

How ‘Women Talking’ Turned a Hayloft Into a ‘Sacred Space’

TheWrap magazine: “We talked a lot about the idea of a cathedral,” says director Sarah Polley



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This story about “Women Talking” first appeared in the [Below-the-Line issue](#) of TheWrap’s awards magazine.

On the surface, Sarah Polley’s “Women Talking” is one of the ultimate examples of a 2022 film that largely takes place in a single location. Polley adapted the novel by Miriam Toews, which was itself based on the true story of a Mennonite clan in Bolivia that was rampant with sexual abuse, and the action rarely leaves the hayloft of a barn in an isolated community.

In that loft, a group of women has been deputized to decide for all of the community’s female members, who must choose whether they should flee the men who have been systematically drugging and raping them or stay in the only place many of them have known.

“It was a really fun challenge,” production designer Peter Cosco said of setting most of the film in a single location. “We found a great-looking barn (outside Toronto), but there were a lot of discrepancies between the real barn and what we needed. I had to figure out a truss system that would support the structure with minimal posts, so you didn’t have things blocking the camera or getting in the way of the actors.

“It was figuring out how to achieve a structure for the barn that felt right but was in some ways the complete opposite of how a barn is really built.”

The idea, added Polley, was to give a sense of import to the place where the women make their life-altering decision. “We talked a lot about the idea of a cathedral,” she said. “It is a barn, it is a hayloft, but it’s also a sacred space.”

The actors who worked in that space included Jessie Buckley, Claire Foy, Rooney Mara, Judith Ivey, Sheila McCarthy and Frances McDormand, plus Ben Whishaw as the sole male occupant of the loft, who is there to document the proceedings because the colony’s women are kept illiterate. The women are dressed plainly and severely, their sartorial choices as contained as the walls of the barn.

“There’s so much restriction in these women’s lives,” said costume designer Quita Alfred, who grew up around Mennonite communities in Canada. “Those dresses are meant to negate those women, to remind them of their subjugation to God and their husbands and other men in their families.

"So we tried our best to show little glimmers of expression and personality in something as simple as a color or embroidery on a head scarf. It may not even be evident to the audience, but it helped the actors go to places where they needed to go for their characters."

Cinematographer Luc Montpellier said that one of Polley's key instructions to him was, "I want the photography to feel as epic as the decision they have to make." And the barn helped him do that. "Our challenge was to make cinema, not a stage play," he said. "I think every decision we made visually was tied to the cathedral aspect of the barn.

"We could easily have built the barn as a small, claustrophobic space, and there was some discussion about making it enclosed. But cinema is cinema. We wanted to show the conformity and unwavering faith and heaviness to their world, but it was also important to see the beauty in things."



(Photo by Diane King for TheWrap [Back row, left to right: Cinematographer Luc Montpellier, costume designer Quita Alfred, editor Chris Donaldson; front row, editor Roslyn Kalloo, director Sarah Polley, production designer Peter Corso])

For Polley, it was also important that the movie have a real pace to it: If the characters are going to stay in one place, the film needs to move. "It couldn't linger because we're asking something of the audience already," she said. "But it took a long time to find what the movie wanted to be."

Editors Roslyn Kalloo and Chris Donaldson worked with Polley at setting the pace and trimming the fat. "The acting was so good that on a first pass you could just follow the rhythm of the dialogue around the room," said Kalloo, who went to work when shooting began. "And then Chris came on board and the film totally benefitted from a new set of eyes."

"On one level, you could say the screenplay had been taken as far as it could go when I came on," said Donaldson, who had worked with Polley several times in the past. "But eventually you have to lay the screenplay aside and find the movie. And the process of getting it to 97 minutes was really distillation, distillation, distillation."

A key move, he said, was changing the film's narrator from the character played by Ben Whishaw to a young girl who had been a background character. "All of a sudden," he said, "everything became very elastic."

As Polley and her crew talked about the film, the conversation eventually circled back to the location — not just that room in the barn, but everything around it. "Peter built a town," Polley said. "It's not totally clear from the film, but none of that was there. He planted crops, built roads and built a town. It was kind of crazy."

She shook her head. "I know everyone's like, 'It just takes place in a hayloft!' But as a matter of fact, it doesn't."