

The squid versus the whale



Often, various reviewers have quite differing opinions about the same film, television show or album. Here at Cadenza, we have decided to print two such reviews, one by our Editor in Chief Margaret Bauer; the other written by our own lowly Music Editor, Jordan Deam. Their contrasting takes are below for you to decide. Who's right—the squid or the whale?

'The Squid and the Whale' aims for comedy and tragedy, and succeeds at both

By **Jordan Deam**
Cadenza Music Editor

★★★★★

Anyone going into "The Squid and the Whale" expecting the next "Elizabethtown," brimming with "heartwarming" sentimentality but lacking any genuine emotional content, may wonder if they're in the right theater. Despite the autobiographical elements of the script—which, due to director Noah Baumbach's insistent silence on the matter, will largely remain a matter of speculation—the characters in his film are not mere surrogates for himself, existing only to parrot grandiose statements about Love and Life that are destined for the "inspiring quotes" section of a 16-year-old girl's diary. They are deeply flawed individuals who manage to rouse in the viewer a mixture of sympathy, disdain and intense interest.

The more we learn about the lives of the Berkman family, the film's four protagonists, the more they seem to unravel. Thankfully, Baumbach's subtlety as a writer prevents him from tying up the frayed ends in an attempt to make the story more digestible. Instead, he crafts a film that eschews the idealized Hollywood view that divorce, like any personal tragedy, can teach valuable "life lessons," opting for an ambiguous approach that is more immediate in both its humor and its pathos.

In a film without a traditional narrative arc to provide momentum, only Baumbach's characterizations can sustain our interest. Thankfully, they are incisive enough

to make the viewer feel the agony of living in their broken home within a single snippet of acerbic dialogue, yet nuanced enough to induce an occasional pang of regret at having judged even the most despicable characters so harshly. Baumbach is most damning in his portrayal of Bernard (Jeff Daniels), the patriarch of the household. A university professor and floundering author, Bernard has an aggressive tendency to constantly appraise the people around him in the same manner that he does literature and film: if a person isn't sufficiently "intellectual" for his tastes, he labels him a "Phillystine" and doggedly disparages him in front of his two sons, who are among the few people with whom he still holds any influence.

This strategy proves successful in Bernard's oldest son, Walt (Jesse Eisenberg), a budding pseudo-intellectual who's managed to inherit his father's prejudices without any knowledge of how they are derived. Walt is soft-spoken and articulate, but almost pathologically self-important: after being confronted by a school official after his talent show performance is revealed to be a fraud, Walt confesses to a therapist that the reason he passed off the work as his own was because he felt he could have written the song—the fact that Pink Floyd already had was inconsequential.

Walt's younger brother, Frank (Owen Kline), on the other hand, doesn't seem to share his family's ambition for intellectual pursuits, to his father's disappointment. His closest role model is Ivan (William Baldwin), the unsophisticated but

congenial local tennis pro who is seeing his mother Joan (Laura Linney) by the end of the film. The young Frank is perhaps the easiest character to empathize with, since he is the least equipped emotionally to handle his family's disintegration. No doubt partly due to a lack of parental attention, he acts out by drinking and compulsively masturbating in public. This brusque depiction of child sexuality may make some viewers squeamish, but it does little to discredit the spontaneous, unmediated feel of the film.

While each of the actors involved delivers a wonderfully understated, unstudied performance, Baumbach deserves most of the credit for the film's success. His writing is taut but expressive; the "retro" visual style serves to add authenticity to the characters rather than distract from them (as in Wes Anderson's later works). Even the soundtrack, which runs the gamut from Tangerine Dream's moody soundscapes to Loudon Wainwright's elegiac folk, is meticulously chosen and always serves to heighten the mood of the accompanying scene rather than overwhelm it.

"The Squid and the Whale" is a film rife with confrontation: the title derives from a diorama at the Museum of Natural History in New York—appropriately named "The Clash of the Titans." It's an image, we learn, that once frightened Walt when he visited the museum with his mother in his youth. Yet it's clear that this kind of mythical conflict—not between giant plaster sea creatures but individuals magnified by years of memory and experience—is something that Walt must face alone and with a clear eye if he is to adapt.

'The Squid and the Whale' a masturbatory tale of family drama

By **Margaret Bauer**
Editor in Chief

★★☆☆☆

The trailer for director Noah Baumbach's semi-autobiographical "The Squid and the Whale" portrays a heartwarming tale of a Brooklyn family going through divorce in the slightly washed out colors of 1986. The film appears to be funny and charming—a cute tale about a couple who just can't get things right. Unfortunately, it turns out to be one of those films where the trailer contains every heartwarming moment in the movie—as we later learn, the rest of the film consists of awkward, jarring moments (and camera angles) in a mélange of overdone and unrealistic character sketches.

The "shaky-cam" scenes at the beginning of the film, presumably meant to lend immediacy to the opening scene of a tennis match between family members, showcase some of the problems with this film. This is a drama that desperately wants to be "painfully funny," but can't quite make it. It's a big-studio "indie" that's made to fulfill our quota of quirky yet delightful characters going through the trauma of growing up together. We're supposed to love them for their complexities and their low-budget '80s aura.

But the only sympathetic characters in this film are the beautiful mother Joan (Laura Linney) and tennis pro Ivan (William Baldwin)—the others are overwrought and scripted to the point where their actions are not only disgusting and distorted, but also don't quite ring true. Just as the family's 16-year-old son Walt (Jesse Eisenberg) simply wants to run away when faced with his blowhard, demanding father in a hospital bed, so I

wished I could run away from most of these characters.

So here's the setup: Walt and his 12-year-old brother Frank (Owen Kline) aren't dealing particularly well with being children of divorce. Walt "acts out" by appropriating a Pink Floyd song and performs it as his own at the high school talent show, then berates his mother with a litany of supposed wrongs she committed, all drawn straight from the lips of gone-to-seed father Bernard (Jeff Daniels). Frank, on the other hand, while barely 12 years old, is frequently forgotten and left behind by his preoccupied, self-centered parents, and proceeds to take up a drinking and masturbation habit more true to the character of an 18-year-old college student. He is subsequently caught wiping semen on a school locker and on books in the school library.

Now, the children of divorce are often marginalized and deal poorly with their ever-changing home situation. That's become a truism in this time of 40 percent divorce rates and drawn-out custody battles. But Frank's actions don't seem realistic—they seem more fitting for a mentally disturbed child who never absorbed proper social norms than a well-educated middle-class son of brilliant writers. It's edgy, to be sure, but shock value seems like the only point of including these masturbation vignettes. Oo, how shocking and daring, they put masturbation on film. Oo, how shocking, a 12-year-old is left alone to drink beer. Score two for the writers. This is one of those films where you don't know whether you should groan or laugh at the jokes.

Each character in "The Squid and the Whale" is overdone to the point of caricature, such that it plays out like a bad informational film about the potential consequences of divorce,

complete with all the standard clichés of divorced life. An angsty, barely self-aware Walt can't bring himself to do anything his father wouldn't do, until he has a stunning realization—he used to like his mother! Instead of taking this revelation as a jumping-off point for reconciliation with his mother, he does the angsty movie thing—he runs across town to see the squid and the whale exhibit his mother took him to when he was younger. His entrance into the hall containing this exhibit is meant to be nothing short of revelatory, as the music peaks, time slows, and lo and behold, there are the suspended squid and whale, the film's namesake. What a precious, overdone moment.

"The Squid and the Whale" is rife with sex. But unfortunately, these are the days where mere sex is no longer edgy or experimental enough for a film like this, so the screenwriter cranks it up a notch. As in the recent "Pretty Persuasion," we witness the awkward moments of mutual masturbation that high school couples endure. The emphasis on semen at points throughout the film almost makes the viewer wonder whether the screenwriter and director shared some behind-the-scenes joke relating squid and whales to semen.

All this tension caused by the film's sexuality and emotional angst culminates in a series of impossibly awkward scenes. When I say "overdone," this is what I'm talking about: vignettes about family troubles, sexuality and divorce are pushed to the tipping point of absurdity in this film, in the manner of a typical Wes Anderson film. (Perhaps not coincidentally, Anderson's name is given prime billing during the opening titles—and writer/director Baumbach was also a writer on Anderson's "The Life Aquatic.") Actors Eisenberg and

Klein appear to have been cast as much for their awkward looks as for their acting ability, and Daniels has certainly looked better. "The Squid and the Whale" provides an absurd, unsatisfying look at divorce through the currently popular lens of mid-'80s colors, styles and sensibilities.

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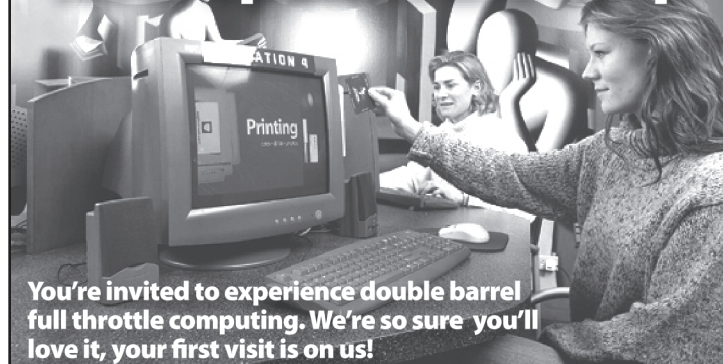
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