

Family Viewing

An Interview with Sarah Polley

by Richard Porton



Sarah Polley, the Canadian actress, screenwriter, and director, has frequently demonstrated a remarkable talent for reinventing herself. Having launched her career at age four with a Disney film, and subsequently becoming identified with the role of Sara Stanley in the long-running television series *The Road to Avonlea* (which was preceded by a pivotal appearance as Sally Salt in Terry Gilliam's *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, 1988), she changed gears as a teenager to solidify her reputation as an "indie actress." Breakthrough roles in Atom Egoyan's *Exotica* (1994) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) led to a wide array of assignments in an eclectic assortment of films, which ranged from Doug Liman's *Go* (1999) to a remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). In recent years, Polley has embraced directing and largely put acting on hold. Her first feature-length directorial effort, *Away from Her* (2006), an adaptation of Alice Munro's short story, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," revealed a great sensitivity in dealing with actors and was especially noteworthy for Julie Christie's bravura performance as an Alzheimer's victim whose illness fails to suppress a desire for a final passionate romance, as well as veteran Canadian actor Gordon Pinsent's low-key, but equally effective, turn as Christie's husband. Critical reactions to *Take This Waltz* (2011), Polley's second feature, were considerably more mixed; although this tale of a marriage gone awry was marked by a certain formal audacity, it was also weighed down by an overly whimsical tone that frequently flirted with preciousness.

Stories We Tell, Polley's latest project and her first documentary, is one of her most successful efforts at reinvention. The unique demands of nonfiction filmmaking, which often generate less schematic results than the constraints of fiction, proved liberating for the novice documentarian. Paradoxically, the impetus of *Stories We Tell* was a moment of personal anguish concerning a series of events that the actress-director hoped would never see the light of day in the mainstream press. While on the set of *Mr. Nobody* in 2007, Polley discovered that a journalist had plans to publish a piece revealing that Michael Polley, the British-born actor who raised her, was not her biological parent and that her birth was in fact the result of a brief affair her mother Diane (who died of cancer when the future actress and director was eleven) conducted when acting in a play in Montreal during the Seventies. In a blog posted on the National Film Board of Canada's Website on the day *Stories We Tell* premiered at the 2012 Venice Film Festival, Polley wrote that the prospect of this article—which was never written—upset her primarily because she hadn't yet told Michael Polley that DNA tests confirmed that Harry Gulkin, a man whose career, like Polley's, combines political activism and show business, was her biological father. Although she observes that "[M]aking this film was the hardest thing I've ever done," she also is grateful that the incident inspired both Michael Polley and Gulkin to write thoughtful essays on the revelation and concludes that making the film enabled her to "know so much about my family, about filmmaking, about trusting collaborators." [<http://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2012/08/29/stories-we-tell-a-post-by-sarah-polley/>]

***Stories We Tell* gives the multifaceted filmmaker and actress another chance at reinvention, as she delves deeply, and unconventionally, into her personal history.**

It's possible that some literal-minded readers will be upset that the preceding paragraph includes numerous "spoilers." Nevertheless, the considerable pleasure to be derived from viewing *Stories We Tell* has little to do with rudimentary facts. This is not a documentary in which the details of Polley's parentage constitute the most important "reveal." Myriad interpretations of this discovery (what the director, in the following interview, terms a "cacophony of voices") prove more important than the discovery itself. Expertly edited by Mike Munn, the film interweaves interviews with Polley's siblings and her mother's friends with actual home-movie footage and Super 8mm re-enactments that playfully illustrate key moments. The interviewees' musings, which often sharply contradict each other, emphasize the imprecision of memory and drive home the realization that we are often unreliable narrators of our own lives. Red herrings abound—especially a maneuver to mislead viewers that another man is Polley's biological father. Synthesizing elements of personal documentaries, essay films, and mock documentaries, *Stories We Tell* reiterates certain tenets that are

now truisms for devotees of hybrid documentaries: every documentary is, in some respects, a fiction film and every fictional film inevitably includes documentary components.

Cineaste interviewed Polley on the day that *Stories We Tell* screened at New York's New Directors/New Films festival. An engaging interviewee, she frequently turned the tables and directed friendly questions at her interviewer.—Richard Porton

Cineaste: Hybrid documentaries that combine fictional and nonfictional elements have become increasingly popular in recent years, especially on the festival circuit. Was this the approach you had in mind originally, or did it evolve gradually?

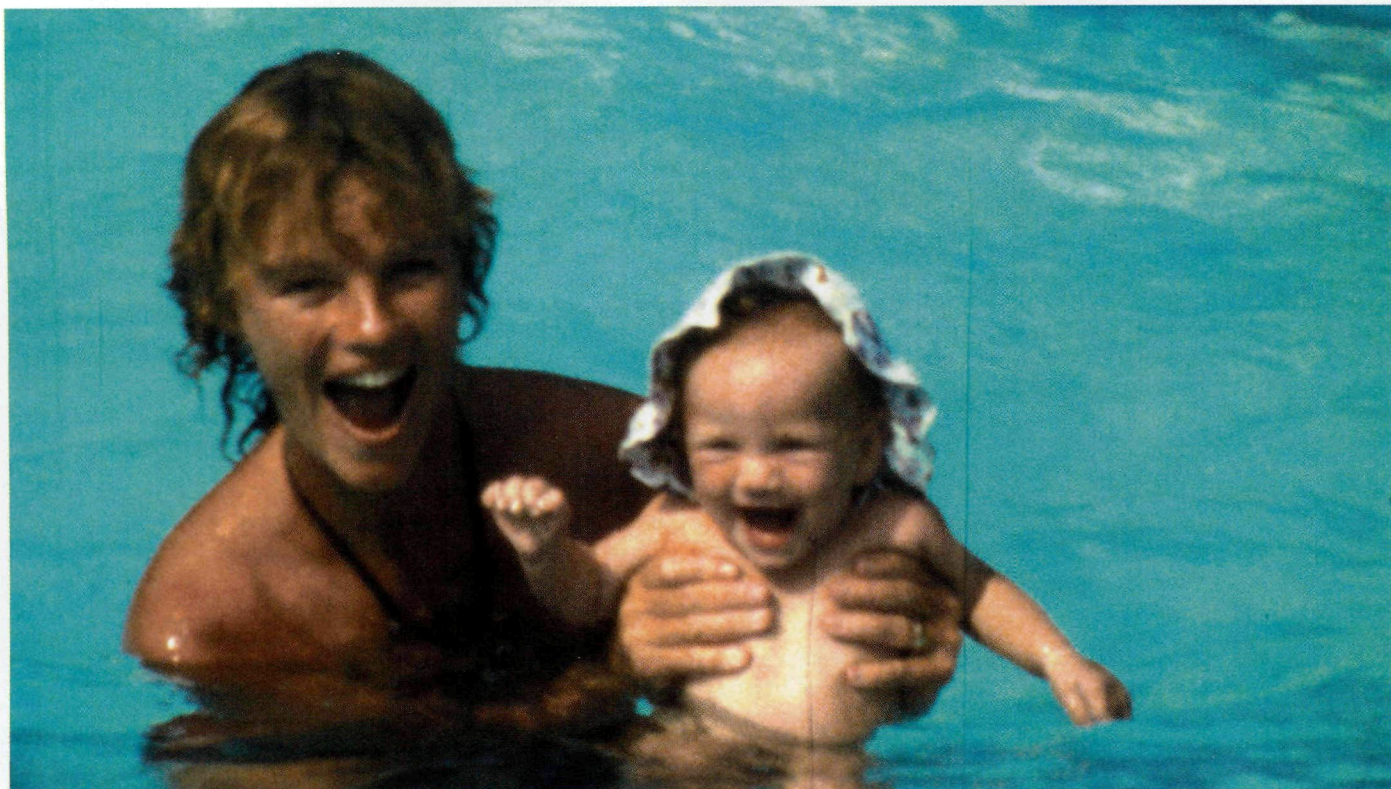
Sarah Polley: From the beginning, I thought it would be a hybrid: something between a documentary and an experimental film. I was less inspired by personal documentaries than films such as *The Five Obstructions* or *F for Fake* films that, because of their format, played with what they were saying thematically.

Cineaste: Essay films?

Polley: Yes, or films that actually gave the audience an experience comparable to what the film was talking about. So, in the case of my film, the idea of constantly wondering what was real and what was not, what was nostalgia, what was fact. This was my own process of discovery that involved getting to the bottom of things, and I guess I wanted the audience to have a similar experience of wondering whether what they were seeing was real or not. I don't think that could have been done in a straightforward documentary.

Cineaste: You wanted to avoid a conventional, linear approach.

Polley: Yes, because, although I've seen some great personal documentaries in which people discuss their families, I think there are a lot of potential problems with this approach—not the least of which is the danger of making the film a self-indulgent, narcissistic exercise in therapy. The truth is also that my story was not what was most interesting to me. In terms of making a film, what interested me was storytelling and the way we construct stories.



Sarah Polley as a baby with her mother Diane in a home-movie excerpt featured in Polley's *Stories We Tell*.

Cineaste: While this is your third feature-length film, it's your first documentary. Was this the reason you brought the project to the National Film Board, which has an illustrious documentary tradition, and decided to work with an NFB producer, Anita Lee?

Polley: Working with Anita, and working with the National Film Board generally, was a thoroughly unique experience. In the outside world, you're usually wary of a financier's notes because you automatically assume that they're only being given to increase box office or popular appeal—or to try to make the film more formulaic. It took me a little while to realize that the NFB was interested in making the most interesting film possible and the least formulaic. So all of their notes, and Anita's notes, were about pushing this film farther and farther outside the box. It was amazing to realize that the pressure was coming from the opposite direction than it usually is when you're making a film.

The film could probably have only been made in this environment. They also had a tremendous belief in the process. So, even when I said, "I don't really know what this film is," Anita always offered support and encouragement and said, "We're not going to know what it is unless we keep going. The film will tell us what it's going to be." Compared to what I'd gone through before, this was such a different process. It really helps to have public money on a film like this.

Cineaste: There's no commercial pressure?

Polley: There's no commercial pressure at all. You have people around you who know a lot more about the medium than you do. So, as opposed to being defensive, there's a lot to be learned from them.

Cineaste: From what I read, there was an interesting production process in that you would shoot and edit in spurts—and then come back to the film

Polley: Yes. First, we started with a few interviews with my dad. And then we did Harry's interview. And then I spent a lot of time with those interviews and decided whom else to interview; the questions that came out of those determined what we wanted to explore. We whittled it down; we had about two hundred hours of footage, decided what we definitely wanted to use, and got it down to about twenty hours. Then we whittled that down to about a three- or four-

hour film with the archival footage we had. Then we went away and shot more interviews and shot the re-creations.

So we had three periods of editing and were able to shoot in between those sessions. I thought this was one of the greatest aspects of making a documentary. It's not this linear process where you have this idea, you execute it, and then put it together. Documentary allows life to happen and for you to change your direction. That seems so much more human.

Cineaste: That seems to be the challenge of making a documentary. You have so much footage that it becomes like a jigsaw puzzle.

Polley: I began to realize how valuable it is to give your editor space. For a while, I was there all the time and when I started leaving Mike [Munn] alone for periods of time, I felt that the film started to find itself. Letting a documentary editor speak with their voice, as well as your own, is very important since they're really cowriting the film.

Cineaste: Was the text your father reads something he wrote especially for the film? Or did he write it independently of the film?

Polley: It was a forty-page email he wrote to his siblings in England after he learned that he wasn't my biological father. To do so, he told the entire story of his marriage to my mum. He didn't reveal why he was writing this until the end and it took some of them three or four days to read the email. They didn't believe it! It seemed like a yarn. It was his totally bizarre way of telling his family. I wanted to do something with that document.

Cineaste: His email becomes one of the layers of narration—in addition to the interviews, the Super 8mm footage, the re-creations on Super 8, as well as the clips from *Marriage Italian Style* and the excerpts from the documentary on Harry Gulkin, *Red Dawn on Main Street*.

Polley: We definitely had a lot to work with. Strangely enough, the concept was originally even more complicated; there were even more layers that we eventually stripped away. That was a good idea. There were a lot of different voices for one film.

Cineaste: The film is very playful. Was it strange when you found certain elements that resonated with your own life—such as the fact that the Eduardo De Filippo play that your mother acted in became *Marriage Italian Style* and deals with the theme of ambiguous parentage?

Polley: Yes, that was strange. And there were things that were going to be in the film that we decided not to include. For example, in a few separate films, I've played the role of someone looking for her biological father. I acted out this scene three times before it actually happened to me! While we originally had these film clips, it then became sort of self-indulgent and ridiculous. But there were a lot of odd coincidences.

Cineaste: *Some of the reviews, especially the Canadian ones, seem tempted to use Stories We Tell to interpret elements from your fiction films. For example, the fact that the protagonist of Take This Waltz feels compelled to walk out of her marriage appears to mirror your mother's story. Do you feel this operates on some unconscious level?*

Polley: I think it probably does. It certainly wasn't what I was consciously trying to do. But if you're mining the same territory again and again—it's certainly true that *Away from Her*, *Take This Waltz*, and *Stories We Tell* have some thematic connection—the themes are probably coming from something personal. So I was probably, on some unconscious level, retelling this story a few times.

Cineaste: *While your father and biological father are intimately involved with this story, you seemed to feel that, to achieve a truly nuanced view, you had to include multiple perspectives—even the points of view of your siblings and half-brother and -sister, whose roles are rather peripheral to the narrative.*

Polley: Yes, I felt we couldn't get a sense of the whole picture without including all of these voices, even those who weren't directly involved. I feel that a cacophony of voices is what can create a picture approximating the truth, even if it never really gets there.

Cineaste: *Quite coincidentally, just before coming here, I heard a promo for a radio interview with a psychologist named Charles Fernyhough, who believes that memory has as much to do with the present as the past. For Fernyhough, the act of remembering entails "narrative imagination." This sounds like a perfect description of your film's narrative trajectory.*

Polley: Totally. I think that's why we become so defensive about our version of the past. It's so intertwined with our sense of who we are now, and why. If that becomes challenged or undermined in any way, there's a sense that who we are, and the reasons why we've become that way, are being threatened.

Cineaste: *That observation seems to segue naturally into Harry's version of the story. From one perspective, he appears a bit possessive of his version of the truth. On the other hand, it's easy to be empathetic to his belief that he's one of the few people qualified to assess this aspect of your past.*

Polley: Absolutely. To a certain degree, all of us can't help being somewhat possessive of a certain version of a story. It's just a matter of how much we're certain that we're right. If making this film has taught me anything, it's that we can't all be right and we can't all be wrong. Something's got to give in terms of how certain we are of ourselves. At times, I genuinely remember some things differently from my siblings. There's something bizarre that I remember reading about a few years ago: when you remember an event, you're supposedly not remembering it but instead remembering your last memory of it. So if you've remembered something fifty times from when you were three years old on, it's like playing a game of broken telephone with yourself. Invariably, some little details are going to shift. It's totally understandable how stories become unintentionally distorted over time. We don't have a direct relationship with these memories.

Cineaste: *Rather than being about truth with a capital T, the film becomes more about family secrets. Almost every family has suppressed some sensitive story. That's probably what makes the film universal.*

Polley: It's amazing how many families have stories like this. I can't believe the stories I've heard since screening the film. What's interesting is that film journalists seem to have particularly fucked-up families. [Laughs] That seems to be a common denominator among people who do this job! The stories you hear are mind-blowing; it actually makes the story of this film seem rather banal. It is a beautiful thing to realize that there are very few families that don't have some very dark thread, or repressed secret. There are very few nuclear

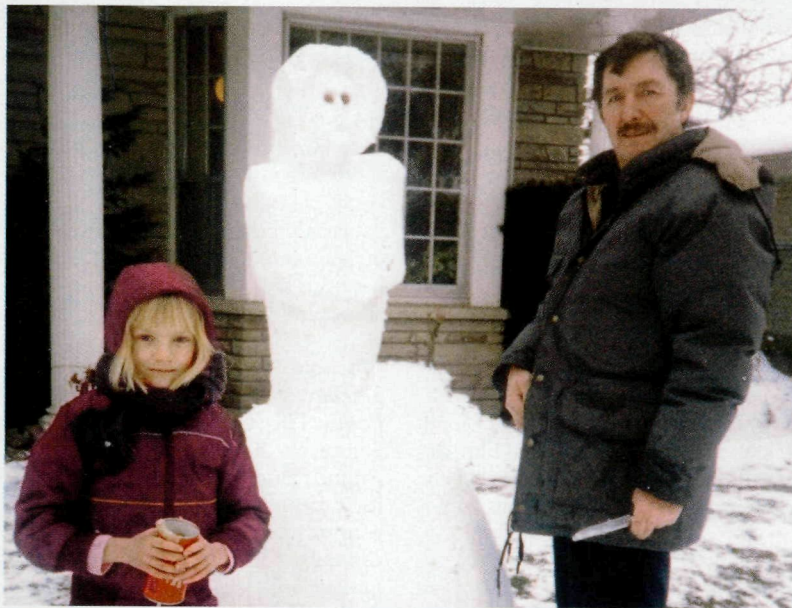
families that don't experience some sort of bizarre melodrama.

Cineaste: *Actually, while watching the film, I was struck by how unmelodramatic it was. Perhaps it's just the fact that you have a remarkable family. For example, your father seems surprisingly sanguine about hearing the news and remarks that it was probably a good thing that your mother had an affair at that juncture in her life.*

Polley: In a way, that was the reason for making the film. If it were just a story of my finding my biological father, it would have been impactful for me and impactful for everyone involved. But I think that's a story that's been told a number of times before. My dad's response was what I found extraordinary, as well as the storytelling and writing that came out of it. That's what really made me want to make a film—this very unusual way of processing an event through writing and telling stories.

Cineaste: *And, in some respects, your father seemed quite pleased since he mentions that he always wanted more opportunities to write.*

Polley: Yeah, it definitely gave him the feeling that he had something to write



Top: Sarah and her father Michael in a family snapshot.

Bottom: In *Stories We Tell*, Michael learns he is not Sarah's biological father.



In a re-created "home-movie" scene for *Stories We Tell*, Sarah's mother Diane is supposedly revealed during her affair with Harry Gulkin.

about. And, for me, making a film with his voice was so much more interesting and rewarding than making a film in my own voice.

Cineaste: Would you say that, in some respects, your father's citation of *Neruda*—"Love is so short, forgetting is so long"—sums up the film's motifs?

Polley: I don't know if it's a central motif, but it's very pertinent at that moment to my dad's feeling about my mother and their relationship. Now that I think of it, though, maybe it does sum up the film's concern with memory and forgetting.

Cineaste: And since your mother died when you were very young, the film offered an opportunity for you to get better acquainted with her life.

Polley: I don't know anyone who's lost a parent at an early age who has had the privilege of sitting down with everyone who loved them and listening to them for hours and hours—without any social awkwardness because there's this construct of a film and a camera. Since your job is to ask questions, you have license to ask every question you ever wanted to know the answer to. It was an incredible experience.

Cineaste: It's also interesting that you start off the film directing your dad. In some respects, given that you're at the soundboard, you resemble a combination of director and DJ.

Polley: There are some uncomfortable moments in that sequence that I'm not too proud of. I'm a bit relentless and ruthless with him; I don't really like those moments, but it also felt dishonest to leave them out.

Cineaste: Of course, the viewer is not quite sure if he's being serious, or tongue-in-cheek, when he calls you a "sadistic director."

Polley: I think he's serious. [Laughs] I could be wrong.

Cineaste: And how did the decision to include the re-enactments come about? Of course, re-enactments are not unheard of in documentaries. The trend seemed to start with Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*.

Polley: I wanted to be open about the fact that the film is a construction; the idea was to provide audiences with that experience and make them wonder what is real (and what they can hang on to) and what is manufactured and manipulated. The idea was to construct something from the past while also calling that entire process of construction into question.

Cineaste: But of course you had some home-movie footage and probably felt the need to embellish that material for narrative purposes.

Polley: Yes, our first cut combined interviews and the archival footage we had on hand. Somewhere between thirty to fifty per cent of the footage is real. Then we were filling in the blanks with these re-creations. Originally, the idea was to be very open that they were re-creations and make them very hokey. Gradually, as we worked on them, we were getting closer and closer to what the original footage looked like. So we decided to go all the way and see how long it would take people to notice.

Cineaste: The idea, then, was to make it match almost seamlessly with the actual footage?

Polley: Yeah, and to make it more of a reveal. Some people don't find out until the credits, some people find out when we finally go behind the scenes, some people find out before that. When did you suspect something?

Cineaste: Well, about halfway into the film, it became clear there was footage of events that would have been practically impossible to capture on film at the time.

Polley: What's weird is that I didn't think that people would be fooled for very long; I thought they'd figure it out quickly, if not necessarily from the beginning. I've been quite amazed by people's ability to suspend disbelief. When people have said they didn't find out until the credits, I've replied, "Well, what about the re-creation that shows me directing it?" People's desire to believe what they're seeing is so strong. It's so strange! And who would be filming at the funeral?

Cineaste: What was the process of casting those re-creations like?

Polley: My brother John cast them; he also cast my other films. So, he's someone I rely on generally. He knows every actor in the city and, since he's also my brother, he's going to do a pretty good job casting my family. It was weird, though. There were definitely times during both the casting, and the filming, of these recreations where people were dressed up like my parents and reenacting scenes from my childhood. You felt like you were having a very expensive nervous breakdown. It was not a good feeling!

Cineaste: At least in Canada there's public money available for filmmakers. Here, since there's very little public money available for filmmakers, they're as likely to become neurotic concerning financing as they are in response to mere questions of content.

Polley: It would be so good, though, if there was public money available in the U.S. So many filmmakers are not entrepreneurs. I'm not an entrepreneur. It seems that if you're a filmmaker within a system that only offers private money, being a filmmaker is not enough. You also have to be a businessperson. It excludes a lot of filmmakers who have something to say and that's such a shame. Also, marketing is now part of what you're taught at film school.

Cineaste: That's horrible.

Polley: It's horrible because it's taking up space in your brain that should be dedicated to doing the work. I know it's impractical to think that way. I don't think it should be. I mean, people go into writing screenplays with their marketing plan in their head. That's got to create work that's diluted. It's so depressing. I feel that it's leaving so many filmmakers behind. I've met three or four people in the last four years who probably won't get a film made because they're awkward and don't have those skills. They're not going to sell their ideas even though their ideas are much better and more substantial—and they'd make better films—than the people who are good at pitching. Why can't we leave the pitching to people who are good at that and let the people who don't have those social skills do what they're great at doing? I find it weird that this is what is expected of filmmakers these days. It's not necessarily what is expected of a painter or a novelist, is it?

Cineaste: Given your history of activism, did you feel an affinity with Harry when you met him? It's of course revealed that he has an activist, as well as a show-business, past.

Polley: It's always impossible to know where your influences come from. My dad was also very political and left wing and Harry, of course, had this incredible political life. He was very active in the Communist Party and organized ships off the coast of Batista's Cuba and served some time in prison. He also knew Raúl Castro. Since I believe I have political affinities with both my dad and with Harry, it's hard to untangle it.

Cineaste: So you don't think there's a genetic component?

Polley: There were interesting coincidences: the fact that we were political activists and had both dropped out of school at the same time to do so. In addition, he went into Canadian film to adapt Canadian fiction [Ted Allan's *Lies My Father Told Me*] and my first feature, *Away from Her*, was also an adaptation of a Canadian short story. Although I can see parallels with all of the Gulkins, I really am my father's daughter. I think you are, for better or worse, a product of the family you grew up in. This film is filtered through my dad's voice. It's really his influence, as well as my mother's, that is what made me who I am. Finding your biological parent is thrilling and kind of a novelty. But I'm not sure, in terms of substance, what it actually means. People are adopted all the time, and, although it's certainly interesting, I'm not sure if it's as significant as you think it is at first.

Cineaste: In other words, although it wasn't the most important event

in your life, this discovery functioned as a catalyst?

Polley: If anything, what was really thrilling was how close it brought my family together. It gave us an opportunity to talk and collaborate in a way that we hadn't done before.

Cineaste: In light of our discussion of Harry's activist past, I was just wondering if you're still active in the New Democratic Party (NDP).

Polley: On and off. It's complicated, because as the party has gotten bigger and more successful, it's probably moved in a direction that I'm slightly wary of. Thomas Mulcair, the current leader, is brilliant and certainly knowledgeable and effective. But he's certainly to the right of where I'd like him to be. Peggy Nash, who ran for the leadership, would have been great. Mulcair is not necessarily someone I can be passionate about. He's more like a Liberal. I think it's great that the NDP is the official opposition, but I just hope that it remains a party that's an actual alternative to the Liberals and Conservatives. I'm concerned of course that there could be a move to the right. But, who knows? It's hard to know what to do in Canada these days. Under the current conservative government, we're the last outpost of Reaganism and Thatcherism.

Cineaste: It's incredible—inasmuch as Canada used to be at least nominally social democratic.

Polley: We used to be able to gloat. We've totally lost our gloating privileges!

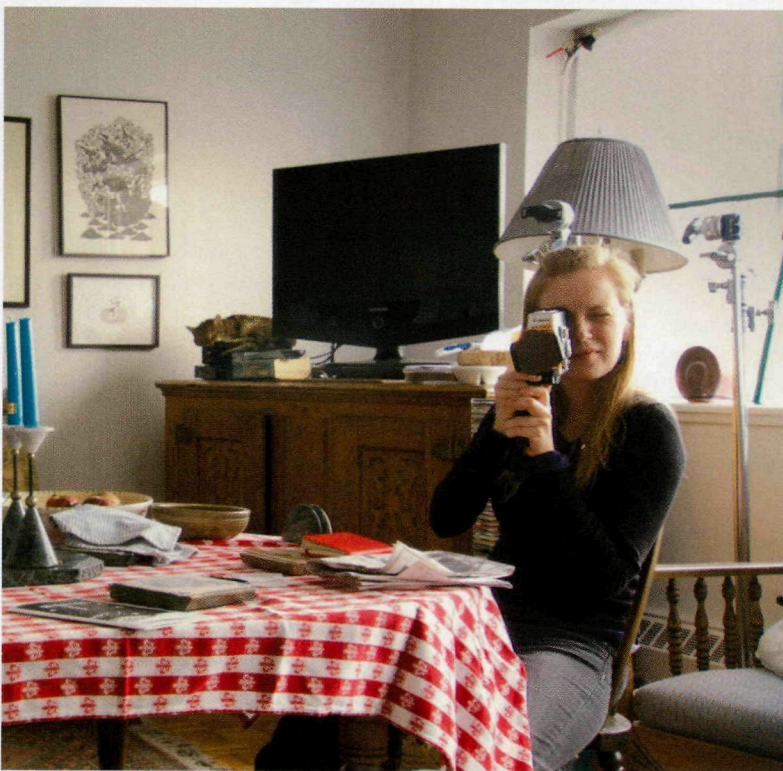
Cineaste: Americans don't need to be so embarrassed anymore.

Polley: That's actually really embarrassing. But we still have universal health care. When I'm asked for ID at various buildings here, I really like bringing out my health card and mentioning that it covers everything. But I definitely think we've lost the moral high ground, especially on issues like the environment and international policy. It's a very disheartening time to look at our government. We haven't been a productive force in the world during the last few years—and that's a hard thing to say.

Cineaste: I know that you've received a certain

amount of grief for your politics from the Canadian public. At one point, you said that you didn't even want to talk about this in interviews.

Polley: I generally haven't shied away from talking about it. To be honest, it's a really different world now with social media and the Internet. People can just tear you down anonymously and be threatening. It's harder to be an actress; it's harder to do anything publicly with that kind of scrutiny. Although I haven't shied away from the subject, I'm just honest that, when I'm not politically active, I'm not the person to be talking about these issues when there are people dealing with them every day. I certainly haven't backed away from my positions or beliefs. I'm just honest about when I'm not being very productive. ■



Sarah Polley with the Super-8mm camera used to re-create "home movies" to relate personal family history in her hybrid fiction/documentary *Stories We Tell*.

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