

THE IRISH TIMES, Friday, April 27, 1984

OUR TIMES

Polly Devlin who immortalised parts of Co Tyrone in her autobiographical book, *'All of Us There'* has recently taken up film making. She talked to Caroline Walsh about her new documentary *'The Daisy Chain'* and about the importance to her of her sisters and her daughters.

Extraordinary Sisters, Extraordinary Women

Polly Devlin casts spells. There she sat the picture of innocence beneath a gigantic mirror in the lounge of the Gresham Hotel sipping alternately Perrier and wine, wine and Perrier, it being early afternoon. But all the time that pose belied her magical powers.

Within minutes of meeting, she has wafted off anyone listening to her into that never-never land of Ardboe; that world of flax fields and dusty roads, of wild rose and bramble, that she immortalised last year in her book *'All of Us There'*. Listening to her talk about childhood in that special part of Tyrone in the 1950s, surrounded on all sides by five sisters and a brother, one begins yearningly to envy all that they seem to have experienced way back then by the shores of Lough Neagh. It wasn't at all surprising that as we parted a man stepped forward to enquire, "Excuse me but just who is that woman you've been talking to for the past hour?"

It is twenty years now since Polly Devlin first began to intrigue the public in this fashion when fate plucked her from her rural backwater and set her down firmly in the tinsel world of London and high fashion. "What happened was that I won the *Vogue* talent contest when I was 19 while I was at a teacher training college in Belfast. It was one of those things that launched a number of women. For instance Jacqueline Kennedy won it, and Penelope Gilliatt and even now I don't know why I entered. I was just leafing through *Vogue* which couldn't have been a more alien thing in Ardboe. It was like an archive of the future."

The contest involved writing three articles, one of them autobiographical, and Polly won: "It was one of those unlikely chances that appear in my life and which I always grasp," she says.

The prize was a job on *Vogue* so, armed with £3 Polly set off for London, but looking

back now she says that it's a dangerous game to suddenly find yourself being paid for a talent before you yourself have actually tested that talent out. "It was a staggeringly different world from Ardboe. The job on *Vogue* was very glamorous but I had misgivings because glamour is unsatisfactory. It's seductive and it has nothing to do with poetry or work or with real life and fine feelings though a lot of that sounds pompous and in fact I've never really given that life up. I'm still seduced by glamour." That first break led to her writing for *The New Statesman*, *The Evening Standard* and *The Sunday Times* and also to her meeting in Paris, when she was 24, with Old Etonian businessman Andy Garnett whom she later married.

In Dublin for a day to promote the Pan paperback edition of her book, *The Irish Times* had to compete for her time with a galaxy of Devlins. They all wanted to see Polly. First came Marie, then Clare, then Barry. No wonder she feels that it's very special belonging to such a large family and laments that in the modern world, tribes of seven children are becoming a thing of the past.

"Paradoxically a large family doesn't give you security as children. You want what they have and they want what you have. It's the fledglings in the nest thing; one body lying against the other, all craving for mother's love, for sustenance, for space, for an inch of the tree to fly from, but the paradox lies in the fact that those grasping eager siblings love you passionately, know you profoundly, and in negotiating the terms of life with them you negotiate so many ways of dealing with the outside world."

What one learns through the relationship with sisters is, says Polly Devlin, about trust. "So often young women falling in love deliver with their love the lot – they give love, trust, pain and grief and they want

everything back and the danger is that they can get terribly hurt. The great luxury of sisters is that you learn a lot about relationships before you set out into that dangerous arena; you don't give you trust over lightly to a stranger. In a big family you go through so many things so quickly that you grow up early."

Of her inability to make her sisters Anne, Marie, Val, Clare and Helen, shine, as she puts it, at the point of her pen in *'All of Us There'* Polly writes, "I want to cry, to feel again the impotent despair of childhood; and then I look again and see that they are all in their own places leading their own rich lives, and that they love me. I stop calling and calling, for I hear for the first time their voices calling back and I know at last but for the first time that I can never be lost since my sisters will always know, as they always have known, where I am, and will find me." They are, she says, extraordinary sisters; extraordinary women.

Now the mother of three daughters, Rose 14, Daisy 11, and Bay 10, the relationship between mothers and daughters intrigues her and figures in a documentary film she has just made called *'The Daisy Chain'*. The film is, she says, ostensibly about the end of term play at a girls' boarding school in a Jacobean house set in the Dorset countryside.

"My children go there so by making a film at the school I was trespassing on their territory quite violently and I was stepping outside the proper confines of being a parent, especially at a school like that where the girls all want their mothers and fathers to be just like the other parents. I was not innocent in the making of that film. I knew what would happen and that was what interested me. It's quite a shocking thing to admit to. It shows a hyena-like quality that's not too attractive but then the things that you use to make your art are quite often disagreeable things. I would love to produce work that didn't involve pain or change or rooting about in my own archaeology but I think that would just produce romance; the Mills and Boon syndrome."

What did happen with this film was that her daughter Daisy didn't at all like what her mother was doing. "All through this documentary there are eruptions of violence as one of my daughters tries to stop me filming so fundamentally it's a piece about mothers and daughters."

The documentary is now being used as a teaching film in a London hospital for the information of social workers working in the

area of family relations and some audiences have been quite critical of it. "Some people have said that I should have switched off the camera when my daughter objected; have said that I am abusing her with the camera. All she had to do was move two inches to the left and she'd have been out of my range but she didn't. She just stood there – objecting – but in focus."

Her daughters she makes a point of stressing area loved, one as much as the other. "My eldest daughter loves the film, my youngest daughter regards it as a piece of work. It is unsurprising to me and I think would be unsurprising to many middle children that it was the middle child who was fighting for her space. The child who is in between, actually refusing to be in between again, in between the sides of my camera."

Polly wasn't that surprised either when at a recent showing of *'The Daisy Chain'* a woman stood up and announced that Daisy would in time turn out to be a writer or an artist. "That's partly what the struggle is about in the film – Daisy fighting the takeover bid by her mother." It is not, says Polly, that she is giving Daisy the makings of an artist. "It's just that the makings of an artist are there within her and are coming out."

Possibly it's as well that the next film Polly plans to make is a comedy "without a hint of human harrowing drama."

She took up filming three years ago when she got a place at the National Film School in Beaconsfield. "If you have been in the business of communicating at all, film is a very powerful medium. It seemed to me that it was a machine-ridden masculine thing which was totally beyond me and I still think that but you can say so much through film that I very much wanted to tackle it."

Not at all coy about disclosing that she is 40 all that bothers her about her two score years is that she feels it is old in terms of getting things done. "For instance it was terrifying putting myself on the line at 38 and admitting ignorance to learn the new skills of filming. I like being in control, being confident. When I went to film school I didn't like being at a disadvantage and having to admit that I didn't know things." She finishes her film course this June. As well as that she continues her writing and is currently one of the judges of the Booker literary prize.

Looking back on her childhood now Polly says that even when she was growing up she knew that it was a childhood with a

difference. “We were mermaids. We were neither one thing nor the other. In a large sense we were Roman Catholics in a Protestant country. We were metropolitan people in a rural setting; we were displaced in an extraordinary way, because we lived in a place called the country of the Devlins but didn’t wholly belong to that place because all of our grandfathers had married, as it were, strangers and there was a shiver in the genes, a collision in the blood, that made us different from our local contemporaries.”

Also her grandfather had singled himself out by making money on the stock exchange and by educating himself. “Another displacing thing was that we were the children of the local school teacher, and that, in a small community, nudges you a little bit out. My mother was a teacher and my father owned the local pub and had a farm. All those clashes and ambivalences made us swim through our experience and our landscape.”

That slight apartness was also probably what made a writer of her and enabled her to appreciate her environment enough to detail it in minutiae for the rest of us yet she is very quick to point out that while not rooted in Ardboe it is still crucially necessary for all of them.

While her life is now divided between London and Somerset she is often back in Ardboe. “We all go back like eels to the Lough. The parents are still there and Ardboe is exactly as it was when we were growing up. We go back as a pilgrimage because it’s our shrine. We go back for sustenance, every one of us, and also we go back because of the healthy attachment we have to our parents.”

Though long established in England she still feels at some level alien there. “I’m Irish. If you sawed through my legs like an old oak tree you would come on rings and circles of Irishness.”