

## Women Talking

The one-liner—"Do we stay or do we go?" would make a crude set-up for the absorbing new film by writer-director Sarah Polley. A stark but compelling drama set in 2010, it is based on a contemporary incident that happened in a religious community in Bolivia. It features eight women from an isolated **Mennonite** colony (location not specified) grappling to reconcile their harsh reality with their abiding faith after it is revealed that multiple men from their isolated colony have drugged and raped the community's women at night for years.

Eight of their number gather in the hayloft of a barn to argue about what to do about this realization. An odd setting for a movie drama, perhaps, but made compelling (mostly) by an octet of fine female actors.

The setting opens briskly but with little background information. It is not clear what people in the colony do for a living, although it appears to be farming. The exact nature of the abuses is never specified or described. What is learned is what the women discuss for the two-hour run time. Viewers will see the colony's inhabitants in what seems a timeless setting--with the women wearing garb out of "Witness" (1986)--modestly dressed but with searing material to impart. The photography is purposely restrained, with a muted color scheme (shot by Luc Montpellier) just this side of high-contrast black-and white.

The protagonists are a fine Greek chorus of women actors: Rooney Mara as Ona, torn about the choices they must face, Claire Foy as Salome, a vociferous voice against the criminal menfolk, Jesse Buckley as Mariche, almost as outspoken but willing to listen to arguments, and Judith Ivey as Agata, who has historical perspective and the presence of an elderly Catholic nun. The only significant male role is August (Ben Wishaw), the shy but honest school teacher who has agreed to take notes of the session.

As stated above, Polley's script reveals little information about the scandal that has riven the community; you piece it together from the women's fervent exchange. The setting of their talk fest is narrow, even a little claustrophobic. The to-and-fro of the debate is intense and gripping (giving each actress a chance to shine), yet, also somewhat repetitive. Will they or won't they vote to leave the colony...?

Polley comes with a long film-making pedigree in her native Canada. She began acting as a child and her breakthrough role came in "The Sweet Hereafter" (1997), playing a teenage survivor of a bus crash, and in the TV series "Slings and Arrows" (2004-2006). Among the dozens of feature films she appeared in through 2010 (when she turned to directing), some of the most prominent included "Guinevere" (1998), "Go" (1999), and "My Life Without Me" (2003).

Her directing debut was "Away from Her" (2006), a sympathetic study of a woman suffering with dementia, "Take This Waltz" (2010), a delicate film about a love triangle, and "Stories We Tell" (2012), a revealing documentary about her

own family's mangled past. This makes "Women Talking" her first feature in ten years, and one of her best. At age 43, we can only hope that Polley has years, if not decades, of work ahead of her (and perhaps she will act again sometime). *(The film is rated "PG-13," runs 144 minutes, and arrives in DC-area cinemas on January 6th.)*

(January 2023)