

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH SARAH POLLEY

Away from Her was an impressive directorial debut for the Canadian actress Sarah Polley, best known for her performances in Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, David Cronenberg's *Existenz*, Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead*, and Hal Hartley's *No Such Thing*. While filming *No Such Thing* in Iceland, Polley forged a friendship with British actress Julie Christie, and convinced her to star in *Away from Her*, an adaptation of a short story by Alice Munro. In this conversation, Polley discusses how she interpreted Munro's tale about an aging couple's struggle with Alzheimer's Disease as a universal love story.

A Pinewood Dialogue with Sarah Polley following a preview screening of *Away from Her*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (April 27, 2007):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome, as a feature film director, Sarah Polley. (Applause) Well, congratulations on the movie. It's great. Could you just tell us, to start off with, tell us the story about how you encountered the Alice Munro short story?

POLLEY: Well, I had just finished working with Julie [Christie] on Hal Hartley's film, *No Such Thing*. And I was on the plane, on my way back from Iceland, where it was shot. And I picked up *The New Yorker* on the way home, and I saw there was a new Alice Munro short story, and I'm a huge fan of Alice Munro's. I read this story, and I couldn't stop seeing Julie's face when I read it. I kind of cried all the way home; I was just so profoundly moved by this story. And it definitely—because I kept seeing Julie's face—occurred to me that it would make a great film. But I was really daunted by the prospect of adapting Alice Munro, because I hadn't made a feature before, and it seemed like a strange place to start. And I couldn't get it out of my head. It sort of lived in my head for about two years and kept forming itself and casting itself... and then finally, I tried to get the rights on a whim, thinking they would be gone or way too expensive; and then, weirdly, got them. (Schwartz laughs) So all of a sudden, had to make the film! (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: I think it's something that would be relevant to anybody in a relationship and, you know, thinking about broader issues about

memory. I'm wondering what grabbed you about this? Why do you think this had a hold on you for that long period?

POLLEY: I don't know. I mean, I think you never really know your personal reasons for these things. I think it was obviously objectively, or I thought, a really beautiful story. And probably for me—I was at the very beginning of a relationship with the person I would eventually marry, and was probably starting to think about what love looked like after life had its way with you. And then I think, you know, probably—you know, my mother died when I was very young, and so probably my first really central emotional experience was watching my dad lose the love of his life, and sort of discover a part of himself as that happened. Which is, I think for me, in a strange way, it's like—you know, I keep talking about it as a love story, but in a strange way, I always feel like it's a coming-of-age story about a 77-year-old man, you know? Somebody sort of discovering their self at the end of a relationship.

SCHWARTZ: And did you picture Gordon Pinsent in the role originally, too? He's not as well known here as he is, I think, in Canada.

POLLEY: I did immediately see him. There was really, for me, nobody else who could have played that part in the same way. And it was important to me, too, that, you know, he is so intrinsically Canadian, in some way; and he, I think, gives the film a real sense of place, which I felt was important.

SCHWARTZ: And what was it like for you to sort of create the script? Because when you read the

story, there are a lot of elements that are there, but sort of in a different order or different places... things like starting with the ski tracks. That's an image, I think, that comes up somewhere in the story, but it's not the opening.

POLLEY: It kind of just formed itself. And of course, there are things that are shifted; and structurally, it's quite different from the story; the relationship with Marian is quite different, and there are definitely a lot of characters that are added and subtracted. But ultimately, I feel that in my mind, it's a very faithful adaptation of the story. And to me, the film seemed very evident. It didn't feel like an arduous process to figure out how to make a film out of this story. It felt like it was incredibly cinematic, the characters were so finely nuanced, and even the dialogue was so specific and interesting and intact. So I felt like it was a really kind of a joyful process to adapt it.

SCHWARTZ: And how big is finding the places? Because, actually, so much is expressed though just what the different houses are like: The nursing home, or the care facility... You're so sensitive to details of place, and it's so expressive—and that's something you had to find, that you had to imagine from the story, I guess... (Laughs)

POLLEY: The locations, to me, were actually the hardest part of making the film, were finding the right places. And it took months and months and months, and the locations manager, Jeff, almost had a nervous breakdown...! (Laughter) Because we couldn't really find what we were looking for, for the longest time. What we were looking for was—in the short story they live on a farm. And so we were looking for this farm for about two or three months, and it just didn't exist. You know, this place that had this clear view to the house, which I thought was so kind of important for him to be sort of standing at—especially for the shot where the lights go out—and it just didn't really exist, and it didn't feel expressive in the way that it should. I just felt like that was something that needed to be adapted for the screen; that it needed to become this frozen lake. The retirement home was really difficult, because I didn't want it to feel just like a hospital; and it had to be very, very light; and to find a place that could accommodate everything we were trying to do... That was actually a real struggle to find those

places, and that they stand in contrast to each other.

SCHWARTZ: Were any of the sort of details about Alzheimer's from your own experience or things you had maybe researched? The scene when she puts the frying pan in the freezer, I don't think that was in the story, and that's a great little detail.

POLLEY: Yes, a lot of it came from books that I read on Alzheimer's disease. Like *The Forgetting* by David Shenk or *Hard to Forget* by Charles Pierce were books—that were some of the most interesting books I've ever read, actually. You know, despite whether I was interested in the disease or not. A lot of the details in the retirement home came from the time I spent in my grandmother's retirement home with her for the last three-and-a-half years of her life. And things like... you know, the hockey announcer is based on my uncle who had Pick's Disease who—he was the voice of the Buffalo Sabers, Ted Darling, and he died of Pick's Disease—and so that was sort of him. So there are little moments of things that I witnessed that ended up in it, as well as research.

SCHWARTZ: What's so impressive about the film is how—as a piece of directorial work—is how short and simple it is. I don't think that simplicity could be as easy as you make it sound. Could you talk about, maybe, what you learned from some of the directors you have worked with—great directors, many of whom have been here to talk about their work. You know, Cronenberg or Atom Egoyan. Is there anything specific you got from any of them?

POLLEY: Well, Atom's probably the biggest influence on me, because I feel like working with him on his films was probably the pivotal experience for me in terms of realizing this was something I wanted to do with my life and take seriously, and thinking of film as, you know, a really interesting way of exploring and discussing ideas. And Atom always, *always* moves towards the restrained, I think, especially in dealing with very emotional subject matter. He's never somebody who's going to be manipulative or try to evoke anything from his audience. He's going to sort of give them the space to, I think, experience it on their own terms. So I feel like he was very influential, you know, in terms of my own learning about film, and he's really been

supportive of me as I've made my short films leading to this.

SCHWARTZ: In terms of sort of giving space and letting things happen, the film seems so observational. You're looking at faces so much and sort of observing quiet moments, or putting in touches. Just the way the shot of the milk being poured that opens a scene... How do you do that on the set? What's your sort of frame of mind, in terms of how you're maybe working with the cinematographer?

POLLEY: We were very structured about it. We were very, very clear on exactly what we wanted to get, you know, months in advance of shooting it. You know, I always knew that I wanted this to really study their faces and linger a long time on their faces. But it was funny, as we moved through the process of shooting, we started to get closer and closer and closer. I mean, we just started to realize that's where the film lived, was as close as we could possibly get to these people.

SCHWARTZ: I have to ask about Julie Christie. You both have interesting careers, in that I know you've turned down some big blockbuster-type movies that you could have done: Famously, I guess, the movie *Almost Famous* is one example. You seem to want to do small films; she has not been making films recently. So could you talk about getting her to do this?

POLLEY: Yes. Well, I mean, because I had become friends with Julie by the time I wrote this, I knew that I would get a few 'No's before I got a 'Yes'. I mean, I went in knowing that I was going to be turned down. I think she just has a lot more going on in her life that she's interested in dealing with right now than acting. So she's a reluctant actor, and it did take, you know, several months to convince her to actually be in the film. But I sort of knew that's what it would take, and I was thrilled that she ultimately did it.

SCHWARTZ: You were very young when you worked on the Terry Gilliam film, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, which was a huge spectacle movie. How did that sort of make you think about the types of movies you wanted to make?

POLLEY: Well, it was a pretty definitive experience for me, I would say. (Laughs) And it defined who I am in many ways, I think. It was an absolutely terrifying experience for a child. Probably for everyone involved in that film, it was a terrifying experience! (Laughs) But as a child, it was bewildering. I was working extremely long hours, you know, like sixteen and seventeen hour days; there were explosives constantly going off very close to me, which was kind of traumatic; being in freezing cold water for long periods of time... I mean, I made several visits to the hospital during the course of that film. So, you know, it's strange because I feel like somehow people have interpreted (anybody who cares, anyway) has interpreted... (Laughs) the idea that I'm involved in independent film because that's what I'm interested in—and that's true. But I think it probably has less to do with being a cinephile than it does with just mortal fear (Laughs) of ever going near a big budget film again! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Well, let's hope you never get over that! (Laughs)

POLLEY: Thanks!

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) How did Julie Christie go about preparing for this role?

POLLEY: I'm not sure I could speak to the specifics of it. I know that she's had people in her life with Alzheimer's disease, so this wasn't totally foreign territory to her. I can say she's the hardest working actor I've ever seen. You know, I think one of the reasons it takes her so long to commit to something is that once she does, there's nobody who's working harder and longer than she is. So I think her preparation was extensive and extremely in depth, but I never asked her what the specifics of it were.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Why did you choose a non-linear structure to tell this story?

POLLEY: There are a couple of reasons for it. The first reason was, I liked the idea of us needing to be making connections and putting the film together in our minds. That idea of, you know, it sort of mirroring the fractured memory that occurs in the film, in the structure of the film. I was also interested in the idea of us knowing that this was going

somewhere; that he was going to have an extremely large shift in the way he looked at this relationship she was having with Aubrey, and make this incredibly selfless gesture. But at the moment that we discover he's going to do that, it's unfathomable to us that he could or would do that. So that the momentum of the film came from how he was going to get there, as opposed to where he was going to go. And I felt that actually, it kind of needed that forward movement and that sense of, you know, a little bit of mystery to keep us engaged. It was always my intention to structure it that way. I tried a linear version, and it was extremely plodding. I don't know, maybe people found it plodding anyway, but (Laughs) it was more plodding the other way. So I found that was sort of important, too. I don't know, it might also have come from also, like, growing up in Atom Egoyan films. I have no sense of how to make a film with a linear structure. (Laughs) It's just not in my nature, I don't think.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Were there some real residents in the retirement home?

POLLEY: No, they were all actors. And I had an amazing first assistant director, Dan Murphy, and we had a really long conversation before we started about that being—the background—being a huge character in the film. I think he did kind of a miraculous job with that, so I would have to give him a lot of credit for that.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) A question about how your political activism fits in to your life?

POLLEY: Sure. I've had a hard time reconciling it, to be honest with you, because I don't think I have any skills as a spokesperson. I think I'm actually not a bad organizer, and so I've been really—my love of being politically active is in the organizing context. Yet there's always a pressure, if you're in the public eye, from the media—but also the organizations themselves—for you to be a public figure. And it's not what I'm good at, and I'm painfully aware when I'm working with these organizations that I'm working with people that would be much better than I would be at speaking to these issues—and I find that conflict very, very difficult. So it's been tough, and I'm still trying to figure out how to just do the organizing part, without seeming too precious

about it. And yes, I think ideally at some point, I would find a way to make films that spoke to politics in a way that I felt was interesting and important. But I feel like I've seen so few great political films in my life that actually managed to be elegant and graceful films, and not just really dogmatic or literal. So I feel like it'll be a few years before I can, you know, make a *Battle of Algiers* or a Ken Loach movie! (Laughs) So I'm hoping to wait, until I feel like I'm ready, before I fully combine those things.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Have you had [any] exchange with Alice Munro about the film?

POLLEY: I've had very little contact with Alice Munro. And I think I sort of knew from reading about her and being a fan of hers, that she was not going to want to be, you know, crazily involved in a movie! (Laughs) So I wasn't surprised that she didn't want to be involved. I was desperate for her to at least read the screenplay before we went into production, because I needed to know if there was anything she had a real problem with. And it took months and months to get her to read it. And I didn't know how to get her to read it. I just gave it to about fifteen different people who knew her. And then, just before we went into production, I got a message on my machine from her, saying that she had read the script and she was very happy with it, and she gave us her blessing, and hoped that it went well. I thought it was actually my friend, who's a guy, doing an impression of Alice Munro... (Laughter) because it was so ridiculous that I was getting a message from Alice Munro!

I just remember at the end of the message there was this moment where she went, "So, there we go." And that was the moment where I was like, "That is Alice Munro! Alice Munro would say that at the end of a phone message!" (Laughter) And so I had that, and then I didn't hear anything again. We've been trying to get her to see the film. She hasn't seen the film. Then I wrote a foreword to the reissuing of the short story, and I got a message from her on my machine again, about exactly one year later, saying she was happy with the foreword. (Laughter) That's all. That's my entire relationship with Alice Munro! (Laughs) So, we'll see.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Could you talk about how you developed the character of Kristy?

POLLEY: Madeline doesn't exist in the short story. There's a line about something an administrator or supervisor says. Kristy does exist but she is... What I did was, I split the character of Kristy from the short story into Kristy and Madeline. Because Kristy, in the short story, was incredibly sort of, you know, salt-of-the-earth, and empathetic, and funny—and she was also quite callous and insensitive, in moments. And I loved that in the short story, and I tried to work it in; but I felt like in a film, we weren't going to get the time to sort of think through those contradictions and those complexities, and that he kind of needed somebody that he could speak to. So I made that into two separate characters. And it was also probably reflective of my experience of my grandmother's retirement home, where there were these administrators who were just very overworked and overwhelmed, and did not, frankly, have time to be empathetic to every person they met. And then there were these, you know, nurses who *somehow* found time in their day to be loving and understanding and great listeners, and who were sort of a marvel. So I guess I wanted to show both sides of that.

SCHWARTZ: Can you talk a bit about working with Michael Murphy? That's a demanding role to do, I mean, basically without dialogue.

POLLEY: Well, you know it's funny because, you know, Michael Murphy is an actor I've always loved, and he's probably been in more of my favorite films than any actor. I mean, I think he's amazing.

SCHWARTZ: Including *McCabe* [and *Mrs. Miller*], with Julie Christie.

POLLEY: Yes, yes, yes; exactly. And I also love that they have this history, you know, and have known each other for years and years and been in films together, and that they did have this sort of unspoken history that some of us would kind of know or intuit. And he was amazing to work with. He was like the cheerleader for the film. He was so amazing to have around.

SCHWARTZ: In your opinion, was he going to wheel Aubrey in at the end afterwards? (Laughter)

POLLEY: You should hear, Olympia—(Laughs) Olympia Dukakis's take on the ending is like, "He should have just pushed him in the door and left!" (Laughter) "Just walked down the hall, like, 'What the hell was that?'" (Laughs) And I actually think there's something really legitimate about that point! (Laughs)

I don't know. I mean, it's funny. It is the way the short story ends, as well. And of course, I thought about it ad nauseam. You know, what happens? My sense is she probably forgets Grant, moments, or hours, or a day later; and maybe remembers Michael Murphy's character, but probably not. I don't know. I think probably the real ending of this film is quite a mess. And I think that, you know, what I loved about the ending of the short story, and the way I wanted to end the film was to... I think we all know that this story has a tragic ending. And so it was sort of like giving people the choice to either leave on that moment of communion, or follow it through to its logical conclusion. But I guess the answer is: I don't really know.

SCHWARTZ: Was it a hard film at all for you to get set up? I mean, \$4 million dollars is a modest budget, you know. What was that like, just to get going?

POLLEY: This particular film was really strangely easy to get going. I had tried to make another film for about three or four years, and it was just a disaster and it went nowhere. And this film was—the majority of the financing came from Telefilm Canada, which is our public funding film agency—which is such a treat, as a first-time filmmaker. To get to make your film with public money, and to have final cut on your first film: that's kind of an amazing privilege. And there were a couple of people within that organization who I think were dealing with aging parents and parents with Alzheimer's disease, and who felt an urgent need themselves to make the film. So we had a lot of support.

SCHWARTZ: Do you have any idea about how you want to sort of mix directing and acting, for the coming years, at least? I mean, you're such a terrific director.

POLLEY: Thank you. (Laughs) I'd really like to do both, and somehow have kids, as well. And I have no idea how that works. (Laughter) I'm trying to do the math, and I don't know, but I'd love to do both.

SCHWARTZ: Well, don't look at the math. (Laughs) If you look at the math... you're not going to want to. (Repeats audience question) Could you talk about the lighting in the film? You use so much sunlight.

POLLEY: It's funny. I think there's one passage in the short story that she talks about a corridor that's bathed in light. I can't remember exactly how she words it. But it sort of became this central image for me of the entire film. I think it's something to do with the obliteration of memory. I feel like I can't quite talk about it literally without it sounding really trite. But I guess I also felt like I didn't want to paint this kind of gothic, depressing picture of a retirement home. There are obviously things that are extremely uncomfortable about that facility, and institutional, but I didn't want it to be obvious. And I think the only thing I knew about the film visually from the very beginning was that it had to just be drenched in this winter sunlight, and that that was an incredibly important direction for the film to go in.

SCHWARTZ: There's a question all the way in the back... (Repeats audience question) Okay, (Laughter) was Aubrey the guy in the grocery store? (Laughter) But we could—let's do the first two [questions], then you can...

POLLEY: The first one is: I don't know if he was in the hardware store with her when she was young. But I've always liked to think that yes. I mean, I actually saw a situation like this in my grandmother's retirement home, where people couldn't work out if these two people actually did know each other when they were young, but they were convinced that they had been best friends as teenagers. And some of the details kind of added up, and others didn't at all. And it was interesting seeing the families try to work out this puzzle.

SCHWARTZ: And the line, "What a jerk."

POLLEY: The line, "What a jerk." I mean, I think that—I remember when I wrote (Laughs) that scene, in the script it said, "What a jerk." And then the stage direction says, "(But that's not what she's

thinking)." And I remember a lot of financiers going, "Well, how are we going to know that's not what she's thinking?" (Laughter) So I guess that you just proved them right. (Laughs) I don't know. I mean, I guess for me, like, it's her way of...

SCHWARTZ: It's a performance, I think.

POLLEY: Yes, and it's a kind of denial, and it's a kind of working out and grappling with the effect he's had on her, which is a bit confusing.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience comment) I thought that came through in the performance. It's sort of like, "What a jerk..." for what she's about to do?

POLLEY: Oh, that's so interesting. Okay. (Laughs) It's actually not something from the short story. So that's kind of amazing what you don't know about what you've written. (Laughs) Thank you.

SCHWARTZ: Maybe it's an American thing.

POLLEY: (Laughs) No; that sounds like more of a Canadian thing. *What a jerk*.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Did Julie Christie get together with Aubrey, sort of to get back at her husband? (Laughs)

POLLEY: I mean it's interesting because if you read the short story, some people find that very ambiguous, so I think it's an interesting question. To me, it seemed that no; I feel like it was part of her Alzheimer's disease that she had this attachment to this other person and forgot her husband. But I do think that she did have, at moments, a very vivid emotional memory, and a very vivid anger about a previous time in their relationship. But I sort of like—I think it is ambiguous and should, in a way, remain ambiguous and up to interpretation, because I think other people actually even read the short story very differently than I have, so I'm not sure about that, either.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Yes, actually, the music is wonderful. It's so integral to the film. So the question—yes, go ahead, you can applaud the music. (Applause) So did you ever think about not using music? And then how did you build that?

POLLEY: Okay, well originally, we didn't have a composer and we used a few Neil Young tracks. And David [Wharansby], who edited the film, laid in some Bach as well, some pieces of Bach. And then we found our composer, Jonathan Goldsmith, who I think is amazing. And somehow he married those two things. And I don't totally understand how that's possible. (Laughs) And it's funny because, you know, I remember at first not wanting any music, except for the Neil Young stuff, and maybe there were one or two pieces of Bach. And he just would sort of say, "Okay, well let me just see if I can..." You know, "Let me just write this, and you don't have to use it. Let me just write this, and you don't have to use it." And oddly, it really worked for me, what he wrote. My tendency, as an audience [member], is always like, there's always too much

music in everything. And I'm so scared of it; I have this primal fear of movie music. So it took a lot for me to extend it. But in the end, it still ends up being, like, not enough to release a soundtrack. (Laughs) It's I think seventeen minutes of music or something, so...

SCHWARTZ: Really?

POLLEY: But, yes, it did occur to me to use no music.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. Well, I want to thank you so much. And please join us upstairs in the second floor gallery.

POLLEY: Thank you very much. Thanks. (Applause)

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pannonia Foundation.

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Queens Borough President Helen M. Marshall, and City Council Member Eric N. Gioia.

Copyright © 2007, Museum of the Moving Image.