

Baumbach, Leigh chat about dysfunctional 'Wedding'

By **Dino-Ray Ramos**
STAFF WRITER

WITH "MARGOT at the Wedding," writer-director Noah Baumbach continues his brutally honest exploration of family relationships that he started with his Academy Award-nominated film, "The Squid and the Whale." But this time around his real-life wife, acclaimed actress Jennifer Jason Leigh, joins him in front of the camera.

Leigh portrays Pauline Zeller, the hippy-like, optimistic sister of Margot (Nicole Kidman). As a free-spirited woman, Pauline passively clashes with Margot's uptight, bullheaded ways. Add Jack Black into the mix as Pauline's unemployed artist fiancé, Malcolm, and dysfunction is bound to happen.

With Baumbach's unique vision of naked emotion and Leigh's stunning acting chops, the two make an ideal team — on and off the camera.

We had the opportunity to talk to the couple about their relationship as colleagues, intrigue in family relationships and the movie-going "experience."

Q: How do you respond to each other as colleagues and artists?

Noah Baumbach: I was aware of Jennifer as an actress long before I met her. She was one of the best actresses around. As I got to know her, I was discovering her as a person. The fun of this movie, now that I know her, was to work with her in a way, in a role, that could be closer to the person that I knew.

Jennifer Jason Leigh: (laughs) Not the actual character, but the way of playing her.

NB: She's not literally anything like Pauline. The way of playing it was close to Jennifer as a person. She is incredibly funny and intuitive. The sensitivity that I see in her would work very well in this character. It was two-fold. I was working with an actress I have admired for a long time. But also to find



SISTERLY LOVE: Jennifer Jason Leigh (right) and Nicole Kidman play sisters Pauline and Margot in Noah Baumbach's "Margot at the Wedding."

a part for her that connected with how I know her personally.

JJL: For me, I love Noah's writing. We're always talking about script and work. I knew that I would be in very good hands. I knew he would get a really great performance out of me. I saw how he was with actors in "The Squid and the Whale" and I was excited to be directed by him. We are very honest and supportive of one another and I thought it was going to be great.

Q: Whether it is through writing (Baumbach) or through acting (Leigh), how do you know when a story is worth telling?

NB: For me, it's pretty intuitive. With this movie, I started with an image of a mother and son on a train. There was something about it that excited me. It wasn't really anything I could quantify. It's easier for me, in an odd way, to feel my way into a screenplay through an image. In other cases, it might be a character, relationship or dialogue that makes me want to learn about these people.

JJL: For me, it's not so much a cerebral process. I'll read something and I'll either feel it or I won't. Sometimes when I don't feel it, but I think the director is great, I'll take that leap because I want to work with the director. For me to be attracted to a character, it has to speak to me in some way or feel like a fun challenge. I can't always define it. With

"Margot," the characters were just so well written. I loved it and I loved what it was about. It was my cup of tea.

Q: How much of yourself do you see in Pauline?

JJL: I feel like she's someone who is optimistic even if things don't look good. If there's a 50/50 chance, I will usually go for the good 50. That's true for Pauline. She so wants to think that everything will work out. She has lots of love for her family. She's like me because she likes caretaking. She also gets thrown off-balance easily, which can happen to me too.

Q: How would you handle someone like Margot in reality?

JJL: You're a little bit on eggshells. Margot's in a crisis when we meet her in this movie. She's falling apart. When Pauline says, "Your mom can be scary when she's angry," I think Pauline is scared of Margot's anger. That's why she likes Malcolm so much — (it's) because his anger isn't threatening. When you really don't know when someone's mood might change or when they might go on the attack, you do the best that you can and not get crushed.

Q: Was there a particular character that you had an attachment to?

NB: At some point through

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the writing process, I will internalize each one of those characters. It's important for me to care about all of them. I don't think, "I'm more of this person than that person." I'm sure there's bits of me in all of them. I have real empathy for all of them. The movie almost has a deceptive ensemble. You start off by thinking this is Margot's movie, but I like how when you're with Pauline and Malcolm, it's their movie or if you're with Margot and Pauline, it's their movie — everybody gets their fair share. The movie is kind of democratic in how it portrays everybody.

Q: What is it about family relationships that intrigues you?

NB: Families inform all of us.

JJL: It makes us who we are.

NB: I came off "The Squid and the Whale" writing about a time when children are most influenced by their parents.

Q: What kind of audience response have you received from this movie?

NB: For me, it's important for people to engage with the movie. The movie is designed to be an experience for the audience.

JJL: It's not a passive movie.

NB: It is a movie that I feel that if you go to it openly, it can

be cathartic, funny, painful — if you go with it, it's rewarding. But it requires the audience to actually go with it. Not all audiences want that all the time. When people go to an action film, people throw themselves into the movie like it's a fun ride.

JJL: This is a ride, too (laughs).

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