

'Women Talking' and What a Post-#MeToo Future Looks Like

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Nothing about the making of “Women Talking” should have been easy. The filmmaker Sarah Polley wrote the script, based on the critically acclaimed 2019 novel by Miriam Toews, without the backing of a studio. Despite the praise for the novel, which is loosely based on real-life events in an ultraconservative Mennonite colony in Bolivia, the subject matter was a tough sell.

The story centers on a group of women gathered in a hayloft to discuss their response to the horrifying revelation that they have been repeatedly drugged and raped by some of the men in their colony. The women have three choices: Do nothing, stay and fight, or leave. All of them are illiterate, so they bring one man into their group (Ben Whishaw) to leave a record of their decision. The majority of the film plays out like a stage drama with the women debating their fate while tackling the thorny emotions of rage, anguish, forgiveness and hope.

Despite these perceived hurdles, Polley said she had “an enormous amount of faith and freedom” to make it. She partnered with Frances McDormand, who also plays a small role in the movie, and Dede Gardner, the president of Plan B Entertainment; the production company co-founded by Brad Pitt has an overall deal with MGM. Because of that arrangement, “Women Talking” became one of the production company’s guaranteed films of the year for the studio (now owned by Amazon).

“Women Talking,” which opens on Dec. 23, is Polley’s first film in a decade and her most ambitious work to date. Performances from actresses as varied as Claire Foy, Judith Ivey, Jessie Buckley and Rooney Mara have already been lauded by critics’ groups, and the film itself has been named one of the best pictures of the year by the National Board of Review and the American Film Institute.

I sat down with Polley and two of her cast members, Claire Foy and Rooney Mara, to discuss the making of the film. Here are edited excerpts from that conversation.



Ben Whishaw, left, Mara and Foy in a scene from the film, which is adapted from a novel but based on real events. Credit...Michael Gibson/Orion Pictures/United Artists Releasing, via Associated Press

Sarah, you said there were a lot of questions that the novel had put into words that you couldn't articulate yourself. What kinds of questions?

SARAH POLLEY Questions around individual guilt vs. systemic injustice, around forgiveness and, in terms of the future, what kind of world we want to build. I think it was really easy, especially at the time this book came out, to be flooded with all the harm that had been done and to sink into that. Those are important conversations to have. But the idea of what's the next step and how do we get there was really revelatory for me.

How did you two respond to the script when you first read it?

ROONEY MARA I had read the book. It seemed to me an impossible thing to adapt. It was quite a bit later when I read the script. I loved it so much. I had all the same feelings. I was kind of blown away by it.

CLAIRE FOY This really extraordinary script was unlike anything I'd ever read before. It didn't follow any of the tropes of scripts where you're told what to think when you're reading it. It was all so subtle. And you just read these women's voices the entire time. It was really remarkable.

Claire, what was it about your character, Salome, who appears the most rageful of the women, that you connected to?

FOY I just got her. There were obviously lots of questions I had about her character. It wasn't easy. But I admired her, and I understood her reaction and her position and how she felt with what she had suffered, what her daughter had suffered, her sister, her mother, all the women. I thought she had the appropriate response, which is probably a good instinct to have when it's the character you're playing. There's absolutely no way I could have done what Rooney did. I would have looked half-demonic.

Rooney, how did you convey this level of serenity in light of the horror brought upon your character, Ona, who had been impregnated as a result of these sexual assaults?

MARA I was just lucky with the place I was in, in my life. I was a new mom. I was madly in love with my child. And I did have this optimism that I don't generally carry around with me, but having this amazing person in my life, it just brought out this side to me. It was perfect timing for me to channel that.

FOY That's interesting that that allowed you to go there because I always think of you like that.

POLLEY Me too. That's the only Rooney we know.

FOY You can say anything to her and she'll just go, "I believe ..." and you will agree with everything she says.

MARA People have been yelling at me my whole life to smile. Everyone. From the time I was 3 years old. And I've never smiled so much in my life as I did in this film. Thank God I was playing that part. It would have been really hard to have played one of the other parts and go home to my baby boy. I don't know how I would have done that.

POLLEY I have a theory about your not smiling, which I have not shared with you. Like Ona, you are so connected with what's going on with the other person that you're not constructing anything with your face. Most people are very aware of themselves. And I think you're so connected with what's happening in front of you that what it actually is, is a kind of selflessness that's very unusual.

MARA I'm going to have to record that. I'm smiling on the inside.



Mara and Foy both found the screenplay extraordinary — Mara because she had read the novel and didn't think it was possible to adapt, Foy because the script seemed to ignore all the usual tropes. Credit...Chantal Anderson for The New York Times

When you first got to set, were you terrified about what you had signed up for?

POLLEY I was really excited and strangely calm for a lot of the process. And then that first day of in-person rehearsal in the hayloft — it was constructed so that people had to climb ladders to get up there. They just popped up one by one, these heads. They came really fast. I hadn't quite set up the set yet. So I was kind of sweating anyway, and just seeing all of the faces of these actors I worshiped, pop up, and realizing how many of them there were and that I was going to have to figure out how to manage making this film. But also when you have that many actors, you're kind of performing, too. Like every time I spoke, I had an audience of 12 actors that I admire.

MARA That's my nightmare.

POLLEY What's terrible was there was no anticipation of that terror. It just happened that day you guys first dropped in. There was definitely a moment of, "I haven't been on a set in 10 years, and this is what I thought I should start with."

FOY What an idiot!

What was it like working in a female-dominated space? Did it feel different to what you are used to?

MARA Yes, and we were all in the same thing with no makeup on. It was just so stripped down.

FOY It wasn't easy, but it felt like we were all speaking the same language. We could go, "What do you mean? What are you trying to say?" very quickly. Whereas I feel like sometimes, there's a navigation of having to justify or decode what someone's saying.

MARA We got right to it. There wasn't a lot of small talk or niceties. We were all very real.

Was it refreshing to not have any makeup on?

MARA I loved it. Also, just less time.

FOY I love it. You see people flushing. You see the color of people's cheeks. You can see the age of people's skin and everyone is beautiful. You get to see people as they are, as opposed to what they're presenting. We need to do more of it. It always really pisses me off when people are at home in films with makeup on. You don't wake up like that. No one does.

MARA In period films, they do it all the time. I'm always like, "Guys, this is ridiculous. There is no way I'd have these eyelashes on in bed."

POLLEY I think the fact that you all were doing it made a difference. I remember someone said, “I’m fine with that, as long as everyone does it, you know?” It’s probably less vulnerable than doing that on your own in a movie.

FOY I was secretly putting dry concealer on. [Laughs] We all thought Rooney did because Rooney, for some reason, is lit from within.

POLLEY At the camera test it was clear you were not wearing any makeup and all the other actors were just standing behind the camera going, “What the [expletive]?”

Were there particular scenes you worried about the most?

FOY I knew that I had do like a really energized, angry rant early on. And I was like, this could go really badly. But sometimes owning it, just saying, “I’m scared about this, so I’m going to do it really big and you will know that I’m being terrible.” Then I’m going to try to be better. But at least everyone knows.

POLLEY We would rehearse scenes on set right before we shot them, and everyone started saying their lines as a joke. The only time it was done seriously was when we shot it. It was needing to just preserve something.



Polley said she wasn't nervous about directing the film until she was on set the first day and the actresses began popping their heads into the hayloft. Credit...Chantal Anderson for The New York Times

Are there things from this experience that you want to take with you to your next job?

FOY I feel like Sarah is an example of how to be a leader over everything, basically.

MARA In the world.

FOY How to work collectively with people. How to make something an open environment where everyone's invested, down to the crew. It's such an example. Maybe you can do a seminar or something. And lots of directors can go to it.

Did you do things differently on this set than you've done in the past?

POLLEY Having 10 years off was really good for me, because I think I came into the process with so much gratitude and joy. Preferring the experience for people working on the film, above all things, was really helpful.

It was also the right creative decision. We had to have an environment that felt open enough that people could take pretty enormous risks. And we were asking an enormous amount of these actors who, like in Claire's case, had to do 120 takes of their hardest monologue. It will all fall apart if people feel unsafe or manipulated. It's not just some pollyannaish thing.

What's been the most surprising reaction to the film?

POLLEY I love the way young men respond to it. Those reactions have been by far the most emotional and speechless. It's really unexpected and hopeful. This generation of men is thinking in a different way and I'm finding that really exciting.

FOY I was so involved in the process of making it that I didn't really understand the consequences of what it would be like when it was seen by other people. Like when an audience member comes up to you and says that you've represented something that they've experienced or they felt. It can sometimes feel overwhelming and you don't have the skills to deal with that. But I would take that a million times over doing something that doesn't feel like it's changing something. It's my first ever experience of being part of a cultural conversation.

MARA To me, the experience was the most important part. Generally, when you have an incredible experience on a film, the film is usually not very good. That's kind of the rule. We made the film, and it was this profound experience. I'm grateful that people seem to have the same feelings from the film that I got from the book.

POLLEY The first time we showed the final cut to a small group of people, there was one person I knew a little bit but not well. She grew up with parents who were illiterate. She worked her way up with such intensity to the point where she has an amazing life and is kind of brilliant. Also as a result of her life, she's not someone who ever makes herself vulnerable.

She watched the film in a group of 30 strangers, and at the end, she stood up and said, “I got out of an abusive relationship eight months ago. I literally have my bags packed to go back tomorrow. And this film has made me decide that I’m not going to.” It was such a shocking moment. It was very early in the process of showing the film, and the fact that it was actually changing her direction and she was willing to share that with a group of strangers was a thrilling beginning.