

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH NOAH BAUMBACH AND JENNIFER JASON LEIGH

Writer-director Noah Baumbach and actress Jennifer Jason Leigh collaborated on *Margot at the Wedding*. The film, which has the intimate feel of a home movie yet is razor-sharp in its portrayal of family pathology, stars Leigh and Nicole Kidman as estranged sisters who try to patch up their relationship during a family celebration. In this discussion, following a preview screening, Baumbach and Leigh—who are married—talked about their working relationship and about the relationship between art and life. They also discussed how the production process and style of Eric Rohmer’s films served as inspiration for *Margot at the Wedding*.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a preview screening of *Margot at the Wedding*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (November 8, 2007):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome an amazing team, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Noah Baumbach. (Applause) Congratulations to both of you. One thing I want to ask you is how this film, for you, is different from previous films? In some ways it covers some similar territory, but it felt to me like a sort of freer and more intimate, more emotional film than anything you’ve done. You’ve been moving towards it, but it seems different. So how would you answer that?

BAUMBACH: Well, I can’t really tell from the outside just how different or similar my movies are, but it was a more intuitive process in the early going. I think I sort of let the script or the characters tell me what the story was more than I had up until this point in writing. I did that with [*The*] *Squid* [*and the Whale* (2005)], too, but I think I knew more of what I wanted to get into *Squid*. In this one, there were very few things that I had to start this. It was really the beginning of the movie: it was Margot and Claude on the train. And so I think [there] was, in some ways, more discovery in the process than previously.

SCHWARTZ: I heard that you started with this image of mother and son on a train. So could you talk about that; how that sort of sparked the idea?

BAUMBACH: Well, at the time, it just felt interesting to me. Looking back at it, I think the idea of taking

two people—two family members—out of the family unit and casting them out into the world. Starting a movie in motion, where things are changing—the landscape’s changing outside the train, and we’re moving. Also, having two people who have a very strong bond, who are at points in their lives—very different points in their lives—but where they’re starting to question the bond and look outward. To take them away from home, and put them out in the world, and see how they fared.

SCHWARTZ: There are two little details in this scene that jumped out at me this time: One, the lovely moment when he sits down next to the wrong person, and then finds his mother. It sort of gives you the sense of like, you belong with your family and you sort of run into strangers, and that’s kind of what life is about. And then the other thing is Margot’s reaction when she sort of jumps up and turns around, and she’s sort of acting like a child. So could you talk about those little details?

BAUMBACH: Well, I think at first I was thinking, just from that point of view of a kid when you’re—those times where you think somebody’s your parent and they’re not. You take their hand or you sit next to them—and how embarrassing that is. I thought it would be interesting to do it at the top of the movie, where you don’t know that the wrong person’s the wrong person in a way, you know. So in a way, you discover it after he knows, before you know. Because I think then he sits next to his mother, who—and I think who his mother is is changing for the rest of the movie. In a way, she’s becoming a stranger to him, too, I think, in

some ways. I'm analyzing it now more than I have before, but I guess in how people you know very well, who are supposed to be very close to you—your family—sometimes feel like strangers to you. I think that's the case of the sisters, too. They are very invested in this idea that they're best friends and they have this closeness, but they are strangers in a lot of ways to each other, too.

SCHWARTZ: Jennifer, could you tell us how you saw this project evolve? From the very beginning, you weren't involved. I mean, it grew to involve you. So could you talk about that?

JASON LEIGH: Yes, I was reading drafts as Noah was writing them. But I don't quite remember when... When he first started writing, I didn't know if I was going to be in it or not. I knew what it was about because we would talk about it. I was hoping I'd be in it, but I didn't know. And then at a certain point, he said, "I thought you would play Pauline." And I was really happy about that. But I don't remember where—it wasn't that far in, but...

BAUMBACH: Yes, you'd think we would have pinned it down at this point, just for the clarity of the Q and A's, but we're still honest about it.

JASON LEIGH: Or just make something up. (Laughter) It was after the second draft. It was February eighth. It was very romantic and... (Laughter)

BAUMBACH: I know. I wrapped it in a bow and handed it to her....

JASON LEIGH: A big heart painted in watercolor, so I could still read the script through it. (Laughter)

BAUMBACH: Rose petals leading up the stairs to it.... No. No memory of when it was.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) That was nice scene, though, that you just created.

JASON LEIGH: (Laughs) Yes, right?

SCHWARTZ: You had made the movie, *Georgia* (1995), which was very much about a sister relationship. Because your mother wrote that, we know that was inspired by your life. Could you talk

about sort of how you saw Pauline at the beginning, and then maybe how you developed this character?

JASON LEIGH: I'm fascinated by the sibling bond. I really am. I just think so much of our personalities are formed in spite of or in emulation of our siblings. So Pauline for me was very different than other things I've done, because I had lived with the script for so long, and I'd seen so many drafts and variations of the characters, and we'd talked about them so much, I almost felt like they were in my family by the time we started shooting. And Noah didn't really... I'm very, very different from Pauline. But Noah wanted really, basically, my personality in Pauline, in a way. So it's kind of the least acting I've ever done—or the closest to me, even though she's nothing like me. And because Noah knows me so well, he could tell if I was lying or faking it. So it was really challenging and exciting for me, and completely different than anything I've ever done, I think.

SCHWARTZ: One thing that struck me on this viewing of the film was that Pauline—you know, you watch the film and you wonder, "What is Pauline doing with this guy, with Malcolm?" And it felt this time that it was largely a reaction. She had a strong relationship with her sister, and she finds somebody so opposite, who's not judgmental at all because all of his judgment is heaped on himself.

JASON LEIGH: Yes. Also his anger isn't scary. You know, I think they grew up in a really terrifying household, where anger and rage is a really threatening thing. And when Malcolm gets angry, it's funny. I mean, she laughs, you know? So she feels safe, and adored, and loved. And he's still enthusiastic about all this stuff, which makes her feel a live in a certain way, you know. I think it's a nice relationship—I root for them. I like them together.

SCHWARTZ: I gather that you spent all this time out at this house, in a peaceful, natural setting, which must be relaxing in some ways. But the film has such a palpable sense of tension in every scene. And I'm sure that was different—I would hope it's different than the atmosphere of making the film.

(Laughs) But how did you maintain that level of tension and family ?

BAUMBACH: I think when you're working, it's more about being concentrated and efficient, and giving the actors the room to work. I like to run scenes long if I can. To really run them through. Our filming style allows for that a lot of the time because it's handheld, so we can—even if it's a scene where the character's moving, if we want to block it that way, we can actually just follow them and let them play it out. I think it's nice for the actors to be able to have the whole experience. I mean, they're professionals, they're film actors, they can do it. If you say, "Let's just get this moment in a close-up," they can do it. But I don't really generally shoot that way. I don't shoot traditional coverage. I mean, it's a low key, light set, but that means we're working hard. The hope is, you can spend the most time on what's important, which is getting the performances and getting the scenes right.

SCHWARTZ: I know you make several homages to Eric Rohmer in the name of the character and the film seems to be shot in a similar style. He shot a number of his films in 16mm, with a small, tiny crew.

BAUMBACH: Yes; I'd like to get it even smaller if I could, and do what he did. I mean, those New Wave films seem to be shot with six or seven people. It'd be great to shoot a movie that way. I find that with filmmaker friends of mine, we're always talking about how to cut the crew down, if we can. Just because it's great to get as few barriers as possible, I think, between—you know, just shooting the actors doing the scenes.

SCHWARTZ: And Jennifer, it seems in your acting work on film you've done a few experiments recently that are moving in this direction. *The Anniversary Party* (2001), which you co-directed, was done in a kind of similar style: digital, and has a very intimate, spontaneous feeling. Then you did *The King is Alive* (2000), which was a real Dogme film. So could you talk about this; is this a direction you're really trying to move in?

JASON LEIGH: Well, I mean, the Dogme experience happened pre-*Anniversary Party*, which made me

realize you can actually shoot a movie very cheaply (Laughs) and in a way that makes it feel very spontaneous for the actors, because you can do these really long takes. So Alan [Cummings] and I came up with—you know, at first, we were going to have that movie be completely improvised, with just sort of an outline of each scene. But then we wrote it and kind of fell in love with what we wrote, so we wouldn't let anybody improvise anything. (Laughs) Except for the toasts (but not Winnie's toast!) But yes, so I really liked long takes. I liked it not everything being so precious, because tape doesn't cost anything, really. It's a very cheap medium. This film is very different than that, though, because this is—you know, it's on film and... But the long takes are really helpful. Also, it being handheld is really helpful because you have a kind of freedom as an actor that—you know, they're sort of following you, you're not hitting [marks]—I mean, there were marks we would hit sometimes, but a lot of times we didn't have to be aware of what to hit, which was really nice.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk about the working process with Nicole Kidman? We have heard about your preparation and the process; in the past you have done intense research for your roles. Here, so much of what's in the film has to do with the way you interact with her, so I assume you're kind of building the characters together.

JASON LEIGH: Yes. Noah had two weeks rehearsal, which really helped, and it was kind of a slow thing. I mean, it got to the point where I really did feel like we were sisters, and we had this unspoken history and all this past between us. I think our approach as actresses is very similar. I felt a real similarity. When we were working together, it felt very easy. We're both kind of shy people and slightly reticent. But for both of us, it's all about the work and believing in the moment. And she's so damn good when you act with her that it's so easy—because everything is so alive. You can never leave the moment because you don't know what she's going to do. It really is like that, like quicksilver and electric. It's great.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk about creating this character? I mean, obviously the fact that she's a writer and you kind of set up the scene in the

bookshop, at the reading... Inevitably, the audience is going to think about you as the writer when they're watching that scene. So could you talk about what you were thinking in creating this Margot, who's so cruel, yet sympathetic at the same time? It's such an interesting character.

BAUMBACH: Well, in terms of the bookstore, I was working on the script and I had had one *Squid and the Whale* interview too many. I came home and wrote the scene about dealing with autobiography and what a pain in the ass it was to be asked that question all the time. In terms of Margot, it's funny. I mean, people have strong reactions to her, which I understand. But I never thought of—I guess I never thought about it in terms of how people are going to react to her. I just wanted to create this character who I understood, and who is in crisis and not her best self for a good chunk of the movie. And so it was no different than writing any other character, except that—you know in all the characters, I try to come at them from the inside out. So I don't have anything specific, I guess, really, to say about it, in terms of creating Margot as opposed to creating anyone else.

SCHWARTZ: And it seems so true to me that celebrations are what bring family together; and then you have the family together and they just can't help pushing buttons. They just can't help themselves. It's just part of being a family, pushing these painful buttons.

BAUMBACH: Right; yes.

SCHWARTZ: Well, you put it on the screen, so you don't even have to elaborate on that. Let's take some questions, and I can see hands, so if anybody wants to jump in. There's one right here.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) He felt desperation in your character. Did you think that Pauline ever felt suicidal or felt desperate?

JASON LEIGH: No. I mean, I think Pauline's actually—when we first meet her—in a really good place. She's about to get married, she's pregnant, she thinks she's a lot more grounded than she is, you know, (Laughs) she has idealized the fact that her sister's coming; it's all hope and

good things. And then her sister comes and everything gets—the rug gets pulled out from under her. Then things become very unstable and frightening for her. But I don't think she's ever—you know, she's got a daughter that she's very attached to, and I think she's—that would never cross her mind, I don't think.

SCHWARTZ: I have to just ask about the costumes in relation to character, because they're so specific and perfect. You've worked with one of the great costumes designers, Ann Roth. I just love this kind of flower child sort of hippie clothing that you wear, like Pauline is trying to be...

JASON LEIGH: Right. Yes, yes. Ann is great because she creates, like, a whole character history. And sometimes it really meshes with what's in your head, and sometimes it doesn't mesh with what's in your head. (Laughs) And sometimes you have to, like, meet in the middle. But she's such an icon that you really—you know, it's hard to ever say, "Oh, but I thought she'd wear more, you know..."

BAUMBACH: Jennifer was clearly afraid of Ann.

JASON LEIGH: I was very afraid of Ann. (Laughter) But I love Ann, too. But I got—like, some of that stuff, I brought in, like, some of the hippie-dippy stuff, and she brought in some of the hippie-dippy stuff. And we fell in love with each other after a while.

BAUMBACH: Ann does a thing where she'll talk about the character. She'll say something like, "She's the type to kick off her shoes and throw herself across the hood of the car and stretch out." She'll give these, like, weird descriptions of the people, and then produce the clothing. And I'll think, "That's it, that's what they would wear." But I never recognize—She'll often talk about backstory in the characters, things that I would have no idea what she's getting at, but it gets her exactly to the right place.

JASON LEIGH: Yes, she approaches it like an actor would approach it.

SCHWARTZ: Or a writer or something...

BAUMBACH: Yes, she's brilliant. I mean, I love Ann. It was really kind of fascinating and great to work with her.

SCHWARTZ: How much backstory do you have in mind? Like, you know, I was kind of inventing this whole, "What's the relationship between the mother and Becky?" Like, how much do you have that worked out in your mind, all these different relationships? What the parents are like...?

BAUMBACH: It's hard to say. A lot of it I know, but a lot of it I don't know, too. So, it really just depends. I think the movie in a lot of ways is also—it's so much about the present, but in how the past haunts the present. And so people have asked me, "Oh, did you think about bringing in the mother or Becky...?" And I understand, I suppose, why you might expect that. But no, it never even occurred to me, because they're there, even though they're not there. And it's about, in a lot of cases, what these people carry with them, which is residue of all these other family members that we kind of hear about peripherally.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Carol Littleton also edited *The Anniversary Party*. Can you talk about what that process was like, the editing process?

BAUMBACH: Yes; I mean, Carol's another person that was just really great to work with. Someone I'd really admired. I tried to get her to cut *Squid and the Whale* because Jennifer spoke so highly of her too, and she wasn't available.

SCHWARTZ: She edited *E.T.* (1982) and *The Big Chill* (1983)... She's pretty good. (Laughs)

BAUMBACH: The movie has a fractured feel to it in the way it's cut. Scenes are, in some cases, cut off in the middle and... I always wanted the movie to sort of approximate actual experience, or our memory or interpretation of experience, so that the scenes... Not to think of the scenes as sort of comfortable places that have endings where you're, "Okay, this person knows this about that person." The scenes crash into one another; this is an accumulation of experience, and something that adds up to something else when it's all over. I think for that reason, in some ways, it's funny and

hard to have Q and A's after this movie, because I don't think it's a movie that you can know exactly what you think or feel once it's finished. But Carol—most of it was written that way. I mean, the script—I had done some of this with *Squid*, and I pushed it with this: thinking of having no fat on the movie. Throwing you into every scene in action. Not starting scenes with people coming into rooms, not showing night falls on the house from outside or morning dew, sprinklers come on or whatever. Every moment, we're thrown in the middle. And just to have the meat. That was sort of our philosophy.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, the kids seem so emotionally strong in this tough situation. Can you talk about the difference between the kids and the parents in emotional strength?

BAUMBACH: Well, I feel in a lot of cases, Claude and Ingrid don't know what's happening. In some cases they know more than the parents might think they do; but in other cases they're intuiting things and they don't know everything. I think it's also a world where they don't know... A lot of stuff is presented to them fairly logical and straightforward, so I don't think they even know, in some cases, that things are strange that maybe the audience might find strange. I mean, Claude's relationship with his mother has been formed over many years now, and he's used to this bond. I think there's something very special about being included and being so close to an adult, and let in on these things, and being told these things that feel privileged. I think that can feel very—it can feel very good to a child. It comes with a price, though. But I don't know that Claude, at twelve, quite knows yet how tough all this stuff is. I think, you know, he's on his way to, though.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, so casting Jack Black. Did you consider other actors, and how did you cast him?

BAUMBACH: No, he was the first person I thought of. I wanted someone funny for that part. I mean, it wasn't just that—I mean, I understand that it's a role a lot of people haven't seen Jack do, but I wanted someone who was funny, who also could be funny within the realm of the film. I had met Jack. Jack had called me after he saw *Squid and*

the Whale, and we had lunch—this was before he knew about this movie—and he just had a real sweetness and just a very grounded, very connected guy. I just had a good feeling about him. And Jennifer knew him a little bit, too, and she corroborated that. So it felt like the right fit.

SCHWARTZ: Could you say anything about working with him or what it was like playing that...

JASON LEIGH: So easy to work with. I mean, he's just so available and warm and loving and funny. Yes. I mean, everything you'd want to believe about Jack Black is true. I mean, he's just—you know, he just makes it so easy, so sweet. I loved it.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Well, have you found it hard at all to get the film made, in terms of because of its sort of open-endedness, and things like that?

BAUMBACH: No. This was the easiest movie I've ever—the easiest time I've ever had getting a movie made. The studio was completely supportive and was completely onboard. We sent them—we ran tests in the movie; we talked about, you know, the way we were going to shoot the movie. They were great. They were real collaborators; completely supportive.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) In terms of the color, the very particular look the film has—is that done with the film stock?

BAUMBACH: Yes. We didn't do a digital intermediate on this movie, which most movies use now, where after you shoot, even if you shoot on film, they transfer it all to digital. They do a scan of it; that way, you have a lot of leeway, in terms of changing. It's why so many movies now—I feel, anyway—are starting to feel flatter and flatter, even though they're shot on film; even kind of some amazingly shot movies. But that's the way it's going, there's no getting around that. I mean, what we did is sort of going—no movies will be—I mean, I think everyone will have to do digital intermediates, and then everything will be digital. But what we did was really old-fashioned. We shot with these old lenses, these lenses from the seventies that had this—they were kind of

imperfect. It emphasized the grain of the film and just the photographic quality of it. Then we flashed the film, also. So everything would have this slightly diffuse, de-saturated look to it. It actually was very hard to color time, because we didn't have a lot of leeway. You try and change one color, and it would go too far the other way. So it took a long time in post-production just to get the color right. But that was really just balancing what we had already done.

SCHWARTZ: Since you kind of raised this, the question of spontaneity and improvisation: the writing, as always in your films, is so precise, the exact choice of words. Was there freedom? Were there cases where you would suggest a different emotional arc or response?

JASON LEIGH: No. (Laughs) No, there was no improvising on the movie. No.

BAUMBACH: It's all exactly as scripted. But they bring so much of themselves. For me, the ideal is for them to do the script exactly as written, but to bring everything that they can bring, all of what's unique about these people. And I feel like somewhere in that space between is where you get these kind of amazing moments.

SCHWARTZ: Where did the idea of the family next door comes from? It's just such a great contrast. It's like a different form of cruelty. You know, it's a great contrast to what's going on in...

BAUMBACH: Well, I mean, the family initially came—I was thinking about the sort of anthropology of some of these houses and these areas where you have people of very different economic backgrounds living in close proximity. We only see them, really, through the eyes of our family, our main family. So the neighbors are different things, in some ways, at different times. They're almost like projections of our characters. I mean, when Claude looks through the slats of the fence in the croquet match, he sees these naked images. And I figured in a way—I mean, Claude is hitting puberty; these things are becoming—things are sexier, maybe, than usual, than they've been in the past. Margot looks in the window and there's this seeming brutality. But then the kids look later and they're eating a pig. And so that I

always wanted it to remain, in some ways, up for grabs, who this family was. Because I think they're only interpreted through Margot and Pauline and everyone.

SCHWARTZ: I think it was Jack Black who said watching this film is like watching twenty-eight therapy sessions, or some line like that. But could you say anything more about Margot...

BAUMBACH: I really can't, no. It wouldn't be fair to all the other people who see this movie and don't get the Q and A. I mean, I appreciate you wanting to know more and all that, but it's kind of—what I know is up there.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, I'll just ask—this is maybe just a question for both of you, to end with, because I'm so interested with both of your work, I know you're both very analytical. Yet what's great about your work is how intuitive it is. Could you say anything about how you sort of keep that?

BAUMBACH: Well, I think that's true, and I'll be curious about how Jennifer answers this. But there's something freeing about work where you don't have to be that way. Or at least I feel like I don't have to be that way. I mean, I am naturally analytical in my life, for myself; and I can be sometimes like Margot, overly critical of other people. (Laughs) But with the work, that's a kind of pleasure: not to analyze it. I mean, people ask me some of these questions, I'm not being cheeky; I just don't have the answer. I mean, it's really—it's there to be interpreted. I'm happy to hear interpretations. It's interesting to me. But I don't have the symbolism in my pocket.

JASON LEIGH: I have it in *my* pocket. (Laughter) Seriously, like for me, I could go on for an hour about Margot and why she's, you know...

BAUMBACH: You asked the wrong person.

JASON LEIGH: Yes, clearly. (Laughter) But it's easier for me to analyze. I know Noah very well, and I am very analytical also. So I can—and for me, work is also like a freedom. But I can look at his scripts and I can tell you what the tree means; I can tell you that Margot's going through a crisis and that, you know, she's contemplating leaving her husband and her children over this period, which happens to coincide with her sister's wedding—which is lucky for her. But she's really in a meltdown. She's trying to make herself as detestable as possible—so that when she leaves it won't be as hard on other people. But it's all self-inflicted, really. But that's me being able to analyze it because I've read it so many, many, many, many times. I see what Noah did, and I see Nicole's performance, and it's very clear to me. But I also understand why for Noah, it's a much more intuitive thing. But anything that you want to know about his writing and symbolism, I'll tell you. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: Well, as the analyst says, I'm afraid our time is up. So thank you, and good luck with the film.

BAUMBACH: Thanks.

JASON LEIGH: Thanks. (Applause)

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