

MARRIAGE STORY

Directed by Noah Baumbach
Produced by Noah Baumbach and David Heyman
Distributed by Netflix
Released in 2019

While there is some truth in the axiom that an audience is more likely to be emotionally invested in a film when it is familiar with the dilemmas and struggles experienced by the characters, there's a catch: precisely because this kind of story is familiar from real-life experience, it is easier for the film to go off the rails and fail to ring true. This isn't a heist film, or, more obscurely, a time-travel comedy. An audience would have little or nothing to bring to the table with such films. So *Marriage Story*, while providing relatability, is also taking a risk.

The central conflict (though there are many points of contention) is that Charlie is obsessed with his work and not only wants Nicole to use her own skills to complement him artistically, he wants her to be seen as merely his artistic appendage so he won't be upstaged. She elevates her work over her home life, and, despite Charlie's high sensitivities for household responsibilities, particularly child care, she wants out. (His brief affair with a theater acolyte is just used as leverage against him in court—it's not the primary concern.)

Composer Stephen Sondheim is privileged with providing the summary on the harrowing conflict that is *Marriage Story*. His song from the musical "Company," sung by Charlie at length in a restaurant amidst theater acquaintances, says it all: Being alone is the same as being dead. Being with someone, struggling, striving, trying to make the relationship work, is what counts.

Charlie wants to keep fighting. Nicole does not. Since he can't love her, he fights for Henry. After months of fighting and many thousands of dollars, they end up with what they originally wanted—an effective 50-50 time-share of their son. And Charlie gives up. The whole divorce fight centered on L.A. Was that going to be home, or New York? Charlie accepts a residency at UCLA. He admits defeat, effectively accepting the idea that his identity is no longer in his work, but in his ex-wife and son. Nicole embraces this decision, drops her perpetual stubbornness about not being flexible on Henry, but, still, refuses to budge. She's "home," she's finally getting accolades of her own (an Emmy nomination not for acting, but *directing*), and she's with her "family."

It's a very sad movie, and plays like an updated version of *Kramer v. Kramer*, another stressful slice-of-life downer.

The big change here is the mother staying with the child and not only having a career of her own, but being a professional rival of her husband.

Sadly, this is the reality for millions of people. Hollywood used to give us something to aspire to, something to dream about. Maybe those days are really gone. *Marriage Story* glorifies self-actualization; for when we're told it's o.k. to be a failure at life's most important job so we can make personal accomplishment the defining characteristic of our happiness, something,

indeed, is very wrong. Given what the characters have learned, given how they have come to terms with each other, and—without a doubt—finally understand each other, why can they not end up back together? Marriages that have gone sour can be restored. It's uncommon, but it does happen. This isn't a documentary we're watching. Why not let it surprise us?

Probably, there is a cultural/world-view explanation that transcends dramatic necessities. We're looking at competing values: success in marriage as opposed to success in career. It is possible for women to achieve both. But, finally, after half a century of modern feminism, women are starting to see that there is no free lunch. Everything has a price. Most worrisome is Nicole's apparent decision that, when the two are ultimately incompatible, career is more important than marriage. (She'll say she's still putting Henry first, but, with his parents breaking up, he will be the one who suffers most.) *Marriage Story* isn't saying that broken marriages can't be salvaged, but it is implying that, even though Charlie finally understands Nicole, he will not change. Nicole will not have the career she wants as long as Charlie can impress his will on her (as husbands are wont to do).

But for those who have already been divorced, the strange thing is that, for them, *Marriage Story* has a happy ending of sorts. Ironically, it affirms their experience, and it's always a pleasure to feel vindicated. The ex-partners are courteous, and Henry seems to be adjusting well. For these audience members it's too late to have something to aspire to, too late to dream of a successful marriage. That dream has died. Sure, one can always remarry. But there's no going back, no fixing what is broken, no restoring to the children that which is irretrievably lost.

And that's life as we know it now: Live for today; tomorrow be damned.