

The Wife

Glenn Close has had a kaleidoscopic career in motion pictures since her notable film debut in 1982 (“The World According to Garp”) and currently has the distinction of being the actor with the most Oscar nominations (6) who has never won the trophy. She’s probably OK with that, but it doesn’t mean that she, at 71, is through trying. In her latest film “The Wife,” Close brings a performance that could win her lauds in the next awards season.

Joan Castleman (Glenn Close) is the self-deprecating rock behind her novelist husband, the mercurial Joe Castleman (Jonathan Pryce). We meet them on the night when, in great anticipation, they receive a phone call informing Joe that he has won the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature. The scene shifts quickly to Stockholm, where the couple settles in—with their grown son David (Max Irons)—to prepare for the award ceremony. Their stay is a minefield of parties, event rehearsals, misunderstandings, mutual digs, and reprisals. Joe, bloated in his celebrity, has the gall to explain to one admirer that “my wife doesn’t write, thank God.”

Interspersed with the Stockholm scenes are flashbacks to the Castleman’s origin story, beginning in 1958 at Smith College, where the young lit professor Joe (Harry Lloyd) charms the prepossessed but admiring student Joan (Annie Starke). Later sequences show their backstory, first living together, then finding a home with kids, and, always, Joan aiding Joe with his writing, ready to refashion and polish his prose with crucial edits.

Back in Stockholm, when Joan sees Joe hitting on a young photographer, her umbrage sends her out to seek a stiff one. Thus begins a key sequence where Joan is joined in a bar by the nosy Nathaniel Bone (an unctuous Christian Slater), Castleman’s unauthorized biographer who, over drinks, tries to get Joan to drop her “supportive wife” façade and confess her real contribution to her husband’s work. The exchange develops slowly, with light fencing, but builds in tension as the sly, insinuating Bone schemes to arouse Joan to reveal her true literary bent. It is the core of the picture and a masterful two-shot episode.

The Nobel ceremony is a semi-climax, and the film ends in a finale which—though undoubtedly dramatic—feels contrived and extreme rather than subtle and affecting. It is a flaw in the plot, although the production is otherwise carefully crafted by Swedish director Bjorn Runge (working from a novel written by Meg Wolitzer).

Striking is the resemblance and demeanor of young Joan played by Annie Starke, no surprise because she is the real daughter of Close, now launched on her own acting career. She carries the same cool customer vibe that her mom personifies in the rest of the picture. Her coolness is nicely contrasted with the twitchy, randy figure of the young Joe, played by Lloyd Welshman Jonathan Pryce, playing an irresponsible and ebullient Brooklynite, is a wonderful contrast to Close’s tamped-down spouse. He clumsily loves Joan in his shambling way but cannot help himself by belittling her and consigning her to dutiful helpmate status.

Overall, “The Wife” is a showcase for Glenn Close, a role that tests her mettle for contained resentment and rage. She passes that test, elevating “bottling up” to an art form. Ever protective of her wayward hubby while stifling her contributions to his life and output, Joan is a caged animal in modest, wifely garb. A scene that projects her

inner tumult most resonantly is during a pre-awards dinner, when she has to listen to Joe damn her with overweening praise when she asked him not to; her stony posture, clenched mouth, and, especially, her scorching eyes reveal a soul ready to explode. Yet Close is able to still play a woman committed to her family of 30-plus years, able to thrill at being a grandmother and to rush to rescue a fallen husband. Her performance is peerless.

(The film runs 100 minutes and is rated "R.")

(August 2018)