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TRUE GRIT

**The Power and Purpose of
*Women Talking***

By **DAVID CANFIELD**
Photographs by **SEBASTIAN KIM**

Clockwise from right: writer-director Sarah Polley
with Jessie Buckley, Rooney Mara, & Claire Foy

No one in *Sarah Polley's* gripping allegory *Women Talking* has ever made a movie quite like it. The writer-director and her cast speak candidly about upending Hollywood norms for a film with even bigger revolutions on its mind

By DAVID CANFIELD | Photographs by SEBASTIAN KIM

SOME- THING TO *TALK* ABOUT





SARAH POLLEY IS TALKING. She's been reading up on auteur theory lately and questioning the idea that one person can—or should—ever take credit for a movie. “Even with the most obnoxious filmmakers in the world, it’s always collaborative,” she says. Polley came of age as a child star on productions including Terry Gilliam’s *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, which required long working hours and whose conditions ranged from uncomfortable to unsafe. She knew, having helmed a few features already, that she wanted to “throw out the rule book” with her next one. “I certainly did much better work when I felt safe and happy as an actor,” the Toronto native says. “People are different when they feel like someone gives a shit about how they’re doing.”

Just ask the company of *Women Talking*. Polley’s new film premiered to acclaim in Telluride over Labor Day weekend, and I’d often spot her and her cast moving in a pack from brunches in the mountains to other premieres to the occasional bathroom break. Such camaraderie is a rare sight for a starry Hollywood movie. I first talked to them under a tent, our benches in a sort of therapeutic semicircle. Polley

IN THE MOMENT
On set, Claire Foy performed a searing monologue 120 times at “full tilt,” as her director Sarah Polley has said in awe.

Clothing by **Staud**.
Previous spread:
blazer by **Alice + Olivia** by **Stacey Bendet**.

adamantly resisted credit for what the team had achieved, but producer-star Frances McDormand quickly and emphatically highlighted her leadership: “She set the bar.” Unanimous agreement followed.

After reading Miriam Toews’s 2018 novel *Women Talking*, Polley envisioned a movie she would both write and direct—and not merely a small-scale, single-setting movie. Toews based *Women Talking* on the experiences, in the 2000s, of women in a Bolivian Mennonite colony who were drugged and raped every few nights by men in the community. In the fictionalized account of the novel, the women have never been taught to read or write, and the text mostly consists of meeting minutes taken by a sensitive male schoolteacher named August. Community members originally attributed the assaults to ghosts or demons—or suggested the women were lying. As the women gather in a hayloft, they acknowledge the reality of the horrific assaults, then weigh the men’s capacity to change and their own capacity to forgive. Ultimately, they work to imagine a better future for themselves, empowered and united.

Polley saw the story as an epic. She heard a sweeping score and, at times, booming laughter, the gallows humor that shines in heavy darkness. She imagined rich performances and a wide-open space. Polley partnered with Oscar-winning producers McDormand (*Nomadland*) and Dede Gardner (*12 Years a Slave*, *Moonlight*), and their clout allowed her to keep dreaming big. With *Women Talking*, she sought to infuse the spirit of her film—three generations of women engaging in respectful, if heated, debate about building a new world without men—into the production itself. Less hierarchy, more teamwork.

This is Polley’s first narrative feature in 11 years, which is odd, considering her track record. (Her 2007 feature debut, *Away From Her*, which drew on a short story by Alice Munro, netted her an Oscar nomination for adapted screenplay.) In the decade between *Women Talking* and her last fictional film, 2012’s *Take This Waltz*, Polley got married and had three children. She adapted Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* into a Netflix limited series; directed *Stories We Tell*, a gorgeous documentary unpacking secrets from her parents’ past; and wrote *Run Towards the Danger*, a memoir in essays tracing her traumatic early years in the industry as well as various struggles in adulthood. Coming into *Women Talking*, she’d just recovered from a difficult pregnancy and a concussion, the aftereffects of which plagued her for years. Her father, the key figure in *Stories We Tell*, had also recently died. A lot to carry, maybe, but Polley felt ready for a new chapter. “There was something about returning to film with far more courage than I’d had before, and a sense of wanting to take risks,” she tells me a month after Telluride. “I came back not neurotic, but really grateful, excited, and okay with failing.”

That energy fueled her drive to do things differently. Polley meditated and exercised every morning while making *Women*

STYLISTS: ROSE FODE (BUCKLEY), RYAN HASTINGS (MARA), KARLA WELCH (POLLEY), NICKY YATES (FOY); HAIR: KRISTIAN HAYDEN (POLLEY), BEN SKERVIN (FOY), LIZ TAY (BUCKLEY), DAVID VON CANNON (MARA); MAKEUP: KRISTIAN HAYDEN (POLLEY), KATE LEE (MARA), QUINN MURPHY (FOY); FLOKIE WHITE (BUCKLEY); SET DESIGN: HANS MAHARAWAL (FOY, MARA, POLLEY).



“I WAS TAUGHT IN THIS INDUSTRY,
‘SHUT UP, DO WHAT
YOU’RE TOLD,
DON’T FIGHT BACK, YOU’RE
LUCKY TO BE THERE.’”

—*Claire Foy*

PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY 360 PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT (BUCKLEY), AREAT02 PRODUCTIONS (ALL OTHERS); LOCATIONS: STREET STUDIOS, LONDON (BUCKLEY), UNTILLED NYC (ALL OTHERS); FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/ENTERTAINMENT.

Talking. She asked crew members if they had input on scenes and checked in on how the work was affecting them logistically and even emotionally. She emailed the cast every night, outlining expectations and orders of operations for the next day. She also kept a therapist specializing in trauma and memory on set from beginning to end and devised a schedule that maintained humane daily hours so working parents could see their kids.

Virtually all of this was foreign to the stars. “I was taught in this industry, ‘Shut up, do what you’re told, don’t fight back, you’re lucky to be there,’” says Claire Foy, who plays the righteously rageful Salome. “I’ve never worked with a director like Sarah, ever. It’s how she believes the world should be.” Adds costar Jessie Buckley, “She’s constantly putting herself in a position of fierce vulnerability—just that insatiable curiosity to understand something that she doesn’t know yet. I think she’s monumental.”

The goal was to surround the women—and the lone male star, Ben Whishaw, who plays August—with support, love, and safety, as they worked through an intense monthslong shoot filled with devastating conversations. “There’s nothing that helps your recovery from your life more than being able to have things go a different, better way,” says Polley, who’s written not just about her Hollywood experiences but also about a traumatic sexual encounter at the age of 16. “In terms of my own experiences and what was harmful, it was an amazing, almost euphoric experience to figure out how that could be constructed differently.”

Polley wrote and shot the movie with August as the narrator, as he is in the book. Later, she realized the audience needed to hear a female voice, and as she sat in the editing room with returning collaborator Christopher Donaldson,

POWER IN NUMBERS

"I've never worked with a director like Sarah, ever," says Foy, pictured with Polley, Rooney Mara, and Jessie Buckley.

Polley's suit by **Alice + Olivia** by **Stacey Bendet**. Foy's clothing by **Staud**. Buckley's coat and boots by **Alexander McQueen**.

"THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT RETURNING TO FILM WITH FAR MORE COURAGE THAN I'D HAD BEFORE, AND A SENSE OF WANTING TO TAKE RISKS."
—Sarah Polley



“I KNOW THAT I WON’T HAVE
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WE’RE A TROUPE.
 YOU DON’T FEEL ALONE.” —*Rooney Mara*

cutting between the hayloft’s eight dynamic women, she kept returning to the face of Kate Hallett, the teen actor playing Autje, who quietly sits in on her elders’ seismic explorations of womanhood and agency. She made Autje the narrator. Polley won’t take sole credit, of course—Gardner and Donaldson were instrumental in the decision, she insists—but the beauty and heartbreak of the final product, defined by this young woman’s steadfast belief in a better tomorrow, are rooted in Polley’s achingly personal attachment to it. She tapped into her memories, her youth, the stuff she didn’t want to look at again.

“[I had] to make contact with the poetry of the subconscious, which I think

saved me at that age,” Polley says. “Suddenly, that wall between my own life and this film just got broken down.”

For much of her cast, that’d already happened.

ROONEY MARA IS TALKING. There’s a great warmth to her performance in the film. “We certainly see way more of my dimples than I’ve ever shown—I don’t think laughter or joy is something I’ve shown a whole lot of,” she tells me with a laugh. “Because of where I was at in my life, there’s probably some glow to me that wasn’t there before.” She also serves as a grounding force in *Women Talking*. Her character, Ona, is slightly more educated than the rest of the group, and she gently mediates fiery disagreements over whether the colony’s women should stay and fight the men or head off into the unknown. (She’s pregnant too, meaning the group’s decision will determine her unborn child’s way of life.)

Mara considers *Women Talking* her first movie since becoming a mother. She took more than three years off before joining

Guillermo del Toro’s *Nightmare Alley* while pregnant; that production was shut down due to COVID, and she resumed shooting it in the fall of 2020, when her son, River (named after the late brother of her partner, Joaquin Phoenix), was just eight weeks old. “I don’t even remember it—it was like I wasn’t even there,” Mara says. She alone took River to Toronto the next year for *Women Talking*. She felt terrified of leaving him for work every day, but Polley’s compassionate production schedule helped.

On set, Mara let her guard down. Polley is the first woman director she’s worked with in 13 years, and only her fourth ever. That, combined with an all-too-rare powerhouse female ensemble, allowed for new artistic freedom. “We all were able to fully be ourselves,” says Mara. In her case, that meant being a kind of mediator for the whole company. “Having her on that set was, at times, this very obvious anchor for everyone, and at others, she was holding the room together in ways we weren’t even seeing,” Polley says. On the obvious set, Mara brought a fart machine to use as a way of (very) loudly releasing tension in the room—“I stole the idea from Joaquin”—and creating real laughter in the scenes that demanded it. “We heard this fucking raunchy fart out of nowhere, and I thought for sure it was a crew member,” says Michelle McLeod, who plays Ona’s acquaintance Mejal. “I almost peed my pants laughing.”

In our Telluride roundtable, Mara spoke the least, while buoyed by castmates who sang her praises. When she attended the Colorado festival for *Carol* in 2015, she won a tribute award. Sitting with her *Women Talking* castmates, she recalled being—as she often has been on other films—the only female cast member on the ground for *Carol*’s US premiere. (She also argued the honor was “very premature” and reiterates for me that she’s still embarrassed by and “undeserving of” the award.) Throughout her career, Mara has known the weight of being the face of many heavy dramas, including *Carol* as well as her 2011 breakout, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (both of which earned her Oscar nominations), while uneasily navigating her burgeoning celebrity.

When she was doing press for *Dragon Tattoo*, she drew ugly media coverage for expressing regret over starring in the 2010 *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

AFTERGLOW
 Playing mother-to-be Ona so soon after becoming a mother herself, Rooney Mara was the “obvious anchor” for her castmates, says Polley.

reboot. “I got a lot of shit for it,” she says. “People were like, ‘Oh, she’s so ungrateful,’ blah, blah, blah, and it was like, wait, I’m allowed to have *not* had a good experience on a job and say that. And in fact, I’m very grateful for that experience because it taught me what I don’t want to do in my career.”

Then there’s the typecasting. For *Dragon Tattoo*, David Fincher didn’t see Mara as Lisbeth Salander because she seemed too “innocent,” Mara recalls. “He didn’t even want me to read for Salander, and I insisted that they put me on tape for it.” After she nailed the part, she was boxed into the opposite, hard-edged cliché, until Todd Haynes tapped her for *Carol*. “Every single time I saw her in something—and they were all quite different films—something of real integrity was evident in her work,” Haynes tells me. Now Mara sees the industry typecasting her again, as the wide-eyed girl who had to fight for *Dragon Tattoo* in the first place. “I think that just is going to keep happening,” she says.

All this may be why she brought so much joy to *Women Talking*, both on camera and off. Ona is anything but a type—she’s complex and surprising. Mara went deep with Polley about motherhood, which was fruitful for both her character and her own parental journey. “I know that I won’t have this ideal, supportive situation for other films,” Mara says. “Even out promoting the film, we’re a troupe. You don’t feel alone.”

JESSIE BUCKLEY IS TALKING. Unlike Mara, she joined *Women Talking* during a period of constant work. Within a year, she’d shot the last of *Fargo*’s fourth season; flown to Greece to film her Oscar-nominated turn in *The Lost Daughter*; returned home to London to perform in the National Theatre’s televised production of *Romeo & Juliet*; stayed in the country to lead Alex Garland’s horror drama *Men*; and then, finally, crossed the Atlantic to shoot *Women Talking* in Canada in July 2021. By year’s end, she’d also top-line the West End’s *Cabaret* revival opposite Eddie Redmayne to rave reviews, and go on to win the Olivier Award for best actress for it. The 32-year-old Irish chameleon ranks among her generation’s most sought-after actors. As Olivia Colman recently told me, “She’s the greatest one I can think of.”

For years, I’ve heard directors admit to having no idea what Buckley will actually do on camera. In her slippery role as “Young Woman” in Charlie Kaufman’s *I’m Thinking of Ending Things*, she bursts with life, shifting from funny to tragic to trippy on a dime. Maggie Gyllenhaal, who helmed *The Lost Daughter*, described Buckley to me as a “wild animal” who never does the same thing twice. And Polley echoes that sentiment: “The problem with Jessie is she just gets more exciting as time goes on. You continue to do takes, which feels inhumane, but you just can’t help yourself because you know she’s going to do something insane and fabulous.”

Buckley plays Mariche, the group’s resident cynic, who lives with a particularly cruel husband and can’t see a way out. The actor imbues *Women Talking* with caustic comic timing and an incandescent heartbreak. “I never know where my characters are going—I genuinely don’t,” she says. She improvises one eye roll so outrageously well-timed that the Telluride premiere audience howled in laughter. Then she had them sniffing. “My experience of Mariche was this steely shell with a belly of violence—and at the [movie’s] three-quarter mark, that’s shattered,” Buckley says. “I didn’t really like myself during shooting. She was hard to carry around.”

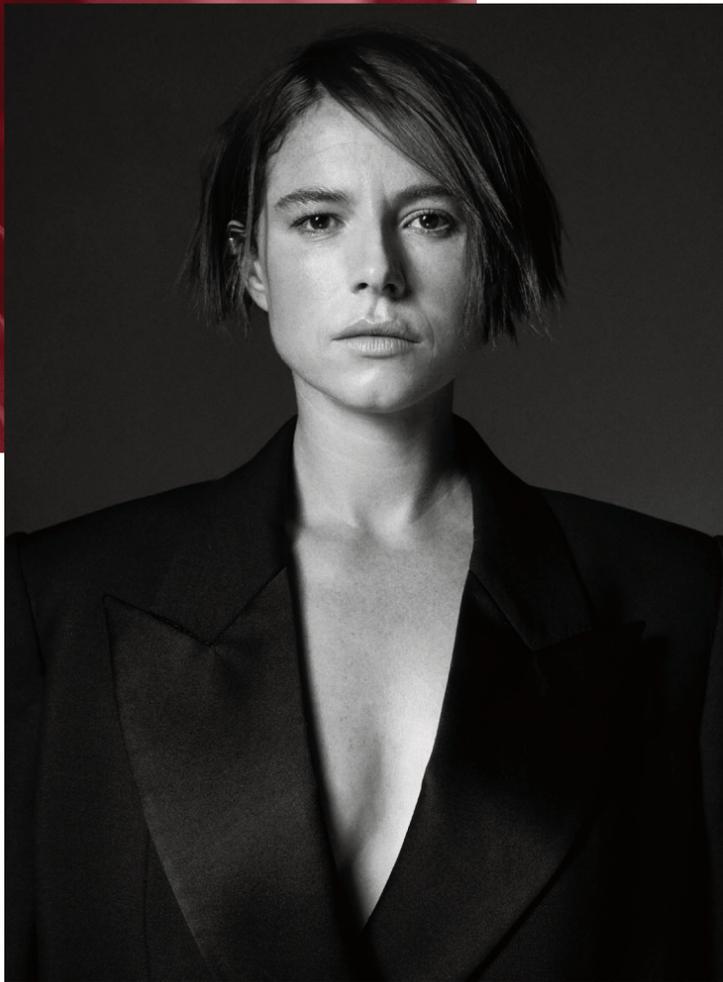
Buckley is “not Method-y,” not prone to taking her work home. But as the work gets deeper, so too does its effect on her. *The Lost Daughter*’s raw portrait of motherhood and desire came “at a time in my life when I really needed it,” Buckley says. “I learned to not apologize for being hungry for the life that you want to live.” She grew because of *Women Talking* too: “When I was a teenager, my understanding of what it was to be a woman in the world was much smaller than what I feel now, and what I’ve learned from working with these people.”

Buckley didn’t sense the project’s true impact on her until the last time she and her castmates walked out of the hayloft. In this climactic scene, Mariche shows up bruised and bandaged, having been beaten, again, by the drunken husband she’s considering leaving behind forever: “As I understand it, what we women have determined is that we want, and believe we are entitled to, three things,” Mariche says. “We want our children to be safe. We want to be steadfast in our faith. And we want to think.”

This is where Buckley’s “crack” happened, where the role took over in a way she’d successfully avoided until then. “Look, it was really intense—it was, hands down, one of the most intense things I have ever done,” she says. “And I’ve done intense things.”

CLAIRE FOY IS TALKING. She’d barely started filming *Women Talking* when the moment came to perform the first of several searing monologues. She ended up shooting it at “full tilt,” as Polley repeatedly says in awe, 120 times. If you’ve seen the film, you know how unbelievable that sounds. The 10-page scene’s writing is so guttural, so emotionally overwhelming, that doing it three or four times would seem daunting. “It’s massive, heavy, lots to explore, lots of beat changes—but that’s what acting is,” Foy says. “I had to be really technical about it, and that’s not a bad thing. Every job has its pace.”

Foy delivers what is arguably *Women Talking*’s most explosive performance—and she’s been advocating for this sort of character for years. After shooting her Emmy-winning breakout as Queen Elizabeth II on *The Crown*, Foy had options, to put it mildly. “She was a miraculous discovery for all of us—a once-in-a-generation arrival of a major talent where you privately think two things,” *The*



“IT WAS, HANDS DOWN, ONE OF THE MOST INTENSE THINGS I HAVE EVER DONE. AND I’VE DONE INTENSE THINGS.”

—*Jessie Buckley*

agonizing, visceral scene. “We know that we are bruised and infected and pregnant and terrified and insane and some of us are dead,” Salome says. “When our men have used us up, so that we look 60 when we’re 30 and our wombs have literally dropped out of our bodies onto our spotless kitchen floors, finished, they turn to our daughters.”

Crown’s creator, Peter Morgan, tells me. “First, how lucky we are to have her, and second, how much we’re all going to enjoy watching the rest of her career.”

Quite intentionally, Foy went on to play several women in high-profile films that some viewers felt bumped up against the tired Hollywood trope of “the wife.” In a speech at the 2019 Critics Choice Awards, for her turn as Neil Armstrong’s earthbound wife, Janet, in *First Man*, Foy pushed back: “I can’t tell you how many times during the making of the movie and in the press tour that people said to me, ‘Well, that part is normally the part of ‘just the wife.’” There’s no such thing as ‘just the wife.’” Foy tells me that she mines these parts for depth and dignity she knows exist in real life. “I will always want to represent women who have been in those positions,” she says. “Yes, it may be a supporting or smaller role in a movie, but I’d rather play that woman than not, and hopefully drive that action and conversation forward.”

Women Talking, with its collection of richly drawn daughters, wives, and mothers, reflects that step forward. “I’m interested in seeing female characters dealing with being female characters,” says Foy. “This film is a massive indication of understanding what that is.” You could say Salome is the role the Oxford School of Drama graduate has been waiting for. When Foy first encountered the character in Toews’s novel, she was struck by her uncontainable anger, her “massive heart,” her ability to juggle a dozen different tasks and thrive. “She can be looking after 12 children, and then what’s five more? I just found that really incredible,” she says.

After Polley shot Foy’s first monologue, the director realized she was in danger of pushing the actor past her limit. (“It’s really humbling to realize that you can put this much energy into making a safe and healthy environment, and that you sometimes are going to get it wrong.”) So they only ran through Foy’s next monologue a few times. It’s another

ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

“I never know where my characters are going,” says Buckley. “I genuinely don’t.”

Coat by **Alexander McQueen**. Throughout: hair products by **Back of Bottle** (Polley), **Color Wow** (Foy), **R+Co** (Buckley, Mara); makeup products by **Chanel** (Mara), **Isamaya** (Buckley), **Neen** (Foy).

STILLS: MICHAEL GIBSON/ORION PICTURES.

Foy didn’t want to cry. She felt frustrated as the tears came. “I’m listening, responding, looking into people’s eyes, hearing other people breathing,” she says. “I’m allowing everything else to take over. I’m not in control of it anymore.”

SO LET’S TALK about *Women Talking*. Just listen to the music, for one thing. The soaring score from Oscar winner Hildur Guðnadóttir (*Joker*) sounds almost out of sync with the subject matter but actually functions as *Women Talking*’s engine of hope. When Guðnadóttir first signed on, the grim topicality of the script left her “paralyzed with anger and sadness,” she says. She expected to channel that pain into the music, but Polley wanted something different. They had long conversations. Guðnadóttir needed to find that joy, that hope, in herself and her art—and ended up drawing inspiration from a long-buried composition from her past. “It felt like the kernel of the whole film, and I just wanted to hear it everywhere,” Polley says. She stretched the theme across *Women Talking*, letting it swell, and using it to unlock a talky book’s potential as epic cinema.

Like the novel, the film defines itself as an “act of female imagination.” The artists who made it all brought something to it and took something away when they left. That goes for industry titans McDormand and Gardner; for Sheila McCarthy and Judith Ivey, veteran actors who bring gravitas to their roles as the family matriarchs; and certainly for the young women on set. Hallett told her adult castmates that *Women Talking*, her first movie, has taught her to expect and ask for more as an actor in Hollywood. “Even at the age of 18, there isn’t a hope in hell I would’ve ever been able to say that,” Buckley says.

Toews wrote her novel just before #MeToo, and the movie’s timing is undeniable, especially as it hits theaters in the same season as *She Said*, another stark account of a community of women confronting an abusive patriarchal system. But *Women Talking*’s subject and impact transcend its cultural moment. The film’s conversations feel timeless, in the vein of *12 Angry Men* or *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Polley pushed for Luc Montpellier’s washed-out cinematography, a color-palette choice that has divided critics, to evoke a faded postcard. “As soon as they start that conversation, the world they’ve been living in has been consigned to the past,” Polley says.

Back in Telluride, McDormand said that, during the development phase, she and Gardner were searching for *Women Talking*’s paradigm. “Where’s the big triumph?” they’d ask Polley, and Polley would tell them, “I don’t think women’s stories are told that way.” Out, again, goes the rule book. “So then what’s the alternative? This movie is the alternative,” McDormand says. “You haven’t seen it before because it hasn’t been explored.”

No wonder *Women Talking* is like nothing its company has ever experienced in their careers. “A lot happened in the attic—we laughed, we cried, we got pissed off with each other, we held each other, we fought,” Buckley says. “It was real.” Adds Mara: “It was like everyone disappeared—like we were alone up there.”

For that, at least, Polley should take a little credit. ■