

Marriage Story: Noah Baumbach, self-involvement and the divorce racket

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21 December 2019

Written and directed by Noah Baumbach

Writer-director Noah Baumbach's *Marriage Story*, now streaming on Netflix after a brief theatrical release, is the account of a divorce between a theater director and an actress set in Los Angeles and New York City.

Charlie Barber (Adam Driver) is the New York director whose most recent, "avant-garde" production of Sophocles' *Electra* featured his wife Nicole (Scarlett Johansson), long a member of his theater company. The play is scheduled to transfer to Broadway, i.e., to a larger, more profitable theater. Nicole, however, is dropping out. She has been offered a television series in Los Angeles (her birthplace) and has moved there, temporarily or otherwise, with the couple's young son, Henry (Azhy Robertson).

In any case, the Barbers' marriage is breaking up. Nicole hires a high-powered, high-priced divorce lawyer, Nora Fanshaw (Laura Dern). Nicole explains to Nora that she wants out of the marriage because while being with Charlie—supposedly a remarkable artist—had been enough in the beginning, over time she felt she had "less and less weight" in his theater company and "got smaller." She explains, "I didn't ever really come alive for myself. I was just feeding his aliveness."

On a visit Charlie makes to Los Angeles to visit Nicole and Henry, who are staying with Nicole's mother, Sandra (Julie Hagerty), he gets served—much to his surprise—with divorce papers. Charlie haltingly explains, "I guess I didn't think it through, but I thought we agreed we weren't going to use lawyers." He stumbles out of his mother-in-law's house in some dismay.

While in Los Angeles, Charlie meets with an expensive lawyer, Jay Marotta (Ray Liotta), and his assistant Ted. Jay opens with: "I charge \$950 an hour. Ted is \$400. If you have a stupid question, you call Ted. To start, we'll need a \$25,000 retainer. ... And all your financials. We need to do a forensic accounting. Which runs anywhere

from ten to twenty thousand dollars. But if we can all agree right away, it shouldn't get too bad."

Charlie then tries to make do with a cheaper, older, more humane lawyer, Bert Spitz (Alan Alda). The divorce process begins to take on a bizarre and illogical character. (Charlie: "Will we go to court?" Bert: "No, no, we don't want to go to court. The courts in California are a disaster. No, that's just how we have to think about it. ... Where are you living while you're here?" Charlie: "I'm in a hotel right now." Bert: "No, a hotel doesn't look good." Charlie: "To who?" Bert: "The court." Charlie: "You just said we weren't going to go to court." Bert: "No, of course, of course. We have to prepare to go to court, hoping we don't go to court.")

Eventually, Charlie, who has just received a MacArthur "Genius Grant" (\$625,000 paid out over five years), feels himself in a financial position to hire the legal shark, Jay. The case *does* move to court and the two attorneys portray each other's clients in the darkest and most unfair, one-sided colors.

Charlie and Nicole meet apart from the lawyers, but their conversation descends into bitter, angry recrimination. However, in the end, they come to a fairly equitable, rational agreement.

Baumbach (*The Squid and the Whale*, 2005; *Margot at the Wedding*, 2007; *Greenberg*, 2010; *Frances Ha*, 2012; *While We're Young*, 2014) includes some straightforward, interesting (and amusing) elements in *Marriage Story*. It is less damaged by self-satisfaction and self-consciousness than some of his previous efforts. Driver and Johansson are both effective, as are Hagerty, Dern, Liotta and Alda.

The strongest aspects of *Marriage Story* have to do with the dreadful divorce racket and the monsters (and bankrupts) the process can make out of normal human beings. Bert tells Charlie, "Getting divorced with a kid can be one of the hardest things you'll ever do. It's like a

death without a body.”

Whatever Dern—off-screen a self-righteous #MeToo crusader—may think she is doing with the Fanshaw character, the result is an unpleasant picture of self-interested, moneyed and thuggish “feminism.”

Fanshaw phones Charlie at one point to issue a series of threats:

Fanshaw: “If you don’t file your response [to the divorce papers], we’re going to file a request for default judgment against you.”

Charlie: “Default judgment, what does that mean?”

Fanshaw: “We’ll be able to lay claim to whatever we want.”

Charlie: “W-What do you mean, whatever you want of what?”

Fanshaw: “Your apartment, your things, everything you own.”

Charlie: “We ... She [Nicole] and I already discussed this. We don’t own that much stuff.”

Fanshaw: “She can have pretty much whatever she wants. And it means we’ll set the number for child support at its highest level and claim full custody of your child.”

Charlie: “Full custody? I mean, that’s not even. ...”

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Fanshaw: “This is what the law says.”

Charlie: “Nicole’s not going to do that. I mean, she won’t.”

Fanshaw: “No, Charlie, I represent Nicole, and she’s aware of everything I’m saying to you.”

In writing about Baumbach’s *Greenberg*, we argued that accuracy was all to the good, “but the spectator also needs to be genuinely intrigued and compelled by the characters and their dilemmas.” That is a problem with *Marriage Story* too.

We are presented with a series of pleasant enough but rather self-centered, middle class individuals, with no great concerns apparently apart from family and career issues. As we also noted in regard to *Greenberg*, if there is an implied criticism of self-involvement in Baumbach’s new film, it “is itself rather narrow and self-involved.”

There are numerous issues. Is Charlie an authentic artist? Baumbach satirizes the quasi-incestuous off-Broadway theater set in Manhattan (including writer Wallace Shawn as one of Charlie’s associates), and it is not possible to determine from the fragment of *Electra* we glimpse whether the production has artistic value or not.

In a somewhat stereotyped and perhaps outdated sequence, *Marriage Story* presents the creators of Nicole’s upcoming television series as a bunch of entertainment industry idiots. Baumbach wants it both ways. On the one hand, we are meant to take Nicole’s intelligence seriously. However, how could a truly intelligent, sensitive individual descend from Sophocles to this rubbish? It makes no coherent sense.

It is difficult, in any event, to consider as substantial people for whom the only “reality” that means anything occurs within a theater or a television studio, or perhaps a bedroom, on one of the two “Coasts.”

The dramatic holes and the problem of self-centeredness come together around the question of the Barbers’ breakup itself. We hear that Charlie is rumored to be “very controlling,” although we don’t see fatal indications of that quality. As noted, in her conversation with her lawyer, Nicole complains vaguely that her desires had not been sufficiently paid attention to, that she had wanted to spend more time in Los Angeles, that Charlie had made fun of her television “pilot,” that “he didn’t see me as something separate from himself,” etc.

In one of the later scenes, Nicole claims Charlie “put me through hell during our marriage,” but we don’t see much proof of that, either because Baumbach wants Charlie to remain likeable on the whole or because it isn’t true. In either case, the climactic scene is not fully convincing. Having people curse at one another or punch walls doesn’t by itself establish the truth or strength, or importance, of the emotions in question.

At any rate, we have no sense that Nicole fought her husband over her concerns. “And I asked him to say my phone number. He didn’t know it. So, I left,” she tells her lawyer. As an after-thought, she throws in the fact that Charlie had an affair with the stage manager.

The light-mindedness with which the pair treat the fate of their marriage and their child speaks to a more general superficiality. We wrote in 2010, “When writers, directors and producers gaze at the world at present, they often gaze into a small, hand-held mirror.” This continues to be a problem.



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