

Jack Black, Nicole Kidman and Jennifer Jason Leigh in *Margot at the Wedding*



Claws

Nothing hurts you like family

MARGOT AT THE WEDDING: Written and directed by Noah Baumbach. Produced by Scott Rudin. Cinematography, Harris Savides. Starring Nicole Kidman, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jack Black, Flora Cross, Zane Pais and John Turturro. Paramount Vantage, 2007. R. 92 minutes. ★★★★★

Among the best films of 2005 was *The Squid and the Whale*, a dark drama that happens to be wickedly funny. If it leans a little heavily on Wes Anderson (*Rushmore*), it at least gives fans of Anderson a director to lionize in Noah Baumbach. Produced by Anderson, with whom Baumbach wrote *The Life Aquatic*, *The Squid and the Whale* is the story of Baumbach's parents' divorce, a bitter breakup told from the children's point of view. From the perspective of two awkward, bemused teenage boys, the arrogance and stubbornness of their parents — rival writers — feels unexpectedly light and whimsical. The script earned Baumbach an Oscar nomination and a number of passionate supporters. Now his follow-up, *Margot at the Wedding*, arrives with little fanfare but great expectations. I suspect few people will see this film, and potentially a handful of people will enjoy it. I mention that because while I admire it very much, *Margot at the Wedding* is *Squid* without a safety net. There's no youthful, delicate point of view. Instead, the knives are bigger, the cuts are deeper and real blood (emotionally speaking) is spilled. I'm still healing from my viewing of it, yet because it presents sibling rivalry so authoritatively, I hope to see it twice.

The story is deceptively simple. Margot (Nicole Kidman) arrives in Suffolk County, N.Y., with her son Claude (Zane Pais) for the wedding of her estranged sister Pauline (Jennifer Jason Leigh). Margot is without her husband, a condition that instantly makes her conspicuous; her son, who's teased for his girlish looks, is clingy to the degree that an intercession will be needed; and Pauline, gentle but brittle, wants to mend fences with Margot and get married, all at once. That will be difficult, given that the groom is Jack Black, who plays Malcolm, an ex-rocker, with all the

restraint he can muster. As for plot, that's about the sum of it. There are some feral neighbors, a dispute over a tree and an adulterous subplot with Margot and an old flame. But the scenario of *Margot at the Wedding* is subordinate to the way the film places its characters high on a wire and watches them teeter, flail and fight for survival. *Margot* isn't really about anything other than family, which in the end, of course, is everything. It's as literary as Alice McDermott's fine novel *Child of My Heart*, which happens to be set around the same people and places as *Margot*. Only *Margot* is darker.

Margot herself is insufferable, a term she likes to apply to others. She's the type of person who laments her sister's pregnancy because it means Pauline can't drink champagne with her. Despite her flaws, Margot briefly reconnects with Pauline — who frankly can't believe her sister came at all — until Margot reverts to leading Pauline through life, rather than simply supporting her. The film does a cunning job of setting up one sister as flighty and the other as responsible; before you know it, the fragile Pauline turns out to be strong, while the stable Margot turns out to be fragile. *Margot at the Wedding* is a hard road to travel. It can be cruel but it never ceases to be funny. The pace is breathless. There are no interstices: One meaningful scene follows the next without pause, leaving no room for music or those calm, reflective shots of nature so common in family dramas like *The Ice Storm*.

When Malcolm finds himself outside looking in, Black can't help making *Margot at the Wedding* a farce. There are a few rickety sequences in which Black's reactions upset the film. When the sisters (sans Black) end up in a motel room, the film slumps when it should be sliding to conclusion. I had the feeling of stepping off an escalator: My body wanted to know why it wasn't moving anymore. Then *Margot*, and Margot, suddenly lurch forward in a way I couldn't completely accept. But the ride prior to this is so clearly mapped, I didn't let the detour get in the way. **EW**

Margot at the Wedding open Friday, Dec. 28, at the Bijou.

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