girl since the day she was born, but we've been living this very rigid, very repressed, very misogynistic world.

**Buckley:** I was scared because I think in that moment, the generational things that we've learned—the chain has to be cut. And from that moment it changed.

**McCarthy:** We're on entirely new ground.

**Buckley:** Which is scary, unknown ground. This is something which we've always understood about ourselves. This is how we survive. This is how we get up in the morning and go to bed at night. This is how I see you. This is how I've always seen you. And this is how you see me. And actually in one moment, it's like I see somebody completely different. And I can see myself differently for the first time. That's really scary.

**I would think that shooting it chronologically also gives you that building, where you get to a moment like that, both in the story and in the filming, where you reach new ground and it's scary.**

**McCarthy:** Because that was never found in rehearsals. You're right.

**McDormand:** Can I ask you something that I don't know and I can't remember—is it once in the script? Did you add two more?

**Polley:** Yeah, so that moment for me was the biggest pivot in the adaptation because that doesn't happen in the book, but I realized it all hinges on whether she's going to move or not. I had just read all of this amazing work by **Harriet Lerner** on apologies, this book called, *Why Won't You Apologize?* It's about, What does a great apology look like? How can it transform a person? And how can you move forward out of harm? I've been doing all of this thinking and talking about apologies. And so then I suddenly realized Mariche can't move until someone gives her the right apology. We shot it and we had some crew members who had come from backgrounds with abuse, backgrounds in devoutly religious communities where abuses have been repressed. I remember there was something missing in the writing. I literally turned to one of our crew members who came from this background and I said, "Would that be good enough for you?" He had been sobbing through the whole scene, and he just said, "No, I need more." And I said, "What do you need?" And he said, "I need her to say, *I'm sorry.*" And so I said to Sheila, "If you feel like you have to say you're sorry, say it. But don't say it if you don't feel like you have to. Hold it in." Then Sheila just said it three times. The idea, it wasn't in the script. Sheila just did that spontaneously.

**McDormand:** [*Crying*] And that's what forgiveness is. You don't decide to make a movie about forgiveness. How can you really do that? It comes out of the experience of a group of people creating that.

**Polley:** It was just so many people finding that moment together. And just to finish the story, because I forgot what the main part was. Then that crew member said, "That would be good enough for me. If my parents could say that to me, I'd be okay."

**Foy:** Something we said a lot when we were shooting was not to slip into sentimentality. Not that we thought any of us were, but I think that because you are doing such emotional things all the time, there's a truth to how people communicate and a truth to trauma, which is that people aren't always able to articulate it.

**Polley:** You were so disciplined with that. Even Claire's big monologue that you were talking about—I said to Claire, "How are you feeling about it?" And she said, "I'm so frustrated with myself because there's tears." What other actor is like, "Oh fuck, the tears"? There was this active desire to not do the obvious thing. It's so good watching someone fight that.

**McCarthy:** And *that* makes you do the tears.

**Foy:** That's all these women have— is words. We act out so much of the emotion on each other in life, anyway. "Don't tell me what we're going to do, show me." But in this, they have to articulate it. They have such a huge responsibility. It's like the United Nations or something. They have to be able to speak to each other and get their point across so they can all be heard.

**Buckley:** This is sort of *Women Talking*. [To me] Take some minutes! [*Group laughs*]

**If I can be Ben Whishaw for a day, I'm happy.**

**McCarthy:** In the last 24 hours, since our screening, I don't know if this is pertinent, but I've been in lines to the loo, with women who have seen the movie and they can't talk. A lot of the women just said, *ugh*. And then they're filled with emotion.

**Buckley:** And men.

**McCarthy:** And men too, you're right.

**McDormand:** I had a great conversation with a couple, late 30s, man, woman. He was saying he saw it with his wife, her mother, and her grandmother. And that at the end of it, his position was that he really wanted them to kill [Mariche's abusive husband] Klaus. He wanted someone to go back and kill Klaus and they were like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, you really missed the point." And so they all really wanted to keep the conversation going. It was so great to see it still happening. And that was the next day. They were still engaged in the talking.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*