

Sarah Polley's 'Stories We Tell' Resonates For All Viewers

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on May 16, 2013 - 2:37pm

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sarah Polley's "Stories We Tell" may seem deceptively simple or even boring in concept. At its core, it's a film about a talented filmmaker and actress investigating her family's past and her own lineage. Where Polley's work goes from mere family movie to something much greater is in how she uses her own quest for answers to illuminate why & how we tell stories in the first place, especially in the form of film. The ripple effect of memory, the way stories reveal personality, nature vs. nurture, and the idea that it not just action but how we share, the stories we tell, that impact future generations. This is the best film to be released in Chicago so far this year.

From the beginning, Polley is playing with the form of the family biographical documentary. The subject is her mother, Diane. She passed away when Sarah was very young and it makes sense that Polley would want to speak with her father and siblings about the mother she never really knew. Who was Diane? Was she melancholy because she longed for a theatrical career she could never have? Was she happy with her family? What did we learn from her life and her having left so soon? "Stories We Tell" could have been merely a series of interviews, talking-head clips with people who knew Diane and Sarah and could help bridge the gap between the two created by time and death.



Stories We Tell

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

However, Polley starts subverting expectations right from the beginning. We see her father Michael not merely in interview but in a recording booth, reading the story of his love and life with Diane. Sarah sits at the sound board, sometimes even asking for alternate takes. One of Polley's brothers asks how he looks on film. We are being constantly reminded that this is a story within a story. It is Michael Polley's story, first and foremost, but it is also being crafted, edited, and directed by Sarah Polley. The concept of turning personal into public feels even deeper when one considers Polley's other films, "Away From Her" and "Take This Waltz," which simply cannot be watched with the same detachment from their filmmaker after seeing "Stories We Tell."

The filmmaking tools and lifting of the curtain of the process in "Stories We Tell" would be interesting but probably a bit dry to most viewers if Polley didn't have a stunning family history to reveal. The story told by Polley is a fascinating one that I wouldn't dare spoil here. I knew nothing about it going in and I would advise you to avoid as many articles about the film as possible as some critics seem to have no problem revealing some of the twists and turns of what is essentially a mystery.



Stories We Tell

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

As I said, the mystery itself is intriguing on its own. I think Polley probably could have written an interesting magazine article about what she discovered when she interviewed those who knew her mother. But she did something much deeper when she chose to turn it into a film. She didn't just tell her story. She made a movie about how and why she wanted to tell her story at all and what not just the facts of her family tree meant to her but the importance of retelling them in cinematic form. There's a huge difference. "Stories We Tell" is a different kind of film. One you won't forget.

"Stories We Tell" was directed by Sarah Polley. It is now playing in some markets and opens in Chicago on May 17, 2013.



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