

TELEFILM
C A N A D A

MOUTHPIECE

(dir. Patricia Rozema, 2017 – 91 mins)

"You're a white, thin, middle class, educated, hetero Canadian.
No one has ever stopped you from saying anything that you wanted to say."

There's something thrilling about the self-deprecating, aching self-aware temperament of *Mouthpiece*, Patricia Rozema's bold and inventive character study of a young woman mourning the sudden passing of her mother.

Adapted from Amy Nostbakken and Norah Sadava's award-winning play, *Mouthpiece* takes the personality of its grieving protagonist Cassandra and breaks it into two parts, played onscreen by two different women. It's the calmer, more sombre of the two that reminds her spikier counterpart of her privilege – a young woman reminding herself that she is lucky even in a time of extreme pain.

The dual role is a neat externalisation of the tidal wave of emotions that accompany grieving. Neither polar opposites nor entirely harmonious, the parts switch from perfect synchronicity to kinetic confrontations as the cycle of mourning ebbs and flows.

Rozema – keen to maintain the voices from the play – recruited Nostbakken and Sadava to play the two strands of Cassandra; Nostbakken plays Tall Cassandra, with striking features, a mercurial temperament and a tendency to vocalise her every last thought. It's through this version that we see her unfaltering feminist attitudes, which she applies loudly to everything from her mother's failed career to watching *Beauty and the Beast* as a child and buying into its misogynistic values. Sadava's Short Cassandra is more patient, absorbing situations before acting rather than charging in headfirst as her partner tends to do.

Through meditating on their current pain and ruminating on their past, the collective Cassandra begins the humbling process of writing their mother's eulogy, a journey that brings revelations about a maternal relationship tainted by sacrifice and frustration.

Intergenerational feminism is having something of a cinematic moment, and *Mouthpiece* sits firmly at its crest alongside recent masterpieces like Mike Mills' *20th Century Women* (2016), Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017) and Josephine Decker's *Madeline's Madeline* (2018).

Rozema uses Lena Dunham's TV series *Girls* (2012 – 2017) as a key reference when describing the film, and whereas there are easy comparisons between the colourfully-furnished, modest interiors of Cassandra's apartment and the Ruth Bader Ginsburg fangirl mentality of her central character, *Mouthpiece* takes the life of a millennial poster girl and pulls the rug out from under her, forcing our heroine to evaluate what is actually important to her.

Through flashback, we witness Cassandra's mother Elaine (Maev Beaty) unable to retrieve her career as a successful editor after her pregnancy, and its rippling effects on her marriage and her mental health. Her failure to resuscitate her career drains her confidence and her ability to put herself out there again despite her interminable talents. In an especially symbolic moment, she drops her notebook with resignation into the food that her family refused to eat.

Cassandra probes her relationship with Elaine with trepidation, barely trapping feelings of disappointment, guilt and impatience as she jumps between memories and daydreams. Flicking through past, present and fantasy in her mind, she describes Elaine as a doormat, winces at a particularly destructive festive confrontation, and reflects on a phone call with her mother after a piece of her writing is published replete with her headshot.

"Brown is not your colour," Elaine comments absentmindedly, sending the conversation spinning into guarded terrain that it never quite returns from (the line is directly borrowed from a real conversation between Rozema and her own mother).

The daydreams that take place in the current time play out through performance art, paired with haunting, melodic vocals from Nostbakken and Sadava. Here's where the actresses' theatrical prowess takes hold, using their physicality over their words to externalise Cassandra's tacit grief.

When Nostbakken and Sadava began penning the stage play of *Mouthpiece* in 2013, the Western world was a different place. Feminism meant something very different, Hollywood was still yet to feel the ripples of change that would begin in October 2017, and this new strand of millennial women on film was yet to form.

The concept of *Mouthpiece* was years ahead of its time, and today has become more relevant than ever as a piece of feminist art that interrogates the infinite roles of women as mothers, daughters, writers, performers, wives, friends, and countless other positions of duty.

Under Rozema's keen directorial eye – and fuelled by the talent of two artists who not only understand the complexities of womanhood but can translate them into vibrant, complicated mediums – *Mouthpiece* is a sincere and accomplished collaboration that is at its heart a kind but defiant embodiment of femininity, whatever that may look like to you.

– **Beth Webb**