

Screen, Screen Reviews

# LFF 2019 Review: Marriage Story

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes is won over by Noah Baumbach's relationship parable.

5 mins read

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**M**arriage Story opens with a stark contradiction – this isn't at all a story about marriage. At least, not the story we've come to expect from the annals of romantic comedy tradition, one of glamorous meet-cutes and blossoming love against all odds. Noah Baumbach's latest tale is rather about what happens when those odds *do* overpower the kitsch fantasy; where navigating the reality is often more tumultuous and unexpected than any regurgitated love story. It also might just be a

collective career-best work for Baumbach, Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver.

*Marriage Story* truncates the traditional love story in its profoundly strong opening montage. Nicole (Johansson) and Charlie (Driver) introduce each other through a checklist of habits and attributes they've grown to love in the other, a bittersweet summation of both the characters themselves but more importantly, how they're perceived through their spouse's eyes. Naturally, it doesn't take long for these affectionate words to be thrust back into context – Nicole and Charlie are undergoing a strenuous separation. Nicole wants to move back to her hometown of LA and transition from theatre into television. Charlie is taking his New York theatre company and its production – in which Nicole was the star performer – on Broadway. Both dreams are incompatible; the relationship begins to crumble.

As the separation spirals and mutates into a divorce, the emotional pitfalls and absurdities Nicole and Charlie find themselves in appear more insane and vicious than ever. If the world of love is an autumnal park bench coffee date, that of divorce is a bloody no-holds-barred prison brawl. Baumbach handles the subject matter with astonishing delicacy. For every tear of laughter, there's one of heartbreak and vice versa. Few films this year have achieved such an accomplished balance between comedy and tragedy. While a script is typically only as good as its players, they're thankfully magnificent. Both Johansson and Driver have firmly laid down the gauntlet for acting awards with their performances. Charlie and Nicole are deliberately confused characters, both fascinatingly flawed with neither of them ever a clear vessel for the audience's sympathies.

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Johansson delivers a jaw-dropping monologue and expresses a remarkable emotional range throughout, swinging from joyful reminiscing to restraining tears at a moment's notice. Similarly, Driver's relationship with his son is one of the film's more frustrating, gripping sub-plots. The legal process of divorce equates custody to commodity; the emotional experience of fatherhood is quickly trivialised and dismissed. Even with Charlie's inherent selfishness, Driver's performance makes him largely sympathetic. Their friction explodes in the film's centerpoint – a single-

room extended duologue seamlessly traveling from restrained silence towards cathartic chaos that's likely my favourite scene of the year.

A relationship is nothing without its supporting players. Laura Dern is superbly hateable as Nicole's ruthless divorce lawyer in contrast to Charlie's counterpart, played by a pitiable Alan Alda. Baumbach understands how integral the lawyers are to the convoluted web of divorce, to the extent where each lawyer externalises elements of their client's subconscious. Nicole desires self-sufficiency; Nora has developed it to the point of alienation. Charlie wants a fulfilling family life; Bert desires that so much, he's been through multiple marriages *and* divorces.

*Marriage Story* is exceptional at these tiny details that heighten the indisputable imperfections of life, love and family – it feels truthful and raw to the point where some may feel voyeuristic in observing these individual lives fall apart. Yet, that is undeniably part of the film's appeal. Some may refer to this as *Kramer vs. Kramer* for a new generation, yet that undersells the nuances of *Marriage Story*'s writing. This isn't an updated portrait, but a transposed one, still exploring the same foundations of fragile relationships but in its own space, living through its own experiences. Whether it was therapeutic for Baumbach or not, for every personal touch *Marriage Story* adopts, it only feels more reinvigorating and essential.

**We give it**

**5**



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