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

ANGELA BASSETT & KEKE PALMER
Reunited

THE BEST PICTURE RACE
The Studios Fight Back

STEVEN SPIELBERG & TONY KUSHNER
Talk Shop

PLUS

VIOLA DAVIS
DANIEL CRAIG
TAYLOR SWIFT
& More
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
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 feel like someone gives a shit about how they’re doing.”

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 righ
teously 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 nar
erator, 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,
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
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, insisting—but the beauty and heartbreak of where I was at in my life, there’s probably some glow to me I’ve shown a whole lot of,” she tells me with a laugh. “Because of where I was 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 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 side, Mara brought a fart machine to set 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 Mejia. “I almost peed my pants laughing.”

In our Telluride roundtable, Mara spoke the heart, while her costar co-stars who sang her praises. When she attended the Colorado festival for Carol in 2015, she won a tribute award. Sitting with her 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 reiterated 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-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 slipper role as “Young Woman” in Charlie Kaufman’s I’m Thinking of Ending Things, she bursts with life, shifting from funny to tragic to typecasting her again, as the wide-eyed girl who had 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. Mara 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 slipper role as “Young Woman” in Charlie Kaufman’s I’m Thinking of Ending Things, she bursts with life, shifting from funny to tragic to typecasting her again, as the wide-eyed girl who had 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.

Buckley plays Mariche, the group’s resident cynic, who lives next door for Women Talking opposite David Gyllenhaal, who helped her in her role. “I almost peed my pants laughing.”

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 slipper role as “Young Woman” in Charlie Kaufman’s I’m Thinking of Ending Things, she bursts with life, shifting from funny to tragic to typecasting her again, as the wide-eyed girl who had 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.
You privately think two things,” she said, “to put it mildly. “She was a miraculous Emmy-winning breakout as Queen Elizabeth of character for years. After shooting her and she’s been advocating for this sort of thing, and that’s not something we can 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 delivered the ultimate performance in The Crown’s most explosive episode—and she’s been advocating for this sort of character for years. After shooting her Emmy-winning and Bafta-nominated performance as Queen Elizabeth II on The Crown, Foy had options, to put it mildly. “She was a miraculous discovery for me—a generation arrival of a major talent where you privately think two things,” The 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 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 raises struck by her unsustainable 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 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 50 and our wombs have literally dropped out of our bodies onto our spotless kitchen floors, finished, they turn to our daughters.”

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 Hoy, veteran actors who bring gravitas to their roles as the family matriarchs; and certainly for the young cast 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 80, 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 year as the MeToo Women Talking, which is a portrait 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 Ismael Ferreira’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,” the Polley says. Back in Telluride, McDormand said that, during the development phase, she and Gardner were searching for “a paradigm. Where’s the big win? Is it not a paradigm?” They’d ask Polley, Polley would tell them, “I don’t think women’s stories are told in that way.” Out, again, goes the rule book. “So what then’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 any 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 like everyone disappeared—like we were alone up there.”

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