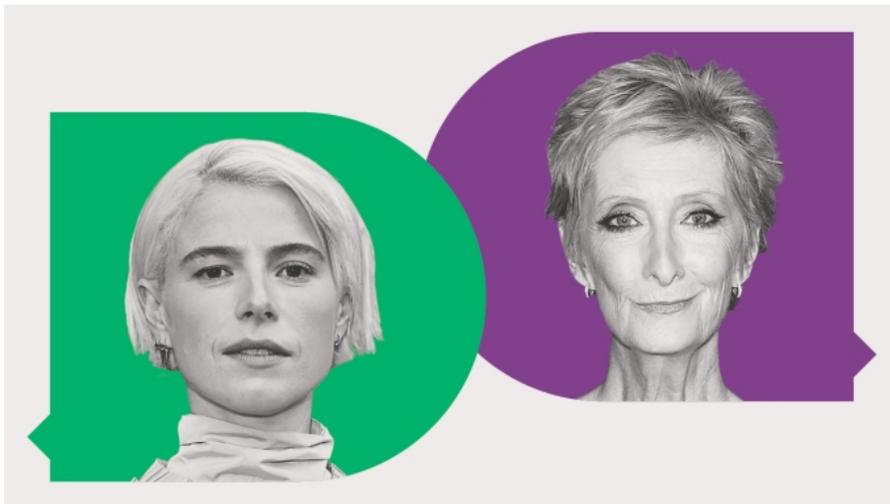


‘Women Talking’ Jessie Buckley and Sheila McCarthy Says Film’s Cast Was a “Band of Sisters, Like a Pack of Wolves”

Two stars from Sarah Polley’s ensemble drama discuss finding levity on set while filming intensely emotional scenes, plus the costumes (and fake teeth) that helped them discover their characters.



Jessie Buckley (left) and Sheila McCarthy *Amanda Edwards/Getty Images; Jerod Harris/Getty Images*

In Sarah Polley’s *Women Talking*, Jessie Buckley and Sheila McCarthy play a daughter and mother who have both been raped by the men of their Mennonite community. Buckley’s character, Mariche, is obstinate. As the women of her enclave are debating their future, she is tied to the past, frustrated with the potential for change. McCarthy’s Greta is comparatively serene. She finds metaphors in her beloved horses, Ruth and Cheryl, who might know a way forward.

It’s heavy material, but when Buckley and McCarthy get on a Zoom call one Saturday evening, they are giggly and joyful. It’s a reflection of the experience of making the film, balancing the upsetting circumstances of what they were portraying with a jovial camaraderie. “None of us went back to our trailers,” McCarthy says. “We were always in these big communal rooms ... for the whole time. That was [like a] private girls school, a sorority. We all bunked in together.” Based on the novel by Miriam Toews, which itself was inspired by real-life events, *Women Talking* teams Buckley and McCarthy with Claire Foy, Rooney Mara, Judith Ivey and Ben Whishaw.

The partnership between these two actresses — Buckley, who was Oscar-nominated for *The Lost Daughter*, and McCarthy, a veteran of Canadian cinema — is evident throughout their conversation about sandals, tough days and false teeth.

What was the experience like when you met the rest of the cast?

SHEILA MCCARTHY I remember emailing Jess while I was watching *Wild Rose*. I was literally watching your movie, emailing you, and we weren't allowed to see each other because of COVID. You were isolated for two weeks. We thought about sneaking and then we didn't. And then we did the Zoom [rehearsal] for a whole week. It was so much fun when we finally got to meet in the hayloft [to shoot].

JESSIE BUCKLEY And we all turned up in our funny little dresses and socks and sandals and we all burst out laughing. You could do a whole article on the socks and sandals in *Women Talking*, because everybody's socks and sandals were so particular.

MCCARTHY And you had those fake boobs.

BUCKLEY I had fake boobies because I thought, "I've suckled an army." I got a fake bra filled with bird seed, and then I drew two faces on my bra — one called Ruth and one called Cheryl.

MCCARTHY It was like a theater thing. We were together every day for months at a time, doing some intense things. But oh my God, we did laugh a lot, too.

Now that you mention it, Jessie, what were each of your socks and sandals like?

BUCKLEY Mine were the saddest socks and sandals. My socks were quite dirty. They were like little armadillo shoes. They were a little hard. But then the back of my strap on one of my shoes was broken.

MCCARTHY And it just stayed broken, I think. Didn't it?

BUCKLEY Oh, no. It started broken. We decided she'd have one broken strap ... like her heart.

MCCARTHY Mine were Birkenstock-y, kind of like —

BUCKLEY Oh, hold on a second. Sheila looked so effortlessly chic. We all looked completely rubbish. And Sheila with her hat and her beautiful face and slim body ... Me and Claire [Foy] and Rooney [Mara], we'd be like, "Fuck her, we look awful."

MCCARTHY Have you seen the movie? My only saving grace now is that people come up to me and go, "Oh, you actually look quite a bit younger in real life." And I'm like, "Thank God." When I first saw the movie, Judy [Ivey] and I were like, "Oh my God, there's not a chin to be

found.” I remember Sarah [Polley] saying to me, “You might be a bit too young for the movie.” And I went, “Are you out of your fucking mind?” You take off the mascara and put on those polyester dresses. We’ll be fine.

This is already a delightful, funny interview about a very serious movie. You’re dealing with horrific incidents, but you obviously did have a good time together.

BUCKLEY There was such an incredible generosity of heart on this set. It was intense. And we sometimes were doing 150 takes of one scene over three days, and every single person in that room was there for the other person when it was their turn and gave 120 percent and would reach a hand out to say, “I’m here.” I think that’s why making this film was so different; it was an experience rather than a performance. We were really like a band of sisters, like a pack of wolves. And Ben [Whishaw], who’s my Friday wife, aka my drinking buddy. Sarah [has] such a vulnerable powerfulness about her, and that’s how she leads. She creates a space where everybody is equal. And that meant that the hard days were as good as the good days.

What is so incredibly beautiful and so fulfilling is [hearing] the young women [in the cast] speak about [feeling that] this has changed their lives. No way at 18 could I articulate what these women have come to be able to articulate from this experience. To stand up in front of people and say, “It takes a hell of a lot of courage to stay, it takes a hell of a lot of courage to fight, it takes a hell of a lot of courage to leave,” and know that. And equally say, “I know that I have a voice that deserves to be listened to. Before I would’ve thought that I just had to be good.” That was thrilling. That comes from actually living something.

MCCARTHY I think having them on the set made us all very aware of the need for sensitivity, too. We had a lovely crisis counselor [clinical psychologist Lori Haskell] with us a lot of the time. She would look around at all the seasoned ones and I would just say, “I’m just going to get another Starbucks. I’m pretty good.” But with the young girls, we were all very aware of the need to be careful.



From left: Claire Foy, Judith Ivey, Sheila McCarthy, Michelle McLeod and Jessie Buckley in United Artists' *Women Talking*, written and directed by Sarah Polley *Courtesy of Michael Gibson/Orion Pictures*

Jessie, how did you find it helpful having Dr. Haskell on set?

BUCKLEY I didn't realize how hard a knot Mariche was to carry around. I'm not somebody who takes it home, but you do take it home sometimes. There were probably one or two days where it got to me and I was a bit like, "You could stand far away. Get far away from me with your healing hands." And then I did need her. I didn't know it at the time, but it was such a gift to have that support. But also we were all there for [one another] when we were finding it hard.

MCCARTHY And that includes the crew, too — everybody was very sensitive to the experience. And I think we all also realized that it was something really special.

Jessie, what was your initial approach to Mariche? She stands in opposition to so many people throughout the film.

BUCKLEY I immediately responded to Mariche in lots of ways. She sits on the other side of me in my life, too, and that's partly why I was curious about her. I wanted to know what that woman was, because I know that woman in my life. What you think you know of yourself or what other people think they know of you, there's a whole world going on inside people, secrets and hopes and dreams and fears. Mariche was somebody who had a lot of internalized violence from a legacy of violence that she was experiencing in that moment. But also she's

lived that with her own mother, and her mother probably lived that with her mother. The chain has been going on for centuries. The thing about all of us women in that loft is that we had to unlearn things to learn something new about ourselves and be brave enough to step into a place where we didn't know what was there yet.

Sheila, what did that unlearning mean for you in playing Greta?

MCCARTHY Greta was pretty steadfast from the very beginning, but my way in was through that very gentle humor that Sarah really wanted to push, because it sort of takes the air out of the balloon in tense scenes. She knows exactly what she's doing when she talks about [her horses] Ruth and Cheryl and speaks in metaphors. There was such a quiet strength to her that came from her faith — which is something I don't have, but I understand it. For all these women, their faith was totally steadfast in their lives, and that's what helps them. I kept thinking about these women having never spoken before, ever, and how compelling that is to have a room of eight or nine women speaking something for the very first time.

Jessie mentioned playing this woman who has borne so many children. Sheila, how did you want to carry Greta?

MCCARTHY The loss of her teeth [was], to me, a metaphor for not having her voice. I don't know whether Miriam Toews wrote that intentionally, but that spoke volumes to me about finding her voice again with teeth that don't fit. That was huge.

Did you wear false teeth on top of yours?

MCCARTHY No, that was my makeup. I remember the first time I took my teeth out and you didn't know it was going to happen, Jessie, you started laughing so hard.

BUCKLEY Cruel daughter, cruel daughter.

MCCARTHY I'm not making light, because it is horrible. But I didn't tell anybody the first time I took them out. I always had a handkerchief in my hand because can you imagine having teeth that don't fit in your mouth and how painful that would be all the time?

Interview edited for length and clarity.