

THE RESTLESS AND THE YOUNG

Noah Baumbach's *While We're Young* is a wry spin on the midlife crisis

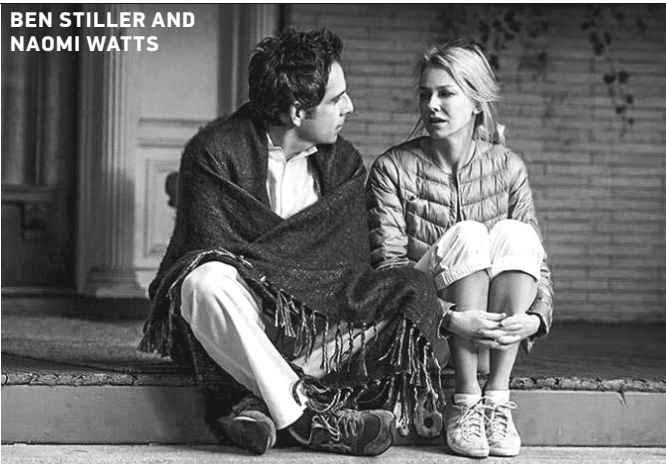
If 2013's *Frances Ha* seemed a little nicer than writer-director Noah Baumbach's usual fare — fewer pointed observations, more gentleness toward his characters, no matter how self-deluded — *While We're Young* is a trip back to slightly rougher territory (though not quite as rough as *Greenberg*). Sly and self-aware, Baumbach is a deeply fair storyteller, giving his characters room to hang themselves and room to get their shit together all at once.

Josh (Ben Stiller) does quite a lot of both. A fortysomething stalled documentary filmmaker (it's a running joke that no one really knows what his unfinished 10-year project is about), Josh lives in a lovely apartment with his wife, Cornelia (Naomi Watts). Cornelia, a film producer, is the daughter of an acclaimed documentarian, Leslie (Charles Grodin, meandering calmly through the film), whose success is something Josh can't look away from, even as he tries to distance himself.

Their best friends, Marina (Maria Dizzia) and Fletcher (a smartly cast Adam Horovitz), are new parents, distracted but eager to induct their pals into the baby cult. In one direction, professional success; in the other, procreation — all unattainable, for one reason or another. Midlife malaise has begun to set in.

Then Jamie (Adam Driver) and Darby (Amanda Seyfried) wander into Josh's uninspired adult-education film class. Over dinner, a friendship forms, nebulous, a little strange; Jamie and Darby are twentysomethings, shiny with youth and possibility. (If there's one thing that strains credibility, it's Josh and Cornelia's obliviousness to the fact that Jamie and Darby's loft-living,

BEN STILLER AND NAOMI WATTS



artisan-ice-cream-making Brooklyn lifestyle is, at this point, hardly unique.)

Jamie and Darby don't have kids; they have beach parties in the street and visits to a shaman who feeds a roomful of smiling strangers a vomit-inducing hallucinogenic. Their relationship with Josh (and, to a frustratingly lesser degree, Cornelia) quickly shapes itself: They show him things, remind him what it is to be young, and he pays for dinner, helps Jamie out with a project, says yes to things he doesn't want to agree to in an attempt to absorb some of what he sees as youthful openness and generosity.

While We're Young is wickedly on the nose in its depiction of men so self-obsessed they can't see who they really are — or who their friends are. Wry, pointedly funny and painful (the baby music class must be one of the circles of hell), Baumbach's generational comedy gradually moves Leslie into the spotlight, setting up Josh as the older man's version of Jamie: younger, inspiringly/aggravatingly different, focused on the wrong things. Each generation has no control over what the next chooses to take or discard from its pile of carefully hoarded beliefs and priorities. So why stress about it?

For all its bite, *While We're Young* is a reminder that doing your own thing is much easier when you're not worried about what everyone else — peers, elders, smart-ass kids — is doing. (*Bijou Metro*)

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