

Sarah

PLAIN AND TALL

When the 17-year-old former *Avonlea* star takes on an issue, it's not an act

by Trevor Cole

"Hi, Trevor. This is Sarah Polley calling. I'm really sorry, I'm calling to ask if I can put our meeting back. There's a big demonstration at Queen's Park that I helped to organize and I didn't realize that they were going to be jumping the barricades... I'm really sorry to put you out but there's like people getting bloodied up. Okay? Bye."

From this message alone, it's clear Sarah Polley is a long, long way from *Avonlea*.

Only occasionally do the worlds of politics and acting merge, and then usually — witness Arnold Schwarzenegger and Charlton Heston — on the right. It's rare these days for an actor of prominence to align him- or herself with left-wing causes, and even rarer for that actor to become actively involved. But Sarah Polley is involved. The 17-year-old actress, who starred in the Kevin Sullivan-produced *Road to Avonlea* series from the age of 10 until last year, who has endured the death of her mother, and severe scoliosis that put her in a full-body cast for a year and a half, now sits in a Bloor St. West coffee shop, bearing the weight of Ontario's homeless on her shoulders.

"I'm kind of going a bit crazy," she says.

Slumped in front of a half-eaten salad, her face loose with fatigue, she toys with the foot-long thread that dangles from the sleeve of her worn purple sweater. Polley hasn't had a good night's sleep in two weeks. A few days ago she returned from Montreal, where she attended a pan-Canadian conference on the political climate in Ontario and Quebec. There she joined the steering committee of the Common Front, a coalition formed to fight the Ontario government's budget cuts. For the last few days she's put up two delegates from the Montreal conference in her Toronto apartment.

Meanwhile she's working hard for the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and staying involved with her NDP riding association. "I'm also running for the council for the actors' union," she says. Not surprisingly, she's wondering if she's wearing herself too thin.

But she can't stop now. "I'm so afraid of living in a country with no culture and no social safety net, with huge unemployment. I've got this fear in me. That's why I can't sleep."

A few months ago, Polley lost a couple of back teeth on the steps of Queen's Park, during the first violent confrontation between police and anti-government demonstrators. At this moment she's considering taking part in the civil disobedience planned by protestors against the pass-



Sarah as Sarah (left), and as the troubled "Goth" Lily in CBC's *Straight Up* (above).

ing of the Conservative omnibus bill. She is risking herself for a cause she has difficulty discussing without anger. And some of that anger is directed at her show-business colleagues, the people who have access to the media and don't use it as she feels they should — to fight. "Every interview, people should be speaking out against these cuts," she says. "I find it appalling, like so *disgusting*, that actors, that writers, that anybody who has the opportunity to be on the airwaves is wasting their time on self-promotion. Because it means nothing when people are starving on the street."

There's one obvious reason for their reluctance: fear. The days of Joe McCarthy may be long past, but these are the days of billion-dollar entertainment conglomerates, and a left-wing stance can still be a real anchor on a showbiz career. What makes Polley's public efforts even more remarkable is that she *knows* what sort of backlash she can expect.

Five years ago, during the Gulf War, Polley — then 12 — attended an awards ceremony for children's television in Washington. At her table were representatives of the Disney channel, which airs *Avonlea* in the United States. They noticed she was wearing a peace symbol at her neck. They told her to take it off — and leave it off.

She vehemently refused. "Disney never called me again," she says. "I used to get two or three auditions a year from

Disney, and I never got a single one after that."

Polley's new agent, Celia Chassels, confirms the Disney story. She hasn't encountered anything similar, but admits, "I haven't been her agent all that long. Does Polley's stance cause her any worry? "Sarah may say things that are not politic at this stage of her life," she says. But, "it makes our lives much more interesting when an actor has that kind of courage."

Polley is driven in part by the passion of her age, the righteousness of youth confronting blind authority. As she talks, she tucks her hair behind her ears and flicks a finger under her nose, both the unconscious, habitual movements of adolescence. But her eyes remain steady, almost imposing, as she tries to get at the source of her zeal. "It's about an issue. It's about the government. It's about this province. It's about the people I see around me every day. And it's not about who knows what the motivations are — but I hope it's not about leaving my mark on the world."

Belying her age, she's mindful of the pitfalls of the passion. "How can you see what you see, like with these streets filling up with homeless people, and not just have an anger and a hatred in you? And I'm so afraid of it. Because that hatred is dangerous."

She's also very aware of her own lack of awareness. "There are tons of issues I have no grasp on whatsoever," she admits. But she doesn't think that disqualifies her from saying what she believes. "I have an instinctual sense that people shouldn't be starving on the streets while somebody who's living in Rosedale is getting a 30-per-cent income tax break."

There are other issues that fuel Polley's ire too. She has strong opinions, for instance, about the treatment of child actors. ("My kids will never — never, ever, ever — be in film or television.") An agent's backed that up by helping to amend the child labour provisions in the Independent Production Agreement at ACTRA (Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists).

Her politics hardly leave her time for performance, but Polley has recently managed to squeeze in some work in a couple of small-budget productions. In this Monday's episode of CBC's *Straight Up*, she plays a troubled "Goth" girl (for "gothic"), a role — with its black hair, clothes, makeup, and strong sexual undertones — that puts great distance between her and her tea-and-cake *Avonlea* image.

Of course, anyone missing that performance might just catch Polley on the evening news. Having left the restaurant, having arrived at Queen's Park, Polley is now walking through a mighty late January ice storm, past the barricades and up the steps of the Ontario legislature to join her fellow anti-poverty protesters struggling to hold on to their placards. "Who knows," she had told me. "Maybe Mike Harris is right. But I strongly doubt it. My sense of compassion, my sense of being a human tells me that he's wrong. So I'm going to act on it." Now she slings her backpack over her shoulder and turns to look out at the media. And she stands there, against the whipping winter of Ontario. ■