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Film Discussion Group
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The Wife (dir. Björn Runge, 2017)

Cast

Joan Castleman: Glenn Close: legendary for *Fatal Attraction* (87), *Dangerous Liaisons* (88)
Joe (her husband): Jonathan Pryce: played a somewhat similar figure in *Listen Up Philip* (14)
David (their son): Max Irons: *Woman in Gold* (15); also with Close in *Crooked House* (17)
Nathaniel (biogr.): Christian Slater: young star of *Heathers* (89); resurgent in recent years
Young Joan: Annie Starke: Close's real-life daughter, who cameo'd in *Albert Nobbs* (11)
Elaine (novelist): Elizabeth McGovern: *Ordinary People* (80), TV's *Downton Abbey* (10-15)

Off Camera

Director: Björn Runge: five previous film credits, but none were ever released in U.S.
Screenwriter: Jane Anderson: Emmy-winning playwright, screenwriter, producer, director
Author of Novel: Meg Wolitzer: published *The Wife* in 2003; new: *The Female Persuasion* (18)
Cinematography: Ulf Brantås: two lovely Swedish movies, *Together* (00), *We Are the Best!* (13)
Original Score: Jocelyn Pook: made a memorable debut on Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (99)
Film Editing: Lena Runge: edited five of the six movies her husband has directed (*ahem!!!*)

Other works by screenwriter Jane Anderson...

The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom (1993) – One of my all-time favorite media satires; Holly Hunter is brilliant as the early-90s tabloid villain

The Baby Dance (1998) – Stockard Channing plays a wealthy woman trying to adopt the unwanted fifth child of a poor Louisiana woman (Laura Dern), who starts having second thoughts

If These Walls Could Talk 2 (2000) – Vanessa Redgrave won every award for the opening chapter of this women-driven anthology film, about an old lesbian ignored by her dead lover's family

When Billie Beat Bobby (2001) – Anderson reteamed with Hunter for this ABC movie about the same Billie Jean King/Bobby Riggs "Battle of the Sexes" that inspired a feature film last year

Normal (2003) – Jessica Lange and Tom Wilkinson give moving, funny performances as a couple sticking it out through the husband's gender transition; directed by Anderson from her play

The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio (2005) – In the only Anderson-directed movie to hit cinemas, Julianne Moore stars as a harried 50s homemaker with a genius for writing commercial jingles

Olive Kitteridge (2014) – Anderson won two more Emmys for writing and co-producing this HBO take on Elizabeth Strout's novel about a strong-minded schoolteacher (Frances McDormand)

If you enjoyed *The Wife*...

Six Degrees of Separation (1993) – Another drama about marital tensions and convenient fictions in U.S. high society, with terrific performances by Stockard Channing and Donald Sutherland

One True Thing (1998) – Renée Zellweger is strong as an aspiring writer in her father's shadow, who learns too much about her parents (William Hurt and Meryl Streep) when her mom gets ill

Away from Her (2006) – Julie Christie and writer-director Sarah Polley earned Oscar nominations for this story about a woman with Alzheimer's who has not forgotten her husband's infidelities

The Ghost Writer (2010) – Imagine a more political version of *The Wife*, told through Slater's character, as Ewan McGregor is hired to write the memoirs of a shady British Prime Minister

Still Alice (2014) – Another adaptation of a popular novel, written by a woman and centering a woman's experience, that connected with audiences and secured Julianne Moore her Oscar

Phantom Thread (2017) – Albeit expressed in a much more grandiose cinematic style, this odd marital drama from last year also concerned a competition for power, dependency, and creative authority between an artist renowned for his genius and his wife, who is no mere "muse"

Facts about *The Wife* you may appreciate...

When *The Wife* first started coming together, Frances McDormand was slated to star, and most of the other roles were assigned to different actors. Even after Close (who tried to recruit Gary Oldman as her husband) and director Bjorn Runge signed on, the project took years to amass financing—so long that screenwriter Jane Anderson eventually wrote a letter to Runge apologizing for all the time he had spent developing a script that was never going to get made.

Glenn Close and Jonathan Pryce, Tony winners both, share with their director a decades-long devotion to theater, which significantly influenced filming of *The Wife*. Runge had the actors rehearse entire scenes over and over, changing subtle and sometimes major aspects as improv revealed new possibilities. He filmed with two cameras rather than one, so that every nuance of each actor's face and body was recorded, and they could give full-bodied, stage-style performances, instead of playing to a single camera in one fixed spot. Close and Pryce have been very vocal in promoting the movie that they loved this rare style of working.

Max Irons, cast as Close's troubled son, is the child of actors Jeremy Irons and Sinéad Cusack. Close and the elder Irons both won Tonys as co-stars of Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* on Broadway in 1984, and he won an Oscar as Claus von Bulow in *Reversal of Fortune*, their first collaboration on screen. While Close has a more obvious connection to Annie Starke, her real-life daughter, who plays her character's younger self, other relations in the film have history.

The crew had one or two days to shoot in Stockholm, with the extensive cooperation of the Nobel society, but the interior scenes that constitute 95% of the film were shot in Glasgow.

The Wife debuted at Toronto last year, preceded by almost zero buzz; no distributor had purchased the movie. Raves for Close's work attracted Sony Pictures Classics, which had followed the same path into acquiring *Still Alice* in 2014, another under-heralded, woman-centered film that won Julianne Moore her Oscar. They're hoping that lightning will strike twice!

Broad conversation topics...

Suspicion: When did you first guess the secret that Joan and Joe have been harboring throughout their marriage? Was your impression that the movie was working hard to conceal this fact, or did you think it was signaling the hidden truth earlier, so that we had the right suspicions in mind as we observed the characters' behavior throughout these scenes? And how about the characters in the movie, especially the son played by Max Irons and the journalist played by Christian Slater—do you think they have known or guessed for quite a while but tried to deny the evidence, or do you suspect they are blind-sided by what gets revealed in Sweden?

Acting: One welcome feature of Close's performance is that she does not play the character as self-consciously "mysterious," or as if she has a secret. This probably keeps the audience from sussing out the truth faster but is also the sign of a woman who's been telling the same lie for so long that it's become second-nature. When did you see cracks in Joan's façade?

Motivation: Close has admitted that the toughest question for her was, "Why doesn't she just leave him?" I'm curious how many of you wondered that, and whether the movie persuaded you why Joan remains complicit in the arrangement that she and Joe have shared for all these years. Incidentally, Joan narrates the novel, which begins during the flight to the ceremony, and starts this way: "The moment I decided to leave him, the moment I thought, *enough*, we were thirty-five thousand feet above the ocean, hurtling forward but giving the illusion of stillness and tranquility. *Just like our marriage*, I could have said, but why ruin everything right now?" The movie signals Joan's decision to separate much later, but I wonder if you saw that coming, and if it made sense why she would make the break when she does.

Location, Location: The story differs from the novel's in copious ways, some of them inevitable for the two-hour compression of a feature, some imposed by Anderson, and some introduced when Runge and his actors made their own alterations. One huge change is that the award Joe wins in Wolitzer's book is the (fictional) Helsinki Prize, a prestigious but nonetheless second-tier award that is regarded as consolation for distinguished writers who will never be Nobel candidates. Joan also deduces quickly that Finland itself, feeling culturally outclassed by Oslo and Stockholm and by the annual fanfare around the Nobel, is trying very hard via the Helsinki Prize to raise its own reputation. Why might this story resonate differently in that context than it does in the movie's Nobel environment, where the entire world will be watching the events?

Other Changes: In the novel, Joe has a friend and rival named Lev Bresner, a previous recipient of the same prize, whose career has encompassed a series of memoirs and reflections on his childhood experience in the Nazi death camps. Joe, also Jewish, feels that Lev earns more literary and cultural credit than he does because readers and peers are more impressed by that kind of traumatic autobiography than by the quieter, domestic fictions in which Joe specializes. Through this relationship, Joe's Jewish identity, which Joan does not share, receives more sustained attention than in the movie (which at least does not erase it entirely, as many scripts still do). David remains a tragic figure in Joan and Joe's lives and a disappointment to his father and is not invited to the prize ceremony. Also, on the climactic night in the hotel room, Joan physically aggresses him as their argument escalates, she pushes Joe against the furniture, which precipitates his heart attack. How do you respond to these alterations on the film's part?

Some specific touches worth contemplating...

Editing and Art Direction: The movie is called *The Wife*, but the first shot is of Joe, not of Joan.

That said, Joe, dressed all in black, is a graphic anomaly in a room where the textile headboard, the pillow, and the walls are all a similar ice-blue color to the clothes Joan wears to bed. We may meet him first, and it's his big day, but the world he inhabits is really Joan's world. (Later, we see the younger Joan sporting this ice-blue color in college, where her all-female classmates are mostly dressed in brick red: a visual way of helping Joan stand out from the crowd, but also a signal that she has deviated little, for better and worse, from the person she was back then.)

Dialogue: "You don't have to do anything, just lie there," is what nobody dreams of their partner saying while pleading for sexual intimacy, and it's a quick way to put us on guard against Joe, although Joan somewhat surprisingly relents. The whole movie is, in some ways, about what Joan surprisingly consents to as terms of their marriage, and it's interesting that neither Close nor the direction portray Joan as unhappy or unsatisfied during the sex that ensues. Meanwhile, "just lying (there)" is something Joan Castleman does a lot, presaging later lines of dialogue that reveal themselves as double-entendres, as when she assures her joyously award-winning husband "It's all real, darling," or when he insists, "Without his woman I am nothing."

Editing: The center-framed close-up on Joe as he receives the telephone call about his prize cuts to a close-up of Joan, listening in the other room, that is framed so identically that it's almost disconcerting, as if one character's face has abruptly turned into another's. Filmmakers often use this kind of "match cut" to suggest a close relationship between similar-looking and or identically-positioned faces or objects. Think of how the relentless back-and-forth cuts between Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs*' interview scenes were a shrewd way to suggest she was getting inside his mind and he inside hers. I responded to this early cut in *The Wife* similarly: suggesting that Joe and Joan (such similar names!) almost share a headspace, and may be more closely related or interdependent than they appear.

Costumes: Joan often favors chunky, conspicuous necklaces and brooches on relatively subdued garments, the kind of flashy accessorizing that commands attention away from the rest of an outfit, or even from the face of the person wearing them. Besides the more obvious maneuvers of self-effacement, this seems like one of the ways she manages to recede into the background.

Framing: When the journalist Nathaniel first approaches the Castlemans on the plane, Joan sits between them and the shot continues to frame all three, even though she has very few lines. Why is it important to present her body as something Nathaniel and Joe talk across?

Art Direction: Just as different floors and rooms in the Castleman's home had bold but disparate color palettes (an earth-and-mauve first floor that totally contrasts with the Joan-specific hues of the bedroom), the colors of the suite in Stockholm change dramatically each time they enter a new room: mint green, crimson, blue, gray. To me, this accentuated the way in which the tone of Joan and Joe's relationship or the subjects of their conversation often changed abruptly as they moved around the space. It suggests that the present itself is kind of broken up, erratic, and full of separate "compartments," even as all the cross-cutting back and forth between the young Joan and Joe and their older selves suggests that the past and present smoothly co-exist

Sound: Many scenes have the kind of empty sound design you expect from movies set in space: it's almost *too* quiet, which amplified my sense of tension during family conversations. One exception was the stiff, creaky sound of the pages when young Joan opens the pages of the novel by Elaine Mozell, the novelist who discourages her from writing and warns her that her books would languish forever...and indeed, this one sounds like it's barely every been opened.

Casting: I doubt this was much on anyone's mind, but Christian Slater last played a journalist in *Interview with the Vampire*, where he extracts an extended testimony from Brad Pitt's morose character that eventually reveals him as a vampire, and which gradually reveals how long he and the other members of his household have been playing intramural power games and literally feeding on each other to stay alive. This is not entirely off as an account of *The Wife*.

Dialogue: One thing that is striking about Joe's acceptance speech is that he may actually be telling the honest truth, insisting that "this honor should go to someone else" and calling Joan the "muse and inspiration for every decent impulse I have ever had," but these sentiments have become so clichéd that everyone hears them as pat sentiment rather than frank admission (as Joe surely knows that they will). In an interesting shift from the novel, Joe's speech is almost *entirely* about Joan, directly contrary to her wishes; in the book, which is set a decade later than the movie is, Joe talks for the bulk of his speech about art and life in the era of post-9/11 terror. He eventually commits the same infraction of thanking Joan, as she directly asked him not to, but by that point in the speech she is already disgusted with him, because she considers the emphasis on terror an obvious and hackneyed subject, unworthy of a Helsinki Prize recipient.

Camera: In visual terms, this has been a relatively placid film, so it stands out when the camera itself is as agitated as Joan is after Joe's speech, bobbing and weaving with a handheld lack of control as she violently storms out of the banquet hall, even bumping into a waiter in her path.

Editing: I love moments in the film that disrupt predictable tones for an unexpected joke, like the comic cut to the limousine parked on the side of the street where Joe is retrieving his Nobel medal, after so histrionically discarding it through the limousine window. By this point, you're expecting the movie to double down on rage and catharsis. The humor is welcome.

Lighting: The harsh, bright light over Joe's bed as he dies, surrounded by quite a number of people (as opposed to the book, where Joe and Joan are alone), makes this scene a visual double for the Nobel ceremony itself, where the overhead lights were comparably bright and unforgiving. Once again, there is a sense that Joe is inhabiting the most earnest possible moment while also performing before a crowd—further proof that boundaries between art and life or between truth and deception have totally collapsed. The movie even concludes amid a light snowfall, just like the one that finishes James Joyce's "The Dead," the very story Joe used to recite to his worshipful co-ed students, and always wished he could have written.