

THE WIFE

USA (2017) 101 minutes

Director: Björn Runge

Cast: Glenn Close (Joan Castleman)
Jonathan Pryce (Joe Castleman)
Annie Starke (Young Joan)



Screening 1 April 2020 at Swindon Arts Centre

Synopsis

It's 1992 and after nearly forty years of marriage, Joe and Joan Castleman seem to complement each other. Joe is the Great American Novelist and Joan pours her considerable intellect, grace, charm, and diplomacy into the private role of Great Man's Wife. When Joe is about to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in Stockholm, Joan is to confront the biggest sacrifice of her life and the secret of his career.

Reviews



For Joan the award triumph sparks a crisis of identity and conscience that builds as the couple arrive in Stockholm. Adoration will be lavished on Joe; meanwhile, Joan takes her accustomed place in his shadow.

But it's Close who takes it to the next level with a powerfully implosive performance that doubles as an accumulation of details that define a marriage. She never telegraphs Joan's feelings, letting them unravel slowly as we watch her attend parties as a build-up to the big night. . .

Why does this long-suffering spouse stay with this skirt-chasing narcissist? There are the grown-up children, of course: Susannah, who's pregnant, and David, a struggling writer waiting in vain for his dad to throw him a crumb of encouragement. However, Joan's reasons for playing the good wife go deeper. The script wisely refuses to lay them out in dialogue. Everything you need to know about Joan comes through in Close's subtle and simmering portrayal, her eyes a window to a wounded soul. Just don't call Joan a victim — the star makes it clear that Joe's wife is nobody's patsy. Her final confrontation with Joe will have you cheering.

Peter Travers, Rolling Stone

The mission of the film is to capture the essence of an unravelling marriage and is rooted mostly in one hectic weekend in Stockholm where Joe is fawned over by the Nobel staff, has his past probed by a persistent biographer and his carnal desires threaten the fabric of his long relationship with Joan.

Joan's reactions to this behaviour, however, are what elevate the film to a marital classic (think *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *Blue Valentine*). She does not, initially, judge, censure or castigate. She is complicit in his crimes. She mothers him. She frets about his diet. She worries about a crumb in his beard. He is her project and their relationship is appallingly, yet perfectly co-dependent.

The movie splits and divides, with flashbacks, rich ideas and righteous ire about the professional sacrifices that Joan has made for Joe to succeed. In an era when any movie that has a prominent female cast is cravenly labelled a 'Time's Up' project, this is a drama with an impeccable feminist voice.

Yet this rarely matters because the focus is consistently pulled towards the two central performers. Pryce is on fearless form, boldly inhabiting a character with a monstrous carapace and soft, shrivelled insides. While Close is ineffably good, playing the still-simmering centre of a cruel, capricious world. Runge's camera loves her and repeatedly returns to her seemingly placid features as scene after scene tests her restraint. It's up there with her best work.

Kevin Maher, The Times

Film Facts

- The film is based on the bestselling novel *The Wife*, by Meg Wolitzer, published in 2003.
- Annie Starke, who plays Young Joan in the film, is Glenn Close's real-life actress daughter. She has also appeared with her mother in *Father Figures* (2017) and *Albert Nobbs* (2012).
- Glenn Close won Best Actress Awards at the 2018 Golden Globes and Screen Actors Guild for *The Wife*. She was nominated for, but did not win, the Oscar this year. It was her seventh nomination without a win.