

Stories We Tell

Exactly six years ago in this column, I praised highly the film “Away from Her,” the directorial debut of Sarah Polley, known up to that time as a fine character actor for her performances in “The Sweet Hereafter” and “Guinevere,” among others. In that film, I felt that she showed, though barely 30, maturity and taste both as a screenwriter and as a gifted handler of her veteran actors. Last year, she struck again with “Take This Waltz,” which was, for me, a wondrous study of young people in relationships they don’t quite fathom and which starred a radiant Michelle Williams. Now she has turned her attention to her own Toronto roots in the very personal documentary “Stories We Tell,” a searching and compelling portrait of a family discovering and disclosing a long-held secret.

Polley’s documentary technique at first seems clumsy, almost offhand, as she quietly adjusts equipment and mumbles through set-ups to interview her father and her sundry sisters and brothers. All the family members are genial but also somewhat skeptical of Polley’s project, anxious about the story she wants to tell.

Her purpose was explained in an interview: “I think it’s a universal thing in every family, that people have their own specific versions of pivotal events or even small memories. They are 100 percent certain that their recollections are the truth because whatever the truth is, as they recall it, has formed them and it is part of their history. Discrepancies in memory preoccupy families, and the idea of this fascinated me.”

The family narrative she is seeking focuses on her deceased mother, Diane, a vivacious and fetching Canadian actress who died of cancer in 1989, when Sarah was 11. The family, involved in theater and acting, was an early user of Super-8 video technology so there is a lot of grainy family footage, much of it focusing on the photogenic Diane.

Much of this footage is described in over voice by Sarah’s father, Michael Polley, an Englishman long established in Toronto who met Diane in 1965 while both appeared in a play (they married in 1967). Michael’s story of the marriage admits of difficulties, Diane being ever the slightly ditzy party girl while her phlegmatic husband settled into the insurance business. She had no guile; he hid things. The voices of the siblings are brought in, as are those of several friends of the family and acquaintances, most especially one Harry Gulkin, a show business figure from Montreal.

The drama, with all the characters in place, unfolds in roughly chronological order, with the crucial event being Diane’s leaving the Polley home in Toronto to perform in Montreal in 1978. This sojourn leads to Diane’s late, and last, pregnancy at 42, and the birth of Sarah, who, somehow, “doesn’t really look like her father.” Family discussion of this lack of resemblance pepper conversations over the years, leading Polley herself, as an adult, to find out if there was a romantic liaison in Montreal. This turns out to be the story she seeks to tell.

Summarized thus, “Stories We Tell” may sound like rather thin gruel, but Polley is able to create a steady tension as pieces of the family story slip out, as Michael’s narration grinds on, as her attractive sisters and brothers (Joanna, Susy, John, and Mark) bob and weave under her steady probing (at one point, her father bemoans her

“sadistic interview”). When her brother John asks Polley what her documentary is about, she replies that she is “trying to bring someone to life”—her mom—and also to resolve the long-standing family slips and contradictions about her own origins.

Through it all there are twists and turns that keep you guessing. Why, for example, is Michael standing at a lectern “reading” this candid depiction of his marriage to the camera? Only late in the documentary do you learn why. How are all these kids related in the first place? Only two-thirds through do you learn of Diane’s first, unsuccessful marriage, and the fact that she lost custody of four kids. Revelations keep slipping out. The documentary then morphs into Polley’s recent search to determine her own parentage, including her quizzing of men in her mother’s stage life and her befriending of the voluble Harry. It becomes a gentle, slightly aching detective story.

A wonder of the film is the fount of footage that Polley is able to show. OK, this image-conscious family had cameras around and used them (esp. focused on Diane) but how could Polley find in the archives such timely shots of her mom’s active home and social life under all conditions, including some quite intimate, not to mention her own involvement with the Harry character in Montreal?

Answers to these questions come only when you carefully read the end credits of this fascinating family odyssey. Turns out that Polley’s method is hardly clumsy or offhand; a very sly and pointed intelligence has produced more a work of artfully crafted “truth” than a straightforward documentary.

(The film runs 108 min. and is rated “PG-13.”)

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